

TONY HAO WORK SAMPLE 1

The final project of ENGL467 Journalism, Yale's advanced journalism course and the prerequisite of the Yale Journalism Scholar Program. I took the course in the Spring 2023 Semester with Sue Dominus, NYT Magazine staff writer. All reporting, interviewing, and research done by myself. Some interviews and sourcing done in Mandarin Chinese.

Headline: Learning an Unfamiliar Heritage: Chinese American Students' Quest for Their Family Language

Nine-year-old Puang Yi-Sing wanted a glass of fruit juice. It was a hot summer day in Taipei, and the American-born child was visiting her mother's extended family in Taiwan. Showing hospitality to the foreign guest, a friend of Yi-Sing's family who owned a juice bar allowed Yi-Sing to have one item from the menu for free. With a climate so different from Yi-Sing's rice-producing home state of Arkansas, Taiwan is known for producing pineapples, mangoes, guavas, and many other fruits that make for cold, sweet, vitamin-packed fruit juice, an ideal thirst-quenching elixir amidst the scorching summer heat.

Yi-Sing was shown the menu and immediately found herself in a predicament: the menu was written only in Chinese, a language she grew up speaking at home but could barely read. She couldn't distinguish the word for lemon from the word for melon, and she didn't want to admit that she couldn't read basic Chinese words. Eventually, she settled for one of the few items she did recognize: Taiwanese High-mountain tea (高山茶, *Gao Shan Cha*). In her family friend's juice bar, the tea was served unsweetened and hot. The adults were astonished that little Yi-Sing was cultured enough to share Taiwanese grandpas' palate for Oolong's complex aroma.

When Yi-Sing, who goes by Serena in America, started taking Chinese courses in college at Yale, she cited her fundamental motivation as "to be able to read menus." Competent in speaking and listening yet having little reading and writing knowledge, she was placed in "Intermediate Modern Chinese for Heritage Speakers," and one of the first words she learned was "Playboy Magazine" (花花公子, *Hua Hua Gong Zi*, lit. "Flower-Flower Man-Child"). The peculiar vocabulary lesson set the tone for Serena's confusing year of learning the language of her family heritage. The correct spelling of her Chinese name changed from Yi-Sing to Yixin; the correct word for 'arm' became *gebo* (胳膊) while nobody understood *shobei* (手臂), the word she grew up using; she was even asked to change the way to pronounce the words for 'mom' and 'dad.' If she failed these basic tasks, she'd lose points in oral assessments.

Serena felt insecure in class. At Yale, she could not use the words she grew up speaking, even though the language she grew up speaking was authentic Chinese – a dialect only spoken in Taiwan, to be sure, but Chinese. She resisted abandoning the words and accent she learned at home, but she had no choice but to learn new vocabulary and the writing system following her Mainland China-raised instructor. When she visited Taiwan in the autumn following her year learning Chinese at Yale, she found herself struggling despite having gained an expanded vocabulary. She had problems reading basic Chinese because some expressions she'd learned in class were written differently in Taiwan. Surprised by her language limitations, acquaintances

asked her whether she really went to Yale. Some family members could not understand some of her Mainland Chinese vocabulary and thought she developed a ‘weird American accent.’

Serena started taking Chinese hoping to better communicate with her family and Chinese-speaking community. Instead, she developed a language faculty which she called a “Frankenstein” and “a bastardized Chinese accent” that contained the accents of everyone who’d taught her Mandarin.

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Heritage language courses in American colleges are designed for students who grew up in households that speak the instructed language. These students tend to have better speaking and listening skills. As a result, heritage courses usually place heavier emphasis on reading and writing. Despite America’s high linguistic diversity, heritage courses tend to be limited to only a few languages. A 2017 survey of 296 US colleges found that Spanish, Chinese, and Arabic are the most commonly offered heritage language courses. At Yale, Chinese heritage courses are offered alongside Spanish, Korean, Russian, Vietnamese, and Persian.

For most of these languages, a heritage speaker may speak with a dialect, but they will have no problem understanding or being understood by another speaker of the same language. An immigrant from Mexico, for example, can communicate in Spanish with a friend who grew up in Chile. The Chinese language, on the other hand, has many variants that are mutually unintelligible beyond regional expressions. When the word “Chinese” appears in the general discourse, it almost always refers to Putonghua, Mainland China’s official Mandarin language. Used in governmental, educational, diplomatic, and business settings, Putonghua is largely based on Beijing Mandarin, a dialect with only about 20 million native speakers. The rest of China’s 1.4 billion population, when communicating with family and friends, speak either Mandarin with a regional accent or a language that isn’t mutually intelligible with Mandarin. The relationship between the two Mandarin dialects is comparable to the relationship between American and Australian English. Fluent Mandarin speakers can easily understand and distinguish different regional Mandarin dialects. The Beijing dialect and Putonghua, for example, are famous for having the -r sound absent in many Southern China Mandarin dialects.

Notable non-Mandarin Chinese languages include Cantonese, spoken in Guangdong Province, and Fuzhounese, spoken in parts of Fujian Province. These languages as well as different variants of Mandarin, albeit not mutually intelligible, are all considered Chinese because they are all historically rooted in China and share the same formal writing system. When it comes to news stories and governmental documents, readers can hardly distinguish Mandarin from Cantonese unless the writing contains dialogue excerpts. But the vernacular vocabulary of these languages varies greatly, and the pronunciation of these languages includes different vowels, consonants, and tones. According to a 2008 study, the lexical similarity – a linguistic concept that indicates mutual intelligibility – is only about 24% between Mandarin and Cantonese, and only about 20% between Mandarin and Min (Fuzhounese is a variety of it). As a comparison, the lexical similarity between English and French is 27%.

In addition, a few languages that shall be called “Chinese” are spoken outside China: Guoyu, or Taiwan’s Mandarin, has many everyday expressions that do not exist in Putonghua. Taiwanese, a cousin of Fuzhounese, has seven million active speakers in Taiwan. Local variants of Mandarin and Cantonese are also widely used in Malaysia.

And yet the default – and, in most colleges, the only – Chinese language taught in the classroom is Putonghua. Non-heritage speakers aiming to do business in Mainland China will certainly benefit from learning the perfect Putonghua, but the Putonghua-centric curriculum does not always meet the needs of children of Chinese immigrants. For those seeking to learn the language of their heritage, they instead acquire a more formal-sounding language that, when they speak it at home, distances them from their family members.

Nina Lin, a Yale student and second-generation Chinese American, comes from a household that speaks Southern Chinese Mandarin and Fuzhounese. Nina’s parents have not mastered English at the fluency level of native speakers, and she hoped to perfect her Mandarin so that she could discuss deep topics with her parents in their most comfortable language. After she started taking Chinese classes at Yale, both her family and she noticed that her accent departed from the rest of her family and began to sound closer to the Beijing dialect. While her parents were happy to see her improvements in Mandarin, she found her new way of speaking with her family awkward. “It’s like you’re talking to your friends in the US, but you have an Australian accent,” she said, commenting on her acquired accent. The Northern Chinese flavor in her accent was not as baffling to her family as Serena’s ‘Frankenstein’ Mandarin was, but her new dialect did affect her feeling of closeness to her family nonetheless.

In Chinese classrooms, instructors strive to polish their students’ accents to the perfect Northern Chinese Putonghua pronunciation. For heritage speakers, this could mean abandoning the way they speak Chinese at home, a development at odds with the deeper reasons why they started studying Chinese in college in the first place. Nina remembered that she and other students of Southern China descent were corrected similarly by the instructor, while the students of Northern China descent received far fewer corrections and spoke in a dialect “more natural for the class.” Serena, a native speaker of Guoyu or Taiwanese Mandarin, was taught a different pronunciation for words as simple as ‘trash’ and ‘to hug.’ On one occasion,, she was asked to read a passage that contained the Chinese word for ‘there.’ She found herself physically incapable of forcing herself to pronounce differently a word she used on a daily basis. “I really psyched myself for it,” she said. She remembered talking with her instructor in her natural Guoyu dialect during office hours. Yet in Serena’s classroom, until late in the academic year when her instructor finally decided to stop penalizing her for using her home dialect, Putonghua was the only acceptable accent for tests and evaluations.

Serena mastered her native language well enough to understand that she was being penalized for speaking a different dialect. But for heritage speakers with less Chinese fluency, such penalties can lead to misconceptions of their home language. Will Zhu, another Yale student, hails from a Southern Chinese Mandarin heritage background. His Mandarin-speaking parents sent him to weekend Chinese schools since elementary school, but he never enjoyed the classes or did well on tests. His instructors always told him that his pronunciation was wrong. “I always assumed I was wrong,” he said, never thinking about whether he was mispronouncing words or merely

repeating words he heard at home. “I thought I spoke with an ‘American accent,’” he said, evoking the stereotype against many English-speaking Chinese learners, who often can not pronounce many Mandarin-specific consonants and tones. Two summers ago, Will participated in a Beijing-based Chinese online program and asked his instructor how to improve his accent. To his surprise, the instructor told him that he had no American accent at all. “He just told me that I sounded like someone from a Southern [Chinese] village,” recalled Will.

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Chinese heritage speakers’ needs have historically been undervalued by language programs in America since Yale opened America’s first college-level Chinese course in 1871. The history of Chinese language instruction in the United States can be broken down into four stages. During the First Stage, between the late 1800s and the 1920s, the few Chinese programs mainly trained sinologists and overseas missionaries, and the main form of pedagogy was translation and grammar studies of Classical Chinese texts such as Confucius’s *The Analects*. The Second Stage, which lasted until the 1970s, saw China’s rising geopolitical significance. The federal government intervened and commissioned higher education programs that trained military officers, pilots, and information agents. As a result, listening and speaking were prioritized over reading and writing.

The Third Stage, between the 1970s and 2000s, coincided with the establishment of the China-US diplomatic relationship and the end of communist China’s isolationism. Students flooded into Chinese classrooms hoping to eventually pursue China-related commercial, political, and educational opportunities. Responding to the students’ shifting needs, performance-based pedagogy focused on preparing students for real-life situations such as ordering food and asking for directions, as well as introducing a friend and seeking others’ opinions. The Fourth and current stage, in a time of China’s rising significance in international politics and business, sees increasing funding poured into Chinese language programs and a revival of the military-tailored pedagogy of the second stage.

The needs of heritage speakers, therefore, were barely taken into consideration in Chinese language programs until the third stage, when an influx of Mainland-China immigrants – who wanted their children to learn Chinese – arrived in North America after Mao passed away and China opened up its border. Even with Chinese heritage speakers’ increasing interest in learning their families’ language, non-heritage students interested in building business, political, and academic ties with China continue to dominate Chinese language programs. At Yale, whose student body is 16.2% Asian compared to America’s Asian population rate of 7.3%, the Chinese program opened 19 non-heritage sections across all levels in the Fall 2022 semester. When it came to heritage sections, the number of sections fell to 10.

In college Chinese classrooms – heritage and non-heritage alike – the mainstream pedagogy comes from military roots that rarely took heritage learners’ needs into consideration. Based in Princeton’s Chinese department, formerly chaired by long-term professor Chou Chih-p’ing, the “hard-core drilling instruction” (a terminology used by MIT lecturer Liao Haohsiang) inherits the audio-lingual tradition used in the military language training of the Second Stage and heavily relies on intensive repetition exercises. According to multiple Chinese instructors who have

worked with Chou or Chou's disciples, a teacher in a drill exercise classroom is expected to ask follow-up questions and demand the students to repeat entire sentences of responses in Chinese until their answers involve the correct grammar, follow the accurate pronunciation, and incorporate enough advanced words and ideas.

The drilling instruction-based curriculum was invented when students studied Chinese for military situations, in which language inaccuracy and miscommunication could lead to life-threatening situations. Such intensive exercises condition the students to produce the most accurate Chinese grammar and pronunciation, but the accuracy is measured against the singular standard of Putonghua. For non-heritage learners, the drilling curriculum corrects their language misuse that cannot be understood by speakers of any Chinese dialect. But for heritage learners of a non-Putonghua dialect, the exercises eliminate natural features of the language they speak at home with their families.

"The standard Beijing pronunciation is accepted everywhere in China," said Perry Link, coauthor of many Chinese textbooks with Chou, who turned down interview requests citing health reasons but adamantly believes in teaching Putonghua in America's Chinese classrooms. Link pointed out that only one language can be taught in a classroom out of practicality, and Putonghua is the natural choice. Link did add, however, that students may be exposed to regional accents after two or three years of Putonghua studies.

E, a novice Taiwan-born Chinese instructor who teaches at a US East Coast college and wishes to remain anonymous, offered an interesting insight into America's Chinese language curriculum. "It feels similar to China's political system," E said. The Chinese government frequently uses political stability and public safety to justify its unjustifiable policies against ethnic minorities. For example, China sees the internment camps in Uyghur's Xinjiang as tools that prevent Islamic extremism and protect national security, but the United Nations considers them to seriously violate the Uyghurs' basic human rights. "Putonghua and its pronunciation and usage are strictly enforced in American schools so that classroom efficiency will be maximized," he added, elaborating on the similarity he observed. "But doing so will harm the student body's diversity. After all, preserving diversity inevitably requires more effort and risks exposing students to more moments of confusion." In other words, the clause of maximizing classroom efficiency has been used to justify eradicating heritage learners' linguistic diversity. In Serena's and Nina's cases, this eradication has made the students feel alienated and deviate from their goal of intimate communication with their families.

E had encountered many occasions when his supervisor told him to refrain from using his Guoyu vocabulary. He once audited another Taiwanese colleague's Chinese language course. Knowing that she grew up speaking in the familiar Guoyu pronunciation, E listened to the colleague lecturing in perfect Putonghua. "Why should anyone need to censor themselves to such a high degree!" E lamented. In front of his students, he chose to acknowledge the Putonghua words in the textbook but also taught them the Guoyu expressions as well as other dialectical expressions he knew.

Some instructors have learned to be flexible. Liu Fan, Serena's instructor, eventually decided to stop correcting Serena and other heritage students from their home dialects. Today, she no longer

enforces the iconic Putonghua ‘-r’ word-ending pronunciation, which does not exist in the Mandarin dialects from Southern China. In oral or written evaluations, if a student uses a phrase or pronunciation different from the Putonghua standard, she’ll ask them where they learned the nonstandard usage. If the usage comes from a minor Chinese dialect the student speaks at home, she’ll give the points back to the student. “The teacher’s answer isn’t the only one that’s correct,” Fan said, recalling her takeaway from teaching Serena.

Liu Ning, a former Chinese instructor at Princeton and UPenn, remembered sending out questionnaires at the beginning of a semester. She always asked her students why they wanted to study Chinese and how they wished to be assessed. She found it necessary to strictly enforce the Putonghua pronunciation for those interested in opportunities that demand perfect Mandarin, such as diplomatic posts in Mainland China. But for those learning to establish tighter connections with their families and wishing to preserve their regional Mandarin dialects, she asked for corrections only when their mistakes affected basic communication.

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The concept of Putonghua was born in 1955, six years after the founding of Communist China. The next year, observing China’s need for a lingua franca above the hundreds of local dialects, Prime Minister Zhou Enlai released the “Instruction to Promote Putonghua,” which administratively regulated and standardized Putonghua based on the Beijing Dialect in Northern China. In 1982, the promotion of Putonghua was written into China’s Constitution. Schools, radios, TV stations, and public transportation adopted Putonghua as a working language. The Putonghua Proficiency Test was developed to hold teachers, government workers, and other professionals to a certain standard of Putonghua fluency.

The promotion of Putonghua did facilitate economic and cultural development on a national level. People from traditionally non-Mandarin regions gained access to educational and business opportunities in the Putonghua environment. But the execution of the Putonghua promotion was often problematic. Some local governments got rid of dialects in schools and public spaces completely, which led to the demise of Shanghainese, Pinghua, and many ironic regional dialects and languages. Other local governments deployed their propaganda departments and made banners that juxtaposed “speaking Putonghua” with “being cultured/civilized,” and “using dialects” with “spitting out curse words.”

The dominance of Putonghua has hit Barbara Zheng, Will Zhu’s mother, twice in her life, creating alienation from her family and heritage in both instances. Barbara grew up in a Fuzhounese-speaking household in China before moving to America at age 24. When she was a child and teenager, her hometown Fuzhou was feverishly promoting the use of Putonghua. The Fuzhou-grown owners of all the neighborhood shops spoke Putonghua to their customers; students got yelled at by their teachers when they spoke Fuzhounese in class. The result of such policies? Barbara only spoke Fuzhounese at home with her family. When she hung out with her friends – who were also native speakers of Fuzhounese – they chose to speak Putonghua with each other. “We thought speaking Putonghua was cool,” she said, “it felt cultured and modern. Fuzhounese, on the other hand, felt rude and uneducated.” Those who couldn’t speak Putonghua well were called *Tu Di Gua*. “Muddy Potatoes.” Backward bumpkins.

Speaking with a Fuzhou accent, Barbara thought her Mandarin pronunciation was inferior. In America, she never asked her two children to learn Fuzhounese, even if that meant that Will had almost no communication abilities with her mother, who also spoke Mandarin as a second language. One evening, when her daughter Angela came home from weekend Chinese school and corrected her pronunciation of a word, she felt immensely proud. “Angela learned something,” she said, “and she’ll speak better, more correct Chinese than I do.”

China’s forceful promotion of Putonghua continues to affect today’s young generation of Chinese Americans. Nina’s parents are both fluent in Fuzhounese, but they both refrained from teaching their children their heritage language. Nina has gotten the impression from her family that Fuzhounese and Fuzhou-accented Mandarin are “crass” languages associated with the countryside, while Northern Mandarin-based Putonghua sounds more polite and sophisticated. At the same time, the Fuzhou languages sound more unfiltered and familiar to her and remind her of, in her own words, ‘homebodies.’ She has thus developed mixed emotions about the dynamics between Putonghua and her home dialects. When she heard Northern China-sounding Putonghua on TV programs about Chinese diplomacy, she was reminded of – and saddened by – her parents’ internalized attitude towards the Fuzhou languages, that people speaking these languages sounded less intelligent. But she loves her parents and has never considered them less intelligent than Northern Chinese people. She understands that learning Putonghua will open up more professional opportunities for her, but she can’t help questioning, “Why is [Putonghua] the standard in the first place?”

Serena, having enrolled in extensive linguistics courses at Yale, references the sociolinguistics concept of “prestige.” Similar to the relationship between standard American English and English with a Southern accent, Putonghua is a higher-prestige Chinese dialect than other Mandarin dialects in America. As the language of instruction, Putonghua is considered the more proper way of speaking, and there are practical benefits for Chinese students – heritage and non-heritage – to learn Putonghua. But when Serena was forced to code-switch in her Chinese classroom and speak in her nonnative dialect, she found herself feeling inauthentic and frustrated, as if her home dialect was deemed less legitimate.

Putonghua has a complex political history across multiple generations and regions. It has challenged the current generation of heritage speakers as well as their families in East Asia. American colleges teach Putonghua with the intention of maximizing their students’ benefits. But if the politics and prestige behind Putonghua remain unexplained and unresolved, Chinese language programs will continue to unintentionally contribute to Putonghua’s detrimental effect on the marginalized cultures of the Sinophone sphere.

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While learning Chinese can open up professional prospects for heritage learners, many Chinese American students enroll in Chinese courses for non-practical reasons – to understand their cultures and to become a more valued member of their Chinese-speaking community.

When Will was a kid, his parents always brought him to many “Asian parties,” in which Chinese-speaking first-generation immigrants brought their children and socialized. The adults always took turns teasing the children, asking them questions in Chinese. When it was Will’s turn, he would greet his parents’ friends, call them *Shushu* and *Ayi* (Uncle and Auntie), and begin to struggle to find the right Chinese words. “They don’t even say it, but you could see it on their faces,” Will added, “[that they thought] ‘Oh this is an American kid not in touch with his language.’ It made me feel bad, especially when other kids were so good at [speaking Chinese].” He wanted to improve his Chinese, but until speaking Chinese was tied to his GPA in high school, his fears of pronouncing the words wrong overcame his interest in practicing Chinese.

Another dimension of Will’s personal investment in learning Chinese came from his parents’ attitude towards the language. His parents, who immigrated to America as penniless Chinese students, asked him to study hard on a variety of subjects from a very young age. Having heard his parents’ life stories, he thought that his parents pressured him to do most things in life out of “a survival instinct.” He was made to study math, for example, so that he could score high in math competitions. His success in math competitions helped him get into Yale, which helped him land a high-paying finance internship with a high likelihood of a return offer. He did not enjoy his parents’ helicopter parenting style, but he sympathized with his parents for wanting him to plan ahead and secure financial stability.

When it came to Chinese, however, his parents’ attitude was the opposite. Will remembered many fond childhood memories – encoded in Chinese because his parents were speaking Chinese – when his father drove him home and spent the entire forty-minute ride talking about Tang Dynasty emperors, or when his mother told him about growing up in a poor village and seeing her sister almost lose her backpack in a dirty squat toilet, or when his father brought up participating in the 1989 Tiananmen Square Protest, a topic still prohibited as a topic of discussion in China today. “It didn’t come out of that anxiety [to survive and make money],” Will said, commenting on his parents’ wanting him to study Chinese. “It came from pure care and love, and a desire to share their culture with me and having me be part of that culture.”

Multiple instructors interviewed for this story acknowledged heritage speakers’ different needs, but they also considered teaching a non-Putonghua dialect in the classroom irresponsible for language learners, especially for those seeking professional opportunities through the Chinese language. But for heritage speakers, respecting and meeting their language needs may require the opposite of enforcing Putonghua instructions. Ning foresaw the possibility of opening non-Putonghua sections, as long as there would be a high enough demand.

Both Will and Nina mentioned that certain topics could only be discussed in Chinese when speaking with their parents. The same thing holds true for their parents’ generation. At the end of my interview with Barbara, which was conducted in Chinese, Barbara thanked me and said that she really enjoyed talking to me. She confided that she felt she had a deeper conversation with me than most of her conversations with her son. “You speak fluent Chinese,” she said, “there’re so many things I can talk about more easily with you. I’m so jealous of you and your mom because you two can talk fluently in Chinese.”

Barbara's native language is Mandarin. Will's is English. She can't translate her Chinese words into English and convey the same sentiments. Nor can her son reproduce Chinese words that capture his thoughts, first encoded in English. Neither of them speaks their second language perfectly, but fluency isn't the problem.

"Part of speaking Mandarin is understanding the cultural nuances. You have a very acute awareness of what words mean beyond the dictionary definition," said Nina, who had a more eloquent vocabulary to articulate the experience of her family, Will and Barbara's family, and many other Chinese American households. "There's more to language than just the words."

TONY HAO WORK SAMPLE 2

Completed Jul-Aug 2021, for RADII China. Part 1 of a three-part feature series on ordinary Chinese people's reactions to the government shutting down the for-profit tutoring industry. Part 1 focuses on Chinese parents' need for after-school tutoring and the social phenomenon of Chinese parenting. [Part 2](#) examines Chinese tutoring organizations' business behaviors. [Part 3](#) returns to the fundamental topic: the nation's shifting understanding of the concept of education.

I pitched the feature series to my editor and completed all research, sourcing, interviewing, and writing myself.

Headline: China's Embattled For-Profit Tutoring Sector is Fueled by Anxious Parents

Summary: China's new education reforms aim to free students from chronic academic stress, but some parents are likely less than thrilled with the changes.

By Tony Hao. Edited by Matt Bossons

RADII China, Aug 10th, 2021

<https://radii.co/article/for-profit-tutoring-in-china>

Editor's Note:

On June 9, China's Ministry of Education founded the Department of Off-Campus Education Administration to regulate China's after-school tutoring industry. During the May 2021 Conference of China's Central Comprehensively Deepening Reforms Commission, Chinese President Xi Jinping and the conference committee reiterated that new policies would be needed to make school less stressful for students — [with the target focused on after-school curriculum-based training centers](#).

The hammer fell last month when the State Council — China's chief administrative authority — [released new educational policies](#) to reduce students' workloads and tighten rules on for-profit curriculum tutoring companies.

Chinese students are famous for participating in excessive amounts of private tutoring outside of regular school hours. The government's reform efforts aim to free Chinese students from their chronic academic stress. And while it's easy to argue the regulatory changes will be positive for kids, some parents are likely less than thrilled with the reforms.

In part one of our three-part series on China's crackdown on private curriculum-focused training companies, we introduce the phenomena of '[chicken parenting](#)' and explore how anxious parents have fueled China's enormous for-profit tutoring industry.

“I've Forgotten How to Smile”

Kelly Zhou is the head of a Shanghai-based private international kindergarten that offers Chinese-English bilingual education. A veteran in the education industry, she understands the importance of children’s social and emotional wellness. Thus, when one of Zhou’s students, who we’ll identify as C, told her that she is so busy every day that she had forgotten how to smile, she immediately scheduled a chat with C’s mother.

According to Zhou, C was a bright young girl who “was more than prepared to be a kindergartener.” She was polite, intellectual, and articulate. The downside was, she didn’t have many friends because she felt that her peers “were too childish.” She didn’t see the point of befriending her peers because “none of them understood anything.”

At the time, C was 4 years old.

C’s mother graduated from one of China’s top colleges and was a full-time parent. Every Friday after kindergarten, she would send C to a private English tutor. Afterward, her young daughter would attend other academic-related sessions.

Over the weekend, C would partake in a ballet class, a piano lesson, a painting school, math tutoring, and a sports team. “Pretty packed [schedule] for a 4-year-old,” says Zhou.

“I’m able to offer my kid everything,” C’s mother told Zhou, “And she’s able to manage all that.” The parent didn’t see anything wrong with jam-packing C’s life with extracurricular activities — robbing her child of free time.

Zhou once asked C what part of her life made her happiest. “I’m never happy,” C responded, “I’m tired every day.”

The Chicken Philosophy

The story of C and her mother represents a small yet significant group of Chinese parents: the ‘chicken parents’ (*jiwa*, 鸡娃, literally ‘chicken kids’). The verb ‘chicken’ (*ji*, 鸡) comes from ‘chicken blood’ (*jixie*, 鸡血). The Chinese idiom ‘shot up with chicken blood’ (*da le jixie*, 打了鸡血) refers to someone with inexhaustible energy, and the phrase ‘chicken parents’ derives from the action of ‘chickening’ one’s children — doing everything to make their kids perfect.

Chicken parents are not the majority of Chinese parents. However, they have quickly garnered the most media attention and have formed a community — or perhaps more accurately, a cult-like community.

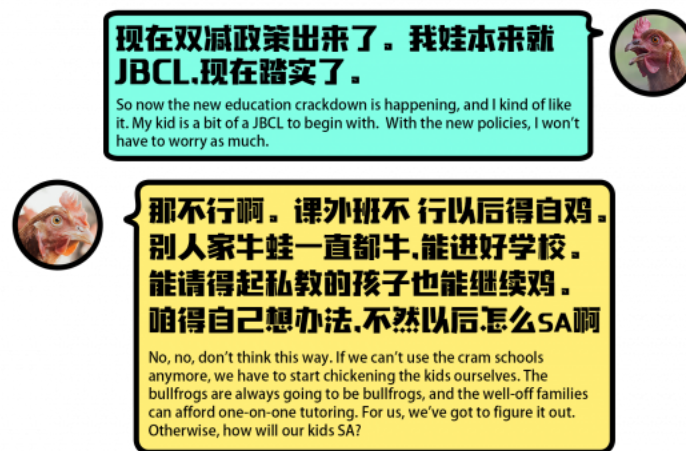
In March, Chinese publication *Everyday People* (*Meiri Renwu*, 每日人物) [published an investigation](#) on chicken parenting that quickly went viral. Having no kids herself, the first-person narrator posed as a Beijingers chicken mom and attempted to join a few prominent chicken parenting WeChat groups. (The narrator’s gender is never explicitly stated in the story.)

For the sake of convenience, we will use the ‘she/her’ pronouns, based on the concocted identity.)

The narrator’s initial attempts to join the groups failed because she did not know the basic slang terms used by chicken parents. Due to her unfamiliarity with chicken parenting, she was deemed “unhelpful for the other parents” and blocked by the group’s moderators.

Communication within these WeChat groups is heavily based upon a collection of euphemistic vocabulary. These groups of parents share resources such as illegal PDFs of English storybooks and discuss success stories of the most competitive kids. They also research the best extracurricular sports and arts programs, organize ridesharing to cram schools, and rant about their children’s inability to be ‘chickened.’

Indeed, the collaborative community of chicken parents is possible because everyone has been verified to be “helpful for other parents.”



A concocted conversation between two mothers using a healthy dose of chicken parent slang. JBCL (an acronym for 鸡不出来, ji bu chu lai) means “can’t be chickened” or “chickening with no effect,” while bullfrogs (牛蛙, niuwa) are “super-smart kids.” SA (上岸; shang’an) refers to “ending the long chickening journey” or “getting into a good school.” Image created by Sabina Islas

Some of these groups even discuss good places to take children to rest their eyes. Eye-relaxation spots are allegedly needed to ensure that kids are visually able to continue studying. According to a parent, “if [the children] become myopic now, how can they take more tutoring sessions in the future?”

K, who also asked to remain anonymous, is a facilitator of several chicken-parenting WeChat groups and a 15-year veteran in the education industry. He explains to RADII how he manages his WeChat groups:

“Before we add new parents to our group chats, we always verify their identity — who they are, where their kids go to school, etc. We want to make sure that the parents subscribe to the same chickening ideology and thus feel comfortable sharing their thoughts.”

K also has different groups for parents, depending on how active they are and how competitive their children are. Carrying along with chicken parents' long-lasting tradition of food-focused vocabulary, K named his groups 'Kobe Beef,' 'Hida Beef,' 'Miyazaki Beef,' and 'Sendai Beef,' among other Japanese Wagyu terms.

Unsurprisingly, the names of the most high-quality and luxurious Wagyu varieties are reserved for the more prestigious chicken parenting groups.

"I do it the same way as I'd manage a celebrity fan group," K tells us. "The more you participate, the higher status you achieve."

Except in these groups, the focus of adoration is the concept of chicken parenting.

"The parents love it. Their chicken kids at school are the rare ones, and they are the weirdos among other parents," says K. "But here, everyone shares the same parenting ideology; they do the same things to their kids. Nobody challenges them. I can't even recall the last time when there was a big argument in any of these groups."

"Here," K adds, "the parents feel that they belong."

Operating an Excavator

If chicken parents were the only parents who enrolled their kids in cram schools, the government might not need the Deepening Reform Commission to rein in the private education industry. [According to a 2019 survey across Chinese cities](#), 60% of children under 15 were signed up for at least one private tutoring session.

S, another alias, is among this 60% of parents, sending her third-grade daughter to three cram school sessions per week. However, S herself is not anxious about her daughter's education and future. Instead, she sees cram school as something inevitable, telling us, "It's what China's education is like today. Everyone else is getting tutored; how can you not play by these rules?"

Kelly Zhou also falls among this broader group of parents. However much she disagrees with her client's chicken parenting philosophy, she still feels the need to sign her son up for weekend math courses.

"I explained my reasoning to my son," she says, "he said that he had a dream job for the future. I told him, 'If you don't start studying a bit more now, you won't make it that far.' Worst case scenario, he won't go to college. And I asked him, 'Will you be okay with that?'"

Part of Zhou's fear originates from the fact that China is allegedly planning to shrink the number of students admitted to high school and, as a result, college.

Rumors have been widely circulating on the internet that 50% of China's middle-school graduates will go to vocational school in the future. Chinese state-backed media People.cn [has](#)

[debunked](#) the rumor, but it's apparent that Chinese parents are worried about their children not being admitted to high school and college.

“The difference in salary and social status of white-collar workers versus blue-collar workers, the gap is simply too wide,” says Zhou. “Think about how Chinese parents scold their kids, ‘If you don’t study, in the future you’ll be working on a construction site operating an excavator.’ I’m personally not against my kid operating an excavator, but who’d like to see their kids being viewed as inferior?”

K agrees with Zhou. Reflecting on his experience with parents, he tells RADII, “When parents send their kids to cram schools, their expectation for their kids’ future increases.” In other words, those who have taken tutoring lessons will be seen as failures if they end up in a vocational school or a community college.

“Now that cram schools are to be cancelled, parents won’t have false hope of their kids getting into college,” K adds. “So, when their kids get into a vocational school and go work in a factory, the parents will be mentally prepared.”

Editor’s Endnote:

Unaware of their parents’ and educators’ discussions above, many young Chinese children are trapped in the system of cram schools. They feel overworked when taking more tutoring classes than they desire; when they don’t, they feel anxiety about themselves and their parents’ expectations, potentially pushing them into schooling after regular classes end.

But for cram schools and training centers to thrive, it is not enough to tickle the interests of children. In [part two](#) of our series on China’s crackdown on private curriculum-based training companies, we’ll explore how cram schools win the hearts — and wallets — of parents.

TONY HAO WORK SAMPLE 3

Time-sensitive short-form reporting for Ad Age's Creativity desk last summer. Reported on the Internet's and the industry's immediate reactions to a decade-old racist creative campaign and its resurface on social media.

The editor sent me the assignment and some background info. I was the sole person responsible for sourcing, interviewing, and writing.

Headline: Racist Diesel Ad with Native American Image Resurfaces, Sparking Agency Apology

Summary: Out-of-home ad resurfaced by a social media user was part of a 2010 Cannes Grand Prix-winning Campaign

By Tony Hao. Edited by Ann-Christine Diaz

Ad Age, July 20th, 2022

<https://adage.com/article/agency-news/racist-diesel-ad-native-american-image-resurfaces-sparking-anomaly-apology/2423761>



Credit: Diesel

Anomaly has apologized for a 12-year-old Diesel ad that recently resurfaced in a New York subway station and drew social media fire for its racist depiction of Native Americans.

[The ad](#), from the 2010 “Be Stupid” campaign that earned a Cannes Lions Outdoor Grand Prix, reappeared due to a July 8 TikTok video from user [@witchytwitchytv](#). The 40-second video reacted to the Diesel poster, which appears to have been uncovered in a New York subway station during construction. Subtitled “Came across this racist advertisement on West 4th St.,” the video opens on a portion of the ad, featuring a white man wearing what appears to be a traditional Native American headdress, holding a bow and arrow, with a spaceship-like vehicle in the background. The campaign slogan reads, “Be Stupid.”

“I know it’s difficult for some people to treat Natives with basic dignity and respect, but this really goes above and beyond,” the TikTok video creator says. In the video, she goes to Diesel’s website where she fails to find information on the campaign but does land on the brand’s code of ethics. “Talks a lot about respecting people from different cultures and backgrounds, and even, quote, ‘committed to ensuring the utmost consideration is given to the recognition and safeguarding of dignity, freedom, and equality of human beings,’” she reads. She concludes the video emphasizing the ad’s juxtaposition of “a caricature of Native Americans” next to the “Be Stupid” slogan.

The comment section under the video was flooded with criticism, with the majority of the users tagging Diesel and demanding an explanation or an apology. One top comment inquired about the ad agency behind this campaign, and the uploader responded “Anomaly.”

One week after the posting of the TikTok video, non-profit news organization Indian Country Today released a statement from the organization Ikiya Collective, demanding “Diesel pull down the harmful racist 'Be Stupid' campaign appropriating Native culture.” “Native communities experience higher rates of suicide compared to all other racial groups in the U.S.,” the statement reads. “Racism undeniably plays a role in the mental health of Indigenous peoples, as well as plays a part in the lack of our access to mental health care.”

Anomaly’s apology, posted on Instagram on July 19, noted, “An ad Anomaly created in 2010 was unearthed during construction at a New York City subway stop. It is offensive and insensitive, especially to Native American and Indigenous communities. We apologize for the harm caused through our work.” The statement continues to acknowledge that despite its age, the campaign nevertheless exposed “the need for greater diversity, inclusion, and equity—then and today.”

A spokesperson from New York-based Anomaly explained to Ad Age that after the agency discovered the ad had been unearthed on July 12, the media group that had originally put the ad up worked with New York City's Metropolitan Transit Authority to remove it the following day. The space where the ad had hung had been covered by vending machines and became exposed after the machines were removed for construction. The spokesperson also reiterated Anomaly's apology, noting that the agency also addressed the issue internally and that it remains "in the process of identifying next steps for accountability and action that are most beneficial to Native American and Indigenous communities."

Diesel did not respond by press time.

The incident shines a light on how social media can amplify dated marketing messages, so brands and agencies must be prepared to answer for them.

When it was first introduced, the ad from Diesel, which was famous for deliberately provocative advertising, did not call attention for its depiction of Native Americans. The "Be Stupid" campaign, which extended across outdoor, print and digital, originally aimed to portray the word "stupid" as something positive, "reimagining it as a label for 'daring, heart-driven, acts'" and a 'relentless pursuit of a regret-free life,'" as reported by Ad Age's Creativity in 2010. The campaign was filled with edgy, sometimes cryptic images of young people doing bizarre things, with copy elaborating on the campaign platform.



Credit: Diesel

The jury that awarded the campaign an Outdoor Grand Prix at Cannes in 2010 described the work as "brave."

It's unclear how the ad found in the subway was meant to communicate the "Be Stupid" philosophy. The costume of the model alone is enough to take issue with, but the pairing of the image and words out of context of the greater campaign makes it even more problematic.

The campaign did draw some negative attention at the time—but for another reason. The ad was banned in the U.K. by the Advertising Standards Authority for being encouraging “antisocial” behavior, citing an ad of a woman pointing her camera inside her bikini bottom as well as another ad featuring another woman flashing her breasts at a CCTV camera. At the time, Anomaly was Diesel’s agency of record, and the two parties ended their partnership in 2010. In 2017, the fashion brand reappointed Anomaly to run its global advertising account, only to drop it 10 months later for Publicis Italy, which continues to work with the brand.

More than a decade after its creation, however, the ad stirs strong emotions.

When asked for comment, Michael Gray, founder of Billings, Montana-based G&G Advertising, the first Native American-owned and operated agency, called the ad “offensive, unbelievable. ... The minute [when Anomaly and Diesel] started involving race was when they went wrong.” A Native American himself, Gray noted that by featuring inauthentic Native American clothing of “Halloween store” costume quality, the ad reinforces negative stereotypes against Native Americans. “Stuff you create is not going to be made in a silo,” Gray said. “Imagine if this is Black face and the uproar it’s going to have. But it’s a Native American face—it slides through. We’re seen as the silent minority in this country.”

Understanding that the ad was not made recently, Gray still questioned how such an ad was not intercepted before its launch. “[The] art director, the copywriters, the executive director, the client, the photographers, the actor, the makeup artist,” he said. “All of them touching that one ad. [Not] one of them raised their hands to say, ‘Don’t you think that’s offensive to people?’”

Gray was pleased, however, to learn that Anomaly had released a statement of apology and sees the incident as an opportunity for people of color in the marketing industry to step up and lead the conversation. “We can’t just wait for another George Floyd to talk about how minorities are treated in this country,” he said.

TONY HAO WORK SAMPLE 4

One of my earlier stories, completed Jan-Feb 2021 for Yale Daily News WKND, the long-form and creative nonfiction desk. Reported on Yale's undergraduate dating scene reflected through student-made matchmaking algorithms.

The editor sent me the assignment and connected me with one source. I did most of the sourcing and all of the research, interviews, and writing myself.

Headline: Ghosting, Percentiles and Roommate Romance: Revisiting the Yale Marriage Pact

Tony Hao, Edited by Andrew Kornfeld

Yale Daily News (WKND), Feb 12th, 2021

<https://yaledailynews.com/blog/2021/02/11/ghosting-percentiles-and-roommate-romance-revisiting-the-yale-marriage-pact/>

On a clear, chilly New Haven afternoon in October, with fallen leaves gleaming under the golden New England sunlight, Caroline took a walk with Steven along Chapel Street.

Steven was Caroline's most recent date, following a series of unsuccessful Tinder right-swipes. The two met — or rather, were matched — on the Yale Marriage Pact, the most recent edition of Yale's biannual student-run love-predicting algorithm. In Caroline's match announcement email, the Pact proudly predicted that this match "is in the 99.97% percentile" of all matches. "This is considered an excellent match," the Pact added in a smaller font, under the number.

The newly matched couple eagerly yet meticulously opened up to each other and carefully discovered their similarities. They were both cat people. Caroline's cousin went to the college where Steven's mom taught. They both enjoyed board games, TV shows and books. Steven even had a fun fact about books: His high school friend group had a book club that included every friend's dad.

Near the end of this first date, Caroline suggested getting food together. "Sure," Steven said, "What do you want?"

"I don't know," Caroline answered, "Up to you."

"I'm good with anything," Steven responded nicely.

"So, where did you end up going?" I asked Caroline during our interview.

Caroline burst out laughing. "We didn't get food. Neither of us wanted to choose a place," she said. "We ended up going nowhere."

(Caroline, among other interviewees, requested to use pseudonyms to protect their identity. All names in this story, unless accompanied by a class year, are pseudonyms).

The idea of a matchmaking algorithm like the Yale Marriage Pact isn't new. Among Yalies interviewed for this story, most recalled at least one new algorithm advertised every semester. Nevertheless, the Marriage Pact last semester saw unprecedented popularity. In a pandemic semester when students struggled to meet new people, 2,756 of them — 45 percent of the undergraduate population — filled out the matching questionnaire. By contrast, Three Day Relationship, organized by Barkley Dai '21 and six others in fall 2019, saw fewer than 800 participants.

After filling out the questionnaire, students received a match and a percentile index, scaled from zero to 100 percent, determined by the algorithm. The Marriage Pact never explained the meaning of this percentile, though they did declare the couples with higher indexes as better matches.

The 2,756 marriage-seeking Yalies included Caroline, who had been actively looking for a relationship. An off-campus junior, she felt lonely and “wanted to meet people.” She “had been on few dates” in high school but was never in a real relationship. At Yale, she had used dating apps and been on dates with “douchy guys” and even a girl, but she was never attracted to any of them. The Marriage Pact offered her a new possibility for dating. Instead of her manually selecting her dates, an algorithm would select a date for her.

“Were you worried that you may get a bad match?” I asked her.

“Well, worst case scenario, I can just ghost him,” she answered.

Caroline filled out the 50-question entry questionnaire and waited. A week later, she received Steven's email address, the 99.97 percentile number and a personality evaluation for the couple that said, “You were highly compatible among conformity to rules.” Caroline found this evaluation puzzling and judgmental.

A day later, she received an email from Steven titled “A robot thinks we should get married?” In this self-introductory email, Steven offered her biographical info alongside the following line: “Oh, and I think it's important to be critical of authority and hegemony — what are your thoughts on conformity rules? (a great conversation starter from the Yale Marriage Pact)” The two texted back and forth. The following weekend, they went on the aforementioned date.

Caroline and Steven are among the lucky ones: They at least had a first date.

Among those interviewed, all claimed they had friends who either ignored or were ignored by their matches. Mary, a sophomore, was matched with a frosh. Because of the age difference, she immediately knew she was not interested. She never reached out to the frosh, and neither did the frosh to her. A mutual ghosting.

This was a 70 percentile match.

But things could get ugly. Emma, a junior looking for a relationship, reached out to her match the same day she received the matching email. She never got a response. The next day, when stalking her match on social media, she saw her match tweeted out: “why is my match so bad?” She felt personally attacked — she had never met her match before.

And those who ghosted their match may not have done so out of disinterest or dislike. Mark, a first year, found out he and his match shared mutual friends and ghosted him/her. He cited two reasons. He did not want a relationship out of the Marriage Pact — he preferred hookups over one singular commitment. Besides, even if he would meet his match to make friends, he feared that their first encounter may be awkward.

“I don’t like awkwardness,” he said.

Mark had an 83 percentile match.

A few days following their first date, Caroline and Steven texted again. Steven sent Caroline music recommendations and Caroline liked them. Caroline had learned that Steven was a talented musician, so talented that he ran his own music podcast. Eventually, Steven acknowledged their failure to get food on their first date. Caroline replied “haha” and suggested getting lunch the following weekend. And they did. Finally. From Junzi. They sat on the steps in front of the library and ate.

It was another clear, breezy New England fall afternoon. As they finished their food, they also exhausted common topics for conversation. For a short while, they sat in silence. Steven asked Caroline what she wanted to do.

Caroline realized that she had never been to the Grove Street graveyard. “I’ve never been to the graveyard before,” she said. “Me neither,” Steven answered.

With that, this 99.97 percentile couple continued their second date in a graveyard.

Emma’s match percentile could have been 30 percent, or 70 percent, or 95 percent or even 99.97 percent. It remained unclear whether Emma’s match considered Emma a bad match because of a low percentile. But it never mattered. She never went on the date. The percentile number only mattered to the couples that went on a date, when they compared their Pact experiences with the Pact’s quantified prediction.

Among those who ghosted their matches, some explained that their friends pressured them to join the Marriage Pact. In other words, it was not their intention to ghost their matches. Others, like Mary, simply had no interest in their matches. Mark’s answer was the most interesting. He claimed to speak for not only himself, but a majority of his friends. “People wanted to take the questionnaire,” he said. “People are curious what’s the outcome. They want to see who they get matched with, what percentile is the match, and what defining similarity the couple has.” He thought it was interesting to look at these results.

“It’s like astrology,” Mark added, “like Zodiac signs.” How an Aries cannot get along with a Virgo. It doesn’t make sense, but it’s interesting.

The percentile. The defining trait. 99.97 percent. Conformity to rules. No logical sense. But interesting.

A week after their second date, Caroline and Steven decided to meet up again. It was the week before Thanksgiving break. Old Campus, where Steven lived, was under lockdown. The pair decided to follow the Marriage Pact’s prediction, conformed to Yale’s COVID-19 rules and met up on Old Campus.

No need to agonize over what food to buy. Caroline and Steven walked inside Old Campus, lap after lap. They talked more about music, Steven’s podcast and TV shows. Steven recommended to Caroline a show that Caroline eventually binge-watched over the break. They soon ran out of topics again. Caroline asked Steven who he disliked in his college. Steven gave her a name. “HA,” Caroline said, “I hate this dude too!”

“That was the highlight of our date that day,” Caroline told me.

Connecticut’s nice fall weather had ended. It was a cloudy early winter day with cold, wet wind. A little over an hour after, Caroline and Steven decided to call it a day. Standing in front of Steven’s dorm building, for the first time, Caroline and Steven hugged.

The hug ended up being their final in-person interaction.

In the end, it did not work out for Caroline and Steven.

“We did text about how to proceed after the break,” she said. “Back in November, neither of us knew if we would be back on campus this year. Steven suggested we could try again if both of us are back in New Haven this spring.”

Caroline is back in New Haven. She doesn’t know if Steven is. She hasn’t asked him. He didn’t ask her either. “Clearly there was no feeling between us. If we truly liked each other, we would’ve texted back and forth over the break. But we didn’t,” she said.

“We were both too passive,” she added. It was just like their first date, when they could not decide what food to get.

“It has nothing to do with Steven,” she explained. She likes him as a person. He reminded her of an old high school date. She admires his musical talent. She still listens to his playlist and watches his TV show recommendation.

“But I never felt any attraction,” she said.

When asked to evaluate the Marriage Pact's algorithm, Caroline said she was not sure if it was good for matching romantic couples. But one thing was for certain, she and Steven had a lot in common. They were similar people.

She had also heard an anecdote from Princeton's Marriage Pact — a pair of twins got matched.

Maybe the Pact matches similar people well, she thought. But do similar people necessarily form a good couple?

The Yale Marriage Pact never responded to the interview request for this article. Dai from Three Day Relationship in 2019, however, did call back. Besides his algorithm in 2019, Dai had also spoken with developers from other matchmaking algorithms. Dai and these other developers all took a dramatically different approach than the Marriage Pact.

Take Dai's team, for example. Three Day Relationship does not have a complicated matching algorithm — their questionnaire contained far fewer than 50 questions. Instead, Dai invested more time and money in the post-matching component. For the first few dates, he designed incentivized tasks for his newly met pairs such as taking a couple selfie and co-writing a poem about the couple's life stories. If completed, the couple would win prizes like free coffee or a restaurant gift card. Through such events, the couple would get to know each other and break the ice.

The matches they made “maybe aren't the best matches,” Dai remarked, “but chemistry [between anyone] can develop.”

Did the Marriage Pact fail in the sense of establishing potential marriages? The answer is no. Among those interviewed for this story, there was one couple that got together because of the Marriage Pact. Well, with an asterisk.

Josie Steuer Ingall '24 was matched with her current boyfriend, M, via the Marriage Pact. Their match carried a 99.59 percentile, an indisputably high score. The only thing was, the two were beyond well-acquainted before their match.

The two met through Yale's Endowment Justice Coalition in 2019. Both are from New York and both have parents who are teachers. The two were friendly in Josie's freshman year. This past semester, Josie and M rented an apartment together along with two other roommates. Josie and M both had a difficult time during the pandemic. Both were in need of another human to listen to and empathize with.

They found each other. From late August to early October, in their windowless living room in their tiny attic apartment, under the dim lamplight, the two had countless late-night conversations. They would discuss any topics over hours, from inequality of public education to what was going on with their friends, from their high school memories to the universe and aliens. Josie observed that M was always carefully listening. Gradually, the two developed a bond, both intellectual and romantic.

Josie initially despised the idea of an algorithm-controlled Marriage Pact. But under the pressure of her roommates — including M — she signed up. M also signed up. She already had feelings for him, so this made her sad. Nevertheless, she continued the late-night conversations with M. Until the night before the Match Announcement. It was Josie’s birthday. M, an artist, gave her a comic drawings series as her birthday gift. Josie teared up. Later that night, the two hooked up.

The next day, they discovered that they were matched, 99.59 percent. “The Marriage Pact was the vindication we needed for our relationship,” Josie said. Since then, whenever they were “in a nice relationship moment,” one of them would chant “99.59.”

Towards the end of each interview, I asked each interviewee whether they felt it was easy to find love at Yale. Caroline gave a firm no. She finds it difficult to encounter those she likes, as well as those who like her back. When elaborating on his fear of awkwardness on a first date, Mark noted that “You don’t wanna look like you want too much.”

In their email to Caroline congratulating her 99.97 percentile match, the Marriage Pact never explained what an excellent match was.

For now, Mark has disengaged from romantic relationships completely.

Caroline is still searching for love.

Valentine’s Day is in two days. Datamatch, another matchmaking algorithm, is releasing match results on Valentine’s Day. 1,624 Yalies are waiting to hear back.

TONY HAO WORK SAMPLE 5

A work of creative nonfiction that involves heavy reporting. I wrote this story in Apr 2021 for Yale Daily News AAPI Special Issue. Written in the first person during the pandemic, the story is a profile of the owner of Taste of China, New Haven's most celebrated Chinese restaurant.

Headline: Ambition, Design, and Empathy: The Tale of *Taste of China*

Introduction

This article fell in our laps completely by surprise.

The News originally planned a feature article on New Haven's Chinese restaurants and their experiences during the pandemic. As a co-byliner and a native speaker of Mandarin, I reached out to Taste of China, the most iconic Chinese restaurant of New Haven, and scheduled a call with the owner.

"Just call me Auntie Hu," Ms. Hu Ping, the owner, responded to me in Mandarin.

"Yes, absolutely," she answered when I asked her for an interview, "Come to my place tomorrow for lunch, and I'll tell you everything. Auntie Hu is a woman with a lot of stories."

We met up the next day after peak lunch hour. Waiting for me were a plate of bok choy and a pot of Mala Xiang Guo (Szechuan-style spicy stir-fry), two cannot-be-more-authentic Chinese dishes. We talked over the food and hot tea, about her life before coming to the States, her life before Taste of China, and how she's popularized authentic Chinese food in New Haven. The interview lasted over three hours.

The person who connected the News with Ms. Hu commented, "[Ms. Hu's] story is, truly, a tale of how Chinese American immigrants thrive, thousands of miles away from home.

I was born in 1965 and grew up in Nanjing. During my childhood and teenage years, China was still slowly recovering from the impact of the Cultural Revolution, but I was fortunate enough to not be heavily affected. My parents were well-educated, and they brought me books, Chinese and Western literature. The books opened up a new world for me. The Chinese literature I read felt tragic, an unsurmountable despair. The Western books felt much brighter—even in a Shakespearean tragedy, I could feel a hint of hope at the end. I became curious of the "outside world." I wanted to see it with my own eyes.

When I graduated from college, study abroad opportunities finally began to grow. As a design major, I wanted to study in Paris, but my visa didn't go through. I ended up in a graduate program in Singapore.

It didn't take me too long to realize that I might've not been prepared enough. My English wasn't good, and I couldn't understand the lectures. My school soon realized the same problem, and they put me in an ESL program. And that was where I met Jonathan.

Originally from America, Jonathan was my ESL instructor. We were around the same age, both around the age of looking for someone, and we gradually got to know each other. He was truly a sweet dude, and he cared for so many small things about me. Eventually, we fell in love with each other. I didn't use my time properly to perfect my English.

We met each other in '95. My time in Singapore soon came to an end. We both wanted to continue our relationship, but I was from China, he from America. Where should we go next?

We decided to go to China, him following me. It wasn't an easy decision. Back then, China as a country still wasn't too used to being open, and it was quite some news in my social circle for me to bring back an American boyfriend. It wasn't an easy time for him, but we had a plan.

When I was in Singapore, I noticed how fast language schools appeared one after another. There were so many East Asian students pouring into these few narrow alleys, where language schools clustered, and foreign students learned English before getting their coveted Singaporean university degree. China was rapidly integrating into the rest of the world, and people would love to study abroad. Well, I was a Chinese student who'd studied abroad, and Jonathan was American. Where else could you find a better couple to open a language school?

Unfortunately, Jonathan couldn't get a permit to work in China, so no language schools. The same question popped up again. Where should we go next?

My parents weren't optimistic about our romance at all, but they couldn't stop someone like me, who, in their words, was "completely blinded by love." I decided to follow Jonathan and go to America.

We came to Connecticut in '97. The first few months was really, really tough. I was like a infant. I barely knew how to speak English. I couldn't express myself. I had nothing besides Jonathan. I had to depend on him for everything.

Think about where I came from—I'd always been accomplished. I was smart enough to study abroad in Singapore. But in America, nobody acknowledged my diploma and my achievements. I was really depressed. My parents might've been right, that it would be hard for Jonathan and I to work out, and I'd have a hard time in America.

But why couldn't I be right, too? Why couldn't our relationship work out? He loved me so much, I couldn't quit after just one month in America. I myself made the choice to date him and to follow him to America, and I needed to be responsible for my choice. Plus, if I quit, and he followed me to China, he'd had to struggle the same way I did. I couldn't bear selfishly watching him struggle. I made up my mind to fight for a way to live.

The first task was to put down my pride and forget about my accomplishment in China. I was no longer the design student who wanted to study in Paris. I embraced that I was nobody, and I needed to start learning about America from point zero.

During the day, while Jonathan was at work, I spent all my time with my mother-in-law, and asked her to teach me English. We'd go to the library and start with books for little kids. I'd read them all and even memorize the text. Yes, I was learning through kids' books, but I wanted to survive in America, as an independent person.

It paid off. I could communicate with people after a few months. But this wouldn't be enough—I wanted to eventually live like everybody else. I realized that I wanted a job. Not even for the money—through a job, I'd be able to get to know America.

I wrote up a resume and sent it to everywhere that was hiring. And I wasn't hired by anyone. It was understandable—why would somebody hire someone who couldn't even speak fluent English? My mother-in-law told me straightforwardly that I wouldn't be hired by anyone.

She said I couldn't do it. That was my wake-up call. I had always been accomplished before coming to America. Why couldn't I be accomplished here too?

I continued to send more resumes. And bold as I was, I began to tell the employers that I didn't want them to pay me. I told them I came fresh off the boat, and I just wanted the experience.

My efforts paid off—a clothing store in the Clinton Outlet decided to hire me. The manager also happened to be an immigrant. She came from France to Canada, then to America. She also had to learn English from scratch. Maybe she felt for me.

It was an unpaid position for 10-15 hours a week. I had to do everything, from unloading the heavy boxes and unboxing the clothes, to hanging them up at the right spot and selling clothes. I learned the basic operations of the fashion business, and my English steadily improved.

Two months after I started working, my manager found out something that shocked everyone: since I came to work at the store, I'd sold more clothes than everyone else. I was the number one salesperson, despite working part-time and speaking broken English.

When I reflected upon what happened, I realized that my design background helped me. When I picked, say, a shirt for my customer, I'd also pick a pair of pants that matched well with the shirt. Then I'd pick a matching jacket, with my knowledge and instinct from design. When other people sold one piece of clothes, I could sell four or five. I was putting my heart into my work. I wanted my customers to look good and be happy.

Two years quickly flew by. I'd sold many more shirts, I felt comfortable in the fashion industry—I realized it was time to look for something else. Two years ago, I wanted a job despite knowing little English, and I became the best at my position. Why couldn't I do something even more ambitious? I wanted to start my own business. I came to America for a good life, and I needed to put in action and never settled for mediocrity.

My manager was not happy when she heard about my intention to leave. "Hu Ping," she said, "I think you have great potential in the fashion industry." She offered me a higher position in her store in Greenwich, CT, where the revenue was much higher than the store in Clinton. It was a tempting offer, and I appreciated everything she'd done for me, but I ultimately said no. The stake of this position felt too high. She gave me the position, and I'd forever feel obligated to her. I didn't want this heavy chip on my shoulder to burden me. I wanted to do my own things.

My initial plan was to open a Chinese-style tea parlor, as there was nothing like that within ten miles around where I lived. Until Jonathan and I went out for dinner one day. We went to a Chinese restaurant in Clinton called *Chuan Yuan* (literal translation: Szechuan Garden), or *Taste of China* in English. It was probably the dirtiest and worst decorated restaurant you could find in America, but the food tasted very authentic. They had a lot of Chinese regulars, but no local Americans ate there.

The owner brought us the food and began to chat with us. Over their delicious *Hui Guo Rou* (stir-fried sliced pork belly), I learned that they were selling their business. "For how much?" I asked. Forty grands, they said.

We finished our food and went home, and I couldn't stop thinking about the future of their restaurant. An epiphany suddenly struck me: this'd be a perfect opportunity for me.

I told Jonathan that I wanted to buy the restaurant. "Are you crazy?" he responded, "I've never even seen you cook before."

I wasn't fazed and laid out my reasons. First off, the food was so good, but there were no non-Chinese customers. And there were no authentic Chinese restaurants anywhere near where I lived. How could I fail? If I could redo the design and clean up the place, the market would be wide open for me. Plus, I'd observed that the most popular restaurants in America all included a bar. Guess who else knew how to bartend? Jonathan.

I proposed this extremely ambitious plan to Jonathan: He quit his current job and chip in forty grands for me. We'd maintain *Chuan Yuan's* kitchen staff, completely revamp the design,

and add a bar. We'd both work extra hard. Jonathan would also bartend, and I'd also serve food. A good restaurant could make a grand or two every night. We wouldn't aim for too high. Every evening, if the kitchen could make just three hundred, and if Jonathan's bar could make another three hundred, we would earn the forty grands back in two months. Subtracting the fee for water, gas, heating, we'd start to make a nice profit pretty soon.

I told him that I wanted to do it for myself. Again, for my entire life, I'd always tried to be extraordinary. I'd always challenged myself. I'd made it to America. I'd learned English from scratch. I'd become the number one salesperson in the clothing store with zero prior experience. Why couldn't I excel in the restaurant industry?

Besides, when I thought about Chinese restaurants in America, I could only think of Chinese takeout places. Cheap, messy, inauthentic. I could definitely do better than that. I wanted Americans to know what I grew up eating. I wanted them to appreciate my culture. I was confident that I could do it.

Essentially, I asked Jonathan to go all-in with me. "Worst case scenario," I said, "if this doesn't work out, then go to China with me. If you don't want to go, I'll go myself."

Jonathan went all-in with me. He supported me for this most important decision. He's always supported me for everything. I couldn't find another person to feel more grateful for.

The owner of *Chuan Yuan* was stunned. They never thought someone would be dumb enough to pay forty grands for a crumbling restaurant. "Let her buy our place," the owner said, "we'll see how long she'll last. She simply doesn't look like someone in the restaurant business."

But did I need to look a certain way to fit in the restaurant business? Like someone wearing a dirty apron, with cooking smoke all over her hair? Nobody would want to eat my food if I'd looked that messy.

It was Year 2000. Jonathan and I paid the forty grands and decided to keep the names *Chuan Yuan* and *Taste of China*. We thoroughly cleaned the place, redid the interior décor, and told the local newspaper that *ToC* changed owner. The old Chinese regulars came and realized that the food was equally good as before. The Americans read the newspaper, showed up in front of our completely revamped place, saw a ton of Chinese people inside, and thought to themselves, "Hmm, this place must be pretty authentic." They walked in, we served them food and booze, and they were seriously impressed. Whenever I served a table, I talked to the customers and explained dishes on the menu they hadn't never tried. If they weren't sure if they'd like it, I'd even allow them to sample the dishes for free. It was okay if I couldn't earn the maximum revenue—I sold the entire genre of authentic Chinese food to the local Americans. Like our Chinese customers, they too loved our food and became our regulars.

The former owner of our place was wrong. Jonathan and I made *ToC* the most iconic Chinese restaurant in Clinton, or even along the coastline of Connecticut. We had regulars coming from as Yale, a thirty-minute car ride from us. Whenever there was a conference at Yale that had Chinese guests, they'd happily drive for thirty minutes in order to taste our authentic Chinese cuisine.

I don't want to make the grand claim that I was spreading Chinese culture, but my food definitely left an impression for my customers from everywhere. When I started the business, I was looking for something much more than money. I'm confident to say I'd achieved what I wanted.

In 2003, three years after I took over *ToC*, the owner of the building decided to sell his property. I sat down with him and struck up a deal. This time, I paid six hundred grands.

I haven't talked much about my family life—I'd been focusing on my restaurant until I felt I'd fully established *ToC* in Clinton. In 2005, when I was forty, Jonathan and I welcomed our son, also our only child. Until he was six, I spent most of my time at home with him, while Jonathan took good care of our restaurant. Things were going smoothly.

Our regulars from Yale continued to come, some of whom frequently asked us if we were planning on opening a branch at Yale. Not a bad idea, I thought, but it was important to spend time with my son.

Until he turned six, when he started going to school. Time to be around dad, I thought. He needed to know how to fit in his peers; he needed to play in sports games on weekends. Dad needed to drive him to games and cheer for him.

Jonathan and I finally switched our roles. He took over my responsibility as a caretaker, and I went back to manage the restaurant, and, more importantly, prepare to open my second restaurant, in New Haven.

I began looking around in New Haven in 2012, both for a suitable place and to understand the Chinese restaurant scene. After all, New Haven was a small city, and if there was already another restaurant similar to us, my entering in New Haven would harm both of our businesses. I walked around, talked to other restaurant owners, and found no direct competitions.

Next step was to find a place for my restaurant. I connected with a real-estate owner from Miami, who owned the building across from New Haven Green. Before I opened *The New Haven ToC*, the place was a sandwich shop he owned, with a full kitchen, undecorated walls, naked concrete columns, and not many customers. I showed the owner my restaurant in Clinton. He came back, closed the sandwich shop, and signed with me a ten-year lease, with another five-year option. Like what I did in Clinton twelve years ago, I thoroughly cleaned the place, redid the interior décor, and opened *New Haven Taste of China* late 2012. It immediately became popular and has been widely loved by New Haven's community. I even met President Salovey a few times. Heard him say "If you want authentic Chinese food in New Haven, come to *Taste of China*." It made me really happy.

Another time, a professional designer came to eat at my place and was immediately impressed by my interior décor. When he learned that I did all the design myself, he said, "Wow, Hu Ping! You should put 'Hu Ping designed' on every wall of your restaurant!"

I'm bring this up once again—my design background has helped me. When you visit a typical Chinese-owned Chinese restaurant in, let's say, New York, you see a lot of imperial and religious elements like dragons and deities in their interior décor. These elements indeed reflect the Chinese tradition, but the customers won't feel comfortable sitting in an environment like a temple or a royal palace! They'll feel intimidated by the grandiosity and feel uncomfortable.

But when my customers visit *ToC*, they'll see elements of Chinese paintings and calligraphy. They'll see wooden decorations. The concrete posts are colored in dark red and resembles classical Chinese architecture. The design is Chinese and classy, but also quiet. My customers won't be distracted by the chaotic environment and can therefore focus on the food. My interior décor is good because I think for the customers. I think about what they feel. I want them to be happy. Just like what I've always been doing from the beginning, when I explained to them my menu, when I allowed them to taste unfamiliar dishes for free, and, before I opened *ToC* Clinton, when I picked matching clothes for my customers.

The New Haven Taste of China wasn't the end of the story. In the recent years, I've opened in New Haven *Steamed*, a dim sum restaurant, and *Chuan Du* (literal translation:

Szechuan capital) Hot Pot, as well as two more *Steamed* across Connecticut. Unfortunately, because of COVID, I had to shut down *Chuan Du* and all three *Steamed*. I look forward to reopening them after the pandemic ends.

But I did not close either of my *Taste of China*. I never planned to close them, and I never will. I worked so hard to establish these two places. Now, they're the flagships Chinese restaurants in Clinton and New Haven. They've been integral parts of the local communities. People liked our food. Yale's Chinese students and faculty find the taste of home. Without them, I would've never achieved what I have today.

When the pandemic struck, most restaurants shut down, and my places were losing 70% of our revenue. But people needed food. They must be able to find an open restaurant that would cook them lunch. The Chinese students in town needed Chinese food. They were thousands of miles away from home, all alone, in a foreign land.

We've always depended on the community. Now they need us.

My door will always remain open.