Reading America Program Fosters Intergenerational Understanding in Chinese Immigrant Families

Erin M. O'Toole

Davis Library in the Plano Public Library System, Texas, received a grant from Libraries for the Future to implement the MetLife Foundation Reading America Program in 2003. The goal of Reading America is to use the public library and its materials to promote understanding between generations of immigrant families. This article describes the planning and implementation of the grant, resulting in the exhibit and Web page titled, “Teens between Cultures: Chinese American Teens and Their Parents Explore Cultural Differences.”

The evening of Friday, November 7, 2003, was a long-anticipated one at Davis Library in the Plano Public Library System (PPLS) in Texas. Fourteen Chinese American teens and their parents from the Dallas Modern Chinese Language School (DMCLS) and several PPLS librarians had spent the past two months preparing for an exhibit that would open that night. The exhibit’s title was “Teens between Cultures: Chinese American Teens and Their Parents Explore Cultural Differences,” and it had a companion Web page debuting on the PPLS Web site. The MetLife Foundation funded all the supplies and equipment for the Teens between Cultures program and exhibit, through a grant administered by Libraries for the Future (LFF) (www.lfff.org) through The MetLife Foundation Reading America Program, coordinated by Elissa Goldman.

The long process leading up to the exhibit began in fall 2002, with a call for grant applications for the MetLife Foundation Reading America Program. The purpose of the program is to reduce tensions and promote cultural understanding between teens and adults in immigrant families through film and book discussions at the public library. This grant was perfect for Davis Library, which has a high percentage of immigrant Chinese patrons. Extended Chinese families frequent Davis Library on a daily basis. Once PPLS director Joyce Baumbach and Davis Library manager Cathy Ziegler gave their enthusiastic approval, Blythe Lee, an adult services librarian, and Erin O’Toole, a youth services librarian, commenced work on the application.

Finding a Community Partner

Research for the application revealed some surprising facts about the Davis Library service area and its patrons. In 2002 DallasNews.com reported that in Collin County, Texas, home of PPLS, the general Asian population quadrupled between 1990 and 2000.1 Census 2000 shows that Asians make up 14.6 percent of the population in the Davis Library zip code area.2 Furthermore, 6.4 percent of the population is from mainland China alone!3 Obviously, Davis Library was a strong candidate for the grant, but needed to fulfill a crucial requirement for Reading America: finding a community partner with whom to collaborate.

PPLS is fortunate to have two librarians who are from mainland China, Janeen Zhu at Haggard Library and Hui Zhang at Parr Library, and they suggested a number of Chinese organizations. The most youth-oriented of these, therefore the most attractive for this grant, were the Chinese schools in the Plano area. There are approximately four Chinese schools in the city of Plano proper and many more in the nearby cities of Richardson and Dallas. These schools meet on Sundays and offer courses in Chinese language, culture, and history, as well as other academic topics.

After contacting a number of Chinese schools, Davis Library finally received a positive response from Hua Yang, the principal of DMCLS. The school was established in 1994 with eight students and has now grown to more than four hundred students, guided by an administration, board, and faculty. O’Toole communicated with Yang through e-mail, then arranged a meeting with Yang and some board members to discuss the tentative program details.

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While meeting with Yang and the board members, it became clear why LFF requires a community partner for Reading America—the community partner knows the target immigrant group best and is alert to sensitive issues in the community. O’Toole discovered that the majority of families associated with the school were from mainland China, thus they had strong opinions about how China should be portrayed in any books or movies shared with their children. For example, O’Toole had tentatively selected Red Scarf Girl (HarperCollins, 1997), a highly acclaimed Cultural Revolution memoir for young adults, for a book discussion. She was surprised to learn that the board considered the book a biased and sensational depiction of China. DMCLS agreed to be Davis Library’s community partner in this endeavor after making it clear that they wanted to use materials that depicted China in an even-handed manner and that the time commitment of their teachers, parents, and students would take into consideration their already busy schedules.

O’Toole sent off the application in December 2002, proposing a schedule of four programs, culminating in a reception and exhibit opening. The four programs consisted of a film viewing and discussion, a book discussion, an oral history presentation, and a tour of PPLS’s Chinese language collection. In March 2003, Davis Library was awarded the grant. By this time, Lee had moved on to another job, so Judi Collett, now a youth services librarian at Parr Library, stepped in to help implement the program. The next phase was to flesh out the details of the proposed programs and exhibit, and start preparations.

PPLS decided to start “Teens between Cultures” after August because O’Toole would be busy with the summer reading club and many Chinese families would be taking extended vacations to China during the summer. In addition, the library did not want to interfere with the students’ preparation for fall semester finals, so the exhibit opening was scheduled for early November. Recruitment for participants was limited to students and parents of DMCLS because they would be more motivated to participate because they are proud of and committed to their Chinese heritage. Yang and her teachers distributed recruitment flyers, along with pep talks, to fifth through twelfth grade classes on two consecutive Sundays. A core group of fourteen teens, in grades five through ten, and their
parents made the commitment to undertake this project.

**Meeting to Discuss and Learn**

On a Thursday evening in September 2003, a group of wet yet highly energized Chinese parents and their teens arrived at Davis Library for the first meeting in the midst of a thundering downpour that caused flash floods in the Dallas area. Each family was given a folder containing the grant press release, a schedule of events, and handouts for coming programs, plus the book chosen for discussion at a later date, *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China* by Jung Chang (Simon and Schuster, 1991). The meeting started with an explanation of Reading America and a summary of coming events.

After refreshments and conversation, the group watched the first half of a 2002 Chinese movie in Mandarin without subtitles, *He Ni Zai Yi Qi or Together*, directed by Kaige Chen. Yang recommended the movie because it explores family relationships. It follows a father who makes great sacrifices so his violinist son can prepare to be a professional, but the son has doubts about his planned career and its implications. Zhang and Zhu helped interpret the movie for those who were not native Mandarin speakers.

The following week, the parents and teens met again at Davis Library to watch the remainder of the movie and discuss it. For all of the discussions, the teens and parents were divided up for the first half of discussion time, each group having at least one PPLS or DMCLS facilitator. Facilitators thought the teens would feel more open to exchange ideas when alone with their peers, then everyone would regroup for the second half of the discussion. O’Toole and Collett facilitated the youth discussion, which was conducted in English; Zhu facilitated the adult discussion, parts of which were conducted in Chinese.

The teens discussed whether the stereotype that all Asian youth play a musical instrument had any basis in truth. Indeed, all of the teens in this group, except one, played an instrument. When asked why, and whether they felt their parents forced them to play, the teens explained that their parents wanted them to take advantage of this opportunity and that they knew their parents would let them quit if they did not enjoy it.

The teens and their facilitators later gathered with the parents for further discussion and discovered what this “opportunity” was. The majority of parents involved were young teens during the Cultural Revolution in China. Most of their families could not afford to own or rent an instrument; some had not even seen a musical instrument during their youth. So when they arrived in America and starting raising families, they were overjoyed to find that they could afford to purchase instruments and music lessons for their own children. The parents wanted their children to experience musical opportunities that they never had.

The third meeting was held at Haggard Library, which houses the system’s Chinese language collection, including books, periodicals, and media materials for adults and children. The majority of these are in Mandarin, and both simplified and traditional character fonts are available. The program participants were taken on a tour of this collection so they would know what PPLS has to offer to its Chinese-speaking patrons.

The bulk of the third meeting consisted of a presentation by O’Toole and Collett about how to conduct an oral history interview. They distributed and discussed handouts that explained basic guidelines. Then O’Toole and Collett did a sample interview of each other about clothing they wore as teens. The teens and parents were amused to hear what passed for stylish in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s and that girls were not allowed to wear pants to school until the late 1960s. Then the parent-teen teams were asked to pick a topic about which they would interview each other. The topics chosen were food, clothing, friends, hometown, entertainment, school, higher education, relationships with parents, and relationships with grandparents. The facilitators encouraged teams to ask for detailed answers so the oral histories would be interesting to the public.

The parents and teens met for their last discussion program in early October at Davis Library. During the past weeks, everyone read selections from *Wild Swans*. The program used the English-language edition of this adult title so the teens could concentrate on the subject matter without struggling with the language. Yang chose chapters about events that occurred during the parents’ teen years, specifically the later years of the Cultural Revolution. This memoir is packed with political and personal details from the author’s life. Some of the reading was difficult, especially for the teens. Nevertheless, they had a lively discussion during which the parents compared their teen years with those of the author. Although some parents were uncomfortable discussing this period of China’s history, the teens gained an appreciation of the hardships and deprivation many Chinese, including their parents, endured and why their parents have such high hopes and expectations for them today.

**Preparing the Exhibit and Web Page**

After the last discussion program, the parents and teens worked on their own to create their oral histories. Each parent-teen team drafted interview questions for each other about their topic. The resulting oral interviews were limited to two pages each, totaling four pages per team. The librarians and Yang invited parents and teens to communicate with them about their projects during the next month; the librarians instructed them to e-mail completed histories to O’Toole for editing and standardization.

The librarians were also busy during this month, preparing for the reception and exhibit. They scanned photos borrowed from the families and took them to a photography shop for printing, and ordered banners bearing the name of the exhibit for the header panels. The city’s print shop designed a beautiful poster to promote the exhibit. Library Advisory Board members, City Council members, and all faculty, administration, and school members of DMCLS were invited to the exhibit opening.

The oral histories started trickling in and the librarians were so pleased! Some were funny, others poignant, and all were fascinating to read (see appendix). O’Toole experienced another flurry of activity as she standardized the histories for the Web page and exhibit panels. She also searched for graphics of objects or places mentioned in the histories. The printed histories were mounted on cardstock, as were the photographs, then hung on the exhibit panels. Librarian Sara Mosca designed the Web page for the exhibit; O’Toole sent her the photos and oral histories, which she used to create an amazing cyber-exhibit.

**Sharing and Celebrating the Achievement**

On the afternoon of November 7, everything finally came together. The exhibit
was complete and ready to put on the public floor. The Web page was ready to view. The program room was decorated for the reception. By 7 P.M., more than sixty people had arrived for the reception, including the participating parents and teens; other parents, students, and teachers from DMCLS; and Library Advisory Board members. O’Toole and Yang made heartfelt speeches about how much was shared and learned during the program, and how the program actually did promote understanding between the American and Chinese cultures. Then they presented each teen with a bookstore gift certificate and gave each the opportunity to say a few words about participating in the program. All were glad they had participated because of what they learned about China and their parents. One student commented that she had discovered her father had been “a bad boy.” We truly attained our goal of increasing understanding between generations!

Then it was time to cut the cake and enjoy the exhibit, both in person and on the library Web site. The parents and teens were pleased with the presentation of their efforts; the teens were especially proud to see others reading their oral histories. A guest book near the exhibit allowed reception guests to make comments about the exhibits. In addition, a notebook was placed by the exhibit for the next two months so library patrons could also make comments. We found the comments gratifying, and they confirmed our sense that this was a worthwhile community experience.

The icing on the cake? People’s Daily Overseas Edition published an article about “Teens between Cultures” in its March 25, 2004, issue.4 The Overseas Edition is the international arm of People’s Daily, an influential Chinese language newspaper with a circulation of more than three million. The newspaper was very interested in this new direction taken by a Chinese school, namely collaborating with an American organization on a project. So People’s Daily invited the school to submit an article; board member Xinsi Lin wrote it. O’Toole, who left PPLS for an academic position, was overjoyed to receive a copy of the People’s Daily article on her last day.

Davis Library heartily recommends doing an intergenerational, cross-cultural program with a community partner, particularly a school, in your library’s service area. The members of DMCLS were enthusiastic, dedicated, and generous with their ideas, opinions, and time. The program team never worried about attendance or whether projects would be completed. “Teens between Cultures” served to both bond the parents and teens in participating families and bond Davis Library with the surrounding Chinese community. Furthermore, the exhibit promoted understanding of Chinese culture in the entire Plano community. Many exhibit visitors commented that this was their first exposure to Chinese history of the 1960s and 1970s and said they found it enlightening and intriguing.

This fruitful relationship between DMCLS and PPLS continued in 2004 with a continuation grant from LFF and Reading America. Yang and librarian Hui Zhang coordinated the program, which featured The Cultural Exchange Project. After participating in film and book discussions, each teen and parent exchanged information with each other about a subject in their respective cultures. They were asked to focus on cultural aspects that they liked or admired. The eighteen teams then wrote joint reports, recording what they had learned about each other’s culture. For example, one mother and son team shared their musical tastes and wrote the report, “Eminem’s Rap and Cui Jian’s Rock Music,” while another team compared important cultural buildings in “Forbidden City and the White House.” The Cultural Exchange Project was posted on the Internet at www.planolibrary.org/teensbetween.

LFF again received funding from the MetLife Foundation to administer Reading America in 2005. This year fifteen libraries were given $5,000 each to start programs in their communities. Interested libraries can obtain information on how to start their own intergenerational programs for immigrants from the Reading America Booklet, which was written by LFF and is posted at www.lff.org/programs/RAbooklet.pdf.

References and Notes
3. Ibid.

Appendix. Voices of the Participants

The following were excerpted from the Web exhibit at www.planolibrary.org/teensbetween_copy(1)/index.htm.

Oral Interviews about Entertainment
Lin Zhang (mother) and Jeff Zhang (son)
Mother: What are the popular singers or bands, or types of songs you like?
Son: Anything with heavy bass. I like many kinds of music, except the country ones. Often country songs are based on high stuff, like melody. Often they don’t accompany with bass or drum. I also enjoy some classic music, with a minor key.
Mother: Limited, very limited. Eight operas, which were made under the government’s control. We memorized them so well because those were the only movies we could see, and those were the only plays we could make locally.

Oral Interviews about Higher Education
Xinxi Lin (mother) and Shulin Ye (daughter)
Mother: As a girl, do you think higher education is necessary? Do your girlfriends think education is necessary?
Daughter: Yes. Do you think boys should get a better education than girls? No, no, no!
Mother: Why?
Daughter: We are all created equal.
Mother: How about your girlfriends? What do they think?
Daughter: Although in the school we do break ourselves into two groups, girls and boys, girls usually play with girls and boys usually play with boys. Usually, you think boys and girls should get the same educations, although sometimes girls do...
better than boys in the classes. I know that, I find out that
easily. You just watch out in the class, who are the people
who raise their hands when my teacher asks questions. As
a girl, did you think higher education was necessary? What
did your girlfriends think about higher education?

Mother: In the new era of China governed under the Communist
Party, we were brought up under the belief that the girls
can do the same thing as the boys do. I didn’t have the
slightest doubt about that, naturally I never thought that
as a girl I may have to think differently. I don’t remember
among my girlfriends that we ever discussed whether we
should or shouldn’t (get a higher education).

Oral Interviews about Hometown
Dapent Xin (father) and Tianyi Xin (daughter)

Father: How did the location of your hometown affect your
teen years?

Daughter: San Antonio has a large Hispanic population, so
I had quite a few Hispanic friends, learned a lot about
Hispanic culture, and ate a lot of great Mexican food!
Also, San Antonio has Sea World and Six Flags, so that
gave kids something to do when we had time off.

Father: Was there anything special, say a custom or tradition,
in your hometown?

Daughter: Every year, we would celebrate the Battle of the
Flowers and Cinco de Mayo (fifth of May). I think the kids
got Cinco de Mayo off from school every year. Also, when
I was in elementary school, we would make flowers out of
tissue paper to celebrate the Battle of Flowers. How did the
location of your hometown affect your teen years?

Father: It was a city with climatic conditions close to that of
New York, by the coast. During summer, I went swimming,
and during the fall, I could pick apples and peaches in the
nearby country farm. I could climb tall hills to see the
sunset and sunrise. Also due to its location near the ocean,
the residents of Dalian could enjoy delicious seafood,
not available to most of the other areas of China.

Daughter: Was there anything special, say a custom or trad-
ition, in your hometown?

Father: Every summer, the kids would go down by the Tiger
Beach Park to swim. During winter, we would ice skate in
the man-made skating rink by our school. We could also
visit the local zoo and shop at the fancy Tai Yuan Street,
the most popular shopping area in Dalian. Kids could also
ride the trolley to tour the city when they had free time.
Also, the whole family could go see the Dalian soccer team,
which was famous nationwide.

Oral Interviews about School
Chunmei Shen (mother) and Lucy Miao (daughter)

Daughter: What other activities did you have at school besides
the core subjects?

Mother: In my elementary school years during the Cultural
Revolution the kids didn’t learn and the teachers didn’t
Teach. Therefore, the children had a lot of time to do what-
ever they wanted to. When I was in the fourth grade, my
friends and I went to a restaurant to volunteer. I learned
how to make Chinese pancakes and bread. The first benefit
of this education was when I cooked for my parents and
siblings for dinner. They all said that the food was very
good. Now, I can cook bread and Chinese pancakes for my
husband and kids!

Mother: What kind of other activities or clubs do you have in
your school besides the core subjects?

Daughter: We have a million different clubs at our school!
There are many writing and reading clubs sponsored by
our librarian, Mrs. Long. There is also a spirit club, for
the wannabe cheerleaders. We also have tutorials in all
subjects every morning except for Thursday, since that is
the teachers’ meeting day. We also have a student council.
I applied and got accepted! It was really exciting until I real-
ized that they met on Monday afternoons, which is when I
have my piano lesson. They get to vote for the Teacher of
the Year at our middle school!

Oral Interviews about School
Lan Sheng (father) and Rena Sheng (daughter)

Daughter: How was the school in the city different from
school in the country?

Father: When I moved to the countryside, it seemed that was
less affected by the Cultural Revolution than the city. We still
had normal class, not just revolutionary activities. But the
facility was really poor. The whole village had no electricity.
We used candle or oil lamps to study in the night. At school,
there were only simple tables and we had to carry a stool or
a little bench with our school bag to school everyday to sit
on. There was no air conditioning, no light, no fan, and no
heater at school. The walls were made of clay and the win-
dows weren’t made of glass, they were made of plastic.

Daughter: Was there a group of people that were considered
“popular”?

Father: In China, in school, the teacher sometimes assigned
a student leader, like the chairperson for all the activities.
Maybe one of the students was in charge of student learn-
ing activities, and another student was in charge of sport
activities. Sometimes they might be considered to be the
“popular group.” The teacher really liked these students so
they could be kind of like the teacher’s pets.

Father: What is the most challenging thing at school?

Daughter: The most difficult thing I would have to say is to
fit in. There’s a popular group of people that will kind of
suck up to you if you’re smart so they can get help with
their work, but if you’re a teacher’s pet, they won’t like you
anymore. The best way to fit in is just to be you!

Oral Interviews about Entertainment
Mr. Wu (father) and Ye Wu (son)

Son: What kinds of books did you read?

Father: We couldn’t read books; it was against the law. All
of the libraries were closed, and none of the books were
allowed. The only books we could read were used to make
negative comments about other Chinese leaders that dis-
agreed with President Mao.

Father: After you have heard about my teenage years, how do
you feel about that we could not read a lot of books?

Son: Dad, as you know, I am a reader; I love to read books.
From The Romance of the Three Kingdoms to Sherlock
Holmes are all in my collection of favorite books. I thought
I did not like school, but still, not being able to read any
books would be torture for me.
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