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CHINA'S REACH

Chinese Move to Eclipse U.S. Appeal in South Asia

By JANE PERLEZ

CHIANG RAI, Thailand - In pagoda-style buildings donated by the Chinese government to the university here, Long Seaxiong, 19, stays up nights to master the intricacies of Mandarin.

The sacrifice is worth it, he says, and the choice of studying Chinese was an easy one over perfecting his faltering English. China, not America, is the future, he insists, speaking for many of his generation in Asia.

"For a few years ahead, it will still be the United States as No. 1, but soon it will be China," Mr. Long, the son of a Thai businessman, confidently predicted as he showed off the stone, tiles and willow trees imported from China to decorate the courtyard at the Sirindhorn Chinese Language and Culture Center, which opened a year ago.

The center is part of China's expanding presence across Southeast Asia and the Pacific, where Beijing is making a big push to market itself and its language, similar to the way the United States promoted its culture and values during the cold war. It is not a hard sell, particularly to young Asians eager to cement cultural bonds as China deepens its economic and political interests in the region.

Put off from visiting the United States by the difficulty of gaining visas after 9/11, more and more Southeast Asians are traveling to China as students and tourists. Likewise, Chinese tourists, less fearful than Americans of the threat of being targets of terrorism, are becoming the dominant tourist group in the region, outnumbering Americans in places like Thailand and fast catching up to the ubiquitous Japanese.

As the new Chinese tourists from the rapidly expanding middle class travel, they carry with them an image of a vastly different and more inviting China than even just a few years ago, richer, more confident and more influential. "Among some countries, China fever seems to be replacing China fear," said Wang Gungwu, the director of the East Asian Institute at National University in Singapore.

Over all, China's stepped up endeavors in cultural suasion remain modest compared with those of the United States, and American popular culture, from Hollywood movies to MTV, is still vastly more exportable and accessible, all agree. The United States also holds the balance of raw military power in the region.

But the trend is clear, educators and diplomats here say: the Americans are losing influence.

As China ramps up its cultural and language presence, Washington is ratcheting down, ceding territory that was virtually all its own when China was trapped in its hard Communist shell.

"The Chinese are actively expanding their public diplomacy while we are cutting back or just holding our own," said Paul Blackburn, a former public affairs officer of the United States Information Service who served at four American embassies in Asia in the 1980's and 90's.

China Radio International, with light fare and upbeat news and features, now broadcasts in English 24 hours a day, while Voice of America broadcasts 19 hours and will soon be cut back to 14 hours, he said.

CCTV-9, China's flagship English-language television channel, which features suave news anchors and cultural and entertainment shows, is broadcast worldwide. America may have CNN International, but in the realm of public policy, the United States has "nothing comparable," Mr. Blackburn says.

Across Southeast Asia, American centers run by the State Department's United States Information Service, which once offered English-language training and library services, were closed and staff was slashed as part of the worldwide cutbacks in the 1990's.

The impact is still being felt. In Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim country, the three United States information centers were shut. A new program, "American Corners," provides books, computers and databases for a handful of Indonesian university libraries, but it has less impact, American diplomats said.

As Washington cuts back, China is providing concrete alternatives. The Chinese president and Communist Party chief, Hu Jintao, made clear the importance of China's cultural offensive to Beijing when he addressed the Australian Parliament last year.

"The Chinese culture belongs not only to the Chinese but also to the whole world," he grandly offered. "We stand ready to step up cultural exchanges with the rest of the world in a joint promotion of cultural prosperity."

The invitation is being accepted by growing numbers of Asian students who are taking advantage of proliferating opportunities for higher education in China. No longer are status-conscious Asian families mortified if their children fail to qualify for elite American universities, parents say. A berth in a Chinese university is seen as a pragmatic solution, even if the quality of the instruction falls short of the top American schools.

In Malaysia, students of non-Chinese background are flocking to primary schools where Chinese is taught, a reversal of a more than three-decade trend, said N. C. Siew, the editor of the country's major Chinese-language newspaper, Sin Chew Daily.

In Indonesia, the elite long favored American universities. The founding generation of government technocrats was called the "Berkeley mafia" because so many were graduates from the Berkeley campus of the University of California.

Today, the numbers tell a startling story, especially in Indonesia, an American ally where relations with China have been historically difficult.

Last year, 2,563 Indonesian students received visas to go to China for study, according to the Chinese Embassy in Jakarta, a 51 percent increase over the previous year.

By comparison, only 1,333 Indonesian students received visas for study in the United States in 2003, the United States consul general in Jakarta says. That was a precipitous drop from the 6,250 student visas the office said it issued in 2000 and part of a worldwide decline after 9/11.

Although many educators in Southeast Asia welcome the new openness to China, even longtime friends of the United States say China's influence appears to be growing at America's expense.

"You are losing ground, that's a fact of life," said Prof. Tanun Anumanrajadhon, the vice president of international affairs at Chiang Mai University. "People here are talking of China and economics. People don't care about democracy now."

The difference in ambition is noticeable, others say.

"China wants to be more influential here to replace America," Vanchai Sirichana, the president of Mae Fah Luang University, where the Sirindhorn Chinese culture center was opened early this year under the patronage of the Thai royal family. "China is very aggressive in terms of contributions."

Mr. Vanchai said he had proposed a balancing act to the American ambassador to Thailand, Darryl Johnson.

"I said, what about collaboration between the American government and universities in this area, because our door is open," Mr. Vanchai said, describing a conversation when Mr. Johnson visited the campus this year.

"He just laughed; there was no answer," Mr. Vanchai said, indicating that the ambassador's reaction was one of sorrow.

A diplomat on Mr. Johnson's staff confirmed the incident. He said the ambassador's hands were tied; there was no money coming from Washington.

Flowing With the Tide

Outgoing and articulate, Ngoh Eng Hong, 28, is as good a weather vane as any to read the shifting cultural winds in the region.

She is one of the stars of the Economic Development Board in Singapore, a powerful government body that encourages foreign investment in the island. Its staff is handpicked from among the tiny nation's smartest brains.

After she returned to Singapore in 1999 with two degrees in engineering from the United States, one from Stanford University, her bosses still felt she needed to top up with a degree from China. They sent her to Fudan University in Shanghai for a master's in business administration, from a program jointly run by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

"It is what you learn about them as people that is so important," Ms. Ngoh said of her experiences there. "People say the Chinese are very intelligent. When you are there, you see what that means: they are very streetwise."

Ms. Ngoh says she has no question where China is headed. "The world revolved around the United States for a very long time," she said in an interview. "I think people are beginning to understand that one day China can become another superpower."

That view is more and more common in this part of the world. It is a measure of what many see as a leveling playing field between the United States and China.

Today, while the Singapore government still sends a handful of students on scholarships to the top universities in the United States and Britain, it has introduced a parallel program to send equal numbers of its best students to China and India.

"People looked down on China," said Jessie Yak, who recently returned from Beijing, where she studied the Chinese language. "Now there is a 180-degree change. In the past, experience in the United States was important; now experience in China is just as good."

The cultural exchange flows both ways. Middle-class Chinese students whose parents cannot afford the steep fees in the United States are coming to campuses in Southeast Asia.

At Assumption University in Bangkok, Chinese enrollment was only 50 students five years ago. This year, 800 Chinese students are studying there. Most of the Chinese students pay \$2,000 to \$3,000 in annual fees, said Kamol Kitsawad, the registrar.

Singapore, considered an educational center for the region, is attracting Chinese students at all levels, from primary school through high school and beyond.

Chew Soon-Beng, the director of the Master of Science in Managerial Economics program at Nanyang Technological University, teaches mayors and provincial deputy governors from China. On a recent day, his students pondered questions like how to transform a country's free education system into a fee-paying system. They also discussed conflict of interest issues in government, a problem dealt with in different ways in Singapore and China. This summer, 51 Chinese officials graduated with a degree.

What's in it for Singapore?

"Singapore is always pragmatic," Professor Chew said. "In the past, the main engine of growth was Europe, Japan and the United States. We're trying to hitch on to the new engine."

Discovering One Another

Thirty years ago, as their nation's economy began to boom, Japanese tourists discovered the world, starting with Asia. Today, after more than a decade of galloping economic expansion, the Chinese are following suit.

In the last several years, Chinese tourists have started to catch up to Japanese tourists in the region. In Thailand, a favorite country for tourists of all kinds, more than 800,000 Chinese travelers visited in 2002, compared with just over a million Japanese, according to the Pacific Asia Travel Association. Last year, Chinese tourists to Thailand outnumbered American, the association said.

The new Chinese travelers range from low-income workers on package trips arranged by their factories to individual high rollers.

They are taking in the transvestite shows in the seedy resort town of Pattaya, south of Bangkok. They are tasting Hindu culture in Bali. They are buying emerald-encrusted cellphones in Singapore.

Similarly, Asian tourists are going to China, just a short plane ride away. and knitting the region together. Fashion conscious, business-driven young Asians view warp-speed Shanghai as a new version of Manhattan.

Two billboards at the entrance to the Jakarta airport in Indonesia illustrate the juxtaposition: Manhattan in the form of the Empire State Building is featured on an advertisement for Singapore Airlines; Shanghai with its soaring skyline is the image for the express delivery service DHL. Until very recently, such equality in symbolism was unheard of.

Strikingly, it is not only China's mega-cities that are appealing to Asian tourists.

SilkAir, the Singapore Airlines regional carrier, runs advertisements aimed at young executives in Singapore, suggesting that they take a break in rural China.

One panel of the ad shows a frazzled 20-something man toiling behind his computer late at night. "Need to unwind?" asks the caption. The other side shows the man, dressed in chinos, snoozing on the banks of the Min River, in Fujian Province, fishing rod beside him.

"The advantage of China is its proximity and the cultural experience," said Edmund Chua, regional director for the Singapore Tourism Board in Shanghai.

Nearly 600,000 Chinese tourists had arrived in Singapore by August this year. A decade ago, the number was just 165,000 Chinese.

Singapore sells itself to the Chinese in the way that Fort Lauderdale appeals to some Americans: not too far away, relatively safe, familiar food. But sometimes, the most popular attractions for Chinese tourists are what they cannot find at home.

On a warm evening recently, busloads of Chinese tourists made the pilgrimage to Pattaya, the Thai beach resort.

They stayed at a favorite hotel for Chinese tourists, the clean yet inexpensive Golden Beach Hotel (\$14 a room), and piled into Tiffany, a transvestite cabaret show. The Tiffany dancers are costumed in extravagant gowns that they never remove: the show conveys a hint of the risqué but not more.

Afterward, some of the Chinese tourists posed for snapshots with the transvestites, \$1 a shot.

Alice Wang, 32, an office manager in Guangdong, was on one of the buses. "I didn't come just for the sex show like the other tourists," she said.

Her main aim, she said, was some high-end shopping, including a crocodile handbag from a Bangkok store, a pastime once limited to monied Hong Kong businessmen. But not anymore.

"Its fun," she said. "I've already been to the U.S. and India."