

# Connecting with Chinese language and culture at Westwood School

## Photos





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WESTWOOD —

Learning an entire language or culture can seem a difficult challenge, but the students at the Westwood Chinese School (WCS) might say that it's easy—so easy a child could do it.

In fact, Principal Yunlu Jin said children often have an easier time learning a new language. Students at the WCS range in age from 3 to 11 years old. Roughly 200 students are enrolled at the school, most of whom are from Westwood, with others from Medfield and Needham. One student even makes a two-hour round trip with her father from New Bedford. Many of the students are born in America, and their parents are originally from China, Taiwan or Malaysia.

“We create an environment for the kids who want to learn Chinese,” said Jin, adding that for some of the students, this is their first time encountering the language.

The school was founded in 2010 by three Westwood residents—Christina Huang, Catherine Tseng, and Zaiqiang Liu. Huang was the first principal of the school. Classes are held every Sunday at Westwood High School.

WCS offers a wide variety of classes that help teach the Mandarin language and the Chinese culture. There are two types of language classes—those wanting to learn Mandarin in an environment where it’s spoken frequently, and a bi-lingual class for those who speak both Mandarin and English at home. Classes for adults are also available.

These lessons are combined with stories and legends. Chinese celebrations, such as the Chinese New Year, are part of the curriculum.

“They need to practice at home,” said Jin. “Once a week is definitely not enough. They need three days a week.”

Wenli Xu, who teaches the kindergarten level language classes, uses a variety of methods such as games and songs to keep the lessons interesting. She encourages her students to speak to each other in Chinese to help their classmates practice what they have learned.

“We keep the students’ parents involved a lot,” said Xu. “They (the students) will repeat what learn in class and can listen to CDs at home.”

Jin also records lessons on YouTube so the students can continue their studies at home.

Li Ling teaches one of the bilingual classes, and commented on how dedicated the parents are to helping their children learn.

“We play a lot of games to keep it fun while learning,” said Ling. “We keep them coming back as a smiling class. The kids are very happy to come to the class, when they have that motivation to come to the class.”

An important part of the language lessons is learning the four tones of the Mandarin language which can make the same word have different meanings. These are the high level, rising, falling rising and falling tones. Mandarin is used mostly in the northern and southwestern areas of China, and is spoken by more than 955 million people.

“For those who never have been exposed to a Mandarin environment, the most important part is for them to listen and speak,” said Jin.

In addition to the language lessons, the students also learn to draw the characters for the words. Jin said writing these words is like drawing a picture.

“They need to find the environment, the right material,” said Jin. “It’s not difficult, especially for kids. Below 12 years old they have this ability to learn a separate language.”

### **Culture classes**

It’s not just language and writing which is taught at the WCS. A variety of courses aimed at teaching the students about the Chinese culture are offered as well, including Chinese dance, drawing, painting martial arts and music. Catherine Qiu teaches a class on origami for children ages 5 and older, and said this art form can develop motor skills and creative thinking.

“There’s a lot of benefits there,” said Qui. “They will see how a 2-D paper can transform into beautiful 3-D figures.”

Qui began teaching the class at the insistence of her son. Different flowers, animals and other figures are crafted by the students, and along with learning how to properly fold the paper, the children also speak the words for what they are creating.

The Chinese dancing and martial arts classes began in November 2009, and within a few months, the students reached a competitive level and were invited to a series of performances at venues throughout the Boston area.