

Tina Gao

Age: 14, Grade: 8

School Name: Louis F. Holtz Middle School, Vestavia, AL
Educators: Keith Beard, Kevin Zhen

Category: Journalism

Not Just Another Chinese Class: The Yuren Chinese School

Behind a foldable table marked with “Yuren Chinese School”, Chinese adults distributed wrapped textbook packs to a queue of thirty people, checking off clipboard entries and recording payment information. Parents fished for cash in their wallets. Kids strained like dogs on a leash, backpacks slipping across shoulders. When a teacher led their children into a hallway to begin class, adults chatted with nuanced tones and rapidfire syllables untrained tongues can never replicate. In other words, 2019 began like any other year.

Since 1993, the Yuren Chinese School, an independently funded non-profit organization, has served more than 70 families in the Greater Birmingham Area of Alabama. Classes for grades 4 through 8 begin promptly at 1:00 pm each Sunday afternoon.

At 1:05, as soon as attendance ends, Amy’s fifth grade class began its Infamous Spelling Test, a review of last week’s lesson. Elbow propped on the table, Amy slumped in her seat, pondering whether to write 4 y or d. If her book strokes weren’t exact, teacher Li would scrawl a disgracefully thick line with a red Expo marker across that character.

When kids left, the teacher organized the tests into a stack, and the students retrieved their MaLiPing’s Vu textbooks, illustrated Chinese mountains shimmering on the book’s signature orange covers.

“We will start lesson 3 of the first unit today.” Teacher Li, announced as he leaned against his table, “Let’s read the vocabulary list.” The students flip to page 8 and start to read.

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