
Look to the future and learn Mandarin

By Hermes Solomon
Published on June 3, 2012

MY LOCAL pharmacist's daughter is studying econometrics at Cambridge and is sitting her MSc exams at the moment. She would like to teach at one of our universities, but feels she requires a PhD for a chance of a job. She has been offered a place at Nottingham or Warwick universities to undertake the extra three year PhD course and will be 27 years of age before returning to Cyprus in search of work.

British universities entertain over 350,000 foreign students annually, mostly from EU member states with the Chinese (some 47,000) now leading the bunch of non EU entrants. Chinese demand for further education exists equally in France and Germany, although overall numbers are a third less than in the UK - understandably so since English is the lingua franca of the world; any post graduate would not reasonably expect to find a job without it. Maastricht University in Holland recently decided to conduct all courses in English only, and the Chinese are flocking there.

But one in three of EU post graduates cannot now find work, whereas every single Chinese post grad educated in Europe can - much sought after not only back home, but wherever a Chinese presence is planted throughout the world, increasingly so in Africa, the Middle East and South America.

Cyprus does not possess colonies or worldwide foreign interests able to absorb today's disproportionate percentage of Cypriot post grads, most of whom now take lowly paid jobs here while waiting despairingly in ever lengthening queues for a chance to work in their chosen career.

Yet hope is on the horizon for many if the Chinese corporation, Far Eastern Phoenix comes to Cyprus - developing the old Larnaca airport space comprising 475,000 square metres, taking over from Hermes Airports which has a concession agreement expiring in 19 years.

The value of the investment has been placed at €600 million and is said to include a commercial centre with a showroom and bonded facilities. Chinese factories would have some 4,000 booths to display products to potential buyers from the Middle East and Africa.

Of course, the lingua franca of booth employees and management will undoubtedly be English, if not featuring a smattering of Arabic, French and Mandarin in particular when employees need to communicate with their Chinese masters/exhibitors.

Yet do we have any post grads fluent in Mandarin? Is there even a single Cypriot who can speak the lingo?

In response to this question, Michael Alex Polydorou, studying or teaching at Middlesex University, posted recently on the Cyprus Mail website: "Yes, we also have Chinese speakers and Mandarin meet-ups that I am helping host. But we will need a lot more; Mandarin is the most important language to learn in the new decades."

As much as I commend Michael for his foresight, I must inform him that my compatriots here can only say in Mandarin, jia qian and xie xie ('how much' and 'thank you') those phrases taught to them by Chinese housemaids or ladies of lascivious leisure.

Education is all about predicting and satisfying a nation's future needs. Today there are too many economists and not enough solvent banks (if any), too many stockbrokers and not enough investors, too many ill educated and overpaid government administrators thriving on a bankrupt administration/treasury and too many properties for sale or to let with too few takers.

In other words, Cyprus failed to predict, or could never have been expected to predict, a need for competence

in Mandarin, whereas Mandarin is now on the syllabuses of many US universities and has been ever since China was accepted into the World Trade Organisation in the early 90s.

Rather than offering Greek lessons to immigrant workers, our universities should conduct all courses in English and introduce Mandarin on the syllabus for those Cypriot students who might eventually seek to work for a Chinese company like Far Eastern Phoenix where, at their proposed Larnaca airport complex, ten thousand jobs are envisaged to be created over the coming 50 years.

Should a Chinese construction company also win the contract to build the new gas terminal at Vassiliko, having already built the new cement works down the road at Zygi, then Cyprus will buzz with Chinese. And if perchance the Far Eastern Phoenix deal turns sour, as did the Qatar/Cyprus construction deal opposite the Hilton Hotel in Nicosia, then post grads fluent in Mandarin might better find work with any Chinese company worldwide.

Insular, complacent and lazy we have become, and it's these past 30 year attitudes that have closed doors of opportunity for Cyprus and its workforce. Acquiring high sounding but ephemeral qualifications in order to teach at one of our universities or gain employment as a now not so 'secure civil servant', a banker or stockbroker will only further bankrupt the country for years to come.

My wife's 16-year-old boy has been schooled here this past seven years on a visitor's visa and Chinese passport. He speaks Greek, English and Mandarin fluently and after passing his GCSE' A levels in 2014, he might not bother with university and just drive down the road to the old Larnaca airport to 'beg' Far Eastern Phoenix for a job. I bet he gets one.

A phoenix is a mythical bird which burns itself on a funeral pyre and rises from its ashes in the freshness of youth, this seen as an emblem of immortality, reborn idealism or hope.

We can but hope for a revival of that Cypriot post-1974 indomitable spirit to save us from insignificance, hopefully this time like the last, engendering an incisive reformation of our political, educational, administrative and financial institutions, which have grown increasingly staid, decadent and ineffective over this past 30 years.

Fat cows sit down. Lean cows espy fields anew. We must not just wait upon the as yet unquantifiable benefits to our economy of gas and oil.