

Online can be a lifeline for far-flung teachers

Education startups' customized language lessons have economic and cultural implications. **Cheng Yu** reports

Fear and despair seized Stephanie Prestigiacomio, 30, on Sept. 6 last year. The full-time mother and native of Florida saw Hurricane Maria devastate Puerto Rico, the Caribbean island she lived on, ransacking her house and eventually leaving her husband jobless.

Prestigiacomio lost almost all hope until a Chinese educational startup offered her a part-time English teaching opportunity. The gig not only helped drag the family out of a cul-de-sac but became the family's main source of income.

"I've never been happier in my life," she said. "With the part-time job I was able to continue to work despite a major natural disaster wreaking havoc on our lives."

More than 100,000 foreigners outside China now earn decent money by teaching English to young Chinese on online educational platforms.

To be sure, not all faced life-altering situations, but what they earn by teaching English online supplements their regular income, helping improve the quality of their lives.

Chinese internet-based companies have created thousands of such part-time jobs for foreigners outside China. These companies are not as big as Tencent or Alibaba; what they offer are flexible roles and competitive remuneration, with a promise to sweeten the deal further later.

"It makes eminent business sense for Chinese online education providers to attract overseas teachers," said Zhou Zhe, audit partner of PwC China. "This helps access intellectual resources globally."

More than 60,000 North American teachers now teach one-on-one English courses on VIPKid, a Chinese online education startup. 51Talk,



A Filipino teaches English to a Chinese child via an online education platform. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



Foreigners who teach Chinese youngsters English via online platforms with their students during an offline activity in Beijing.

another online English-tutoring platform, links 15,000 Filipino teachers with young Chinese.

The Shanghai online education company iTutorGroup has also attracted more than 15,000 foreign teachers from English-speaking countries, including Australia, Britain and Canada.

Analysts said earnings from Chinese online education companies are competitive in terms of time and energy spent, especially considering that U.S. public school teachers are often underpaid and struggle to make a decent living.

Catherina, 46, a former public school teacher from Kentucky, now



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STEPHANIE PRESTIGIACOMIO
FULL-TIME MOTHER, PART-TIME ENGLISH TEACHER

works part-time with VIPKid. With an average of five classes a day, each of which lasts 25 minutes, she is paid between \$24,000 and \$36,000 a year.

The more she teaches, the more she earns, and executives of the Beijing company said a foreign teacher could earn more than \$70,000 a year, rivalling the average annual income of a public school teacher in the U.S.

Chinese companies follow the local laws applicable to the tutors, who work in the capacity of independent contractors, so they pay taxes on their income locally. Typically, payments after tax deductions are made directly into their bank accounts in local currency.

"In addition to earnings, flexibility is another important reason that foreign teachers apply for the part-time jobs as they can take advantage of their spare time to teach," said Lyu Senlin, founder and chief researcher at the Learneasy Times Online Education Research Institute, an industry research consultancy.

Online platforms' foreign teachers can arrange classes to suit to their convenience. They can log in and teach from any quiet place.

Prestigiacomio, who has a baby and could not work during the day, is now able to take care of her baby and at the same time teach six days a week. Catherina agreed that working like this was perfect because she could teach at a time that suited her.

"It's also a shining example of economic globalization," she said. "Online education, as the latest form of internet economy, is overcoming the limits of geography and time zones."

For long, China has identified education as a top priority. Since 2016 the government has been investing more than 3 trillion yuan a year in education. This accounts for about 4 percent of gross domestic product. Chinese parents have high expectations of their children and are willing to spend big money for high-quality education.

Jing Zhiqiang, 42, of Beijing a father of a 9-year-old son, parted with 10,980 yuan (\$1,500) for a set of 72 classes for his junior. The boy attends four classes a week on an online education platform.

The family spends 2,400 yuan a month for an online English course. That is half of Beijing's per-capita monthly disposable income of about 4,800 yuan last year.

For Jing, the first reason behind choosing the online course is that his children can take one-on-one personalized tutoring from native English speakers. This, he believes, will help his son.

"Also, home-based tutoring is a great relief for my wife and me as we don't have much time to pick up and send our son to tutoring institutes. Particularly in Beijing where the traffic is often terrible, we actually save a lot of road time. ... Time is money, isn't it?"

Zhou of PwC said: "It's apparent the biggest demand for foreign-language tutoring comes from China. The market will continue to grow, driven by demand for studying abroad, business trips as well as traveling."



A merchant puts take-away food into an autonomous delivery robot developed by Segway Robotics. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Robots: Aging presages dearth of hospitality labor

FROM PAGE 1

"Robots themselves are of no value unless they are used in valuable industries to solve certain problems," said Zhao Ming, founder of Yogo Robot.

Yunji Technology of Beijing has produced a similar robot named Run. Introduced to the market in January 2016, the robot has mainly been used in hotels. To date, the robot is employed in 400 hotels worldwide, including Singapore, Australia and South Korea.

The robot mainly runs errands, bringing all kinds of things to guests' rooms. Just like a human employee, it is paid each month, about 5,000 yuan, said Zhi Tao, chief executive officer of Yunji Technology. From time to time it even gets tips, she said.

"Robots for commercial services will improve industry efficiency and provide more pleasant working and living environments for people. Although such robots are in their infancy at present, their roles will certainly grow."

The Ministry of Civil Affairs said the number of people over 60 years old will reach 243 million by 2020, accounting for more than 17.2 percent of the population. It is expected that this figure will surpass 300 million by 2025.

The rapidly aging population will lead to a decrease of labor supply in the catering and hospitality industry, which will result in rising labor costs.

More and more companies are aware of the significance of adopting unmanned delivery robots, which is becoming the new driving force for the transformation and upgrading of traditional industries.

Experts said that with the advent of the artificial intelligence era, unmanned delivery robots could undertake menial work, such as handling orders and deliveries, freeing people to be engaged in more valuable work.

China's service robots industry will be worth about 12.3 billion yuan this year, 27.2 percent higher than last year, the market consultancy Analysys said.

Keenon Robotics Co. Ltd., another Shanghai intellectual service robot manufacturer, has produced autonomous service robots that can be used for shopping, providing information, food and beverage



Customers drink coffee delivered by Meituan-Dianping's autonomous driving car in Xiongan New Area in northern China's Hebei province on Sept. 7.

delivery and other services.

The company's Peanut delivery robot, equipped with a fully autonomous positioning and navigation system, can navigate precisely, allowing it to move freely in a complex indoor environment. Such delivery robots have been introduced in some restaurants and hotels, with the aim of upgrading workflow, reducing costs and helping businesses achieve intelligent management.

In addition, autonomous delivery robots have been introduced in outdoor environments. The e-commerce company JD began robot deliveries in Haidian district of Beijing in June. The robots, which have a top speed of 9.3 miles an hour, are equipped with radar and sensors to help them recognize traffic lights and their surroundings and can carry up to 30 parcels at a time.

Customers receive a message from JD when the robot is about to arrive, and are able to collect their parcels using facial recognition, by inputting a code or using a mobile phone app.

"Unmanned deliveries represent a potential development direction for logistics, which is one reason why e-commerce and logistics companies are experimenting with these things," said Wang Xiaoxing, an analyst with Analysys.

This delivery method will help solve the labor shortage issue in the express industry, reduce delivery costs and improve efficiency, but the industry is still in its infancy and should be further tapped, Wang said, adding that more time is needed to realize large-scale commercialization of unmanned delivery robots.



An online English teacher from the U.S. with a student in Beijing.

In this industry it's raining cats, dogs and big bucks

BY WANG YIQING

Raising pets, especially dogs or cats, is part of modern life, but in recent years raising pets has become a stylish and cash-burning lifestyle in cities, which has given rise to what the media call a pet economy.

People have been raising animals for centuries for food, and as house guards or hunting guides. But today animals, especially pets, also serve people's emotional needs. In a way, the establishment of the China Small Animal Protection Association in 1992 signaled the evolution of animals as human companions. Today many people are willing to spend a small fortune to raise a pet, which they treat like a family member.

Since 2000 the number of pets has rapidly risen in China, so much so that it is almost impossible to ascertain the exact number of pets in the country. The China Pet Industry 2018 White Paper, a non-official document jointly issued by the pet website Goumin.

com and Pet Fair Asia recently, said more than 91 million dogs and cats are raised as pets in Chinese cities. The two organizations conducted a survey that covered more than 52,870 people in 34 provincial administrative regions.

The report estimates that 73.5 million people in cities have pets, meaning about 9 percent of China's overall urban population of 813.5 million last year had pets.

The high degree of urbanization and people's rising incomes are the main reasons why pet raising has become so popular. Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Tianjin and Chengdu are the top cities where pet raising is most popular. The fact that the residents of these first- and second-tier cities have comparatively high disposable incomes has played a critical role in popularizing pets.

The increasing popularity of pets in urban areas has given rise to a whole industrial chain, which in turn has helped build a pet economy, comprising pet consumption including

food, medical treatment and even funeral and interment expenses.

The National Bureau of Statistics said the compound growth rate of China's pet industry was 49.1 percent from 2010 to 2016, the highest among all industries. According to the pet industry's white paper, the pet economy is worth 171 billion yuan (\$24.9 billion), and has been growing 27 percent a year. The white paper also said that on average a pet owner last year spent 5,000 yuan on one cat or one dog, 15 percent more than in the previous year.

Food and other daily requirements of pets and their medical treatment account for the bulk of the pet consumption market. Food and other daily necessities account for most pet owners' spending, which has been rising over time.

Sales of high-quality and expensive pet products have grown rapidly because people are willing to spend more money on pets, and more and more market segments for pet products are emerging to meet the



From left: Some dog owners treat their pets as family members and even dress them up. A cat is given the full spoiled-feline treatment. FANG ZHE / XINHUA



increasing demands of pet owners.

For the pet owners, medical care for their charges is an unavoidable expense. The white paper estimates that pet service accounts for about 30 percent of what is spent on dogs and 20 percent of what is spent on cats, with the biggest pet service demand being medical care. On average a dog owner spends 1,557 yuan a year on the dog's medical care, and a cat owner 1,446 yuan.

But almost half of the pet owners are dissatisfied with the existing medical care system for pets, because of factors such as what they regard as unqualified veterinarians and unreasonable

charges for medical treatment.

The rising popularity of pet raising has also promoted other forms of businesses. For years, pets, especially dogs and cats, have been used as IP characters in many countries, fueling the growth of a new kind of new media economy in China in recent years.

A study of the cat economy by Tencent Research Institute shows the image of a cat considered cute draws increasingly high online attention and helps cultivate new commercial models. Weibo, the Chinese version of Twitter, has become an important platform of "cloud cat-raising" which refers to the phenomenon of internet

users watching photographs or videos of cats for entertainment.

According to the study, up to January this year about 5.5 million Weibo account users had used the tag "cat" to identify themselves. Also, in recent years, the number of pet owners has grown. Most of the pet owners belong to the post-1980 or post-1990 generations, which shows their strong spending power.

Thanks to people's increasing consumption, more market segments of the pet industry, especially the pet-related service sector including pet training and pet shipping, are expected to grow at a faster pace.