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Hello hanyu

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A Mandarin class in south Delhi.

Why businessmen and students in India are learning to speak the official language of the People's Republic of China.

“Ni chi fan le ma.”

“Have you eaten?”

“Hengaoxingrenshini!”

“I am glad to meet you.”

The singsong of an unfamiliar language fills a large room in JorBagh, south Delhi, as students listen attentively to the back-and-forth of Mandarin and English. Twenty-four-year-old Abhishek Gupta, a student at the Chinese Language Institute, gingerly tries out the inflections of nihao (hello) and xiexie (thank you), but he is most eager for next weekend and the introductory class to hao ma (numbers). Gupta is a west Delhi businessman, and is soon due to visit China, the wholesale market of the world, for shipments of dry fruits, spices and chemicals. “If I can talk to traders in their language, I might get a good deal,” he says. A good deal from the People's Republic of China is also why four other businessmen in the class of 10 have signed up to learn Hanyu or spoken Mandarin: four hours every weekend for three months.

This century belongs to China: that's the drumbeat of confidence in Beijing. It's also being echoed in the cities of India, where businessmen are lining up for classes in Mandarin to wrangle the best bargain in Shanghai and Guangzhou, and, while they are at it, ask for tea. The Indian government seems to agree: from 2011-12 academic session, CBSE schools will begin to teach Mandarin to Class VI students. You cannot afford to ignore one of the largest economies of the world.

"Learning Mandarin is like what it must have been to learn English in the '60s," says Gaurav Marwah, a 32-year-old employee of Bank of America in India, who often has to travel to China for work. "How do you do business when the manufacturers of everything you want to sell, from Ganesha idols to footwear, are in China? You go to China and make a deal," says the banker.

The economy is what it is all about, agrees Ganesh Iyer of Iyer Language Classes in Thane. "Trade relations between India and China are on the upswing. So a lot of businessmen want to learn Mandarin to make their lives easier in China. Then, there are students who go there to study and want to be well-versed in the language," says Iyer. A basic language course at the institute costs approximately Rs 13,500.

Fiona Lee, a student of JD Birla College in Kolkata, is one such 20-year-old looking east. "I'm learning how to read and write in Chinese because I want to improve my career prospects. With a burgeoning demand for Chinese-speaking people in the IT sector, a sound knowledge of Chinese will definitely help," she says. **At the School of Chinese Languages where she studies, there are about 100 students. Most of them are Indians," says Madan Saraf, principal, "from eager teenagers to 70-year-old scholars."**

Kashish Jain, 29, has enrolled at Prime Education, a "language solutions" institute on Roshanara Road, north Delhi, for a crash course. He has been travelling to China for three years now and set up an office in Foshan a couple of months ago. "I import light fixtures and bathroom fittings for apartment and hotel projects. But it's difficult to do business there; no one knows English except in offices. At a hotel I was staying, I had to draw a bowl when I wanted one," he says. More valuable things can get lost in translation. Jain ended up with 500 lamps of the wrong model the last time he did business. "They said they didn't understand what I had asked for. The next time they can't say that," he says. "The biggest benefit is that I don't get cheated. Even taxi drivers don't overcharge me."

"The businessmen are smart. They want to go to the villages directly and get material. If they go to Shanghai, Beijing and Guangzhou, they have to pay more money. But if they go to the manufacturing units directly, they make bigger profits," says Cannie Min, a native Mandarin speaker from Taiwan, who has been teaching in Delhi for the last five years.

Mandarin is a difficult language, each word a complex structure of dashes and dots that stacks up vertically. Each letter can be pronounced in two or three ways. "The script is not like Devnagari. It's pictographic. There are around 50,000-70,000 characters in this language and pronunciation has to be perfect, otherwise words lose their meaning," says 52-year-old Poonam Joshi, who runs Bhashalaya, an institute in Jogeshwari, Mumbai, that has been teaching Mandarin for 15 years. Among its clients are companies like Tata International, IDBI, Hindustan Unilever, Reliance and Siemens, which send their employees for short stints to China. A 30-hour course at the institute costs Rs 8,500-12,000.

The script remains undecipherable for Gupta and Jain. At many of the classes, students are taught Pinyin — a system in which Mandarin characters are transcribed to a Roman script through a set of rules. It is learning Mandarin using the English alphabet. “Most people want to learn how to speak the language, not write it. The script interests those who want to get into translation and interpretation, but for businessmen, conversational Mandarin is important,” says PurnimaGarg, director of the institute in JorBagh.

Mandarin has been taught in India for many years — at universities and language schools — but the demand for the language is growing. According to MadhaviThampi, who teaches Chinese history in the Department of East Asian Studies, Delhi University, the tipping point came about five years ago. “The number of applications went from 50 to 500. Since then, there has been an exponential increase in students, and also in the number of private coaching classes,” she says. “The demand is more than we can handle,” she says.

Tapping into this demand are language professionals. PriyaAhluwalia, 20, learnt the language at Beijing University and returned to Delhi to teach. She gets paid around Rs 350 per hour. Neelam Sharma, a 38-year-old in Shalimar Bagh, Delhi, charges Rs 6,500 for a 40-hour course at the Ni Hao Language Institute she opened two months ago. “There is a huge need among businessmen, from car spare-parts dealers to tube-light manufacturers, to pick up the language. I already have 18 students,” says Sharma, who also teaches the language to her 11-year-old daughter and nine-year-old son.

The courses are also packed with cultural nuances, necessary, Garg says, if her students don’t want to make faux pas. “You can never gift a Chinese person anything in a set of four. The symbol for four called ‘si’ (spoken as sa), is pronounced the same way as the word for death,” she says. Do you know why the Beijing Olympics were held on August 8, 2008, and started at 8.08 pm? “Because eight or ‘ba’ pronounced as pa means riches,” she says.

“It is all about the tone, you can say one letter in different tones and it can mean something totally different,” says Min. “For example, if you say qing wen, where the accent is on the ‘i’ and the ‘e’ it means, ‘May I ask you?’ But if you say qin wen, where there is a different tone mark on ‘q’ and on the first ‘e’, then it means, ‘Can I kiss you?’ You can get slapped if you mix it up,” she says.

There is no mixing it up when it comes to business and the bottom line. The JorBagh institute includes a class on how to bargain. “Bargaining is very common in China,” says Garg.

“Duoshaoqian?”

“How much money?”

“Tai gui le.”

“Very expensive.”

And then finally: “Pianyi dinar.”

“Make it a little cheaper.”

After all, you are buying it in China.

(With inputs from SomyaLakhani and PremankurBiswas)