

In Zimbabwe, learning Chinese is a lucrative investment

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Ni hao, Chinese for "hello," or *ting bu dong*, meaning "I hear you, but I don't understand," are two expressions one often overhears today in Zimbabwe's capital. It is one of the results of tenacious efforts by governments, private companies and individuals across Africa, but in Zimbabwe particularly, to learn the Chinese language and understand China's culture.

Learning Chinese as a second or third language has been a global trend in the last few years. In Africa, the rapid increase of Chinese investments and trade (China is currently the continent's biggest trading partner) has spurred the trend.

Zimbabwe's government has been very deliberate in enhancing its bilateral relationship with China. It launched the Look East Policy in 2003 to give priority to investors from China, Japan, Singapore and other countries from that region. As a result, trade between China and Zimbabwe has been growing exponentially - China is now the biggest buyer of Zimbabwe's tobacco.

Although learning Chinese dates back to Zimbabwe's liberation struggle in the late 1960s and 1970s when freedom fighters went to China for military training, the trend has now accelerated significantly, and for different reasons.

Confucius Institute

To spread the Chinese language and culture, the government of China is utilizing a concept called Confucianism. Confucius was a great Chinese philosopher and educator born in 551 BC. The Chinese believe that his thoughts have tremendously influenced Chinese culture and even had an impact on other cultures. Chinese people refer to Confucius as "a greater teacher."

Zimbabwe leads the rest of the continent in the training of local teachers of Chinese, having integrated the Confucius Institute into the University of Zimbabwe's academic structures in 2007, as part of an expanding network of about 400 Confucius Institutes worldwide. The programme has largely been successful, and the university is poised to export surplus teachers of Chinese to other countries as well.

Professor Pedzisai Mashiri, the inaugural director of the Confucius Institute at the University of Zimbabwe, says that one of the institute's goals is to promote the Chinese language and culture in Zimbabwe.

Because the government is yet to integrate Chinese into the national curriculum for primary and secondary schools, schools that host Confucius classes offer the Chinese language as an extra-curricular activity. More than a thousand students have received such language training through the institute since 2009. A few others are completing studies in

China and will join the university soon.

A skill that pays

Observers say there has been a rising demand from organisations and individuals seeking to learn Chinese. Clarence Makoni, the founder of the Cendel Language Bridge, a private company that provides translations, interpretation and foreign language instruction, told Africa Renewal that there are huge benefits in learning foreign languages. Chinese, he says, is by far the most sought after.

"If you look at the rate at which the Chinese are coming into this country," says Makoni, "you do not need to be a prophet to tell who is going to be the most significant employer in a few years to come....All the people we train are snapped up by companies as soon as they finish their courses, and they are paid very handsomely."

He adds that the ability to speak another major language besides English is a great selling point in the marketplace. A Chinese-speaking interpreter can rake in a monthly salary of Z\$5 000, while a bilingual secretary with the same capabilities can claim up to Z\$3 000 - earnings deemed at the top range in Zimbabwe.

Laston Mukaro, a language consultant and lecturer at the University of Zimbabwe's linguistics department, says that although his job grading has not yet changed, he is now earning much more after learning Chinese.

"It makes sense to learn Chinese now other than for the reason necessitated by the government's Look East Policy," he says. "Chinese is one of the United Nation's official languages and if you look at the way China is expanding into the world, you can do better if you speak their language."

Mukaro also earns a lot of money from exchange programmes between China and Zimbabwe. In addition, he frequently consults for the local Confucius Institute. Other benefits include his current work on a handbook for translating between Chinese and Shona, one of Zimbabwe's main indigenous languages. "For those who travel to and do business with China a lot, and are privileged to tap its diverse tourism, then learning Chinese is practically obligatory and has immense benefits," he says with enthusiasm.

More expansion ahead

Professor Mashiri says there are plans to open at least five more Chinese teaching points in other parts of the country, and to construct a Confucius Institute building at the University of Zimbabwe. The Chinese Embassy in Zimbabwe has also promised to build a cultural centre to strengthen cultural cooperation between the two countries.

The world is now a global village, requiring people to understand each other's culture and languages, says Levi Nyagura, the University of Zimbabwe's vice-chancellor. "We want to see Zimbabwean students get jobs in China. We will continue to work hard to institutionalize the Chinese language, as we have done with the other major world languages."

There are also suggestions for introducing Chinese into the national curriculum. "The net effect," argues Professor Mashiri, "is to have the teaching and learning of Chinese cascade from university to secondary and primary schools."

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