

To Give Children an Edge, Au Pairs From China



Danny Padilla for The New York Times

Joan Friend and her son, Jim, with au pair, Hongbin Yu of Harbin, China. Ms. Yu arrived in March to work in Carmel Valley, Calif.

By **GINIA BELLAFANTE**
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Correction Appended



Angel Franco/The New York Times

Kunyi Li, wearing glasses, and Man Zhang, next to her, at a tutorial last week in a motel in Connecticut for au pairs from 22 countries.

In a conference room at a Holiday Inn last week in Connecticut, 167 young women from 22 countries received a tutorial in catering to the needs of the affluent American child. (Lesson 1: Turn off the television set.)

Many of the women were German. But two drew particular attention, Kunyi Li, 23, and Man Zhang, 24, among the first au pairs from [China](#).

Their services are in great demand, in part because so many Americans have adopted baby girls from China. Driving the need more aggressively is the desire among ambitious parents to ensure their children's worldliness, as such parents assume that China's expanding influence will make Mandarin the sophisticates' language decades hence.

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“Our clientele is middle and upper middle class,” said William L. Gertz, chairman of the American Institute for Foreign Study, which oversees Au Pair in America. “They see something really happening, and they don’t want to be left behind.”

The last two years have seen an astonishing increase in the number of American parents wishing to employ Mandarin-speaking nannies, difficult to find here and even harder to obtain from China.

Au Pair in America, the 20-year-old agency that sponsored the two young women in Connecticut, had received no requests for Chinese au pairs until 2004, said Ruth Ferry, the program director.

Since then, it has had 1,400.

The agency said it expected to bring 200 more au pairs to this country before the end of 2007, and other companies in the business are beginning to recruit in China, all taking advantage of relaxed standards for cultural-exchange visas for Chinese.

Hongbin Yu, 23, of Harbin, north of Beijing, who like many other Chinese college students studying English gave herself an Anglophone name, Cecilia, was the first Chinese au pair to land in the United States.

She arrived in March through Go Au Pair, one of the 11 such agencies sanctioned by the Office of Exchange Coordination and Designation at the State Department.

Her employer is Joan Friend, a former president of a technology company in northern California who had been having her two children, Jim, 5, and Paris, 6, tutored in Mandarin for several years.

“The tutors just played with them,” Ms. Friend said from her house in Carmel Valley, Calif. “They thought I was crazy because the children were so young.”

After her son and daughter began to learn the sounds of Mandarin, Ms. Friend sought more intensive training and repeatedly asked Go Au Pair for a Mandarin speaker to live with the family. But visa problems and a lack of contacts in China left the agency unable to place anyone with her.

Ultimately, Ms. Friend found Ms. Yu on her own, through an acquaintance in China, and Go Au Pair handled the paperwork.

“I’ve never been to China,” said Ms. Friend, a single mother who is retired.

She added that she considered China central to the future of global economics, saying, “I think China will rule the banking world in my children’s lifetime, and I want them to be able to participate in that if they want to.”

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Like Ms. Friend, Jean Lucas, who lives outside Tampa, Fla., had been frustrated in finding a Chinese au pair for her four children. She is now obtaining one through Au Pair in America who will arrive in a few weeks.

Ms. Lucas said her husband, Sky, a manager of a hedge fund, initiated the search because he did not want to raise culturally narcissistic, monolingual children.

“My husband had been following China for some time,” Ms. Lucas said, “and he simply believes that it would be better for international relations if we all put some time and effort into learning Chinese. I’m not expecting this girl to come in and lecture. My children wouldn’t put up with that. But I want them to have an introduction, and I want it to be fun.”

Since she has been with the Friends, Ms. Yu, who studied English and tourism in college in China, has been reading to the children in Mandarin and teaching them to count. In turn, Ms. Friend, in addition to paying her expenses and a monthly stipend, has taken her on trips to Arizona, San Francisco and farther down the coast to Newport Beach.

Begun in 1986, the State Department Au Pair program requires that young nannies work no more than 45 hours a week and return to their home countries after one year. Host families have to provide their charges with a window into the American experience. It is only in the last few years that au pairs have been actively recruited outside Western Europe.

Among Chinese-Americans, it is difficult to come upon young women interested in child-care careers, nanny agency representatives say.

“This is not a field they evolve into,” Amy Hardison, founder of Nanny on the Net, said. “We just have a very hard time finding Chinese nannies.”

In China’s new culturally progressive climate, biases against such domestic work prevail. Ms. Zhang, one of the au pairs who arrived last week and moved in with a family in New Hampshire, said her parents had initially disapproved of her decision, especially because she was then working in customer service for Continental Airlines in Beijing.

“There are prejudices about being a baby sitter,” she remarked. “They said: ‘You have a great job coming out of college. Why would you want to go to America to take care of children?’ ”

It is Ms. Zhang’s hope to open a nursery school in China. And she would like to immerse herself more deeply in American culture, she said, beyond the knowledge she has acquired of it from watching “Friends.”

As for American cooking, she foresees it as a challenge.

“I don’t hate it but I don’t like it,” she offered. “I had pizza yesterday. It’s better at home.”

Correction: Sept. 7, 2006

A photograph with an article on Tuesday about au pairs from China that showed a California woman with her son and their au pair carried an incorrect credit. The photographer was Darcy Padilla for the New York Times, not Danny Padilla.

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