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Chinese schools flourish; Adopted children outshine their American parents

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Eight-year-old Mary confidently wheels a Hello Kitty backpack into Saturday **Chinese school**, where she's often the first in class to raise her hand.

She should probably move up a grade, says her mother, who adopted her daughter from China. In fact, Mary once sat with a more advanced class at this growing, all-Mandarin school in Gates Mills.

But, well, mom was struggling.

"I couldn't keep up," said Kathryn Robakowski of Garfield Heights, turning a shade of pink. "There's a lot of work!"

And the children learn faster. It was Mary who advised mom one day, in a whisper across the desktops, that she was holding her book upside down.

Such mistakes draw smiles but really no shame in a class where American-born moms and sometimes dads sit beside their child adopted from China, each trying to fathom one of the world's most difficult languages.

Their presence here, in a school where staff meetings are held in a Taiwanese dialect, was unimaginable even a few years ago.

So was a class like Chinese as a Second Language.

Rapidly, and without a textbook, cultures are merging in the **Chinese schools** of Northeast Ohio. Thrown together on Saturday mornings, American and Chinese-born parents are trying to find the best way to educate Chinese-born children who often have little in common, save for their black hair and almond eyes.

They bring to that task different expectations, a grounding in different cultures, and very different ideas of what school should be.

The kids are all right. For moms and dads, the world is spinning.

Drills instill

30,000 characters

Six children bent over workbooks at the Chinese Academy of Cleveland on a recent Saturday, writing furiously as their teacher slapped Chinese characters on the blackboard and issued commands in Mandarin.

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When she paused, the only sound in the room was the scratch of pencils on paper.

The 8 to 12 year olds - five children of Chinese immigrants and one girl from a mixed white-Asian marriage - were engaged in another drill designed to instill some more of the 30,000 characters that make up traditional Mandarin, the most complex Chinese language.

In a class next door, a softer scene unfolded. Six children of about the same age - some adopted from China, some their American-born siblings - faced a young teacher who sometimes smiled as she coaxed them to repeat Chinese phrases written on the blackboard.

Beside each phrase was an English translation, like "Hello," and "How are you today?"

Beside each pupil sat a mom taking notes, often copiously, one on a laptop. At times a mother whispered in the ear of a slouching child, or grabbed his shoulders and spun him around to face the board.

"Next week, we will interview native speakers," warned the teacher, Ching-Gling Huang. "You will actually have to talk to them."

A chasm loomed, one that everyone here is carefully stepping across.

New interest emerges

in **Chinese schools**

Northeast Ohio hosts an atlas of ethnic language schools, from Arabic to Ukrainian, and all have evolved as their ethnic communities blended and matured. But no academy has faced recreating itself as suddenly as the region's four **Chinese schools**. No other group faced such a surge in interest.

"Before, we were kind of secluded. Probably not many people knew about us," said Grace Huang, a mother of two children at the Chinese Academy of Cleveland, which once drew exclusively Chinese immigrant families like hers.

The changes began six and seven years ago at schools like the Cleveland Contemporary **Chinese School** in Solon, the Westlake **Chinese School, and the Chinese School** of Cleveland, which serves the city's historic Chinatown neighborhood.

As China became an economic superpower, business people and college students began to inquire about lessons. Meanwhile, shifting immigration patterns brought in new Chinese.

In Greater Cleveland, the Cantonese dialect of southern China and Hong Kong is losing ground to Mandarin-speaking immigrants from central and northern China. The dialects share a written language but the spoken tongues are distinct.

Cantonese-speaking parents in the city are now sending children to Mandarin school in the suburbs, to learn the language of Chinese business and government.

But the greatest change agents appeared holding the hand of an American-born parent.

The new children began arriving about 1995, after China relaxed restrictions on foreign adoptions. The region is now home to 500 to 600 children adopted from China, according to parent groups that emerged to support the blended families.

The new parents often strive to connect their Chinese-born children to their native culture, knowing they will always be viewed as Asian in America. It was only a matter of time before they found the schools.

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Sally and Seth Keyes brought their daughters, Samantha, 6, and Sydney, 11, to the Chinese Academy of Cleveland a year and half ago. They came with 10 other families. The parents had been holding Chinese classes on their own.

"We thought the kids were ready for this," Sally Keyes said.

But was the school ready for them?

Already several blended families had found their way to the 140-student school, which meets at St. Francis of Assisi Catholic School in Gates Mills. It was founded 30 years ago by Taiwanese immigrants who speak, read and write complex Mandarin.

Initially, the school streamed the new students into regular classes. But that didn't work. The adopted children were hopelessly behind the students with Chinese-speaking parents, and likely always would be.

"So important is hearing Chinese at home," said Yangyang Lu, principal of the Westlake **Chinese School**, which was seeing the same trend.

His school responded with separate "culture classes" that stress simple conversation and Chinese customs. Enrollment surged. This year, the Westlake **Chinese School** passed maybe a tipping point. More than half of its 120 students are children adopted from China, their siblings and parents. Ethnic Chinese families are the minority.

Small conflict

over teaching style

The **Chinese school** in Solon, supported largely by immigrants from mainland China, maintains a single system of classes. It attracts a far fewer number of blended families

And the **Chinese school** in Gates Mills, with a wary eye toward Westlake, is accommodating the new students in maybe the most thoughtful fashion locally.

The idea of pairing child and parent in the same Chinese as a Second Language class, so that each could help the other, emerged from dozens of discussions, some in Chinese, some in English, some strained.

Parents like Sally and Seth Keyes are grateful for the strategy.

"We have no clue," Sally Keyes said on a recent Saturday, as her class recessed for noodles and juice. "We really need to be here, or there's no hope at all."

The "American parents," as they are often called, voiced a few other suggestions.

Could the homework load be lightened? Could there be fewer exams and more conversation? And seeing as though this is Saturday school, could it be a little fun?

Ted Yu, a software engineer from Taiwan, had never heard anything like it. He and his wife speak Mandarin at home with their 12-year-old son, Nathan, reinforcing lessons from **Chinese school**.

"Initially, it's all parents like my background here," said Yu, the president of the academy's all-Chinese board. "And we want to immerse our kids, not just get a foot wet. To teach children how to use chopsticks in the restaurant is not our goal."

Many of the American parents see room to come further their way.

Some complain that their kids are getting more homework in **Chinese school** than at their local public school.

Between the push and the pull of the two cultures, a quest for balance emerged.

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Yu and other members of the board encouraged the all-Asian teaching staff to find new ways to reach the new students.

The teachers introduced games, burned vocabulary lists onto compact discs, and used their own children as voices on multimedia slide shows, which they e-mail home to the American families so that their children can hear correctly spoken Chinese.

Shuling Tai, a classically trained Chinese language teacher from Taiwan, said she's motivated by her desire to educate. But it's clear the American families have struck a chord.

"They come here every Saturday and they practice and they make a big sacrifice," Tai said. "They adopted for love. Everything I can give, I will give them."

Some of the American parents, meanwhile, are starting to sound a little Chinese.

They flock to the electives that unfold after school, classes in calligraphy, tai chi and dance.

Recently, Sally Keyes looked into a room where a dozen children, including hers, stepped and spun to instructions from a Chinese dance teacher.

She noted that her 6-year-old walked up to the board in class and wrote out the numbers 1 through 10 in Chinese, something neither mom nor dad can do yet.

"The Chinese ethic is, you work hard," Keyes said. "And they keep pushing the kids, and we say, 'Oh, that's too hard. They're only 5 and 6.'"

"But I don't know," she said. "The kids, they seem to get it."

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GRAPHIC: THOMAS ONDREY THE PLAIN DEALER Sally Keyes listens to instructions with her daughter, Samantha, 6, during Chinese as a Second Language class at the Chinese Academy of Cleveland in Gates Mills. Mother-daughter pairings are one strategy the school is using to respond to a surge in enrollment by local parents who adopted from China.

THOMAS ONDREY THE PLAIN DEALER That's mom Karen Lo's hand pushing the pencil across 6-year-old Amy Lo's paper at the Chinese Academy of Cleveland in Gates Mills. The school began pairing parent-child teams when it realized both needed a background in Chinese language and culture. Karen Lo, while ethnic Chinese, never learned Mandarin growing up in America.

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