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Learning how to make dumplings is one of the activities at the summer camp.

## At summer camp, Chinese-Americans 'get it'

For teenagers, the long summer holiday offers a wealth of opportunities.

But for Robert Lin, who is enrolled at the University of California, the choice was simple — the chance to learn more about his heritage.

Lin, 18, was born in the United States and has lived in California all his life.

But his father, from the Chinese mainland and mother, from Taiwan, like countless other Chinese parents in similar positions,

### SPOTLIGHT

By WANG ZHUOQIONG AND JAMIE THOMPSON

are keen that their children don't lose touch with their roots.

The teenager, whose Chinese name is Lin Bohong, is among 37 American-born Chinese attending a 12-day summer camp in Beijing, which has been organized by the Los Angeles-based Chinese Daily

News (World Journal). Lin's parents paid about US\$3,000 for the trip.

"An American-born Chinese should at least be a Chinese once by coming here," Lin said. "The trip is not just about getting to know China, but also about knowing myself. I want to know my roots."

He has taken Chinese lessons once a week for the past 12 years in the United States, and the trip has helped him understand why his parents were so keen for him to take

the lessons.

"Before, I really hated it," Lin said. "It is a really hard language to learn. I thought I would never really use it because in America I don't need it very much."

Lin's parents have always told him about how wonderful China is, but their emphasis on his Chinese inheritance, tradition and culture didn't appeal to him.

"I just didn't get it," he said.

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## Chinese abroad visit mainland to seek their roots

But now he does. Being able to actually practise daily with Chinese people during his trip has convinced him of the importance of speaking Chinese. "I won't understand if I don't speak Chinese," Lin said.

Thousands of youngsters head to China every year for summer camps. Many, like Lin, have Chinese backgrounds, but the camps are often the first time they have ever set foot in China.

Sino Language Gateway (www.sinolanguage.com), which was launched in the United States in 2003, runs camps from June every year for either two weeks or two months.

Most of the time it is based in Beijing, with intensive language lessons, but cultural immersion trips are also arranged both in the capital and other cities, such as Shanghai.

Programme director Bai Fan, currently overseeing a trip in Shanghai, said the vast majority of the youngsters who take part in programmes run by the organization have Chinese backgrounds.

"Some of them have already been to China, while for others this is their first time," she said.

Among the reasons parents want to send their children to China, learning the language is a big one. They have intensive training lessons and the opportunity to converse with local students their own age, she added.

"A lot of them have lessons at home, but sometimes only for two hours a week," Bai said. "We give them a chance to speak to real Chinese people and to use their skills."

"By coming here, they can see this is a huge country and the fact that more than 1 billion people speak

Chinese."

### Competition heating up

The camps are not just about letting youngsters discover more about their ancestry. A small number of teenagers who enrol have no Chinese heritage.

"A lot of parents are realizing how important China is and the fact that it is going to play a big role in the world in the next 10 to 20 years, so they want their children to have an advantage," Bai said.

"This is the main reason why parents of children who have no Chinese connections like them to come here. But of course, there are some students who are simply just interested in Chinese culture and in the country."

With more and more young people wanting to come to learn about the language and culture, summer camps are becoming a competitive industry, with a host of organizations running projects.

Adventure Teen Travel, based in Calgary, Canada, offers adventure camps and travel programmes around the world for students aged 11-18. China is its most recent addition.

"China is a relatively new destination for us and one that we hope to grow significantly over the next few years," programme Director Alan Roessel said. "China is a fascinating travel destination with a rich and varied history and has an incredible number of things to see and do."

"We believe travel can be one of the best forms of education. The same benefits that the teens gain are also applicable to the local Chinese with whom they interact. Both parties are exposed to a different culture



Overseas Chinese show the paper-cutting skills they learned while at Beijing Language and Culture University in July.

and gain a better understanding of the other culture.

"So far our trips have not included any Chinese Americans. The groups have been made up of American, Canadian and French teens who are interested in Chinese culture and the language, and most of them realize the growing importance of China as an economic power."

The growing demand for Mandarin lessons in Western countries is another reason for the rise in demand for summer camps in China, according to Ray Li, director of China Quest, based in the New York City suburb of Ridgefield, New Jersey.

Set up in 1995, it was one of the first groups to run camps in China and has more than 100 people tak-

ing part in them annually. It has joint partnerships with the Beijing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics, Xi'an International Studies University, East China Normal University in Shanghai and Beijing Foreign Studies University.

"Many of the students' perceptions of China before the trip are dramatically different from those by the time they leave," Li said. "Even those perceptions are changing fast, as on the applications we receive, most students list the reason for studying Chinese is because they feel China will become a more powerful force in the world."

"There is a growing demand of Chinese language instruction in the United States, and many of those

students want to visit the country."

The organization accepts students from all over the world for the camps. "This summer, students from nine different countries participated in our programme," Li said.

Some parents even travel to China with their children. Rock Zing and his wife came to China with their daughter Tiffany, who is a member of the Youth Leadership Program this summer to Beijing.

"Since our arrival in Beijing, Tiffany has been curious and excited about everything here," Zing said. "She had never been happy using her Chinese," said Zing, 50, a manager at a distribution company in Los Angeles.

Back home, Tiffany, 16, whose