

Help wanted: Tech firms in Vietnam seek Chinese speakers

Apple suppliers, garment makers fleeing China-U.S. tension hire bilingual talent

By LIEN HOANG, Nikkei staff writer

HO CHI MINH CITY -- Nguyen Thi Hoa's rice farmer parents thought their daughter could have a better life if she learned English to get a job. She chose Chinese instead and is now in her final year of college in Vietnam. Her timing could hardly have been better.

From Apple suppliers Foxconn and GoerTek to makers of tires and textiles, a boom of investment from greater China has hit Vietnam and set off a scramble for staff members with exactly Hoa's skills.

The rising demand for Vietnamese employees who speak Chinese is just the latest symptom of factories shifting to the Southeast Asian nation. Higher costs and risks in China, including its trade war with the U.S., motivated companies from many countries to make the shift. But among Vietnam's major investors, mainland China made the biggest leap -- its cumulative investment doubled in the past five years. When also factoring in the increases from Taiwan and Hong Kong, the shortage of workers who can translate between Chinese and Vietnamese becomes even more profound.

"I just started studying Chinese because I liked it," Hoa said. "But now my goals are clearer. When I search online, there are so many different jobs ... from north to south."

Upon graduation she will have an embarrassment of riches when it comes to job openings.

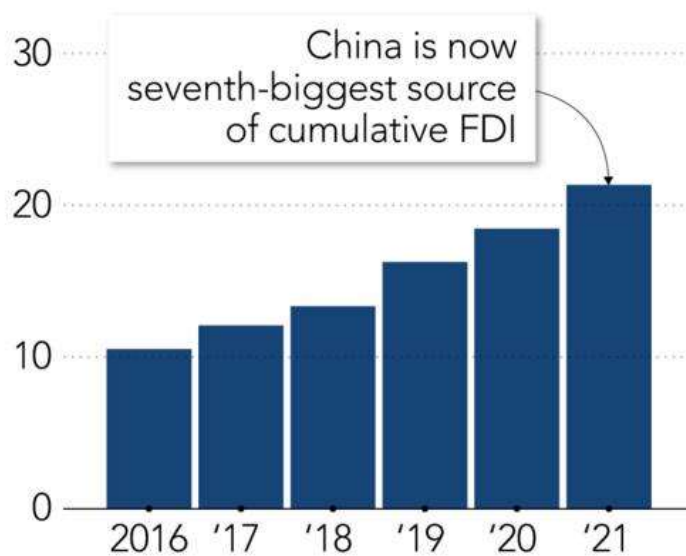
As companies pull up stakes in China and cross the border to Vietnam, they "find it difficult to recruit personnel with high professional quality [who are] fluent in Chinese," said a recent report from Navigos, owner of the biggest local job site, VietnamWorks.

Manufacturers in the smartphone, earbud and other electronics sectors are especially affected, the company told Nikkei Asia, based on the recruitment work that its consultants do for clients in those industries.

China's cumulative FDI in Vietnam

(In billions of dollars)

Excluding Hong Kong
Source: Vietnam
Ministry of Planning
and Investment



Nikkei tracked job ads on VietnamWorks for the past month, finding a 55% increase in ads seeking Chinese speakers.

Apple suppliers Wistron, Pegatron and Compal often feature in the listings for all manner of engineers, line managers and accountants.

At the request of Apple and other clients, key AirPods assemblers Luxshare and Goertek also aggressively expanded in Vietnam. The latter made one of the country's biggest foreign investments in January, with plans to inject another \$400 million and hire 30,000 workers in Nghe An, the north-central province has said.

"When [investors] come here, they want to do business in their language," said Filippo Bortoletti, Vietnam director at Dezan Shira, a consultancy with 12 offices in China. "It's tough to find the full package."

His clients include Chinese electronics and toy producers that sought advice in relocating to Vietnam.

The communist country's top two investors have not changed in the past decade -- South Korea and Japan -- so their native tongues and English also populate help-wanted ads.

But the need for Chinese speakers has grown because China is the only nation in that time to steadily climb the ranks of the top 10 by cumulative investment, reaching No. 7 in 2021 from No. 9 in 2015, according to Vietnam's planning ministry. In five years the Middle Kingdom's investment into its smaller neighbor ballooned 102.8%, by far the biggest jump among the top 10.

The U.S.-China tariff war was a more recent driver of businesses migrating south, but before that it was the Trans-Pacific Partnership. Garment manufacturers came to Vietnam tantalized by the TPP trade deal's promise of reduced textile tariffs.

"We do see an inflow of Chinese and Taiwanese companies coming in to invest in Vietnam," said Chien Chih Ming, chairman of the Taiwanese Chamber of Commerce Vietnam.

"Textile and shoemaking industries are more traditional, so I would still see they prefer to hire people who could speak Chinese."

English remains the lingua franca, however, especially in high-tech businesses, which also ask "managers from China or Taiwan to learn Vietnamese," he added.

The move to Vietnam saw a slight reversal last summer, when a brutal COVID shutdown forced global buyers to reroute their orders to China, Indonesia and Sri Lanka.

But customers are returning for the stability of the one-party state, geographic location and modest but rising pool of suppliers.

"It's not just because of the tariffs," Bortoletti said in an interview, "but also because the expertise is very good in Vietnam now."

Additional reporting by Cheng Ting-Fang in Taipei.