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A relentless pursuit to learn Mandarin

With the rise of China as well as the proven benefits of learning a second language, my husband and I have pulled out all the stops to help our two daughters develop a love of Mandarin



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"Hablo espanol," (I speak Spanish) repeatedly rang out in Riverside Park when we lived in New York over a decade ago.

Spanish was the second language of choice for most parents, with babysitters and nannies hired to reinforce it with little ones on swings and scooters.

Now living in Singapore, I envy my local friends for their bilingualism and, as parents, we understand a second language is good for our children, with proven cognitive, educational and health benefits.

With the resounding rise of China, today's parents are opting for Mandarin.

We have read articles touting tech gurus who are teaching their wee ones Mandarin, and in my small-time home town of Rocky Mount, North Carolina, with a population of 50,000, 10-year-olds are learning yi, er, san (one, two, three).

United States President Donald Trump's granddaughter even speaks the language.





ST ILLUSTRATION: CEL GULAPA

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My husband Jim Rogers and I have seriously drunk the Kool-Aid, too, and our immigrant mentality makes us a bit fanatical in our quest for our daughters Happy, 15, at Nanyang Girls' High, and Bee, 10, at Nanyang Primary School (NYPS), to speak standard Mandarin at the native level.

Jim, born in a tiny town in Alabama, with a population of 5,000, cannot speak the language.

In fact, he is tone-deaf. And when he first took me dancing, I asked why he did not keep the beat. "What beat?" he quipped.

I took French in high school, then placed out via testing in college. No Tiger Mum made me persist. I did study Mandarin when we lived in Manhattan, yet my speaking ability remains bu hao (not good), although I can understand anyone bad-mouthing me in the lift.

When we lived in New York, we hired Shirley, a former teacher in China, to train Happy in all things Chinese. Then in 2007, we moved to Singapore to be in Asia and for the Mandarin.

Once on the ground, I made calls, searched online and asked locals to recommend the best Chinese school.

"I can't believe there's no pure Chinese curriculum in Singapore," I grumbled to Jim over dinner one night. Quite annoyingly, he replied: "Someone didn't do her homework."

I soon discovered Special Assistance Plan (SAP) schools that aim to preserve the core Chinese values and develop capable, bilingual students. Repeatedly, folks mentioned NYPS as a good choice for Happy. "Even the prime minister sent his children there," several recommended.

When I saw a mention of an NYPS Primary 1 Registration discussion in The Straits Times, Jim and I attended, two years too soon we would learn.

Then-principal Heng Boey Hong wowed us with her smarts, commitment to discipline and incorporation of Chinese culture. Post-talk, Madam Heng suggested rather matter-of-factly: "You should visit other schools. Getting into Nanyang is terribly difficult."

So much for my blue-eyed, Mandarin-speaking daughter knocking the socks off of Madam Heng.

Still determined, I became a parent volunteer, clocking more than 100 hours in the English department's Reading Mums programme and even moved my family within 1km of NYPS to improve our chances in the event of balloting.

We were lucky. There were 31 applicants for Phase 2B with 30 spots available (2003 was a low-birth year, due to severe acute respiratory syndrome), and all applicants for that phase gained a coveted place, after one parent decided on another school. (Laws have since changed, making it almost impossible for a permanent resident's child to enter high-demand schools.)

What a riot it was when, after completing school registration forms, an official called, explaining: "Ms Parker, you must list Mandarin as her mother tongue to attend NYPS."

Even though Happy spoke as a native, how could I check the box for Mandarin as her mother tongue since I, her mother, was too incompetent to speak it?

Betting on her future, I returned to the school declaring my daughter Happy to have a mother tongue which no one in her family could speak.

"You're so lucky, Paige. Both Happy and Bee adore Mandarin," I hear regularly.

The truth is we labour persistently to build this love and it is not easy. We try to spend time in China and offer exposure through Mandarin books, movies, playgroups, cooking, singing - never solely through classwork and tuition.

Children never love anything that is a chore, right?

Both girls have participated in Chinese dance, speech and drama, wushu and art, all taught in Mandarin. Always keen to be on stage, they join Mandarin-speaking contests and, sometimes, if they win, Jim and I sit stunned, albeit thrilled.

I am right there with other parents agonising over the difficulty of Mandarin for our children.

They say Mandarin fluency requires a whopping 2,200 class hours while English needs only 600 for a similar level of fluency. I mean really.

There is no easy fix, so I am trying to build a love of the language, culture and country, making it relevant whenever possible.

My girls, although they work really hard trying to master the language, do not top their classes for sure (although Happy comes pretty close), and comprehension remains a real challenge for Bee ("Read more Chinese books" is my mantra).

Mandarin continues to gain in popularity as the young realise their futures will be hen hao (very good) if they master it.

What if I am wrong? If Mandarin is not supremely important in my daughters' lifetimes? No regrets.

I am betting this experience will shape my daughters into accepting and resilient adults.

With more than one billion Chinese, my daughters should be able to gain good jobs, start out-of-the-box companies and always revere me, their Caucasian Tiger Mum, with xie xie (thank you) in abundance.

• Paige Parker is a mother of two, published author, gemologist and supporter of the arts. She is married to American investor Jim Rogers.

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