

For ABCs, it's easy as 1-2-3

American-born Chinese
return, kids in tow,
for language — and
cultural — immersion

BY BETTY MING LIU

BEIJING — By this time last year, I was thanking my friend Jeannie for finding a summer camp option that I had initially considered insane.

She had wanted us, along with our friend Wendy, to haul our children to China and enroll them in a month-long language immersion program.

Her idea was a hard sell because of the ambivalence we ABCs — American-Born Chinese — often feel about our roots. A visit to my parents' homeland in the early '80s left some bad memories. I had never recovered from the shock of using hole-in-the-ground squat toilets, or seeing citizens hock spit with such gusto.

Wendy, who is also Chinese-American and lived in Beijing during the politically-charged late '80s, went into emotional convulsions, too. Jeannie, a Korean-American hoping to visit China for the first time, received a similar reaction from her Chinese-American husband, who had been to southern China briefly years ago.

So when Jeannie first pitched her plan, we shuddered. Absolutely not. No way were we going back.

But Jeannie, a Harvard-educated executive manager, was persuasive. She noted Mandarin's growing popularity as a foreign language in American schools. Attending a camp would give a competitive edge to our collective brood of four children, who have been buddies since birth. Besides, shouldn't they learn about their Chinese heritage?

Then she insisted that we three moms would make a great team. She could organize the entire trip, from researching camp options to arranging airfare. Wendy had contacts and first-hand knowledge of the turf. Since I grew up in a Mandarin-speaking family, I would serve as group interpreter — even though my Chinese was terrible.

Eventually, we took up Jeannie's recommendation to enroll in Sino Language Gateway (SLG), a San Jose, Calif.-based program that promised "total language immersion" and welcomed little ones as well as teenagers. SLG also agreed to let our two boys and two girls double up in the single rooms, with us in private rooms next door.

Still, we worried. This was a long trip for young children. Our kids were only 10 then, except for Ryan, who was 8.

I wasn't sure the racially homogenous Chinese-Chinese would welcome Gabi, my multiracial daughter (her dad, my ex-husband, is African-American).

Wendy, whose husband is Jewish, was terrified that their Sam, a picky eater, would starve if deprived of his four main food groups (bagels, matzoh ball soup, mashed potatoes and ravioli).

Jeannie, meanwhile, was confident that her Ella and Ryan would do fine.

But she wondered if the moms would survive a four-week, 24/7 journey without killing each other. There was only one way

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to find out.

Last July, Jeannie, along with her children, flew to China a few days ahead of the rest of us. When our 13-hour direct flight from JFK International landed at sprawling, modern Beijing Capital International Airport, I took one look at the Starbucks and KFC outlets there and realized this was not my mother's China anymore.

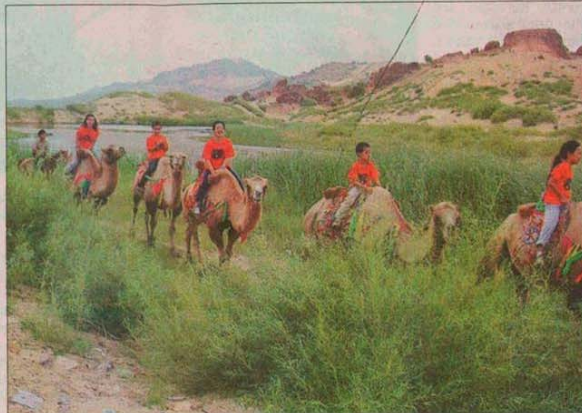
We were also surprised to see that 800-year-old imperial Beijing had a surplus of McDonald's restaurants and Pizza Huts, not to mention a new Wal-Mart. Everywhere, construction cranes were the new pagodas in a Beijing determined to impress the West when it hosts the 2008 Olympics.

In the sleepy northwestern outskirts of the city, we reunited with Jeannie and her kids in a new dorm at Tsinghua University. Together at last, we were about to embark on the ultimate group play date.

Our days began with biking to the nearby Chinese-style cafeteria for an amazing breakfast of dumplings, pot stickers, scallion pancakes, a traditional rice porridge known as *congee*, Chinese pastries, fried, scrambled and boiled eggs, and eggy French toast — at a cost of less than \$1 per person.

Afterward, we were back on the bikes, with the moms escorting our children to class. The 20-minute ride was a balmy, early-morning treat before the full force of Beijing's summer heat wited us. We would begin along leafy, tree-lined campus boulevards that opened onto maniacal street traffic leading to our destination, an air-conditioned high-rise complex.

Here, SLG's core immersion schedule ran from 8:30 a.m. until 4 p.m., Monday through Saturday. Students had two 90-minute language lessons daily, martial arts drills and special workshops, all in Chinese. The offerings ranged from activities that our kids loved, such as singing, to the occasional dull history lecture.



Camels take campers on a tour of Inner Mongolia's expansive scenery.

While the children navigated language immersion, we moms immersed ourselves in eating, shopping and wandering around Beijing either in collective excursions or on private time.

We were usually back at the dorm by 4:30 to meet our kids for the evening routine. After a break, we were off to a cafeteria dinner. When there wasn't a scheduled activity, we did our best to help the kids study in a language none of us really knew.

Eventually though, my Chinese did improve. It was the cabbies who coaxed me out of my language funk. As taxis are cheap, plentiful and marvelously air-conditioned, we took them everywhere. As Chinese passengers usually sit with the driver and I was supposed to interpret, I sat in the front seat — and chatted.

The drivers asked where we were from and why we were here. Soon, I was babbling with anyone willing to humor my basic vocabulary. This was so different from back home, where the sporadic pressure to speak Chinese always had me tongue-tied.

I thought I'd made this trip for Gabi to learn what locals call *putonghua*. But we were both learning Chinese and sharing sweet moments together. One night, she knocked on my door and sat on my bed.

There in the dark, Gabi sang a typically Chinese melody about birds in the spring that made me a proud, weepy mother.

Just when we were getting the hang of Beijing, the third week of SLG launched us on a six-day road trip to Inner Mongolia, an autonomous region in northern China. Several parents — including Jeannie's husband Dave — joined us. The campers turned the overnight train out of Beijing into a slumber party, trading candy and junk food in the three-level compartments that bunked six people each.

The train was clean and pleasant enough for sleep. By morning, we were a world away in the dusty mountain town of Chifeng.

Inner Mongolia, famous for warlord Ghenghis Khan and the equally legendary Silk Road trade route, is still a largely undeveloped region with majestic landscape

so vast that we spent hours on the bus trying to get around.

In between, we rode camels in the desert and Mongolian horses on the grasslands, hiked, watched some of our boys try Mongolian wrestling, wandered through a "forest" of natural rock formations, boated on a lake, and cruised through a newly built downtown area that had a modest shopping promenade and office high-rises.

While the nature was awe-inspiring, our hotels were awful. Our first stop was infested with black beetles that crawled in our beds and dropped from the ceilings.

Meals were a challenge because of a limited menu with a steady rotation of tomato-and-egg dishes, eggplant and watermelon; meat was in short supply.

Still, Inner Mongolia left indelible memories. I'll never forget the young mother who served us tea in the round-framed tent of her yurt home, or the Mongolian horsemen pounding across the grasslands on their mounts.

They were in festive traditional gowns that gave them a timeless quality — until one young equestrian, finished with his performance for the tourists, dismounted and pulled off his costume to reveal his jeans and Mets T-shirt as he adjusted his backward baseball cap.

The overnight train back to Beijing took us to the end of SLG. Our little posse exchanged some teary farewells with the camp crowd — then ran screaming to the comfort of the Grand Hyatt Beijing.

All of us returned home savoring our accomplishments. Our kids have since taken a real interest in studying Mandarin — Ella and Ryan's skills have advanced exponentially.

Sam was nourished by Chinese food and culture.

The locals, admiring Gabi's maple complexion and pouffy hair, made her feel like a rock star when they asked her to take pictures with them.

Wendy and I survived one brief squabble on a late, tired night.

And thanks to Jeannie's thoughtful planning, the trip made the three of us even better friends.

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