

Chinese cooks turn interpreters for trade

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Mumbai

Seventh-century Chinese traveller Xuanzang — better known to Indians as Hiuen Tsang — travelled 10,000 miles trudging through the Himalayas to India in his quest for knowledge. He was China's first unofficial ambassador and impressed Emperor Harshavardhan so much that he was treated as a royal guest.

Cut to the present. A humble group of Chinese waiters and cooks settled in India for generations and working in restaurants for years is playing the role of trade ambassadors. They lack the intellectual subtlety of Xuanzang, but are much sought after in view of the growing Indo-China trade.

Honey Chang is a middle-aged Chinese man born and brought up in Pune and fluent in English and Hindi. He's manning the Machinery Factory of Hunan Institute at a government-backed exhibition of Chinese products in which 120 Chinese firms are participating. The exhibition, at the Grand Hyatt, Santa Cruz, ends on Sunday.

Chang's owns a small restaurant on the outskirts of Pune. But here he's donned the role of interpreter to help the Chinese manufacturer sell cheap generator sets to Indian traders.

"My parents are Chinese who were also born in India. I learnt Mandarin from them," he says. "We are a small group of 25 who help our Chinese brothers to do business in India."

Would he go back to China, where urban living standards have improved dramatically? "I am an Indian and I carry an Indian passport," Chang says proudly as he fields technical queries on gensets from customers trooping into the stall.

His current job is very different from the recipes he serves back in Pune. Learning Mandarin in childhood is proving useful now. He earns not less than Rs3000 a day for translating his mother tongue.

Chang and his small tribe are unwittingly playing the role of trade ambassadors, leaving behind their humdrum lives in the eateries. They come in surreptitiously, banking their routine work at restaurants to earn some quick money on the side.

"At times I inform my employers of my inability to come to work, at times I just bunk work to moonlight as an interpreter," says Hsien Chien Cheung, a garrulous old man, who introduced himself as a cook at a prominent Chinese restaurant. "Please don't write my nickname," he says. His proprietors only know him by his nickname.

"We Indians have a great leaning for European languages and have ignored Asian languages," says Sangee-

ta Sabharwal, CEO, Ma Foi Global Search Services, eponymous arm of India's top human resources firm. Her firm has put out a colloquium on how to trade with China.

With Indo-China trade slated to touch US\$18 billion by the end of this fiscal, more interpreters will be needed. A gap that's difficult to fill, unless enterprising Indians learn the language.

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The advertisement features a close-up portrait of a smiling woman, Shonal Rawat, with her hair pulled back. She is holding a green neem branch near her face. The background is a bright yellow. The text is arranged in a clean, modern layout, with the brand name 'GOODCARE' in the top right corner, the headline 'Chaotic Schedules, Hectic Routines... yet Healthy Skin!' in the center, and the name 'Shonal Rawat' in the bottom left. A small 'NEEM GUARD' logo is visible in the bottom right corner.