

The World as We Speak

Language Magazine's forum for changes in world languages

Confucius Says Learn Chinese

The first Confucius Institute Conference

was held in Beijing in early July as part of the mainland's promotion of Chinese language and culture overseas. Speaking to some 400 delegates from 38 countries and regions, State Councillor Chen Zhili said that Confucius Institutes not only help others to learn the Chinese language and culture, but "also get a much clearer picture of a modern China." "Language is the most important tool that helps promote mutual understanding and friendship among people," Chen added. The institutes' main responsibilities are to teach Chinese, train teachers, certify instructors, conduct examinations, and provide consultancy services on Chinese culture, the economy, and society. The Confucius College statute says that "the mission of the Confucius Institute is to enhance peoples' understanding of the Chinese language and culture across the world, develop friendships

between China and other countries, promote multicultural development, and contribute to a harmonious world."

According to agreements signed there by Chinese Language Council International (CLCI), a government body which co-ordinates language-teaching efforts in other countries, there will soon be 80 Confucius Institutes worldwide. It was also announced that China had signed deals with six more foreign institutes to set up Confucius colleges in Britain, Germany, Serbia, Portugal, Belarus, and Spain.

The Confucius Institute, a non-profit public institute, was first initiated in 2004 to satisfy the surging overseas demand for Chinese language learning. To date, a total of 80 Confucius Institutes have been launched in 36 countries and regions, and an additional 99 institutes from 38 countries have applied to set up Confucius Institutes. It is estimated

that 100 million people will learn Chinese by the year 2010, calling for at least four million Chinese teachers. Facing such a great trend for international dialogues, China has announced to build 100 Confucius Institutes worldwide by the year 2010, noted Wang Shenghong, president of Fudan University.

"China is a global power, — it influences global prices on commodity markets, it's a player in global trade talks, it's a principal party in six-party talks on North Korea and many other issues of global importance," says Yuen Pau Woo, president of the Vancouver-based Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada. "These issues are shaped in some ways on perceptions of China and how it behaves as an international power. One way that can be shaped is through softer issues like culture, language and education. These institutes are a way to project an image of China."



China's Miao Language Threatened

China's fourth-largest ethnic minority, the Miao (known as the Hmong in the rest of Southeast Asia) people with thousands of years of history, are in danger of losing their language, Chinese state media has reported.

Evidence from areas in south China populated by the Miao suggest a drastic and speedy decline in the use of the language, the Shanghai Daily said.

"Native people in Miao villages communicate in their own language less and less," said Han Kan, an official in charge of ethnic and religious affairs in Guizhou province, where many Miao live.

In Danzhai county, part of Guizhou, only 60 percent speak their own language, down from 85 percent just seven years ago, the paper said.

The Miao language may have gotten a lease of life when a writing system was developed in

the mid-20th century, but now experts are worried it could be destined for extinction.

"With no effective inheritance mechanism, the Miao language will be hard to preserve," Han said.

The Miao, or Hmong, number nearly nine million in China and also inhabit parts of mainland Southeast Asia, such as Vietnam, Thailand, and Laos.

China's minority languages are under pressure especially from economic forces, as members of ethnic groups migrate to big cities where the standard Mandarin Chinese dialect dominates communication.

Many parents also prefer to send their offspring to schools where Mandarin is taught exclusively or predominantly, as it gives the children significantly better chances in the labor market upon graduation.

Shanghai Seeks Linguists

Language education officials in Shanghai are calling on more people to learn languages other than English ahead of the 2010 World Expo, which is expected to attract 70 million visitors.

The city is seeking language professionals in a range of tongues to avoid a shortage of multilingual volunteers for the Expo, which is expected to attract visitors from all over the world.

Officials will issue qualification certificates for professionals who speak one of eight foreign languages — French, German, Spanish, Italian, Russian, Japanese, Portuguese and Arabic.

Since 1995, the government has issued similar certificates for English proficiency. The certificates are highly prized in the country's crowded job market, and as of last year 100,000 people had them issued.

Officials hope the new certificates will attract the same interest. But issuing authorities reported that only 500 people had signed up for the first qualification test, which will take place in December. Most of the applicants were young students or white-collar workers who had studied language as their major or as a second foreign language at university.

"The number is far less than our expectation, not to mention the city's demand for foreign language professionals," said Shi Ronggen, an official with the certification application office. "We believe that the number of people who can get the certificate is much higher than the number of people who have applied for one," Shi said.

Brazil Embraces Spanish

Almost five years ago, Brazilian congressman Atila Lira presented Bill No. 3987/00 in Brazil's National Congress, requesting that Spanish be taught as a second language in all of the country's private and public schools. Last month, the bill was finally approved, and now only awaits the signature of President Lula da Silva to become law.

If approved, Brazil's education system will have five years to adapt to the new law requiring that Spanish be offered as an elective for students in grades five through eight.

Congressman Lira commented that "The new law is important for primary education and for Brazil's integration with the rest of Mercosur."

Multinational Support for Saving Malay

As English usage becomes more common, Indonesia, Brunei and Malaysia are establishing a regional agreement to revitalize Malay as their national language.

"We would like to maintain Malay-Indonesian's position as a national and regional language and put foreign languages like English, Chinese or Arab in a purely supporting role," said Indonesia's education Minister Bambang Sudibyo after signing the commitment. He also said that to implement the program nationwide, the ministry was initiating a law that would stipulate the use of Bahasa Indonesia as the leading language. The planned law would also require that Bahasa Indonesia be used for public speeches and commercial advertisements.

Although the ministry has yet to decide on the kinds of punishments people might face for breaking the law, the drafting process is finished and the draft bill will be submitted to the President soon.

Bambang said Bahasa Indonesia is now in a difficult position in this country, since public places are often named in English.

"We have to halt this process; otherwise we will no longer have a national language," he said.

A similar thing has happened in Malaysia. The use of Malay has decreased over the past few decades amid increasing emphasis on technology and education. Malaysia's Education Minister Hishammuddin bin Tun Hussein said the globalization process had diluted the usage of Malay among native speakers. The commitment with Indonesia and Brunei, he said, would refresh the three countries' determination to fight for their united national language.

"I will ask support from other institutions in my country to use the language in international agreements and meetings," he said. "If we, the locals, who are the owners of the language, don't want to use it, then who will?"

Indonesia and Malaysia have also established an agreement to link top schools from both countries in a network to promote the use of Malay. The schools would facilitate sharing

Malay Police Go Trilingual

Malaysian police in the eastern Sabah state on Borneo Island will be made to attend language classes to enable them to communicate in basic Mandarin and Arabic, on top of being proficient in the English and Malay language. The majority of police officers in the country are ethnic Malays, who generally lack proficiency in any language but the Malay language. Many struggle with speaking basic English.

New police recruits in the state must now attend a six-month English training program and take a language competency test, said state police deputy director of training Abdul Wahab Julai. "This is to enable future policemen to have at least a basic understanding of these languages and eventually better communication skills." He pointed out that the top brass of the police force was determined to ensure each recruit is able to converse in English or at least have a basic understanding of the language.

"We are trying to improve their communication skills in view of the growing number of foreign tourists," said Julai.



Bahasa Malaysia

The spoken Sabahan dialect of Bahasa Malaysia differs much in inflection and intonation from the West Malaysian version, having more similarity in pronunciation to Indonesian. English, Chinese Mandarin as well as the Chinese dialects of Hakka and Cantonese are widely understood. In addition, Kadazan-Dusun, Bajau, Murut, and other races also have distinct ethnic languages.

Source: wikipedia.org

Kiwis Push Multilingualism



New Zealand's education minister, Steve Maharey, says New Zealanders must become competent in the major languages of the world or risk being left behind in trade with emerging economies.

On July 31, Maharey unveiled a draft curriculum which will make it compulsory for schools to offer classes in a second language other than Maori and English from Year 7. He says New Zealand needs people competent in Spanish, Chinese, and Indian because they are countries New Zealand will be doing business with this century.

"On top of ensuring that people can maintain their languages, we want to ensure that we have a wider variety of people speaking a wider variety of languages," Maharey said.

Maharey noted that final amendments would be made to the draft after three months of consultation ending in November.



A waka [maori canoe] on an Abel Tasman beach, New Zealand

Call for Pan-Pacific Language

The head of the Maori Language

Commission in New Zealand has called for the development of a pan-Pacific language to stem declining numbers of indigenous Polynesian speakers.

Commission chief executive Haami Piripi said the commission was in discussions with a number of Pacific nations including Hawaii, Rarotonga, Samoa and Niue to develop a language database that would be used to develop a common "Meta-Polynesian" language.

He claimed the initiative was required to halt the declining use of Polynesian languages driven by the dominance of the English language and high numbers of Pacific peoples settling in other parts of the world.

"There are networks of languages that share a common ancestry, from Fiji across to Tahiti, it is important to chronicle the changes to the language as it spread across the Pacific and to recognize the family of languages that exist."

The end result would be a database that would assist in developing greater uniformity among the various languages, driven by a need to ensure Polynesian languages are maintained.

"There is a merge point, the point where the languages merge will get greater and greater until it becomes a language of its own. As we move towards convergence we will move towards a means of conversing across all of the languages."

He said the New Zealand and Australian governments had been a driving force in the decline of Polynesian languages and must play a greater role in ensuring their survival.

However, the proposal has been met with skepticism by senior lecturer in Samoan studies at Victoria University, Galumalemana Alfred Hunkin, who said strong opposition would follow moves for change, "When we talk about language loss it is a very emotional

issue. Language is about identity and pride and your culture if you have someone who comes along and says 'hey let's use this word', you are going to have some very healthy debate aren't you?"

Mr. Hunkin applauded moves to compile a database and protect Pacific languages, but said initiatives to ensure the survival of a native tongue had to be driven from within the community and embraced by those at the grass-roots. He added, "While there is a similarity between

Pacific languages, there is also great uniqueness of vocabulary and words particular to each language, including in spelling." ❧

Hello across the pacific

Maori *kia ora tatou katoa*

Rarotongan *Kia orana tatoa katoa toa*

Hawaiian *Aloha kakou*

Samoa *Talofa tatou*

Tongan *Malo e lelei*

Niuean *Whakalofa*

