

The background of the page features large, bold, black Chinese characters. The characters are stylized and partially cut off by the edges of the page. The characters appear to be '桥' (bridge) and '文化' (culture), which together mean 'Bridging Cultures'.

BRIDGING CULTURES

In the past two years, elementary schools in Minnetonka and Hopkins have added Chinese immersion programs, and children at Ridgedale Library's storytime can hear tales told in Mandarin. BY AMY LYON + PHOTOS BY MARSHALL FRANKLIN LONG

Shanghai, the largest city in China, might be 6,400 miles and eight time zones away from Minnetonka,

but local schools and libraries are bridging that distance with new Chinese language programs and classes. About 180 students at two Minnetonka elementary schools are enrolled in a Chinese immersion program, now in its second year. And at the Ridgedale Library story hour for tots has taken on some new tones with readings in Mandarin by native Chinese speakers.

There are several reasons for the growing interest in China. China's rising economic power and status in the world may be chief among them.

"We know our children will compete in a global economy," says

Janet Swiecichowski, executive director of communications for the Minnetonka School District. "Fluency in more than one language will be essential in the 21st century."

Mandarin Chinese, the official language of the People's Republic of China, is spoken by one-fifth of the world's people and is ranked No. 1 among first languages spoken.

"Looking at the statistics, a huge number of people speak Chinese as a first language in the world, which opens up big possibilities for our students," says Lee Drolet, principal of Excelsior Elementary School, one of two local schools offering a Chinese language immersion program for kindergarteners. "Parents are recognizing the need for their children to learn a second language. The world is going to be a very different place, and the chances of our children working or traveling in China, Europe or South America are greater."

TARGETING YOUNG

Minnetonka High School has offered Chinese language instruction for more than 20 years. In 2004, the district invited the public to participate in study committees to assess the district's educational needs. Minnetonka parent Ann McIntosh was a very vocal advocate for the Chinese immersion program. McIntosh's daughter, Jaing, was adopted from China as an infant and is now in second grade at Excelsior Elementary.

"I think kids should be bilingual, and Chinese gives them access to the most opportunities," McIntosh says. "If they can get out of elementary school speaking Chinese, they'll have a leg up on other kids."

In 2006, the Minnetonka School Board approved the Chinese immersion program for Excelsior and Scenic Heights elementary schools for the 2007–2008 school year. That year, the program was open to students in kindergarten and first grade. This year and in upcoming years, students will only be allowed to enroll in the program in kindergarten. (Students can stay in the immersion program through fifth grade.)

Excelsior and Scenic Heights were selected for the Chinese immersion program because those schools already had Chinese activities in place and the greatest interest existed there, Swiecichowski says. Minnetonka's four other elementary schools offer Spanish immersion programs.

Currently, only three other public schools in Minnesota offer Chinese immersion programs for elementary students: Hopkins, St. Cloud and Yinghua Academy, a St. Paul charter school. But more might be coming.

"Elementary-age students are better able to acquire spoken language because of how our brain changes as we get into adolescences and adulthood," Drolet says. "They can attain fluency in middle school, but it goes deeper and is better if it's learned in elementary school. The accents are truly native."

Students in the immersion program study written and spoken Mandarin, which uses both characters and Pinyin—a phonetic alphabet. Teachers teach the same curriculum in all other subjects as other elementary classes, except that all of the lessons are taught in Chinese. "It's really neat to see my child come home with homework covered in Chinese," McIntosh says.

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CHINESE STORYTIME

Hennepin County Library is receiving high praise as the state's first recognized library system to offer storytime in Chinese as part of its world languages initiatives. The library received a grant from the Library Foundation of Hennepin County in 2007 to hire a native Mandarin speaker. The first Chinese storytime was held that year at the Plymouth Library. The program moved to the Ridgedale Library in 2008 when the Plymouth Library closed for renovation.

“We had been looking at the school immersion programs and questioned what we were doing in the libraries to support those programs,” says Linnea Fonnest, youth services librarian at Ridgedale Library.

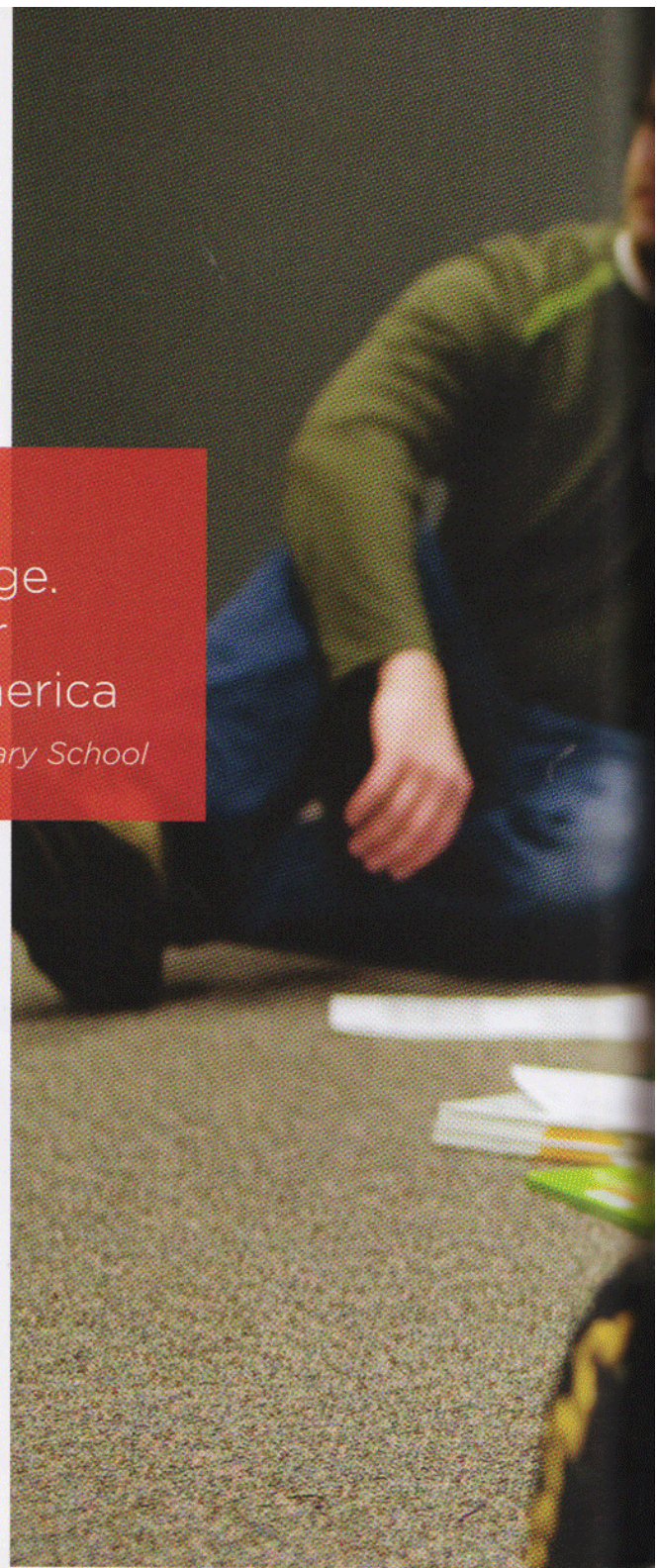
The program is part of Hennepin County Library's World Language Storytime, which also includes sessions in Spanish and Vietnamese. The Library Foundation also sponsored an African Outreach Program in 2007, in an attempt to expand outreach services to new immigrants.

The audience at Chinese Storytime at Ridgedale has drawn anywhere from a few families to a few dozen families. Chinese Storytime is open to children ages 4 to 8, and the reader uses books, songs and puppets to encourage language development.

“We've been pulling from the whole Twin Cities area,” Fonnest says. “We have native speaking families who want their children to celebrate the language and culture, students in the immersion program and adopted families.”

For children adopted from China, celebrating the language helps them value their heritage. “It reminds them that this is important and something to be proud of,” Fonnest says. “Many parents see value in having kids hear the Chinese language at such a young age.”

The value of Chinese language is increasingly recognized by schools, libraries, employers and others, as China's status in the world grows. China's role as a leading economic power is increasing, according to Elaine Dunn, communications manager for Hennepin County Library. As evidence, Dunn notes, China's economy has grown faster than any other in modern history, averaging a 10 percent annual growth rate in the past 20 years. Workers who are proficient in the Chinese language and





Hopkins resident Owen Cooper and his 5-year-old daughter, Virginia, checked out Ridgedale Library's Chinese Storytime and plan to make it a regular outing.

who are knowledgeable of the culture will certainly have an advantage.

"The opportunity to know Chinese is incredible," McIntosh says. "Whether China takes over the world or not, I think they'll be a force to be grappled with. That being said, America needs to figure China out a little bit, and we're not going to be able to do that if no one speaks the language." //

Amy Lyon is a Twin Cities-based freelance writer.

Chinese Storytime at Ridgedale Library

Children ages 4 to 8 and their families are welcome. The program lasts 30 to 45 minutes and includes Chinese stories told in Mandarin, while English is used to help non-native speakers follow along, and songs and puppet plays encourage language development. No registration is required.

When: 7 p.m. Thursdays April 9-30

Where: Ridgedale Library, 12601 Ridgedale Dr., Minnetonka

Web: hclib.org