

October 17, 2005 :: Students seek challenges, opportunity in learning Chinese

By Susan Simpson

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A new bachelor's degree program at the University of Oklahoma recognizes China's political and economic power and the need for American workers fluent in Chinese.

The State Regents for Higher Education recently approved OU's request to offer a major in the Chinese language. OU is the first university in Oklahoma to do so, but many campuses offer Chinese language minors and study-abroad programs.

"China has more momentum than any other place on the face of the earth right now," said David Woods, a partner in EXIM Group, an Oklahoma City company that helps businesses do import and export trade with China. "If you have someone in the organization that can speak Chinese, you can open so many more doors."

China is Oklahoma's seventh-largest export market, accounting for more than \$84 million in export transactions last year, said Barry Clark, director of global business services for the state Department of Commerce. Exports mainly were manufactured parts such as pumps, compressors and gas turbines.

Ming Chao Gui, the languages professor who proposed a Chinese major at OU, said graduates fluent in Chinese will have a "huge advantage" when job-hunting with companies that do business in Asia.

"China is the biggest market in the world," he said. "They need so many things from this country. There is a huge market for our resources."

The students in Gui's advanced Chinese courses plan varied careers. Some want to become language teachers. Others plan professions in politics, international law or economics.

Nathaniel Kretchun, who is studying economics, spent two semesters in China and said he was amazed at the job opportunities available to fluent Americans.

"I was even the translator on a movie set," he said. "There were opportunities I'd never have here as a student."

Still, learning Chinese was challenging. Instead of an alphabet, the written language is comprised of characters, some of which are complex. Mandarin is the most widespread dialect, and word context varies based on the tone of voice.

"It's a little more daunting on the face of things," Kretchun said. But immersed in the language abroad, "I improved so much."

Stephen Montague spent a summer semester in Taiwan, where residents still use the traditional, more complex characters that have been simplified some on the mainland.

He said he hopes to do social work in Asia, helping those less fortunate.

About 240 students took Chinese classes last year at OU, nearly double the number that did just five years ago. The Chinese major is expected to draw even more students to OU. Students also will learn about cultural and business practices in China.

Speaking Chinese "really does give you a leg up over someone who just flies in and gets off the plane," said Vince Orza, a restaurateur and interim dean of Oklahoma City University's business college.

Orza recently visited OCU's Great Wall study abroad program in China, where about four dozen students from around the world are earning a master's degree in business at the Tianjin University of Finance and Economics.

Ten students are Americans and most of the others are from Asian countries. The 18-month program immerses students in Chinese life, where they more quickly master the language and business and cultural customs.

The opportunities are endless for American entrepreneurs, Orza said.

"Right now in China, all things American are good," he said. "They are using us as their role models, looking to America for what they'd like their country to be."