

# Skip Mandarin Class, Choose Latin Instead

In 1989, Japanese businessman Minoru Isutani purchased Pebble Beach's famous golf course for \$850 million, and Mitsubishi Estate Company paid \$846 million for 51 percent of New York's Rockefeller Center. The United States cowered from the kamikaze attack of Japanese capital on American business. American students swamped Japanese language programs, as the Land of the Rising Sun's Potemkin economy bedazzled Wall Street.

But the financial tsunami eventually petered out. The moribund reality of Japan's economy has now slogged through its third "lost decade." The only lasting result of the crisis today is that 55-year-old MBAs can discuss the weather in Japanese with their sushi chefs.

Wall Street has shifted its gaze to China. Career-focused American students now burnish their college degrees with just enough Mandarin instruction to sound like preschoolers. Few care about Spanish or French, and even fewer about Portuguese, the most widely spoken language in South America; NYU does not have one Portuguese major among its 51,000 students. But the smart money is on learning Hindi. The next Jeff Bezos can thank me after India supplants China as the hottest business spot. Unlike Mandarin, students won't be completely lost, since Hindi shares English's Indo-European foundation.

But ignore Asia for a minute. Joseph Solodow's [\*Latin Alive\*](#) (2001) will convince mercenary Mandarin zealots of Latin's importance to English. One Solodow student's epiphany explains why: "Latin has engulfed me all my life, and I'm amazed that only now have I come to realize it!" No such realization could ever occur in a Mandarin class. *Latin Alive* outlines Roman history before romping through Latin

cognates and derivatives. After some challenging morphology and phonology, readers translate important early French, Italian, and Spanish texts.

*Latin Alive* occupies the howling void between popular nonfiction and serious scholarship, with enough erudition to sate academics, yet not so much as to intimidate laymen. Kudos to its publisher, Cambridge University Press, for filling this desperate need. I just wish *Latin Alive* had a larger marketing budget, especially as classics departments shut down nationwide. Recently a Chinese student's mother, a mid-level CCP official, buttonholed me during her visit to New York. Clearly oblivious to the "Ugly American" stereotype, she suggested we should be ashamed of our abominable Mandarin. She then demanded to know what I, as a professor, was doing about it. I'll mail her this review, after I stop spitting in the ocean.

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