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A New Era for



Chinese Language

Following a period of intense growth, Chinese language programs are poised to develop in new ways as more students enter universities with some knowledge of the language.

BY JENNIFER WALKER



IT WAS THE SRIRACHA BOTTLES

in his dining hall at Williams College in Williamstown, Massachusetts, that led Drew Gatewood to study Chinese.¹ Because of his genuine interest in foreign languages, built in his secondary school years when he took Spanish for seven years, Gatewood would often stare at the Chinese characters on the back of the bottles. “I thought, “There’s no way that’s a language. It’s just a bunch of right angles,” he says. His interest piqued, Gatewood signed up for a Chinese class in his sophomore year; one week later, finding that the language was “a good challenge that I could invest myself in,” he decided to major in Chinese. For the next few years, the characters on the Sriracha bottles became his litmus test. “The day I could read all of [them], I was a happy camper,” he says.

Students learn Chinese in a class in Beijing.

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Fast Facts on Chinese Language

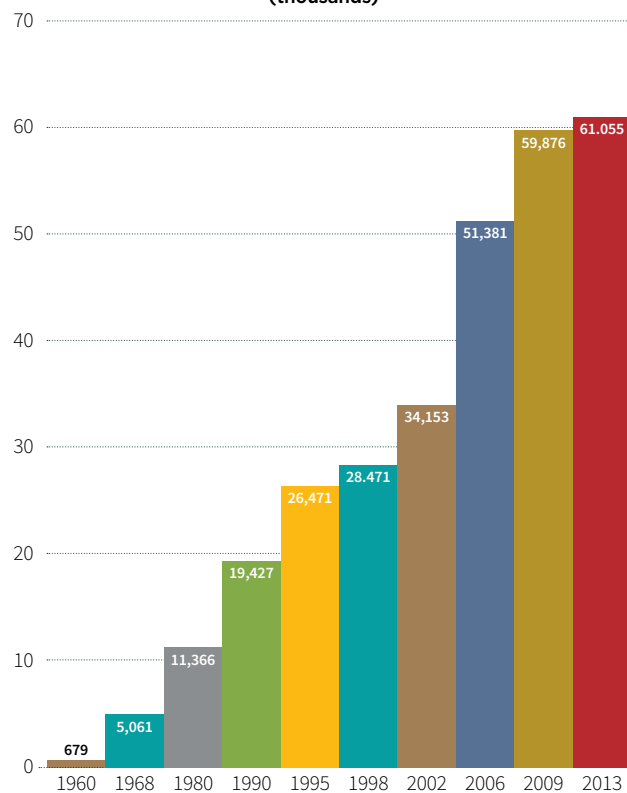
1.39 billion native speakers of Chinese globally¹

Chinese is the **7th** most popular language in U.S. higher education institutions.²

61,055 students studied Chinese in U.S. higher education institutions in 2013.³

China is the **5th** most popular study abroad destination for U.S. students.⁴

Enrollments in Chinese Language Courses in U.S. Higher Education Institutions, 1960–2013 (thousands)



Source: *Enrollments in Languages Other Than English in United States Institutions of Higher Education, Fall 2013*, Modern Language Association, 2015

ENDNOTES

- As reported by the *Washington Post*, which referenced the Population Reference Bureau as the source of data. See article online at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2015/04/23/the-worlds-languages-in-7-maps-and-charts/>.
- David Goldberg, Dennis Looney, and Natalia Lusin, *Enrollments in Languages Other Than English in United States Institutions of Higher Education, Fall 2013*, Modern Language Association, 2015, page 27. Available online at https://www.mla.org/content/download/31180/1452509/2013_enrollment_survey.pdfhttps://www.mla.org/content/download/31180/1452509/2013_enrollment_survey.pdf
- Ibid. See also the Modern Language Association Enrollment Database 1958–2013 online at https://apps.mla.org/cgi-shl/docstudio/docs.pl?survey_results
- Open Doors 2015 Fast Facts*. *Open Doors* is an annual report published by the Institute of International Education with support of a grant from the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs. See <http://www.iie.org/en/Research-and-Publications/Open-Doors/Data/Fast-Facts#.Vz0i32M9bzL>.



Agata Nartowska, a Northwestern University student, practicing Chinese calligraphy.

Since then, Chinese has played a major role in Gatewood's professional life. After graduating in 2010, he moved to Beijing, a city he loves, on a Chinese government scholarship awarded to two Williams students to study Chinese at Beijing Normal University for two years. About Beijing, he says, "the people I've met are relatively laid-back and very welcoming, very friendly, in a way that I had never experienced in the U.S. or any other city." Afterward, he went back to the United States for a year, then moved to Hong Kong to work in finance in 2013. Gatewood is still in Hong Kong, where he now works in real estate investment and where he has been learning Cantonese, the Chinese dialect that is spoken in the territory. Without proficiency in Chinese, "I wouldn't have had any parts of my career to date," he says. "It's [also] good to be able to relate to people in their own language."

In the last two decades, Chinese has been booming at U.S. colleges and universities, with enrollment numbers increasing exponentially between the late 1990s and 2008 or so. More recently enrollment numbers have stabilized or dropped off slightly. But, thanks to a national push to promote Chinese language education at K–12 schools, Chinese programs are poised to grow in a different way as more students are coming to college with some background in the language.

Chinese Language Programs See Soaring Growth in the Last Two Decades

In the last two decades, interest in Chinese, the seventh most popular language at U.S. higher education institutions, has skyrocketed. “There’s a nice Chinese saying: Sprouting up like bamboo shoots after the spring rain, [and] that’s really what it was like,” says Cornelius Kubler, the Stanfield Professor of Asian Studies at Williams College. The number of university and college students who study Chinese has increased 115 percent in the last 18 years, jumping from 28,456 in 1998 to 61,055 in 2013, according to the Modern Language Association (MLA), a membership organization that surveys higher education language enrollment every few years². In just over a decade, the number of students who have chosen Chinese as their first or second majors has grown 190 percent, leaping from 243 in 2001 to 706 in 2013. China is also

the fifth most popular study abroad destination for U.S. students, with a peak of 14,887 studying in the country in the 2011–2012 academic year.

At Williams College, the number of students studying Chinese grew from less than 50 in the late 1990s to its peak of 130 students in 2008. And further west, at the University of Iowa in Iowa City, Iowa, the number of students studying Chinese grew 149 percent between 2002 and 2006, from 86 to 214 students.

Study abroad programs in China also saw growth. In the last decade, at the Inter-University Program (IUP) for Chinese Language Studies, an intensive language program in Beijing run in collaboration with the University of California-Berkeley, “we were turning away students,” says Tom Gold, a professor of sociology and IUP’s executive director. IUP, which focuses on teaching speaking and listening skills through private and small group lessons,

Students in the CET Beijing study abroad program in Chinese language class.

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A Chinese language one-on-two tutorial in Harbin, China

was enrolling 60-plus students. “We were bursting at the seams,” says Gold, adding that IUP’s programs, which have historically attracted graduate students, are starting to draw more undergraduates. Another study abroad provider, CET Academic Programs, which got its start in Beijing as “China Educational Tours,” saw a similar trend: CET’s programs in China more than tripled their enrollment numbers between 2003 and 2007.

Students’ increasing interest in Chinese could be motivated by professional goals. “Today, China is the second largest economy in the world. Within five to 10 years, I think, it’s going to surpass the United States to become the largest economy in the world,” says Kubler, who took a two-year leave from Williams College to become the American codirector of the Hopkins-Nanjing Center for Chinese and American Studies in Nanjing, China. “Therefore, there are many economic opportunities for Chinese people first and foremost, but also for international types...if you know the language, if you understand the society and culture, and if you have some background in economics, business, and commerce.”

The Confucius Institutes may also have played a role in the booming Chinese language years. Established in 2004 by the People’s Republic of China to promote Chinese language and culture around the world, there are now 109 Confucius Institutes at colleges and universities in the United States offering language classes and cultural excursions to students and the public.

Students could also be drawn to Chinese because, as the official language of China and Taiwan and one of the four official languages of Singapore, it is the most popular language in the world, with 1.39 billion native Chinese speakers, a total that includes all dialects. This is one of the reasons that Agata Nartowska decided to learn Chinese as a freshman at Main South High School in Park Ridge, Illinois. “I thought if I learn [Chinese], I could communicate with a billion more people,” she says.

Nartowska went on to study Chinese as an Asian studies major at Northwestern University. Now in her senior year, she also studied abroad for a semester in Hangzhou, a smaller city outside of Shanghai, through a program run by CET Academic Programs and Middlebury College. “I was pretty proficient in reading and writing, but I had never been to China. I hadn’t had any real-life experience with the language. So when I got to China and tried saying things, it wasn’t really working,” she says. During the program, in addition to classes, Nartowska and her fellow students had to take a “language pledge” to speak only Chinese to each other. At the end of four months, her Chinese language skills “got really, really good,” she says. “I could live on my own [in China] if I wanted to, and it wouldn’t be a problem.”

Nartowska, who graduated in June and also studied marketing, isn’t sure how Chinese will fit into her future career. But for now, she is planning to spend a year in an intensive language program in China because she wants her language skills to be the best they can be.

Enrollment in Chinese Language Programs Plateaus

Since 2008 or so, the number of students enrolling in Chinese language programs has stabilized or, in some cases, slightly decreased, according to study abroad program directors and university professors. In the 2013–2014 academic year, 13,763 students studied abroad in China, a 7.6 percent decrease over the record-breaking 2011–2012, according to the Institute of International Education's *Open Doors* study, which is supported by a grant from the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs at the U.S. Department of State. At IUP in Beijing, Gold says the program, which was once bursting with 60 students, has struggled to reach 50 students in some semesters.

CET Academic Programs has maintained relatively steady total enrollment since 2007 in its eight study abroad programs in China. But the type of program students are enrolling in is changing. "There's been a shift in the last five years, so there is declining interest in semester programs and more interest in summer programs or short-term programs," says Mark Lenhart, executive director. "This trend reflects what's happened in every study abroad des-

tinuation. There's more interest among Americans in going for shorter periods of time."

At some universities, enrollment numbers have plateaued. The University of Iowa has had about 200 students a year studying Chinese since 2006, while Kenyon College in Gambier, Ohio, has reached 16 to 18 students since 2004. And Williams College has seen a small reduction in enrollment, with about 100 students now taking Chinese classes. A few possible reasons for the stalled growth include the decrease in the economic growth rate in China, a shift in U.S.-China relations, and, for study abroad programs in Beijing, concern about pollution in the city.

An Increasing Demand for Advanced Chinese Classes

Despite this, Chinese language programs are poised to grow in a different way. In September 2015, Presidents Barack Obama and Xi Jinping announced the 1 Million Strong Initiative—a project of the 100,000 Strong Foundation, a nonprofit established in 2013 to strengthen relations between the United States and China—whose goal is to dramatically increase the number of students

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studying Chinese at K–12 schools from its current estimate of 200,000 to 1 million by 2020. There are already 347 Confucius Classrooms at K–12 schools in the United States. As a result, universities will likely have freshman students with some level of Chinese language proficiency, necessitating the need for more upper-level Chinese courses.

Some colleges have already started to see this shift. In 2013 Williams College added a fifth year of Chinese language instruction to better serve students. And at Kenyon College, Jianhua Bai, professor of Chinese, says he had 16 students in this year's graduating class learning Chinese, the largest enrollment number among graduating seniors to date. "I [also] never had the need to do placement tests. People just come from high school and start from scratch," says Bai, who also directs Middlebury College's intensive summer Chinese language program on its Vermont campus.

In 1992 Erik Isaacman, then a freshman at Kenyon College who had been studying Chinese since high school, remembers simply talking to Bai, a conversation that landed him



Students participate in a Chinese language class as part of the Northwestern Wanxiang Program.

in third year Chinese. Issacman, who majored in anthropology with a focus on East Asian studies, exhausted Kenyon's language program within two years. "That meant a lot of independent study," says Issacman, an acupuncturist at Inner Gate Acupuncture in Portland, Oregon, who planned his advanced Chinese curriculum with Bai.

But in the last two years, Bai has started to use placement tests. Each time, about five or six students—one-third of the total number of students who took the test—were able to enroll directly in second-year Chinese. "We at the college level need to think

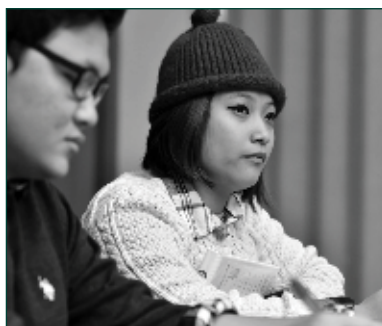
about offering more courses at the advanced level," Bai says.

At the University of Iowa, Helen Shen, professor of Chinese and academic coordinator for the Chinese program, agrees. She currently has five advanced Chinese language students in independent study who focus on learning religion, medicine, politics, or business in Chinese on their own, then meet with an instructor once a week who checks their comprehension of the material. But as more students attain a higher level of Chinese proficiency, "the departments at universities should also plan to recruit faculty members who can teach content area courses in Chinese," she says.

When it comes to advanced classes, one small, but growing trend has already started to emerge: Chinese language courses geared toward students in specific professions, such as engineering, law, and healthcare. "It's no longer just general Chinese language courses, but rather much more advanced, specialized courses for people with background in specific content areas," Kubler says. "[These courses are] becoming more and more attractive to students who are really serious about getting to a high level of Chinese language and culture and society."

Universities Continue to Start New Chinese Programs

Despite the shift in enrollment growth, universities are still starting Chinese language programs. In 2013, 866 universities reported



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their students were enrolled in Chinese language classes, up from 646 universities in 2006. But before starting a program, Thomas Mason, Jr., executive director of the ALLEX Foundation—a nonprofit that recruits and trains instructors from Asia, then places them at one of about 100 universities where they teach Chinese (or Japanese) in exchange for tuition waivers—says university faculty and administrators should be sure the program has broad-based support across campus.

“Campus advocacy is really key to long-term success,” he says, adding that this is especially true for universities in the Midwest, where student interest in Chinese might not be as strong as on the coasts. “A lot of it is engaging your students: running cultural nights and movie nights, and inviting students to visit and observe a class. You really need to be a recruiter.” Universities that have a foreign language requirement for undergraduate students also tend to have more success when starting new Chinese programs, Mason adds.

Universities could also encourage students to study abroad in China as a way to strengthen their Chinese programs on campus. This may seem counterintuitive,

especially when a program is new and faculty need a certain number of students to keep courses open. But “getting students to China and helping them experience firsthand what it’s like to be overwhelmed because they don’t speak the language is a great motivator,” says Lenhart from CET. “Students come back [to their universities] so fired up to continue Chinese.”

As for the plateau in Chinese program enrollment numbers, Lenhart hopes it’s just a blip and the growth continues. “It’s such an important country,” he says. “No matter what kind of work you’re doing with China, it’s to [students’] advantage to learn the language. It gives [them] an advantage in the global marketplace.” **IE**

JENNIFER WALKER is a freelance writer in Baltimore, Maryland.

ENDNOTES

¹ “Chinese” in this story means Mandarin, the national language of China and the dialect that Americans study when they take classes in Chinese language.

² In the MLA database, “Chinese” is also synonymous with Mandarin. A small number of universities also submit enrollment numbers for their classes in Cantonese, or classical or premodern Chinese, so these dialects have their own categories.

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