RaceWire Article - January 2005

RaceWire home | Log Out | Contact *RaceWire*

New York's Chinese Language Schools Growing in Popularity

By Lisa Wong Macabasco

One Saturday afternoon, 20 seven-year-olds squirm in their seats in the basement of the Transfiguration School in New York City's Chinatown. The ones who aren't squirming are slouching. One industriously arranges and re-arranges four practice booklets into patterns on his desktop. Another sits with eyelids drooping and his elbow wearily propping up his head.

The teacher holds up a flashcard bearing the word "fox" in Chinese characters and walks over to a small girl, who responds only with wide silent fearful eyes. The teacher barks, "Chaw ho dee" in Cantonese. It means sit up straight, look good, pay attention. The class collectively sits up straighter, if for only a moment.

On this brisk fall day, far from the jungle gyms, playing fields, TV screens and videogame consoles where their classmates can be found, these students join the generations of Chinese American students forced to sacrifice weekend mornings to sit in uncomfortable desks and be admonished in a foreign language. In the Chinese-American community where obedience to your parents is seldom questioned, Chinese language school is an inevitability that children must silently endure.

Chinese communities have existed in the U.S. for at least 160 years, yet their culture and language show no signs of disappearing here. In fact, in New York—with over 374,000 Chinese, it's the largest Chinese population in the country—Chinese language schools have never been more popular. As the community has expanded outside Manhattan, language schools have spread, too. In 2000, 71 percent of the city's Chinese population lived in Brooklyn or Queens.

Now more Mandarin language classes teaching the official language of China cater to the growing Mandarin-speaking population, whereas historically Cantonese has been the primary dialect of New York Chinese residents. Some schools are even developing new programs to serve older students who have come to appreciate the classes in Cantonese and want to continue learning a second dialect in their high school and adult years.

Plainview Chinese School in Long Island is one of these new schools popping up in boroughs with historically few Chinese schools. Plainview started five years ago and boasts 500 students. Assistant Principal Barbara Tjiong said enrollment has increased steadily since the school's opening. Plainview's student population increase seems to reflect the recent Chinese-American population explosion on Long Island—the number of Chinese-Americans there grew by 44 percent during the 1990s, according to the Census.

Tjiong said Plainview's wide variety of classes, including bilingual classes, classes for non-Chinese and both simplified and traditional Chinese classes attract students to the school. "Our school stands out because we teach every format," Tjiong said. "Most others teach one or another."

Plainview has also tried a more creative approach to the usual Chinese school teaching methods, including incorporating computers programs and PowerPoint presentations into their curriculum and taking a lead from successful public school teaching techniques. "We're not just writing the characters 100 times," Tjiong said. "That doesn't work. We don't tell the kids to go home and do homework. We say 'let's play games.' We try to keep things interesting."

But this education doesn't come cheap—tuition is $500 per year at Plainview. Tjiong argued that while the price may seem steep, it's still a bargain for 30 three-hour classes. "Really, it's cheaper than a babysitter," Tjiong said.

Not all Chinese schools are as successful as Plainview. Transfiguration's Chinese school is one of the older schools facing declining numbers because newer schools in other boroughs have lured many students away. Established 52 years ago, Transfiguration's enrollment has steadily declined in the past few years, according to Principal Beatrice Fung. Today there are only 800 students at the school, down from the more than 1,000 prior to 2001.

Fung points to Sept. 11 as the root cause of the decline in student population. Located a mere mile away

from the World Trade Center, Chinatown and its economy was hit hard post-9/11. In the first two weeks after the attacks, three-quarters of the neighborhood's workforce, nearly 25,00 workers, lost their jobs. Before the massive closure of Chinatown's garment factories after Sept. 11, many garment workers put their children in Chinese schools like Transfiguration during work hours. Now that many of the factories are gone, parents work elsewhere and put their children in Chinese schools closer to their homes in the outer boroughs, according to Fung.

Fung believes parents still choose to make the long trip to Manhattan—from Brooklyn, Queens, New Jersey, and even as far as Connecticut—to send their children to Transfiguration because of the school's "moral education." The school, though not run by Transfiguration Church, is affiliated with the Catholic parish, and the school's promotes itself as emphasizing "ethical and family values." Fung said there are few discipline problems.

Students attend prayer assembly before and after each class, and parents are glad to see their children in this environment, according to Fung. "Parents stand at the back [of the assembly], smiling and nodding," said Fung.

"It's nicer to be here than to be at home," said Mandy Szeto, 16, who graduated from the Chinese school in 2002. But Szeto, who attended Chinese classes for 10 years, did not always feel that way. "I'd say I was forced," she said, recalling her early years in Chinese school.

Many students shared this initial reaction." I wanted to be like everyone else at English school—I wanted to wake up late and watch Saturday morning cartoons," said Kevin Chung, 14, who is now learning Mandarin after graduating from Cantonese. "I told my parents that, but they said to stay and I'll get to like it."

Other students see language as a source of cultural pride. "When I became older, I realized it's necessary," said Andy Poon, 21. "You're Chinese. It's your own culture."

Samson Lee, a Brooklyn-born Transfiguration Chinese school student for 10 years, realized the utility of language when he visited Hong Kong in 2002. "Going back to Hong Kong, all my cousins saw me and my sister as these super-Americanized kids who ate spaghetti and spoke only English," said Lee, 25. "So when we were able to communicate [in Cantonese] with them, it was a big surprise to them. There was just a connection in language that trumped all our differences, culture-wise."

The Mandarin language classes at Transfiguration, which have been taught only for the past six or seven years, are expanding rapidly, according to Fung. There are now 200 students in the Mandarin classes, mostly recent immigrants, many of whom are adults. Interest in Mandarin was particularly high this year. "Every day someone asks about Mandarin classes," Fung said.

Fung said her school's growing Mandarin program is fueled by newest wave of immigrants the Fujian province, who speak their own Fujianese dialect and want to learn Mandarin, the official language of China. In 1994, the U.S. State Department estimated that the city's Fujianese population was about 100,000. Approximately 200,000 Fujianese now live in New York.

The increasing popularity of Chinese schools may stem from the search for cultural identity, or parent's sense of tradition, but increasing interest in learning Chinese comes from the importance of knowing other languages in the era of globalization. Szeto thinks that she will definitely use her language skills because she plans to work in China. Poon also believes that someday he will conduct business in Chinese.

"The Chinese language is spreading across the world," said Chung. "I'm sure I'll have to use it in the future."

If students like Poon and Szeto are any indication, Chinese schools are unlikely to go away anytime soon. Both intend to send their own children to Chinese school someday.

"Even if it's forced," said Szeto.

###

[Portions of this article previously appeared in *The Forum and Link: A Contemporary Journal Celebrating Arab America*]

Lisa Wong Macabasco is a student at Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism. She is a fourth-generation Chinese American who never attended Chinese school, but sometimes wishes she had.

Word count: 1274

back to *RaceWire* home

---

top of page

About ColorLines | **Current Issue** | **Subscribe/Purchase** | **RaceWire**
Classified Ads | **Advertising Rates** | **Online Archive** | **Join List**

ColorLines Magazine
4096 Piedmont Ave, PMB 319 • Oakland, CA 94611-5221
Phone: 510-653-3415 • Fax: 510-653-3427
Subscription Orders: 1-888-287-3126
email ColorLines

published by ARC Publications