

Local school of volunteers brings Chinese education to Chapel Hill

CHAPEL HILL, N.C.- Every Saturday for more than 20 years, a team made primarily of volunteers, works to bring the Chinese language to students of all ages in Chapel Hill.

The Chinese School at Chapel Hill, founded in 1993, operates out of Culbreth Middle School. The school features a variety of classes including Chinese for heritage speakers, Chinese as a second language and various cultural appreciation courses.

“We offer the school as more of a community service,” says Hongbin Gu, chair of the board of directors. Classes are created to fit the need of the community, with different levels being added depending on students.

Originally operated out of houses or a few classrooms at UNC-CH, the school saw a spike in registration numbers around 2002 that allowed them to expand to a bigger location.

Asian-Americans make up 12 percent of the population of Chapel Hill but only 2 percent of the total population of North Carolina

Gu attributes the enrollment increase partially to demographic changes in the area. Asian-Americans currently make up almost 12 percent of the population in Chapel Hill—the largest ethnic minority—compared to only 2 percent of the total population of North Carolina.

Gu herself is from Shanghai and came to North Carolina in 1995 to pursue a graduate degree at UNC-Chapel Hill. She is now an Associate Professor in UNC’s Department of Psychiatry and the Carolina Institute of Developmental Delay where she works with multiple National Institute of Health grants on child development and autism. She also serves on the PTA of her children’s schools and on the board of the Triangle branch of the Chinese American Friendship Association.

She works with Xuezhong (Sean) Cai who is the current president of the Chinese School. Cai is originally from Jiangsu, but lived in Shanghai for three years before relocating to Chapel

Hill when his wife got a job at UNC. Cai is an analytical consultant at SAS and is involved in various activities at his child's school as well as in the Boy Scouts.

The Asian community is drawn to Chapel Hill and Carrboro mainly because of the great school system, says Gu. Many Chinese families who work in RTP chose to live in Chapel Hill instead of Cary or another city because of the schools.

The Chinese School rents space from Chapel Hill-Carrboro schools. They rotate through various schools, switching every two years. The district used to offer them a discounted rate, but after budget cuts, they were unable to continue the discount.

The teachers who work in the school during the week are very courteous to the Chinese school, making sure to leave the boards clean and the classrooms organized for the weekend programs.

About 80 percent of the students at the Chinese School are heritage speakers and are able to take classes from kindergarten through AP Chinese.

Chinese-as-a-second-language students are grouped into four different levels featuring learners of all ages.

In one classroom, an American man learns Chinese with his elementary-aged daughter so they can better communicate with his in-laws.

"Students will graduate from here and after they come back from college they'll say - I wish I had learned more Chinese because it's such a useful language when they are applying for jobs or internships," says Gu.

Language classes are held from 2-4 p.m. and activity classes run from 4-6 p.m. A semester of weekly two-hour language classes is \$160 with a discount for early registration.

Along with language classes, the Chinese School also offers culture and activity classes such as Chinese dance, Chinese chess, English language SAT prep and learning Chinese through film.

The film class is one of the most popular at the school. Students enjoy learning Chinese in a more integrated way instead of just through grammar exercises.

Students come back after college wishing they had learned more Chinese in school because it's such a useful language when applying for jobs

-Hongbin Gu

The dance classes are taught in both English and Chinese. The dance troupe performs across the Triangle at various schools and at Duke University's Asian Dance Festival.

Apart from the Chinese School on Saturdays, there is also the American School of Asian Culture, which offers an afterschool program, and a dual-language program offered at Glenwood Elementary. In the dual-language program, students are instructed in both English and Chinese in all subjects.

The dual-language program is very popular and students are accepted only through a lottery. Many students who take Chinese language classes during the week come to the Chinese School on weekends to continue their education. The activity classes are particularly popular among those students.

The Chinese School has gained popularity primarily through word of mouth throughout the Chinese community. The goal of the school is to expand, particularly to create more Chinese as a Second Language classes and to offer more classes for adults.

The school also holds a few community events, their most popular being for Chinese New Year. The students from the dance classes perform and they have food and music. Administrators from the school hope events like these will help spread the word about their school and attract new students.

Cai emphasizes that the school wants to serve the community. As the demand for Chinese language classes increases, they will expand their services.

"If anybody needs help with the Chinese language or learning the Chinese culture, we are happy to help provide it," says Cai.

To find out more about the Chinese School of Chapel Hill, or to enroll in classes, visit their website at <http://www.csch-nc.org/> .

<http://ourtownchapelhill.org/aboutus/newsletters/the-chinese-school-in-chapel-hill/>