

From **NAMASTE** to **NI HAO**

The growth of Mandarin language in the Indian consciousness

■ Nazia Vasi

Mandarin Chinese has become the foremost foreign language for Indians to learn today. It is coveted by Bollywood, international schools and Indian companies that want to spread their wings across the bamboo curtain.

This wasn't the case in 2010 when I conceptualized my company, Inchin Closer. My mission was to teach Chinese language and culture to Indian professionals. The thought was ahead of its time. People I spoke to didn't know what Mandarin was. Most hadn't sat in a classroom in the last 25 years.

But having lived in Shanghai, China for three years, I understood the importance of bridging the gap between the

people of the world's most populated countries. If we didn't speak each other's languages, how would we understand our neighbours? Trust them and be able to shape the Asian century together?

My time in Shanghai helped. I had gone to the Paris of the East in the summer of 2006 to teach English. I had learnt Mandarin from a third generation Indian Chinese man named Tony Wu in Mumbai. But when I landed in Shanghai, I

found that I was unable to order water at a restaurant. The helplessness strengthened my determination that if I ever taught Mandarin, it should be effective. My teaching would ensure that professionals, tourists or friends would never be stranded in a rapidly-developing China.

My experiences in Shanghai also gave me key points to include in the curriculum we teach from today. At one time, a friend's father was visiting Shanghai for an Expo. He contacted me desperately one day, enquiring where he could find authentic vegetarian food. Being a non-vegetarian, I hadn't encountered the problem. However, when I learnt that he had been surviving on potato chips for a week because he was uncertain of the vegetarian food offered at his hotel, I realized that being able to express food preferences was a vital topic to teach, especially for Indian professionals. 'At the restaurant' is now an integral part of our institute's Beginners Mandarin textbook, so that each professional who learns Mandarin with us will never go hungry in China.

My deep insights into the Middle Kingdom, experience in working as the India head of a China-India tax and legal consultancy and travels across the breadth of China revealed to me the pain points Indians faced in China. I believe in what Confucius said: If you are planning for a year, sow rice; if you are planning for a decade, plant trees; if you are planning for a lifetime, educate people.

All these experiences culminated in the setting up of my institute, which functions as an India-China consultancy and helps bridge the gap between the two countries linguistically and culturally.

In the beginning

I opened my institute in 2010. The first few years were rough. I had to make a mark. I had to build a brand, develop a curriculum, employ teachers from China for an authentic learning experience and create a series of textbooks and materials especially for the Indian audience. Mumbai did not have solutions for any of these challenges at the time. There wasn't a formalized way to teach Mandarin. Technol-



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Beginners Mandarin students rejoice after passing the final test with flying colours

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ogy and applications for languages were few. Majority of Indians weren't accustomed to learning from smart phones yet.

Also, at that time, few Mandarin language institutes existed in India. Hence there was no standardized script to follow. With knowledge of China and her national language scarce, convincing people to learn Mandarin was challenging. The dragon hadn't yet awoken in the Indian consumer consciousness.

There was no predetermined curriculum, textbook or Mandarin levels conceptualized specifically for Indian needs. Nor was there any market survey on price points or demand of the language. A course spread over 20 hours, for Rs 5,000, seemed an appropriate point to start by.

Based entirely on my gut feeling, I began teaching Mandarin with Qin Wen, a Native Chinese teacher trained in-house, using a textbook created by me to friends whom I had convinced Mandarin was the language of the future. Setting up a Chinese language institute in Mumbai was an experiment only I had dared to dream of.

At the time, I was probably the only CEO who wished for competition. Competition would give me a benchmark – one that I could then plot my institute against, and realize where to improve or where I stood out.

In the beginning, bringing in and training Native Chinese teachers to teach Indians was one of the toughest feats the company faced. Selecting the right Chinese teachers was the easy part. Convincing them to come to India was the difficult part. Not many Chinese parents wanted to send their young daughters to India.

Fortunately, I found help. Mr. Prabhu Deodhar, President of India China Economic and Cultural Council (ICEC) who at that time stepped in to sponsor and assist in bringing the teachers from China. We were the only institute at that time which specialized in employing native Chinese teachers, a feat we are proud of even today.



The Author with a Chinese film delegation at Gateway of India, Mumbai

Applying Hindi phonetics to Mandarin pronunciations helps fine-tune spoken Mandarin. Hindi phonetics enables us to pronounce subtle differences in sounds clearly. This makes Hindi an important bridge to learn new languages. Suddenly, a language that seems daunting and difficult becomes easy, because you are learning it from a language that you are already very familiar with

Designing the curriculum

Being a pioneer in a field has its thrills, but one has to face formidable challenges too. Designing the curriculum to teach Mandarin was one such challenge. I was building a language institute charged with passion, but without the professional expertise of an educator. Deciding on

the format, what to teach and how to present it were academic hurdles we encountered. I depended on my gut again – the belief was that since Indians and Chinese shared a rich, diverse history, we should use our commonness to know each other better.

While studying Mandarin in Shang-

hai, I had realized that applying Hindi phonetics to Mandarin pronunciations helped me fine-tune my spoken Mandarin. Most Indian languages are highly phonetic. They enable us to use subtle differences in sounds that the English language doesn't offer. This makes Hindi an important bridge to learn new languages. Taking this uniquely Indian technique from my days in Mandarin classrooms, I added the learning of Mandarin phonetics from Hindi into my curriculum.

Our mission was to highlight the connection between our nations and emphasize that we should celebrate our similarities. The textbooks of the institute now seamlessly incorporate Hindi to teach Mandarin phonetics. We have found that this method makes it easier for Indians to pick up perfect Mandarin pronunciations. It also helps ease people into the language. Suddenly, a language that seemed daunting and difficult becomes easy, because you are learning it

from a language that you are already very familiar with.

Mandarin gaining popularity

2013 is when Mandarin language really picked up in India. Chinese companies had begun to heavily invest in the elephant economy, and the Chinese dragon was waking up to the potential of the Indian economy. In 2014, President Xi Jinping, who is exporting China's model of state-led development in a quest to create deep economic connections, promised to spend US\$20 billion in Indian industrial and infrastructure projects over five years.

In 2015, Alibaba invested US\$500 million in Snapdeal and US\$700 million in Paytm.

The following year, Tencent invested US\$150 million in Hike, a messaging app, and a consortium of Chinese investors paid US\$900 for media.net. In 2017, Alibaba and Tencent announced or closed deals valued close to US\$2 billion—Alibaba's second tranche of US\$177 million in Paytm, US\$150 million in Zomato, US\$100 million in FirstCry and US\$200 million in Big Basket. Tencent's investments included US\$400 million in Ola, US\$700 million in Flipkart and a second round of investment in Practo.

By 2017, Bollywood was well known in China. Indian production houses were plotting for ways to enter the Middle Kingdom and perform their own little magic show. Aamir Khan's 3 idiots had become a pirated and then official media blockbuster. The dragon and the elephant decided to tango on soft power. Yoga gained traction. Through Aamir Khan, the Chinese realized that India wasn't the land of snake charmers anymore, but a bustling new hub for software, a huge consumer market and a profitable production hub.

The third round begins

Thus started the third round of civilization collaboration between India and China. The first came with Xuan Zhang's journey to India. The second was British-led tea and opium trade.

As the third round began, the importance of Mandarin grew throughout Indian boardrooms. Large Indian companies demanded Mandarin be taught to their employees to keep them relevant. International schools too reached out to us to teach Mandarin to impressionable children. We again expanded, developed a new curriculum, found and trained more native Chinese teachers, and rode the wave of Mandarin training for corporates and school-children. By now, our brand-name had been built. Companies and international schools wanted us for the authenticity, quality and professionalism we are now known for.

Revenues grew manifold in those years as demand to acquire a working knowledge of the language gained importance. Businessmen flocked to our centers, eager to gain a taste of Mandarin. Lawyers, traders, diamond merchants, entrepreneurs and owners of family businesses joined our weekend batches to further their professions. They realized that the language would empower them to speak, negotiate and thereby gain better deals with their clients. Additionally, the knowledge of Mandarin would help them to secure an international posting, simultaneously assuring them a better salary and quality of life. Third generation Chinese also joined our classes to learn the language of their forefathers.

We saw more and more school and college students take to Mandarin too. They figured the Emperor's language would enable them to stand out from the crowd in college applications, and give them an edge over the rest of the Indians applying abroad. Our roster of students now also includes politicians who privately seek fluency in Mandarin, enabling them to gain profitable deals with Chinese businessmen.

A part of the Indian consciousness

In 2016, learning Mandarin got formalized. Indian students gained access to scholarship programs more easily. With knowledge of Mandarin, more Indians could access China's similarities with

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India first-hand. Our institute was invited by the People's Republic of China's Consulate, Mumbai, to send the first fully-paid scholarship student to Beijing's prestigious Tsinghua University to study Mandarin for a year.

Within the same year, our institute started training and registering students for the HSK or Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi, a standardized test designed to ascertain the written and comprehension levels of Mandarin for international students.

So our curriculum and materials were revised again, this time to match the HSK exam requirements. We also wanted our curriculum to reflect the changes in experiences that Indians faced in a developing China. Additionally, we were now dealing with a technologically advanced India, one in which working professionals were accustomed to learning through apps. This advancement enabled our institute to include technological aids into our teaching techniques, leading to the 21st century classrooms we have today.

The year 2019 marks nine years of operations for our institute. We have taught more than 60 Beginner Mandarin courses, 20 Intermediate courses, 10 Advanced Mandarin courses and 10 Character Writing courses. We have taught at seven international schools, trained staff in five Indian and international companies and translated documents and interpreted for scores of companies and delegations.

We'd like to believe that we have built an ecosystem, one where our students are productive parts affecting business, trade, policy, tourism and cultural relations between India and China. The depth of knowledge and understanding they have gained in our classes has emboldened them to apply their awareness forward. Many have joined Fortune 500 companies in India, Singapore, Hong Kong and China and are leading the way these companies do business with China. Some others are making films based on the culture, stories and poems learnt in class, influencing China in softer, subtler



The author with People's Republic of China Consul General Mr. Tang Guocai, Maharashtra Minister of tourism Mr. Jayakumar Rawal and others

Now lawyers, traders, diamond merchants, entrepreneurs and owners of family businesses learn Mandarin to further their professional goals. The language empowers them to speak, negotiate and gain better deals with their clients. The knowledge of Mandarin helps them secure an international posting, assuring them of a better salary and quality of life

ways. Yet others have joined politics, the IFS and IAS. They are influencing the way our countries interact.

Having created the impact I set out to, gained the recognition that I have and having established our institute at the cornerstone of the China-India language exchange, the future looks bright to me.

In the coming years, I plan to adopt technology in our classrooms to teach Mandarin to many more Indians. I plan to partner with schools and universities to develop a China studies center. On the cards is also a teacher training course to enable women to teach Mandarin and earn an income with flexible time

and location possibilities.

In the next few months, our institute plans to revive classes for children. We hope to grow our translation business. I expect the demand for Mandarin to grow as professional opportunities increase. This could lead us to create a separate recruitment department, aiding companies to find the right candidates with appropriate Mandarin skills.

For now, our Mandarin language classes continue to impact a new generation of professionals, policy and decision makers. We are glad to be playing a significant part in the people of the world's two largest nations Inchin(g) Closer. □