

CHINA



At Andreas Laimböck's Live the Language Mandarin School you have to banish English from your life - the focus is on immersion. Photo: Simon Song

CHANGING FACES

TO LEARN THE LANGUAGE, LIVE THE CULTURE

Andreas Laimböck says expats must escape their bubble to achieve fluency in Putonghua, and his school in Beijing puts the emphasis on going local

When Austrian Andreas Laimböck, 33, came to China in 2002 to learn Putonghua, he ran into a wall of discouraging obstacles. But the hardship proved inspirational, and four years ago he set up the LTL Mandarin School in Beijing to help foreigners master what can at times seem like "a language from a different planet". This year, he started the University Pathway programme to help foreign students learn enough Chinese to earn university degrees on the mainland.

What first brought you to China?

I first came to China on a one-year exchange programme with City University of Hong Kong in 1999. At the time, I didn't have any special interest in China or indeed Asia. I was 20 and studying in England.

While the year in Hong Kong was fun and exciting, I pretty much lived an expatriate life, and in the end I felt unsatisfied. I wanted to learn Cantonese during that year, but the university didn't offer a Cantonese course. They offered Mandarin, but they were teaching it in Cantonese. Because I didn't speak the language, I felt hidden from a world I couldn't explore, one which my classmates would not bring me to, because even though they spoke English, they did not want to speak it after class.

I returned to Europe, graduated in finance and worked for a bank in Germany. But after three months I realised that was not what I wanted to do. One rainy day, sitting in my office in Frankfurt, I decided I had to make a radical move. So, to the slight shock of my parents, I quit my job and came back to China.

people do business, which is so different from us. However, once I understood it, it became boring.

I was 30, and I asked myself again what I wanted to do with my life. I looked back on my past year, and I realised one thing I enjoyed doing and was proud of was helping a friend who came to China to study Chinese. I helped arrange the whole thing – the university, accommodation, I advised her on how best to study. I felt that was the thing I did best – helping others to learn Chinese, and to escape the expatriate bubble. It was very fulfilling.

How is your programme different?

LTL stands for Live the Language and that's how I believe one should learn Mandarin – you have to live Chinese and banish English from your life. We therefore focus on immersion. Most of our students stay with host families in Beijing, and we offer programmes in Chengde (承德), a city in nearby Hebei (河北) province, where students can spend anywhere from a weekend to three months living with a Chinese family while attending Chinese classes every day.

Is looking for a host family difficult?

Yes, very difficult, but it is what makes the difference. We have more than 30 host families now, but we have to work hard to maintain these relationships.

Many Chinese families are becoming wealthy now, have several apartments, and they are interested in hosting a foreign student, but you need to spend a lot of time convincing them. We pay

as a whole, because anywhere outside Beijing and Shanghai there are simply not enough foreigners for Chinese to like or dislike. The vast majority of Chinese have never met a foreigner, so how could they have strong feelings towards them?

Do you think Beijing has changed during your time here?

Beijing has really changed, from what was a backwater to an international, very self-confident city. It's quite hard to describe. I'd say almost everything has changed but the Beijingers themselves. They still roll up their shirts, drink spirits and eat grilled lamb skewers. They may have become wealthy and drive BMWs, but this is probably still what they enjoy doing the most.

Andreas Laimböck spoke with Ng Tze-wei



At Andreas Laimböck's Live the Language school in Beijing



What was your Mandarin-learning experience like?

There were some problems to begin with. For example, the university insisted on me paying a US\$100 application fee in cash one month before the course started, and I was

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ANDREAS LAIMBÖCK

still in Germany. It was only after many phone calls that someone agreed to let me pay when I got to Beijing.

When I arrived, there were more blunders, as I didn't speak any Chinese, and neither the school administrator nor the teachers spoke English. I didn't know I had been placed in the beginner-intermediate class, together with Japanese and Korean students who didn't speak English, until two weeks later when I met an American student.

The classes had 25 students, so they were very big. Students from different parts of the world have different problems. For European students, while learning Chinese characters is challenging, the grammar is very easy, so you can learn step by step. The hardest part of learning Chinese is tones, since we don't have them, and the teachers didn't pay enough attention to that.

I only started to really learn Chinese when I moved in with two Chinese guys, and we tried hard to socialise together. But even that is quite difficult, because at 23, Europeans like to go to bars, but Chinese are not so interested in that. So we would go swimming, or for dinner, or cook together at home. It took effort from both sides, but it worked for us, and we remain good friends.

So I found that learning a language without social interaction doesn't work. I've seen many people learn Chinese, and those who achieve fluency are willing and able to accept and live the culture.

Why did you decide to open a school to teach Mandarin?

I worked in sales and marketing for different European companies for several years, and I learned a lot about China – both the good and the bad. For example, competition here is very tough. For me it was a great adventure to learn how these

them, of course, but they don't really need the money; they do it because they like our students. For example, one of the family hosts is called Uncle Guo, and the students love him. We keep going back to the family, and they say "oh, where is the student from this time? Ah, American, we haven't had an American yet; send him along." Many of our students become very close to their host families.

What is the University Pathway programme?

We just started organising it, and the first batch of students start this September. I understand we are the only school offering such a programme at the moment, and we thought of it because people overseas have been asking us if we could provide a programme so that students could go to university in China. There are currently degree programmes in English, but all the good programmes are in Chinese.

Most students have been coming to China to learn the language, but we've seen increased interest in coming here for other subjects. Right now, I'd say 80 per cent of students are interested in business subjects. Another popular subject is Western medicine. This is probably because, in many countries, there are only very few places for medical studies.

Universities here are also very interested in attracting foreign students for degree programmes. So far we've signed agreements with seven universities. Students can choose other universities too, but with these seven it will be easier to arrange enrolments, and we'll guide students through the process.

The programme will last half a year, and will bring students with no Chinese language skills up to proficiency level four – the highest in the standard Chinese language test.

We are expecting about 20 to start in September and demand is likely to grow.

This is partly because the teaching of Chinese overseas is still in its infancy, which is why even foreign students who learned Chinese in their home countries do not speak it well enough for university-level studies in China.

Recently there has been talk of anti-foreigner sentiment. Do you feel that?

I haven't experienced it in all my years here. On the contrary, I've always felt that Chinese people take extra care of foreigners. For example, just this morning, a woman on the subway was trying to tell me that my bag zip was open, relying on her mobile phone to translate to English. Would she have done the same for a Chinese passenger? I'm not sure.

Also, you can't talk about China



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