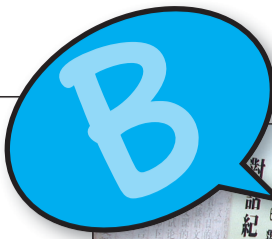


HONG KONG

LANGUAGE



Putonghua in Hong Kong has come of age. Linguistics experts say the standard of Putonghua among locals has markedly improved as business and social links with the mainland grow. But, the likelihood of Putonghua becoming the city's hegemonic or official language remains distant. SL Luo writes.



Dr CM Si says with Hong Kong's primary and secondary schools offering Putonghua classes as early as the 1950s and 60s, a strong foundation has been laid for local school children.

Shen mo a? Ni yao da jie!?

I lent my ear to a simple conversation between a Hong Kong friend of mine and a storekeeper in Yueyang City, Hunan, where I'd been working on a hotel project for a few months several years ago.

We were on a shopping binge and my friend — a former Hong Kong civil servant — was standing at an arcade, haggling furiously over the price of a pair of glasses. It was amusing.

In his hopelessly flawed Putonghua, he told the storekeeper: *Wo yao da jie!* (I want to stage a robbery). What he thought he was saying was *wo yao da zhe* (I want a discount).

He got confused with the consonants *jie* (*jie* in *putonghua* means robbery) and *zhe* (means discount).

The merchant, stunned, his face ashen, barked back in heavily-accented Hunanese mandarin: *Shen mo a? Ni yao da jie?* (What? You want to rob me?).

I still smile whenever that exchange comes to mind. I wonder where my friend had got to after all those years working in government. Maybe he's still on the road, picking up odd fragments of Putonghua — the official language of instruction, of government and of academe on the mainland and in Taiwan.

In Hong Kong, Putonghua, or Mandarin, started taking root way back in the 1940s when some of the primary schools including it in their curriculum. By the early Eighties, between 1981 and 1984, about 100 local primary and secondary schools were teaching Putonghua. Then, in 1988, the language became part of the official curriculum.

Kiangsu & Chekiang Primary School and Kindergarten, founded in 1953, was the first local school to adopt Putonghua as its principal language of instruction. Today, it's estimated that about a third of Hong Kong's 800 primary and secondary schools use Putonghua to teach the Chinese language.

People in their 60s and 70s learned a lot during the heydays of Mandarin cinema in the 1960s when martial arts films produced in Hong Kong and Taiwan were at their peak. When the popularity of Mandarin films waned in the 1980s and 1990s, so did the standard of Putonghua.

The talks leading up to the Sino-British Joint Declaration on Hong Kong's future, in 1984, fueled a new round of interest in learning Putonghua, among people in Hong Kong. The benefit of learning the language took on a new dimension.

What has happened to the standard of Putonghua in Hong Kong since the handover?

Language experts take a positive view. There have been some stumbles, but the overall standard of Mandarin has improved significantly in the past two decades, and particularly since the handover which facilitated closer government, business and social links across the border.

They agree that the "golden period" has passed and, with so many local primary and secondary schools teaching Putonghua, the younger generation already has a strong foundation in the language. People



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DR C M SI
HEAD, SCHOOL OF CHINESE,
THE UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG

in their 30s and 40s, in particular, have become quite proficient and the standard continues to improve.

The School of Chinese at the University of Hong Kong's (HKU) Faculty of Arts has been pivotal in promoting an understanding of Chinese history, language and culture and history, and stepping up cultural exchanges between the mainland and the West.

The School of Chinese, founded 1927, offers a language enhancement program focused on Putonghua for students. The Chinese Language Centre provides two-year courses in both Putonghua and Cantonese for Chinese students who do not speak both dialects.

It also teaches Chinese as a foreign language to diplomats and foreigners. Part of the school's mandate is to co-organize Putonghua conferences with other local universities to promote the language.

This year also marks 17th anniversary of the university's Hong Kong Putonghua Education and Assessment Centre, which organized the first national language proficiency test in Hong Kong in 1996 in collaboration with the State Language Commission of China.

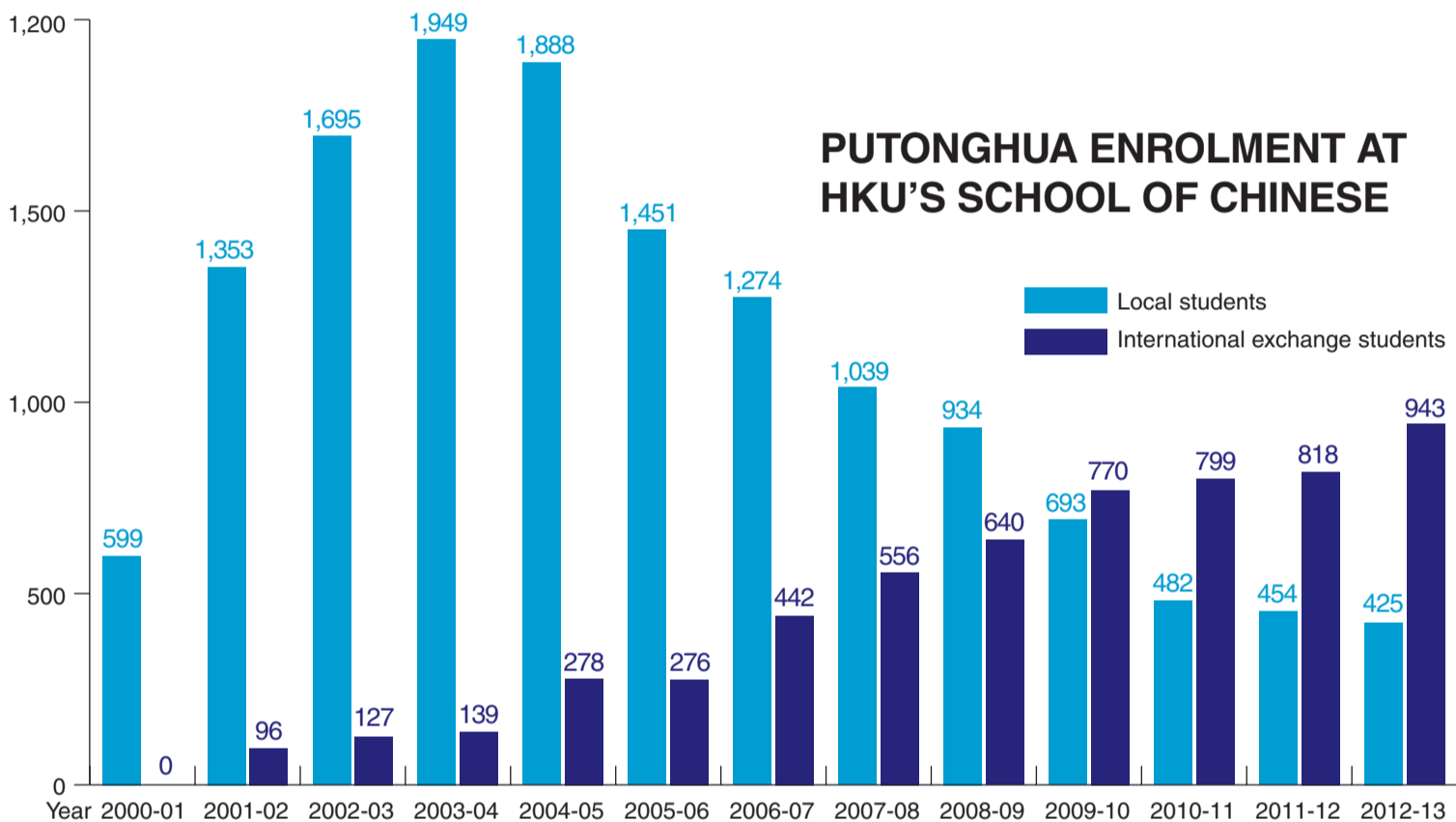
"Many Hong Kong students who sat for that examination came out with flying colors. It showed we were ready for the advent of *Putonghua*," says Dr C M Si, head of the School of Chinese.

He concurs, the overall standard of the language among Hong Kong people has improved considerably since 1997. "In the old days, Hong Kong people couldn't even understand what mainland visitors were talking about when they asked for street directions, but now they have no difficulty listening to what mainland people are saying, and they are comprehending," he adds.

"I would say that, in the past 15 to 20 years, the business community has been well ahead with Putonghua compared with the academic sector, because many enterprises started early, hiring teachers from Hong Kong and the mainland to teach the language to their staff," Si explains.

He argues the fact that Putonghua has come of age in Hong Kong is reflected in the declining numbers of students taking it up at the School of Chinese. The reason: It has become more and more common since the government began training primary and secondary school teachers.

After the handover, local students enrolled in the Putonghua course at HKU numbered 599 during the 2000-2001 academic year and



peaked at 1,949 for the 2003-2004 year before tapering off and falling to 425 students for the current academic year.

"The decline is due to the vast pool of primary and secondary schools that started teaching Putonghua a long time ago, so universities are now teaching it less," Si explains.

There are also about 60 international schools in Hong Kong using Putonghua as the language of instruction.

However, the number of international exchange students studying the language at HKU has been rising — from 96 during the 2000-2001 academic year to a high of 943 students for the 2012-2013 year.

According to Si, most exchange students are from Southeast Asia who have their eyes on the huge mainland market, perhaps planning to work on the mainland in future.

"If you lag behind in the language, you'll be confined only to Hong Kong and you can't fight your way out of the ring," Si warns. "As a Chinese, it's not because you have to learn your national language, it's an extra tool or asset to aid you in your future career besides English and other international languages."

Is there any possibility of Putonghua emerging as the language of choice in Hong Kong, or as the official language of the government?

"Frankly speaking, I don't see this happening in the near future. It may not be easy to do this as English and Cantonese will remain dominant, say, for the next two or three decades. Most of our legislators will have to use English to communicate with their colleagues and electors," Si says.

With Putonghua generally becoming common in Hong Kong, Si says HKU now aims to teach professional Putonghua — in law, engineering and the sciences.

Mainland experts, who were sent to Hong Kong as early as 1983 to help train local teachers to teach *Putonghua*, are likely to continue as advisers and observers in local institutions. The city has nearly 7,000 qualified teachers in the language.

Alfred K L Tse, who operates a local speech learning center, reckons that general perception of Hong Kong people toward mainlanders has changed. "It's all because we have got closer and closer with the rise of the mainland's economy.

In Shenzhen, as one example, Cantonese terms have become more commonly used than ever before, such as *mai tan* (settle the bill) instead of the *Putonghua* equivalent, *jie zhang*.

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PUTONGHUA ENROLMENT AT HKU'S SCHOOL OF CHINESE



For children, the language is no stranger to them at all with the foundation they have already built for themselves at school."

ALFRED TSE
HEAD, AT SPEECH LEARNING INSTITUTE

'It's beautiful, like singing'

Alfred K L Tse counts himself as fortunate, privileged to be ahead of the pack in acquiring and mastering proficiency in Putonghua in Hong Kong.

He attributes his success, among other things, to his flair for and love of the language.

For him, it's not something inborn, but "the language just sounds beautiful, like you're singing," explains Tse, who runs the AT Speech Learning Institute at Prince Edward.

Tse was one of Dr C.M Si's students at the University of Hong Kong's (HKU) School of Chinese when he was an undergrad there in the 1980s majoring in Economics. Ostensibly, he was among the few who had excelled in Putonghua, and, armed with a certificate of proficiency in the language from HKU, went on to see one of the early dreams realized.

"I had a great aim, that's to do China trade after graduation at a time when the mainland was starting to open up itself to the world," says Tse.

He subsequently had himself immersed in China trade for 10 years, and operated a factory in Dongguan, Guangdong, dealing in dried seafood. The venture didn't pay off and Tse decided he had no flair for business. "I had reached 35 then, and wanted to try something new and interesting, more relevant to my capabilities in Putonghua — language

training and education."

Tse sold his trading firm and left for Taiwan where he hooked up with a language training center for a year before returning to Hong Kong in 2003 to launch AT Speech Learning Institute.

In its first two years of operation, the institute specialized in training adults to speak Putonghua and coached corporate people deeply involved in China business. It then expanded its clientele base to take in kindergarten, primary and secondary school students.

Tse calls the fees he charges reasonable — HK\$200 per hour for each child in a group, and up to HK\$1,500 an hour and on a one-to-one basis for the local corporate elite.

There are, at present, about 50 Putonghua learning centers across Hong Kong and Tse's prides itself on having churned out some 10,000 students in the past 10 years, including those his staff had taught in local schools and at companies.

"Now 16 years after the handover, Putonghua among business people is nothing new because of the dire need for the language in mainland business. The interest is great. For children, the language is no stranger to them at all with the foundation they have already built for themselves at school. The stress now is on speech training in Putonghua," Tse says.



Alfred Tse believes Hong Kong residents have changed their perception towards mainland people and have now accepted them as compatriots.