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# Margaret Wong: The character for success

For 33 years, Margaret Wong has been the single most influential figure in developing and spreading Chinese language education in Minnesota.

Kay Miller, Star Tribune

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Margaret Wong cried during the entire flight from Brazil, where her Chinese family was exiled, to America. She was 14 years old.

Her father's fortune was nearly exhausted, and he had arranged a scholarship for her at a Connecticut convent school run by Polish nuns. He purchased a one-way ticket for her, sending his daughter into the world with a string of pearls, an ivory fan, a new dress made from the family curtains, two pairs of ivory chopsticks and \$100.

She didn't speak English. And she was befuddled by the nuns, the Halloween decorations and her first night's meal of kielbasa. But every week she dutifully wrote her father, then awaited his letters that corrected her calligraphy in red. His missives kept her Chinese alive. Wong has since used those skills to teach Chinese to generations of

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Margaret Wong, Chinese language teacher at Breck.

Kyndell Harkness, Star Tribune

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Minnesota students.

For 33 years, Wong has been the most influential figure in developing and spreading Chinese language education in Minnesota, said Ted Farmer, a University of Minnesota history professor and China scholar. "The breadth, depth and richness of the interest in China and the Chinese language that we have in Minnesota would not have happened without Margaret Wong," he said.

In 1973, when she started teaching Chinese at what was Central High School, there were no textbooks to teach Chinese to American students. So Wong devised her own. In addition to creating the K-12 Chinese program at Breck School in Golden Valley, where she is director of international studies, Wong helped to develop Chinese programs for St. Paul schools, Concordia Chinese Language Village and Ying Hua Academy, the new Chinese immersion charter school in St. Paul. She is also active in Minnesota's Mandarin Chinese Project, which aims to expand Chinese language programs statewide.

Even before America and China re-established diplomatic relations, Wong was escorting groups of students there in the summertime, starting in 1976. She's been back 24 times since. On each trip she visits former students who are doing everything from preparing for the 2008 Olympics in Beijing to helping run the Chinese counterpart of Home Depot. One of her students even won the Chinese version of "American Idol." "When people remark how difficult it must be to study Chinese, all I say is that I had a teacher who made it almost too easy," said Whitney Clark, China manager for Asia Sports & Entertainment, a sports agency.

Wong didn't just teach the language, Clark said -- she taught a love and respect for the culture. When her students traveled to China, they knew how to bow, how to tell a joke and how to sing the Chinese national anthem. Along the way, they were able to make friends.

### No English allowed

Students who lapse into English get a sharp look and quickly revert to speaking Chinese. Wong times their one-minute class presentations with a stopwatch. "I am very tough on my students," she said. "I always tell them, 'I don't care if you like me now. I want you to respect me when you are grown up.' "

All around the classroom, posters with her father's elegant calligraphy share space with a map of China, pictures of Buddha, photos of students in China and a magic board said to dispel evil spirits. Wong jokes with students, absorbing their energy, radiating it back. Her swinyg hair is deep black, her lipstick vivid red.

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They're familiar with her story, as she tells it often: She was born in China during the Chinese Civil War. Her father was a general with Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist Government. And for a few years of her young life, the family lived in privilege, power and wealth.

All that came tumbling down one night in 1949 when Mao Zedong's Chinese Communist forces surrounded the Nanjing capital. Fearing for his life, Wong's father escaped to Hong Kong with his second wife, her mother, his eight children and his brother.

After 1½ years he realized there was no going back. So the family escaped to Brazil, where their clothes were too hot and Portuguese was spoken. Wong's father was more Confucian scholar than businessman. As he lurched toward bankruptcy he made sure that Margaret, the fifth of his eight children, got a good education.

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