Our Family's Chinese Immersion Story

By Adrienne Markworth

Our family discovered Chinese culture and Mandarin language when we enrolled our oldest child, Leah, in a two-way Cantonese immersion program near out home in San Francisco. Though I had only the vaguest idea about what studying Chinese would entail, I was intrigued at the prospect of giving my children the chance to become fluent in a language and culture different from our own.
After three months in the Cantonese program, our family relocated to San Diego. The timing was perfect - Riverview International Academy had recently started a Mandarin immersion program, and they were happy to accept Leah halfway through her first grade year. We chose to hire a Mandarin speaking au pair when I returned to full time work during Leah’s second grade year, and we were amazed at how well Leah was able to communicate in Mandarin. Over the next few years, she participated in competitions and performances throughout Southern California. We quickly realized that for Leah, Mandarin language and Chinese culture had turned into a passion. Thanks to encouragement and support from her teachers at Riverview and the Confucius Institute, we were able to not only nurture her talent, but also challenge her to perform at a very high level. She is now a seventh grader at Pacific Beach Middle School, and her experiences using her Mandarin have been the defining experiences of her life. Watching her perform is so much fun - her happiness shines through every song, poem or emcee opportunity.
In addition to opening up a world of opportunities in the arts, it has also opened up the world for her. As a participant in several Model UN programs, we have watched her easily take the perspective of other countries during debates and enjoy learning about different languages and cultures. When we asked her what she wanted to see when we visited New York City this summer, her first request was the United Nations. Spending half her time thinking and speaking in Mandarin has developed her perspective-taking skills, a quality that we know will serve her well throughout her personal and professional life. Our other children are also involved Mandarin immersion education in Confucius Classrooms. Our oldest son Alex, a fourth grader at Barnard, also studies Chinese arts and enjoys performing and competing using his language skills. For him, it has increased his academic confidence, unearthed a love of performance, and provided opportunities to share meaningful experiences with his older sister. He has always been excited to speak the language to anyone who will listen - even people who do not speak Mandarin! Evan, our youngest child, started kindergarten this year at Barnard and we are hoping that he also has a talent for the language since it has provided so much fun for our whole family. Our other children are also involved in Mandarin immersion, our family has added new friendships, new foods, and new holidays to our own family traditions. My kids have richness and depth to their education that builds strong characters, academic strength, love of the arts, and worldview that welcomes a variety of perspectives.