

**Tina Gao**

Age: 14, Grade: 8

School Name: Louis Pizitz Middle School, Vestavia, AL

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Category: Journalism

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## **Not Just Another Chinese Class: The Yuren Chinese School**

Behind a foldable table marked with “Yuren Chinese School 育人中文学校”, Chinese adults distributed wrapped textbook packs to a queue of thirty people, checking off clipboard entries and recording payment information. Parents fished for cash in their wallets. Kids strained like dogs on a leash, backpacks slipping across shoulders. When a teacher led their children into a hallway to begin class, adults chatted with nuanced tones and rapidfire syllables untrained tongues can never replicate. In other words, 2019 began like any other year.

Since 1993, the Yuren Chinese School, an independently funded non-profit organization, has served more than 70 families in the Greater Birmingham Area of Alabama. Classes for grades 4 through 8 begin promptly at 1:00 pm each Sunday afternoon.

At 1:05, a soon as attendance ends, Amy’s fifth grade class began its Infamous Spelling Test, a review of last week’s lesson. Elbow propped on the table, Amy slumped in her seat, pondering whether to write 青, 情, or 清. If her strokes weren’t exact, teacher Li would scrawl a disgracefully thick line with a red Expo marker across that character.

Twenty words later, the teacher organized the tests into a stack, and the students retrieved their MaLiPing textbooks, illustrated Chinese mountains shimmering on the book’s signature orange covers.

“We will start lesson 3 of the first unit today.” Teacher Li, announced as he leaned against his table, “Let’s read the vocabulary list.” The students flip to page 42 as teacher Li writes each phrase along with its definition and explanation on the whiteboard with his trusty Expo marker.

After thirty minutes of repeating phrases, finally, teacher Li began the three-page long story concerning an evil tiger, “从前, 森林里住着一头凶恶的老虎。” (Once upon a time, an evil tiger lived in the forest.)

The students chanted like monks in unison, “从前, 森林里住着一头凶恶的老虎。” Word by word, they inched through a classic but twisty fable- “the evil tiger became the butcher’s apprentice!”

Right after they finish, the clock struck 2:00 pm! Breaktime! Springing out their seats, swiping tickets, and squealing -- the students raced to the lobby, stopping inches in front of a plastic cart piled with snacks, juices, and toys. Puffy Cheeto bags lured her friends, but Amy examined the fidget spinners, gleaming like jewels in the toy box. She purchased one for ten tickets and challenged her friends to a battle of who can spin theirs the longest. In tornadoes of color, clanging blades, and victorious whoops, breaktime whirled by in fifteen minutes.

For the remainder of class, the students practiced the new vocabulary by constructing sentences. Teacher Li reprimanded them for mixing up Chinese and English grammar: “Not I walked in the forest! It’s ‘I in the forest walked!’” After forcing the students to repeat the phrase three times, teacher Li reminded them it takes daily practice and conversation to fully distinguish between Chinese and English, far more than what they cover in class.

At 3:00 pm, while students packed up books and pushed in chairs, the teacher reminded them to use the Blue Odd-Numbered Week Workbook. Some students forgot that the Maliping textbook system alternates workbooks every week.

With her bag slung on a shoulder, Amy leaped across the hall into the first grade classroom. While Mrs. Deng, her

mom, taught class, she copied all 25 vocabulary words three times in her Odd Weeks Workbook.

A boy in the back row glared at Amy, Mrs. Deng, and his mom, clutching a pink, velvet purse as big as her stomach., “Mrs. Deng, Evan *never* studies and *isn't* improving!” she complains. “What is *wrong* with him?”

Mrs. Deng replied in Mandarin, “What is wrong with him? What is missing from *you*? Do you ever read with him and speak Chinese to him at home?”

Fingering the cherry blossom keychain with bubble gum colored nails, Evan’s mom frowned, “Everyone knows about Amy’s fluent Chinese and her perfect Youth Chinese Test scores! Evan never studies. Not even the tickets motivate him, so I have to take him on vacations if he *doesn't* quit,”

“Amy is just a showoff! Evan is also bright, with such good memory of each vacation!” Mrs. Deng suppressed a grin as she looks Evan’s huffy mom in the eye, “If you must convince him with prizes to learn Chinese, then he also forgets the true reward:- communicating across cultures. Yuren has a monthly newsletter for him to showcase anything for the whole school to see! We also host a reading club where we present various facets of Chinese culture, from paper cutting to kites...” Ms. Deng continued about Yuren’s summer camp and other opportunities to apply Chinese in Yuren and in the greater Birmingham community.

Although Evan’s mom and other families admire Amy’s officially stamped, intricately bordered, YCT 3 certificate, she treasures it as part of her identity. “This certifies that I know at least 300 Chinese words. Next year, the YCT 4 requires 600 words, enough to converse with Native Chinese people. At least here, Chinese Americans are proud to learn about and preserve their culture.” she explains.

Gao Jie, the current Yuren principal agrees, “I want kids to have fun learning about their heritage. There are lots of nuances in Chinese culture we can’t translate. It’s just something you have to understand. Especially for Chinese-Americans, who are exposed to so much Western culture it almost overpowers our Chinese heritage. The most important takeaway from Chinese school is not the language, but the culture.”

A startling cultural revival for Chinese Americans arrived in the winter of 2019, when the world turned its attention to the source of the coronavirus outbreak in Wuhan, China. As the number of cases climbed each day, Chinese Americans worried for their relatives each second of every day. Emails, WeChat texts, and phone calls stormed back and forth across the Atlantic Ocean. Knowing the Chinese language became almost as precious as a loved one’s life.

Months later, the virus spread to America.

In 2020, the Yuren Chinese School moved online for the safety of everyone. Emails instead of expo markers delivered grades and slow microphones lagged the weekly monk chants. Orange tickets lay buried, forgotten under crumpled, year-old Odd and Even Week workbooks.

Despite the changes, Yuren and its students’ wills remain unbreakable. During the quarantine, families had more time to practice. People from all over Birmingham, not just Yuren, attended online reading club meetings and read the newsletter. Amy earned a perfect score on the YCT 4 along with a new certificate. And Evan even impressed Mrs. Deng at the start of his second grade year by recalling his staycation vividly- in perfect Mandarin.

“Everyone’s resilience astounded me; we overcame the technological and physical challenges. Who knew that the Chinese-American community would strengthen during this difficult time?” Gao Jie reports, “Because the cases have risen in 2021, we’re sticking to online class. In such circumstances, we must continue, 真是骑虎难下 (It is impossible to dismount a tiger, an idiom describing the drastic consequences of quitting during adversity).”