

# An Analysis of the Phenomenon of Global “Mandarin Fever”

Hong Gao

Heilongjiang Institute of Tourism, Heilongjiang 150001, China

E-mail: gaohong2000@126.com

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## Abstract

For the time being, “Mandarin fever” has been warming up persistently. This article analyzes that the root cause for this phenomenon lies in the daily mightiness of China and distinctive charm of Chinese culture. At the time when we take the pride, we also have to calm down to face up with the fact and make reflections. On one hand, we should try to make a good job of economic construction in a down-to-earth manner, continue to enhance the comprehensive national strength of our country and further reinforce military and scientific strength. On the other hand, we should continuously improve quality of teaching Chinese a foreign language and connotation of teaching Chinese as a foreign language and strengthen competitive force of “Confucius Institute” as a primary channel for teaching Chinese as a foreign language. It is necessary to carry forward Chinese culture, manifest quintessence of Chinese culture and enable Chinese to become one of the languages that people from all over the world show favor for in their communication.

**Keywords:** Chinese language, Mandarin fever, Cause, Reflection, Approach for everlasting mandarin fever

“If you intend to go ahead of others, just learn Chinese!” As early as in June 2006, the Asian version of US “Time Magazine” expounded its viewpoint on importance of learning China. Up till now, learning Chinese has become a hot issue that people have pursued and concentrated on and mandarin fever can be said to become a global issue.

There is such an advertisement at the street in Paris in France, “Just go to learn Chinese, and that means your opportunities and wealth within several decades in the future.” Joel Bellassen, the Chinese language Inspector of Ministry of Education in France, said, “Only domestic Chinese people spoke Chinese in addition to overseas Chinese in the 60s in the Twentieth Century. However, so far, the number of people who learn Chinese in France has far exceeded the number of people who learn Russian, and has even surpassed the European language --- Portuguese.” In France, “Chinese language has become a trump card for employment”.

David Hampshire, Headmaster of Confucius Institute in Britain, said, “Chinese language has received more and more emphasis in Britain and mandarin fever is continuously warming up.”

Caperton, President of US College Board, said in the first World Chinese Conference, “Each of us grows under the sun and each of us has the opportunity to choose speaking our voice or keeping silent. Now, it is time for people to speak Chinese.” As a matter of fact, according to a survey sponsored by US Ministry of Education, there has been a sharp drop in the number of US elementary and secondary schools in which foreign language classes are opened to students in the past ten years. Yet, only the number of schools which open Chinese language as a foreign language has been on an increase. Chinese has become a second language in US that is second only to Spanish.

German have their own particular way in their favor for Chinese, which is manifested as their favor for Chinese popular songs, and, especially, they show special preference to folk songs and songs by Wang Fei, the most popular female singer in China.

The reason that Japanese like Chinese is that they focus on its functions. In their eyes, China will become a big economic power. Since there exists a mutual benefit and reciprocity relationship between the two countries, it is necessary for them to learn Chinese well for demand of bilateral trade.

In Malaysia, the concept of “As a Chinese, I have to learn Chinese” has been deeply rooted among Chinese people in Malaysia. The Thai government has declared to define Chinese as the first foreign language and has brought Chinese courses into 2000 elementary and secondary schools. In South Korea, there are almost 200 universities that have set up Chinese courses and Chinese exam has been officially listed in the subjects of

college entrance examination as a foreign language. Quite a large number of European and American countries have also listed Chinese language as optional subjects as a foreign language in college entrance examination.

In addition, there is such an indisputable fact that, according to the statistical data in September 2010 by the National Office for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language (NOCFL), we had established more than 680 Confucius Institutes (classes) across over 90 countries in the world ever since the Confucius Institute was firstly established in Seoul, South Korea in 2004..... A large number of well-known universities in the world have established Confucius Institutes, such as, University of California at Los Angeles, The University of Melbourne, Moscow University, Waseda University, University of Edinburgh, and so on.

From the above analysis, it can be found that, the number of people who are learning Chinese currently across the world is growing day by day. More and more universities across the world are teaching Chinese and more and more elementary and secondary schools are also setting up Chinese courses. In the mean time, Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi (HSK) that is set up for foreigners has also received recognition by the whole world.

### **1. Causes for the phenomenon of “mandarin fever”**

Just as Professor Li Yuming mentioned in “Powerful Nation Language and Language Powerful Nation”, language is a symbol for a country’s prosperity and decline. The root cause for a global focus on Chinese language lies in the increasing mightiness of China and the particular charm of Chinese culture.

#### *1.1 Rapid rising and continuously developed China is an important power on the international arena*

China is the only Permanent Member of the United Nations Security Council among the developing countries and China is able to play a strategic balancing role in international affairs. Its influences are continuously increasing and China can play a decisive role in resolving international affairs in Asian and Pacific areas. It is a requirement for diplomacy to learn Chinese which has definite political significance.

#### *1.2 Swiftly developed economy and daily growing comprehensive national strength have attracted the eyeball of the whole world*

In the past three decades or so ever since the reform and opening up in China, Chinese economy has gained leap-forward growth, its comprehensive national strength has been strengthened day by day and its earth-taking and enormous changes are impressive. With China’s entry into the World Trade Organization, China has presented itself to the whole world with a more exoteric attitude and its communication and contact with countries from all over the world has become extensive and profound. Currently, China is a developing country with the most powerful strength and it has attracted travelling merchants from all over the world to compete for its commercial opportunities. To learn Chinese means an enormous market and to learn China will bring great economic value.

#### *1.3 The vigorously developing country with infinite potential has produced infinite hope and incessant illusion among people from all over the world*

Most importantly, “mandarin fever” has reflected forecast and anticipation of the world in the future of China. Successful development of Chinese economy and its system has made the world full of confidence in the future of China and embraced with hope in the prospect of China. As for a lot of people, learning China means opportunities in the future and their choice in learning Chinese is to select a way out for their future. Some countries have listed Chinese language as their national education system, and the primary cause is just what has been expounded.

#### *1.4 Longstanding ancient culture and square characters with peculiar charm contain profound connotation and are highlighted with attractive glory*

Chinese characters are the intermediary of Chinese inheritance and the ancient and beautiful Chinese characters are the carrier of Chinese culture and are attestation of Chinese culture that “has a long history”. Only if one knows about Chinese characters, can he appreciate Chinese culture, and only if one illustrates Chinese characters, can he explain the national feature of China. Just as Mr. Shu Yi, the famous Writer, literature Critic and Chief Librarian of National Museum of Modern Chinese Literature, said, Chinese civilization had a history of more than five thousand years in which it had a literary inscription. However, this history of more than five thousand years had never been fractured and each of its period could be connected with each other, with no evidence ever destroyed, never broken down and extended until now, which is called coming down in one continuous line... On the contrary, other civilizations had been so glorious, excellent and astonishing, but were broken down in the midway... This is where the Chinese civilization is great and special, namely, its consistency, continuity and heritability. This is also the characteristics of Chinese people. That is, the strokes of Heng, Ping, Shu and Zhi embody the strength of character and spirit, strokes of Pie, Na, Dian and Gou manifest gentle emotion and graceful bearing and the strokes of Fangfang and Zhengzheng imply profound connotation and power. The

Chinese characters have spanned five thousand years and have been passed down and precipitated with humiliation of the nation, demonstrating tenacious life of the nation and transcendent willpower. The ancient Chinese characters attract people to approach them and come to comprehend them with particular charm and extraordinary beauty. Learning Chinese can enable one to enter the life of the nation which accounts for 19% of the total population of the world and learning Chinese means integration of great, profound and beautiful culture.

In addition to the above factors, there is also another important reason for the global “mandarin fever” that the tens of millions of oversea Chinese always bear the country in mind and whichever nationality they have taken, they always recognize they are descendants of China. Especially, they do not hope their later generations forget their root of birth and they wish they can always maintain blood relationship with their country. Thus, children of a lot of oversea Chinese learn Chinese at an early age. Especially, the strengthened Chinese national strength and reinforcement of oversea Chinese in their regression of the Chinese cultural self-confidence and sense of national identity offer them with motive support in their learning Chinese. Oversea Chinese have added fuel to the fire in affecting and pushing forward the mandarin fever within a global sphere.

Ancient Chinese characters manifest the particular compatibility, stability, gentleness and marvellousness of Chinese culture with integration and combination of pictographic characters, phonetic characters, associative characters and indicative characters, which enables the Chinese culture to pass down from one generation to another and the Chinese civilization to be everlasting spread.

## **2. Cold reflections on “mandarin fever”**

In face of the globally arising “mandarin fever”, it is inevitable for us to feel surprised, proud and excited. Yet, as Chinese education practitioners, we need to face up with the phenomenon and make reflections with a sober mind.

### *2.1 Chinese language is ignored at home, which forms a contrast with the global “mandarin fever”*

In the past several years, the mandarin fever has been just popular in the global world, but has suffered from coldness at home in China. In our educational system, the Chinese course has to be opened in elementary and junior middle schools, but becomes a selective course of quite a lot of majors in the university. Thus, a lot of arts majors do not learn Chinese, and all science and engineering majors even do not set up the Chinese course at all. By contrast, English is a compulsory course in the university for the reason that English is a compulsory subject for taking part in the entrance exams for postgraduate schools and for PhD degrees. At the same time, requirement for English is necessary for seeking for a job, conferring an academic title and promoting a position. As the mother tongue of Chinese people, Chinese has not received due emphasis. Quite a large number of Chinese people speak their voice that, their time spent on Chinese is a lot less than the time spent on learning English. The fact we are facing up with is that, the Chinese level of Chinese students is manifesting a declining trend, and the language used by some university graduates even fails to express their idea in their writing of simple application thesis. There are even some graduates who have bad writing in Chinese characters. There is also a phenomenon that is worthy of being mentioned here: each unit clamors for talents who have a good style of writing and who are proficient in official document writing. It is delighted that we have noticed this situation. Director Li Yuming, the well-known Languages & Words Info Administration Department, Ministry of Education of China, said in the “World Expo International Forum for Language Environment Construction” held in Shanghai, Chinese people ought to enlarge and strengthen Chinese teaching among university and junior and elementary school students. He also emphasized that, the mother tongue should be deemed as an important resource and Chinese people should respect their own mother tongue and learn their mother tongue well. Without training of the mother tongue, it is impossible for one to enhance his overall quality. For a country to be constructed and developed, it also needs a lot of talents who are proficient in the mother tongue. We expect that the official speech of the Director Li Yuming on behalf of the Ministry of Education can be put into practice as soon as possible.

### *2.2 The global mandarin fever is just superficial, sufficiently penetrated*

We are clearly aware that the so-called “mandarin fever” means that we indeed have had certain “temperature” compared with the period before the opening up and reform, but it is far from “being broiled”. Compared with the enthusiasm of Chinese elementary pupils learning English, university students taking the exams of CET4 and CET6 and those taking the exams of IELTS and TOEFL, the enthusiasm of foreigners in learning Chinese is far behind us. Although the tide of the global mandarin fever is one wave higher than another, the status of English as an international language is still as firm as a rock. Yang Guang ever said in his holding the position of director of Languages & Words Applied Administration Department, Ministry of Education, almost 85% of languages used in the internet was English, among languages used in all varieties of occasions of the United Nations, 95% was also English, and utilization rate of Chinese merely accounted for less than 1 percent; there was almost no

international conference held abroad which used Chinese. The total population in the world that is learning English is appropriately 2 billion, with 0.17 billion Chinese people which exceeds the total population that is learning Chinese in the world. Furthermore, through “mandarin fever”, it seems to us that the broad and profound cultural valuables of China with a long history of five thousand years have not got sufficient introduction and dissemination, and the phenomenon that foreigners learn Chinese is just superficial. When we Chinese take delight in such western festivals as Christmas Day and the Fool’s Day, whether we are obliged to introduce to foreigners the four masterpieces of literature in China, Beijing opera, chinaware and redwood furniture and let foreigners experience the implication of Chinese culture to expand for several thousand years and the immortal vitality of Chinese culture through our introduction.

### *2.3 Whether “mandarin fever” can last forever?*

“The whole world is learning Chinese and words of Confucius are becoming more and more internationalized; the whole world is speaking Chinese and the language we speak is being carefully listened to by the whole world...” The song titled “Chinese Language” by the Chinese famous female singing group has been ever popular all over the world. On one hand, just as what has been sung in the song, foreign people like Chinese. On the other hand, difficulty in learning Chinese has made lots of foreigners shrink back at the sight of Chinese language. Besides, under confusion of the three “teaching” issues of teaching material, teachers and teaching method, to some extent, popularization of Chinese language has been affected. The issue we are faced up with is whether “mandarin fever” can last forever? Let’s take US as an example. During the Cold War, Americans learned Russian; they learned Japanese in the 1980s; they switched to Arabic after “9.11”. At present, the mandarin fever continues to warm up in US. All varieties of languages take their lead for almost a decade. Therefore, it is a subject that is worthy of our careful reflection how to make “mandarin fever” continue to warm up.

## **3. To facilitate “mandarin fever” and to carry forward Chinese culture**

### *3.1 To maintain powerful national strength and promote everlasting of mandarin fever*

What “mandarin fever” reflects is the comprehensive national strength and improvement of military and scientific strength. As is well known to all, Chinese has also suffered from “coldness” and has undergone crisis for several times. At that time, China was under poverty, with weak national strength and was on the brink of holding downing its own Chinese characters, which caused the Chinese characters almost to be thrown away. Currently, with development of Chinese economy, strengthened comprehensive national strength and improvement of its international status, any nation should not ignore the fact of peaceful rise of China. Under such a circumstance, Chinese language and Chinese culture are again interpreted. Thus, we have to particularly cherish Chinese language. Just as Professor Lu Jianming, Director and professional professor of Center for Chinese Linguistics Peking University and academic board member of Peking University, said, after all, language was an instrument, which was different from culture in the fact that whether language could become a strong advantage of a country did not rest with promotion, but when the national strength and education as well as science of a country had been developed to a certain extent, its language would naturally become “solid”. Thus, we have to keep a clear mind, conduct economic construction in a down-to-earth manner, continue to improve the comprehensive national power of the country and further strengthen the military and scientific strength of the country. In this way, can we better carry forward the Chinese culture and exhibit to the world the quintessence of Chinese civilization.

### *3.2 To reinforce basic research in teaching Chinese as a foreign language and to enhance the teaching quality*

Teaching Chinese as a foreign language is not a new branch of science. We have strict demarcation to its professional positioning and employment standard. However, under the current new economic and cultural background, especially when the overseas “mandarin fever” is one tide higher than another, we have aroused high attention to scientificity, stringency and timeliness of teaching Chinese as a foreign language. For example, whether “A Syllabus of grammar of Teaching Chinese as a foreign language” is suitable for the application-based teaching syllabus for foreigners to learn Chinese grammar; there still exist fragile aspects in research of Chinese vocabulary and phonetics, which need to be further strengthened; whether study of the method of teaching Chinese as a foreign language should start from “how to learn”, which is integrated with cultural backgrounds and national customs of different nations; whether foreign teachers can offer a lot of first hand teaching information and actual overseas teaching condition in terms of research of teaching Chinese as a foreign language. Only if we make an in-depth investigation into education system of different countries, requirements of Chinese language teaching, learning habits and features, as well as common biased errors in Chinese language teaching, can we work out professional requirements and curriculum standards. According to practice, development of a subject has to have solid theoretical research foundation. Otherwise, improvement of

quality of a subject teaching will become source without water and wood without root.

### 3.3 To integrate teaching resources and to enhance connotation of teaching Chinese as a foreign language

Sustainable and stable development of teaching Chinese as a foreign language has to integrate and optimize teaching resources, and should pay special attention to the three internal “teaching” issues of teaching material, teachers and teaching method. Firstly is teaching material. Compilation of teaching material for teaching Chinese as a foreign language should select the path of cooperation between China and foreign countries in order to work out “localized teaching material” that suits with learning habits of local people, such as the typical teaching materials of “The New Concept English” and “Family Album USA” that are learned by Chinese people and have got recognition around the country, and to form a system to contain demands of learning by people at different levels of elementary, junior and senior schools. Secondly is teacher. It should be admitted that the team of teaching Chinese as a foreign language at present in China is quite complicated with uneven levels, and some teachers are even lacking in relevant education and teaching knowledge and in in-depth knowledge of Chinese culture. We ought to adopt the multiple patterns of “walking out and inviting in” to strengthen training on overseas Chinese teachers, and should especially reinforce vigor in fostering teachers with a non-English language background and cultivate a lot of qualified teachers who teach Chinese as a foreign language and who are able to conduct Chinese language education in a correct manner. Thirdly is the teaching method. We should study a whole set of teaching method to suit with localization habits, work out the thinking modes of different language families and study how to enable foreign students to grasp Chinese language in the fastest and best way within the shortest period of time. We should also study how to teach accordingly among different foreigners who come from different countries and have different cultural backgrounds and different ages as well as different demands so as to teach students according to their aptitude.

In addition, development of modern information technology, for example, effective application of multi media technology and network into teaching Chinese as a foreign language, has initiated a new approach and ensured effective improvement of the quality of teaching Chinese as a foreign language.

### 3.4 To successfully operate Confucius Institute in a down-to-earth manner and to strengthen its competitive force

As is well known to all, “Confucius Institute” that is opened in China is a kind of non-profit making public institution of education and cultural communication that has been set up for promoting Chinese language teaching and dissemination of Chinese culture. Hence, in the process of running the Confucius Institute, just as some academics have pointed out, “Confucius Institute” is still at a weak competition condition of “high cost and low output” whether in terms of the development purpose, cooperation platform and operational mechanism, whereas cultural and educational products that the western society is promoting to the whole world are at a strong competitive condition. In order to alter this weak competitive condition, it is not only necessary to satisfy training of Chinese language, but should also academic golden content of cultural products in Confucius Institute, convey our excellent spiritual and cultural products and strengthen the international competitive force of our cultural products. We can change step by step the current investment system for capital of running a school and finally walk towards the virtuous circle running mode of sole responsibility for profit or losses. It is expected that “Confucius Institute” can push forward Chinese culture to walk towards the world with the channel of Chinese language teaching and enable all people from all over the world to more directly come to contact with Chinese culture and more effectively come to understand the quintessence of Chinese culture.

On balance, through the global “mandarin fever”, what we see is dissemination of a most beautiful language, resuscitation of an ancient and magic culture and thriving and development of a great nation. By no means, we Chinese should be complacent and blind. Instead, we have to conduct economic construction in a down-to-earth manner, continue to enhance the comprehensive national strength, carry forward Chinese civilization and enable Chinese language to become one of the languages that they favor to communicate with.

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