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Middle Kingdom Meets Elementary School

by MARINA KOESTLER RUBEN • NOV. 14, 2008

<4>On the morning of Sept. 2, 2008, the 198th day of this latest Year of the Rat, Sarah Harris stands outside a tan brick building on 8th and Varnum Streets NE in Brookland. She bends to pick up the plastic sign that has just toppled from its perch against a construction fence: WASHINGTON YU YING PCS.

“We are very glad to see you here!” Harris says to one wide-eyed boy, who clutches a stuffed bear with both hands. She reaches out for a handshake as she talks. He doesn’t budge, so she grasps his bear’s paw instead. The boy gives a small smile and heads inside.

A mother-daughter duo approaches. “Which room is she in today?” the mother asks Harris.

“She can go to English,” Harris responds.

The little girl looks up, troubled. She tugs on her mother’s pants, “I already know English!”

If this girl sounds motivated to dump her native language in favor of a foreign one, that’s a good sign. Because learning Chinese requires more than just a passing interest. It’s a challenge so towering, in fact, that there are only a handful of schools across the country crazy enough to attempt what’s going on at Yu Ying.

Mary Shaffner, Yu Ying’s executive director, uses the word “trauma” when referring to the students’ potential problems adjusting to school. The kids are joining the one in five people on this planet who speak Mandarin Chinese. The State Department classifies Mandarin Chinese, the most-spoken Chinese dialect, as one of the five hardest languages for English speakers to learn, requiring approximately 2,200 class hours, compared to the 600 needed to learn French or Spanish.

For some students, it may be a slow boat from America’s apples, boys, and cats to China’s 60,000 separate characters and four tones. Say “ma” in English, and you’ve called your mother; say “ma” in Chinese, and, depending on whether your voice is rising or falling, you may have used the nouns “horse” or “hemp” or the verb for “to accuse.”

China’s economic and political ascendancy is surprising only to those who haven’t been paying attention. It’s the most populous country in the world, with more than 1.3 billion people—quadruple the population of the United States. Even before it became a manufacturing powerhouse, China invented fireworks,

matches, gunpowder, crossbows, kites, cast iron, steel, wheelbarrows, suspension bridges, rudders, compasses, masts and sails, mechanical clocks, umbrellas, silk, porcelain (“china”), and—to buy everything else—paper money.

At the moment, the preschool-age children of parents inspired by China’s rise are supposed to be sitting in a circle in Jue Wang’s pre-K class for their morning routine.

Whether in English or Chinese classrooms, each day at Yu Ying begins the same way: Students must find their designated spots in the circle—the same place in each class—and follow their teachers as they sing and clap; use posters on the wall to review the daily schedule, weather, and day of the week; and say hello to students around the circle.

Harris enters the room as one boy strays from his spot in the circle. “What should you be doing right now?” she asks him. Yu Ying’s guideline is clear: No English in Chinese class—unless to address a safety concern or to comfort a distraught child. Harris breaks the rule occasionally, if quietly, so as not to distract the other students. She has already met privately with crying children, empathizing and then encouraging them to give Chinese class another try.

No one expects the students to understand Chinese right away, and judging from the blank stares around the room, many students clearly don’t. No more than 5 percent of Yu Ying’s 131 students have had any prior exposure to Mandarin. Yu Ying gives itself a wide berth when it comes to language goals; its Web site promises students will “be both bilingual and biliterate by Grade 8”—through which level the school will eventually serve students. Prior to eighth grade, Yu Ying expects yearly improvement in “students’ mastery of both English and Chinese,” with most significant advances occurring beyond fourth grade.

The first month’s goals are primarily emotional: In both English and Chinese classrooms, in all grades, children should feel comfortable, interested, and safe. Ideally, they would also begin to comprehend basic vocabulary, such as “hello,” “goodbye,” “line up,” “please,” “thank you,” “I need,” “I like,” “I can,” “bathroom,” “hungry,” and “thirsty.” By the end of kindergarten, they should recognize 50 Chinese characters.

Curriculum consultant and co-founder Amy Quinn points to a common phrasing problem when people talk about language acquisition: “Our teachers aren’t really teaching Chinese. They’re teaching in Chinese....Language is one of the few things you don’t actually need to be taught as a separate entity.”

Today, after circle time in the Chinese kindergarten class, the students draw pictures of different color squares. Their teacher moves between tables, holding up students’ papers and speaking in Chinese. “Sam drew a blue square,” she’s likely saying. “Chelsea drew a red square.” No one seems quite sure, though a

few students nod tentatively when she directs her words toward them. Meanwhile, two students tug either side of a blue basket, arguing over who gets to play with it. The standoff is communicated in English—it'll be a while before the Yu Yingers can say "Mine" and "No, mine!" in Mandarin.

The story of the school starts, somewhat indirectly, in Dupont Circle's Stead Park in the summer of 2004. While their toddlers built castles in the sandbox, a group of parents began talking about the labels on their children's belongings. They had noticed a difference between what they had owned as children and what they bought for their own kids: Now, "Made in China" appeared on baby cribs, clothing, toys—even Lincoln Logs. "We knew back then that China was going to be the next superpower," says Gloria Borland, who wanted her own daughter to learn the language.

Inspired, Borland and fellow parents planned to open a Chinese-immersion school, the Dupont International School, which would offer an ambitious at-grade-level curriculum, as opposed to the remedial work that the group saw at other public schools. But the Public Charter School Board (PCSB) rejected the group's application the following year, saying it was "almost exclusively targeted to upper-middle and upper income residents of the Dupont Circle area." It was one concern in a long list of PCSB's criticisms of the program. Burned out, the group decided not to rework the application.

Instead, Borland passed her papers off to another mother, Mary Shaffner, who had heard about the Dupont parents' efforts through a Mount Pleasant online forum and sent out an e-mail to see if other parents were interested in meeting and talking about the proposed school. Shaffner and another mother, Lisa Chiu, pulled together a new group of parents, educators, and other professionals interested in Chinese immersion.

The new group decided to keep elements of the original team's ideas, such as requiring parents to perform annual volunteer work for the school. Their application also addressed the PCSB's concerns about inclusiveness; they planned to hire a full-time English Language Learning teacher for Spanish-speaking students and emphasized their ability to offer "differentiated instruction" to reach students with any background or skill set.

After consultation with experts and other schools, the group deliberated about which immersion model to follow (an issue that Borland's proposal barely addressed). At Pioneer Valley Chinese Immersion Charter School, a start-up in Massachusetts, kindergartners and first graders followed a 75-25 model (75 percent Chinese, 25 percent English), but Shaffner and co-founders worried that wouldn't pass the Charter Board; plus, it didn't focus enough on English literacy. Another approach, the 50-50 half-day model, meant one teacher—likely the Chinese teacher—would always work with the kids in the afternoon, when they were already tired. Finally, the group settled on a different 50-50 model: Students would alternate languages daily but follow the same curriculum in each class.

When the Public Charter School Board approved the Washington Yu Ying Public Charter School in 2007, the founders moved quickly to put the school's faculty and staff into place for the upcoming school year. The education committee and the board recruited Harris, who had advised the group as they wrote their charter. Shaffner then gave up her position at Siren Digital Communications to become executive director of Yu Ying.

That winter, they settled on a foreclosed property in Ward 5, a distinguished-looking 1920s building with vaulted windows that used to be a dormitory for nuns at Catholic University. A pro-charter nonprofit purchased the building, which Yu Ying rents.

Shaffner and her co-founders spent the next several months hiring teachers, some of whom worried about committing to a school that didn't yet have a usable building. By June, Yu Ying had managed to fill its faculty, but it faced other problems. Two months before school started, the D.C. Water and Sewer Authority told the building's owner it had to install a new water main, delaying access to the school for a month. Then phone lines didn't work, and repair crews claimed that trucks had blocked their access to the school. Some parents thought the school might not open. Shaffner disagreed. "It was going to be ready, and I was not going to accept any other reality," she says.

Sure enough, the weekend before the Tuesday that Harris greeted students at Yu Ying, the school was ready for a mad dash of furniture arranging and classroom decorating. Granted, they hadn't finished the playground, the parking lot, or the landscaping, but none of that was going to stop the students from learning Chinese.

"Yi," says Chinese lead teacher Jue Wang.

"Yi!" says the class.

"Er."

"Er!"

This is the pre-K Chinese classroom, but it's not filled with pre-K students. Perched in rows on tiny chairs, parents parrot Wang's words. It's back-to-school night, and everyone's learning to count.

A blue circle, yellow triangle, and red square dangle from the ceiling on strings. A small stuffed panda bear watches from a high windowsill.

The lead and assistant teachers for the English and Chinese classes have all had time to speak, helped along by PowerPoint, but they're typical new teachers, and most have given low-energy, lukewarm presentations.

The room is increasingly overcrowded; late-arriving mothers toting babies scrunch near the door. The parents appear to range in age from their 20s through 50s and they've given Yu Ying a diverse student body: 47 percent African American, 27 percent Caucasian, 19 percent Asian and Pacific Islander, and 7 percent Latino and Hispanic. When one English teacher makes tentative reference to a job co-directing a punk version of *Romeo & Juliet* at summer camp, eyebrows rise around the room. *Are these people qualified?* seems to be the telepathy between parents. A man in the corner forgoes watching the instructors in favor of playing with his BlackBerry.

But when Wang speaks, things improve. Despite a distinct accent, she has no trouble communicating, and her positivity puts everyone at ease. She demonstrates the visual cues that accompany the Chinese phrases she uses with the students: For “dui bu qi” (“sorry”), she holds her ears and looks sad. For “pai dui” (“line up”), she chops her hand straight in front of her, motioning to the blue masking tape on the ground that marks the line on which students must stand. By the time she says the phrase for “go to the bathroom” and stamps her foot in mock desperation, parents’ giggling blocks the sound of the Chinese phrase.

This is some parents’ first experience speaking Chinese. Others have already delved into the language or tried to supplement their children’s education in other ways. They’ve used the school’s Listserv to share Chinese videos and cultural activity ideas. Royan Miller, whose niece attends Yu Ying, will attend a once-weekly evening class held at the school; she hopes to stay abreast or ahead of her niece’s knowledge so that she can help reinforce material at home. Peyton West doesn’t speak Chinese, but she has volunteered at school on Fridays so she can get a better sense of how her daughter Addie’s accent should sound. Tanya Clement’s daughter, Isabela Barton, listens to Chinese songs on a CD and does number puzzles in Chinese. “I don’t know if she’s counting correctly,” says Clement, who learns Chinese words to surprise her daughter but doesn’t have prior experience speaking the language. This motivates Isabela: “She likes the idea that Mommy and Daddy don’t know Chinese.”

Now that the parents at back-to-school night seem more engaged, the teachers explain the basics. Nearly all of the time, English teachers present new lessons before the lessons are taught in Chinese. For birthdays, kids sing “Happy Birthday” in both languages. Students receive no stickers or other material rewards. Instead, reward comes as public recognition.

“He counted to 20 in Chinese yesterday!” a teacher says about one boy.

“Wow!” say his and other admiring parents.

Counting is child’s play for Elizabeth Brooks, who watches the teachers’ presentations from her seat on the mat used for circle time. Brooks’s 4-year-old daughter, Gryphon, is in pre-K. Even though Brooks and her husband both know Chinese, they’re realizing that studying the language and even having lived

and worked in China does not necessarily prepare a parent for Yu Ying. Brooks laments, “I can tell you all about the political system in Chinese, but I don’t know how to say ‘blocks.’”

Brooks acknowledges that some days tire Gryphon more than others. “She’s not unhappy to see the Chinese teachers—she’s just—it’s harder those days.”

Easing the students’ transition to Yu Ying, and making them feel comfortable with a demanding language, has preoccupied teachers to such an extent that parents worry about the place of academics. “What’s the exact goal for pre-K comprehension and speaking?” one asks at back-to-school night. “How will you evaluate this?” asks another, “And when will you have formal, individualized literacy assessments?”

“We all want to teach our kids calculus by the time they’re 4,” says one father, half-joking.

“Feel free,” says the English teacher who went to summer camp. “I will not be teaching calculus with the pre-K class.”

When initially pressured by parents at back-to-school night, the teachers insist that formal assessments and meetings with parents about individual academic goals are not yet necessary. But they eventually submit to arranging meetings to discuss individual academic progress, instructing parents to contact them after the meeting to schedule relevant appointments. Even physical education teacher Ely Fall promises to use the school’s Web site for daily updates about progress in gym class.

Nine kids fidget as they stand in rows. Blue masking tape borders the American and Chinese hopscotch boards at their feet. In upcoming years, this will be a classroom, but for now this is the PE room. It’s Thursday at 8 a.m., about four weeks into the year, and these students are enrolled in Responsibility, Education, Exercise, and Fun, or REEF, Yu Ying’s before- and after-school program, which offers tennis, yoga, and, for kids who want to work on Spanish, too, soccer.

Elizabeth Hardage, Yu Ying’s director of cultural programs, stands at the front of the room. She’s one of two staff members who’s not specifically employed to teach in the Chinese classrooms but does speak the language fluently (the other, somewhat ironically, is the school’s English Language Learner specialist). But today’s activity will be in English. Hardage leads the students in a few deep breaths, then presses play on a portable stereo. *Tai Chi for Kids* xylophone music tinkles.

“Can you feel the energy in your legs and in your tummy?” asks a hypnotic woman’s voice.

Some kids do the moves well; others still lack balance. The motion of pretending to let rain drip onto his head fells the tiniest boy, who collapses on the “6” on the American hopscotch board.

As the recording prompts the kids to swim as if among waves, enthusiasm builds. One student says, “I love this!”

“Me, too,” says Hardage.

“Me, too!” cries a chorus of kids.

When the recording finally ends, the room is silent. “Line up,” Hardage whispers, as if appreciating that the early-morning tai chi appears to have brought students and teacher alike to a place of holistic calmness and appreciation for the universe.

Then a girl says, at full volume, “Why are you whispering?”

In a whisper, Hardage responds, “Because we are going to stay quiet when we leave.”

“I didn’t eat!” says the girl.

Hardage pauses. Her voice returns to a normal volume. “Were you supposed to get breakfast first?”

“Yes.”

Hardage leads the kids out to their morning classes and the girl to some Cheerios.

Students are circling up for another morning meeting in Yang’s classroom. They still wear name tags on their backs, but now they can identify their assigned places on the floor. It’s the end of September, and they’ve surpassed the first month’s Chinese language objectives. They can follow directions and understand vocabulary in Chinese. “Now she does ‘Head, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes’ in Mandarin,” says Sam Broeksmit about his pre-K daughter. Peyton West recently found herself awed by her daughter’s accent. That the students have begun to communicate in Chinese is a development that co-founder Amy Quinn describes as “flabbergasting and amazing and wonderful.”

There have been other changes. Students no longer have separate indoor and outdoor shoes. Leaving allergen-laden shoes in the hallway sounded great, but changing shoes several times a day took too much time. Also, teachers and administrators, many of whom started off the year prepping for the next day until 8:30 p.m., no longer gather daily for the 8 a.m. “bullpen” meetings. Everyone’s gotten the hang of the schedule enough that they’ve cut back to only one staff meeting per week.

The students copy Wang, who moves and sings a song in Chinese that counts body parts. Most of the students sing, affirming they have two ears, one nose, and one mouth, while others suck their thumbs. One girl stares into space, making a fish face. A boy watches Principal Harris, who observes the class from a nearby table.

After the song, Wang addresses each student in the circle, saying “Zao shang hao,” (good morning) followed by the student’s name. “Zao shang hao!” most reply. By now, Wang knows which students will have trouble with this exercise. “Zao shang hao” she prompts one boy with a whisper, boosting his confidence enough to whisper the same.

She leads the students in reviewing several wall charts: the day’s activities, the daily schedule, the days of the week. By now, she’s losing the attention of some of the kids. The assistant teacher corrals one boy, and Harris joins the circle to manage another, who’s straying from his spot. Across the circle, a third boy inspects floor fuzz.

Wang draws their attention to an orange-and-green paper chain that hangs on a yellow string from the ceiling. She counts in Chinese, starting with the top link. Now they’re with her, counting together. “Orange or green?” she asks, still speaking in Chinese, and they call out the correct next link color. It’s the nineteenth in the chain, representing their nineteenth day of school—their tenth in Chinese class.

As the class finishes its morning meeting, Wang lets one student pop a balloon that represented an earlier day of the week. They eye her as she blows up the white balloon that she will clip to a weekly calendar to mark today. Meanwhile, the fuzz boy is trying to eat the remnants of the deflated balloon. This seems to meet the it’s-OK-to-speak-English-for-safety exception, but Wang chooses to communicate with the boy with a sound that transcends language: “Uh oh!” He releases the balloon.

For the most part, the kids look comfortable. Some fidget, others suck their fingers or lie down at odd times, but they and their older classmates all seem to be acting age-appropriately and to be generally well-adjusted.

There are still unknowns, though. How will the students’ language skills develop as the year continues? Will the school’s progress meet the PCSB’s standards? (It can revoke a school’s charter if not.) What will the attrition rate be?

Yu Ying—barely off the ground—has already started accepting applications for new pre-K, kindergarten, first-grade, and second-grade students for 2009–2010. Whether the buzz from current parents has enticed or scared away prospective parents remains to be seen. Students joining after pre-K will attend a Chinese-intensive summer program in August, but can this really compensate for missing one—or, in the future, several—years of Chinese immersion that other students have had?

What will happen to these students in high school? One D.C. Public Schools administrator admits that Spanish-speaking students who graduate from Oyster Bilingual School end up getting shuffled into Spanish classes in high school that don’t fit their skill levels, potentially discouraging them from pursuing and/or maintaining their language skills. Today, Shaffner speaks of a high school where these students,

who'll presumably then be fluent in Chinese, can begin studying a third language—a high school she hopes someone else will found.

There have been encouraging moments. Recently, as Elizabeth Hardage was heading out the door, a mother and daughter approached, arriving at school late, passing the still-present green Genie manlift and a Sanijohn. “Nihau, zao shang hao,” Hardage said. The mother turned to her daughter, “What’s ‘zao shang hao’?” “‘Zao shang hao’ is ‘good morning’ in Chinese,” her daughter replied, matter-of-factly.

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