

Asia's Lingua Franca

By Kong Gwi-hyun

In ancient times, two civilizations, the Hwang Ho and the Indus Civilization, were established in Asia. After establishing the civilization, the Hwang Ho Civilization was spread toward East while the Indus spread to the West. So East Asia including almost all countries in the east of India was much influenced by China, and those countries feel that in culture they have some common features with other East Asian countries. Moreover, nowadays trade among those countries is getting more frequent, and in order to efficiently communicate with another, a lingua franca is necessary. In this century, English is a lingua franca of the world. Chinese, however, will be used in trade as a lingua franca of East Asia in the twenty-first century because China probably will be the center of economy of East Asia and most East Asians are with Chinese.

Now China is playing an important role in the world economy, and therefore in order to get economic benefit from China, people will spend much time in learning Chinese. The economical emergence of China is shown in three aspects. The first aspect is China itself. Economically, China is growing into a giant. According to a New China News Agency (ACNA) report, in 2005 China will outrun France in GDP. Moreover, in 2020 China will be the world's third biggest country in economy and in 2050 the second biggest. The second aspect is shown in the fact that among Asian four dragons, three are from China. Asian four dragons symbolize the most powerful countries of Asia in economy. Among them, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore separated from China in the past. Consequently, most people of those countries are Chinese. 99% of Taiwanese people, 75% of Singaporean people and 99% of Hong Kong people are Chinese. The third aspect is through Chinese merchants residing abroad. In East Asia, Chinese emigrants' influence is quite strong. In capital, they are occupying 81% in Singapore, 61% in Malaysia and 81% in Thailand. Considering these three aspects, it is not difficult to estimate that China will be the economic center of East Asia. If that is true, wise men will prepare to learn Chinese. Let's remember the sales skills: To sell products, the best sales people pace their customers and they match customers' mood and speech. China is becoming a rich and strong customer, and in order to trade with China, it will definitely be effective to use Chinese. That means that more East Asians will have to learn to speak Chinese, and consequently, Asians probably will communicate with Chinese when they trade with other East Asians.

Another reason why Chinese will probably become the lingua franca of East Asia in economy is the fact that East Asians are familiar with the Chinese language. In the Middle Ages, the lingua franca of Europe was Latin. The reason Latin became a lingua franca is the fact that many European languages are related to Latin. The linguistic root of Italian, French and Spanish is Latin. So Latin was universal through Europe, and when the people of one European nation met people from another European nation, they spoke Latin because Latin was the most common language in Europe. Most East Asians are familiar with Chinese. In Taiwan, Singapore, and of course, China, Chinese is an official language, and in Japan Chinese script is used. In Vietnamese, Thai, Burmese and Korean languages, many borrowed words from Chinese are used. Thus considering the fact that Chinese is the most familiar language in East Asia, Chinese probably will be a lingua franca of East Asia in economy.

Considering geographical and cultural factors, therefore, in the twenty-first century most Asians will probably be able to speak Chinese. If so, the status of China also will be promoted. Economically, China is no more far from Korea. The Bank of Korea recently reported that the biggest market of Korea has changed from the United States to China. The more we contact China, the more opportunities to speak Chinese we have. It is time to learn Chinese.