

## Mandarin Immersion Montessori – FAQs

### How do you teach language skills in the Mandarin immersion program?

- What share of the instruction in your Mandarin immersion program will be in Chinese?

In our full immersion classrooms, both the head teacher and the assistant teacher in the room will be native Mandarin Chinese speakers and will speak only Mandarin with the children during the school day. Since English is all around us in our culture, and since many students come to us with only limited Mandarin skills, we want to ensure that Mandarin becomes the classroom language as quickly as possible.

That said, we will have an English-speaking Montessori teacher on campus, who will work with the students on English language reading and writing skills from the time they join the primary classroom (ages three to six). This is important so that children can also learn English reading and writing during their “sensitive period” for these skills, which starts as young as age three.

- Which Chinese writing system will you use—traditional or simplified characters?

Great question! We understand that the choice of characters to use is a very important cultural issue for many Mandarin speakers. We’ve spent over six months debating back and forth with parents, teachers and experts in Montessori, and have decided to go with traditional characters and zhuyin (bopomofo) for reading and writing. Here are our four top reasons.

- **Better suited to a culturally authentic Montessori program.** Traditional characters carry the millennia of Chinese culture with them. While they have more strokes, and are thus more complex to write, they also are more meaningful, as they contain pictograms and etymology that lends itself very nicely to the “story-telling” approach to teaching that is at the core of Montessori. (Many of our Montessori teachers have drawn an analogy between traditional characters in Chinese and the cursive handwriting we teach for English.)
- **An easier transition from traditional to simplified than the other way around.** Readers of traditional characters can, with some effort, usually understand simplified text. It’s also easier for someone who has learned traditional first, to later pick up simplified. In general, children who learn Chinese today will be best prepared to use their language as adults if they can use both character sets, which is easier if they start with traditional characters first.
- **Availability of high-quality, exciting and engaging children’s literature in traditional/Bopomofo characters.** Many parents and Montessori teachers have pointed out to us that children’s books with traditional characters are more easily sourced. These books are also closer in style and content to the engaging, high-

quality read-aloud books we use in our English-language Montessori program. As good literature and read-alouds play an essential role in vocabulary development, choosing traditional writing enables us to offer a more engaging literary environment.

- **A prevalence of parent preference and local use of traditional characters for writing in our area.** In the overseas Chinese community, traditional characters dominate (although simplified has been gaining ground in weekend Chinese programs and newspapers over the past two decades). When we surveyed parents who were interested in our inaugural Chinese program in Irvine, the preference was strongly for traditional characters. Parents pointed to the arguments above, and emphasized the relationship between traditional characters and Chinese history and culture, as well as the easier transition from traditional to simplified. While we don't make decisions like these merely by majority vote, we were compelled by the substantive argument these parents brought to our attention!

*Some background for English-only speakers on Chinese writing:* Traditional characters were the writing style used everywhere Chinese was spoken up until the simplification reforms undertaken in the 1950's and 1960's in the People's Republic of China. The simplification movement meant to increase literacy by reducing the number of strokes needed to write characters, and reducing the overall number of characters used in writing Chinese. Simplified characters are derived from traditional characters by applying a series of simplification rules. This means that those who can read traditional characters, and are aware of these rules, can generally read simplified. However, the reverse is not true! Today, simplified characters dominate in mainland China and Singapore, whereas traditional characters are more heavily used in Taiwan and Hong Kong.

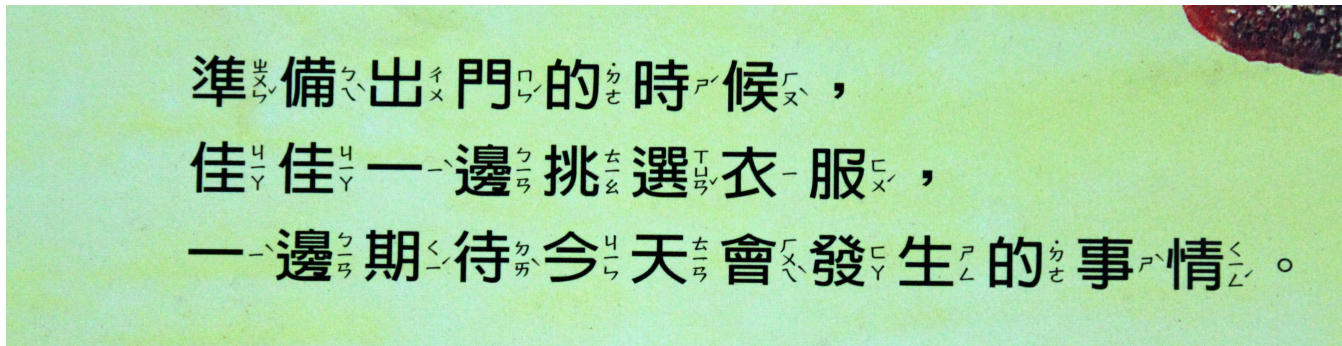
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We know that this is a culturally important debate, and that no matter which choice we made, some parents would prefer the other. We have agonized over this decision for a long time ourselves, and hope you understand it's not one we made lightly. We hope that even if you prefer simplified, that you will still consider our program because during the toddler and preschool years, the main goal of the Chinese immersion program is for children to learn how to understand and speak Mandarin. While children will learn to recognize characters, and to read phonetically (see below), the written component of the program is relatively small. If your child joins our program, and leaves with strong verbal Mandarin skills, a deep appreciation for Chinese culture, and an intuitive understanding of the structure of Chinese characters, as well as the phonetic nature of the language, she'll be able to learn simplified characters much more easily later on than if she didn't have the benefit of this early immersion experience.

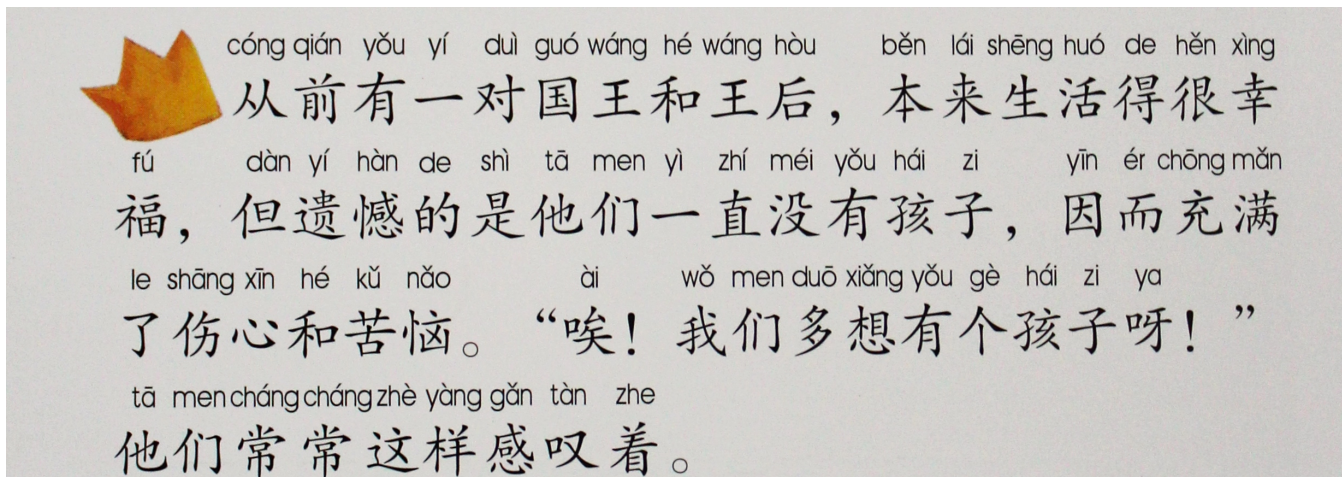
- Which phonetic system will be used, pinyin or zhuyin fuhao (colloquially called "Bopomofo")? Why did you make this choice?

This is another great question, and one we also debated extensively.

Pinyin is way of phonetically transcribing Chinese using the familiar Latin alphabet. It's used in mainland China (with simplified characters) and in Hong Kong (with traditional characters). Zhuyin fuhao or "Bopomofo" is a phonetic alphabet used in Taiwan to enable children to read Chinese phonetically. It consists of small strokes that are printed next to the Chinese characters, and that enable children to read books phonetically as they, over time, become familiar with the Chinese traditional characters.



*This excerpt from a Chinese children's book from Taiwan shows Bopomofo next to the traditional Chinese characters. The Bopomofo helps children decipher the text phonetically, while still keeping the main emphasis on the characters.*



*This excerpt from a Chinese children's book from mainland China shows pinyin text above the simplified characters. The pinyin uses the same letters as English, with diacritical marks that indicate the Chinese tones.*

Ultimately, we believe that children learning Chinese today will need to be able to write in pinyin: that's the easiest way to using our English-language keyboards to write in Chinese. While that's the long-term need, we will start children off by learning bopomofo for two main reasons:

- **Bopomofo naturally goes with traditional characters.** Books printed in traditional mostly also show Bopomofo characters. By learning to read Bopomofo, our students will be able to actually read Chinese books at a young age. Being able to read early in a language is critical to achieving language mastery and growing vocabulary!
- **Children can learn Bopomofo in parallel to English letters, during their “sensitive period” for language in the early preschool years.** In the Montessori approach, we know that children have an early period when they are eager and ready to learn to write and read. This period begins around ages three to four, and it is when we introduce English writing with the Montessori Sandpaper Letters and the Montessori Moveable Alphabet.

Children should also learn Chinese writing during this period! Yet that’s problematic when you use pinyin for phonetic writing: the pinyin letters are identical to English letters, but they represent entirely different sounds. Teaching both English and Chinese sounds that are for the same letters becomes confusing to children. That is why so many programs hold off on teaching pinyin until ages six or seven, when children have mastered English reading. But this means they miss the “sensitive period” to learn Chinese phonetic writing without effort!

By introducing Bopomofo to young preschoolers, we enable them to learn to write and read Chinese phonetically during that important “sensitive period”—without getting confused between English and Chinese.

- Many programs that my child might attend later in life use simplified characters and pinyin. Will she be able to learn this at your school?

In our primary program (ages 3-6) we will focus on traditional characters and Bopomofo. However, we are planning to offer a Mandarin immersion elementary program in the future, at campuses where there is sufficient demand by families who want to continue Mandarin immersion Montessori into the elementary years.

In our elementary program, we will introduce students to pinyin once their English reading and writing skills are fully automatized (usually around ages seven or eight). Once we find that children are conceptual enough in their understanding of language to be able to understand simplification rules—or when we find children able to naturally absorb the differences in letters, we may then introduce simplified characters and some simplified reading materials, once they’ve master pinyin.

- Isn’t it really difficult to learn Chinese for children who don’t have the language at home? Wouldn’t it be better to learn Chinese later, in high school or in college?

Chinese is a language that is hard to learn after the early years of childhood. It relies on different “[tones](#)” to communicate accurately. The same sounds (e.g., “ma”) have entirely different meanings when pronounced in a high tone, a rising tone (like a question in English), or a falling tone. These tones are harder to grasp as children get older.

Adult learners of Chinese language often struggle with recognizing and correctly repeating these tones. This leads to speaking Chinese with an accent (like French speakers of English); and it may actually be unintelligible! Children, on the other hand, learn Chinese language flawlessly when they have the opportunity to enter an immersion program at the age of 18 months or even at three years.

If you do want your (non-native speaker) to learn Chinese, the best time to start is in early childhood. Even if you decide to not continue with Chinese into the elementary years, your child’s brain will have acquired the neural connections it needs to pick up the Chinese language at a later age, whether in high school or college, and to speak it with largely correct pronunciation.

- I want my child to not only know the Chinese language. I want him to experience its culture too. Will my child get Chinese culture in the classroom?

Our Mandarin immersion classrooms will have a heavy component of Chinese culture. While all of our classrooms in communities with Asian influences already have parts of Chinese culture (e.g., we have chop stick practical life materials everywhere, and we celebrate Chinese New Year at all of our campuses), this cultural influence will be even more pronounced in our Mandarin immersion program.

From Chinese eating utensils to Chinese foods at key holidays, from singing in Chinese to reading traditional Chinese tales in Mandarin, from welcoming parent participation (e.g., by sharing photographs from visits in China, or coming in to demonstrate Chinese calligraphy) to Chinese art and other decorations in our classrooms, we’re eager to have the Chinese culture come to life in our immersion classrooms.

Interestingly, our upper elementary history teachers are very excited about this approach: They tell us that being able to understand how cultures differ by experiencing it as a young child really helps children visualize historical time periods, and to connect better to the study of history in the upper grades!

- How much Chinese can I expect my child to pick up—spoken Chinese and written Chinese?

Our full Chinese immersion environment enables children to gradually transition from speaking in English and understanding Chinese, to naturally speaking in Chinese. How much your child will speak depends on several factors, most importantly, whether anyone in your family speaks Mandarin, how early your child joins our program, and how long she stays (3 day vs. 5 day schedule, and half-day vs. full-day schedule). Typically, even English-only children who join an immersion program at 18 months leave at age six speaking their

second language quite fluently. The same is true for children who join a bit later, but have some Mandarin in their family background (grandparent, nanny, one parent). If your child is four years old when she joins, has been speaking only English at home, and only stays for one year, her Chinese will obviously not be as strong.

As we'll introduce phonetically-written Chinese (using Bopomofo) starting at age three, children usually learn to read phonetically quite well by the time they graduate from the third year of Montessori Chinese immersion primary (at age six, which is the equivalent of the traditional kindergarten year). We also introduce traditional Chinese characters during the preschool years and many children in this type of setting learn to recognize between 30-80 traditional characters (in addition to the thirty-seven zhuyin symbols), and write a dozen or two characters before they move on to first grade.

- What about my child's English skills: I understand that children in Montessori usually begin learning to read and write English as early as three or four years old. Will the Chinese immersion program cause my child to fall behind?

Even though we introduce English reading in parallel to reading in Mandarin, your child's literacy skills in English will still be at grade level as he finishes the program, and he will be well prepared to enter a normal (public-school) 1<sup>st</sup> grade. If he continues in Montessori for elementary school, he may initially lag in comparison to his peers from our English-speaking Montessori preschool rooms, but will be able to catch up with some extra time, which our Montessori teachers will, of course, support actively. While many (but not all) English-only Montessori primary students can read regular books by the end of the kindergarten year (i.e., they read at a 1st or 2nd grade level), a typical Chinese immersion preschool student can expect to read at grade level in English. Rest assured, though, that he will stay on or ahead of track in English compared to children attending play-based or traditional preschools. And this lag disappears as he enters adolescence.

### **Who can enroll in the Mandarin immersion program? How will children transition into and out of this program?**

- My child doesn't speak English at home. Will he be able to pick up sufficient English skills at school?

We welcome children with Chinese knowledge to the program. However, our Chinese immersion preschool program is not designed for native-speakers who *will not* be able to learn English outside of school at all. Those children may be better served in our English-language Montessori classrooms, where they can complement their strong Chinese from home with English language skills. If you exclusively speak Chinese at home, one option to consider is starting your child in our English toddler program, to give your child a strong foundation in English. Then, when your child turns three and is ready for our primary program, she can move on into the Chinese immersion track.

In our Chinese immersion primary program we will have a English-speaking Montessori teacher on campus, who will work with the students on English language reading and writing skills during their “sensitive period” for these skills, which starts as young as age three. Depending on the language mix of the campus and classrooms, we may also bring in some English-speaking assistant teachers for after school care (3 pm – 6 pm). We would more likely consider this for a classroom or campus where children from primarily Chinese-speaking homes are a majority, and where English thus wouldn’t naturally be the “playground language.”

- My child doesn’t speak any Chinese, and neither do we as her parents. Can she still join the program?

Yes, even if you and your child do not speak any Chinese we definitely welcome you to join our program! In fact, an immersion environment is ideal for a mono-lingual toddler or preschooler to pick up a second language as naturally as he learned his mother tongue.

We’re completely prepared to help your child make the transition into this new language environment. Our teachers are skilled at providing support to English-only children: they slow way down when they speak. They use gestures: they point to objects and pantomime actions. They use the Montessori materials to help with language skills: in fact, the richness of the Montessori classroom is one of the key success factors for our immersion programs.

At LePort, even outside of our immersion programs, we have families from all over the world, speaking many different languages. We’re actually excited by the great learning opportunity that this provides our children—and even in our immersion classrooms, we welcome non-Chinese families and invite them to contribute and share their cultural backgrounds with the children.

- How young or old should my child be to transition to your Chinese immersion program?

We currently enroll children between the ages of 18 months and 3 ½ to 4 years to start in our Mandarin Immersion program. Older children are admitted on a case-by-case basis; generally, we would prefer them to have some background in Chinese and/or strong parental and family support in Chinese to enroll after the age of four.

The reason for not inviting English-only children past age four is twofold: An older child has a harder time transitioning to the new language, and still learning all the other things that a five-year-old needs to master. In addition, older children are the role models in the mixed-age, Montessori environment. If we admitted older “leaders” who spoke only English, this would significantly impact the teachers’ ability to make the classroom into a Chinese-language environment.

- How will my child, who doesn’t speak any Chinese, be able to understand Chinese in the classroom? Will he feel lost or alienated?



We firmly believe that it is important that your child's relationship with his teacher is exclusively in Mandarin. It really isn't necessary for the teacher to translate: after all, a 2-year-old doesn't understand everything adults say in English to them either, and they learn just from experience. It's no different with Mandarin/Chinese! Especially in Montessori environments, where so much learning is tied to concrete materials and demonstrations, rather than verbal lectures, it's easy for our teachers to get children to understand and learn without resorting to translation. (Of course, in case of emergencies, whether physical or emotional, we will use whatever limited amount of English is needed to ensure the child's safety and emotional well-being.)

As you consider your child's transition into the Mandarin language environment, we encourage you to read this [blog post about starting school in a different language](#). We originally wrote it to address concerns of parents who do not speak English and whose children enter our English language Montessori rooms—but the insights apply just as well to English-speaking children joining our Chinese immersion program!

- Will my child be forced to speak Mandarin? What if he feels more comfortable speaking in English, which he knows well?

Many children who enter our program naturally speak English, their native language. In our Mandarin immersion classrooms, teachers will consistently respond to children in Mandarin and give lessons in Mandarin. As children speak to teachers in English, teachers will provide the Chinese expressions and encourage children to repeat back in Mandarin. Experience shows that in Mandarin language immersion classrooms, over time children naturally switch to speaking in Mandarin: when they have mastered the Chinese vocabulary needed to express their needs and thoughts, they naturally want to use their new, exciting language!

We do not force children to speak in Mandarin. Ever. We want their education to continue to be the joyous, natural experience it is in any classroom at LePort. In every one of our Montessori classrooms, a child's voice is valued, whether he is speaking English, Mandarin, or another language. We know that the child has an inner desire to use his new words, so there's no need to rush his progress and destroy that personal development. All children will communicate in their nascent second language, but all children will not do so at the same pace — and in our school, that's ok!

- I am currently enrolled in the English Montessori program at LePort. I'm very intrigued by the Chinese program, but am wondering if transitioning is a good idea for my child. Any thoughts for me?

We are thrilled that we have strong interest from our currently enrolled families to join the Chinese immersion program. In our Chinese Immersion program, children learn the same Montessori preschool skills and activities, from Practical Life to Sensorial, from language to math in *Chinese*. And since your child is already a LePort student, she will already be



familiar with the Montessori materials and activities that had in her English classroom which may help with the transition.

In general, a transition is more likely to be the right choice for an infant moving up to toddler, or a toddler moving up to primary, than for a 2<sup>nd</sup> year primary child about to begin her pivotal 3<sup>rd</sup> year of the Montessori primary. By the 3<sup>rd</sup> year, your child will have formed a strong bond with his teacher, and be at the cusp of his “explosion” into writing and reading, and to move to a different language environment at that time might do more harm than good.

If you are interested in transitioning your child, we encourage you to meet with your child’s current teacher and/or LePort Head of School, to discuss your family’s unique circumstances, and to develop a plan that is tailored to your child’s needs for this possible transition to language immersion.

- When my child graduates from your program at age six (after kindergarten), where can he go to continue with his Chinese? Will you offer some kind of Mandarin immersion in your elementary program at LePort?

With our Spanish immersion program, we are opening a Spanish-immersion-track lower elementary program (1<sup>st</sup> – 3<sup>rd</sup> grade) in the fall of 2014. This came two years after we launched the Spanish-immersion primary classroom. With sufficient demand, we are very eager to open up a Mandarin immersion option for our graduating 3<sup>rd</sup> year Mandarin-immersion primary students in Irvine, probably by fall 2016. This program may initially be a half-Mandarin, half-English classroom, but over time, we expect to be able to continue Mandarin immersion into the 1<sup>st</sup> – 3<sup>rd</sup> grade program at LePort.

*This program FAQ is current as of February 2014. As this is an evolving program, some specifics may change over time. Feel free to contact us at [info@leportschools.com](mailto:info@leportschools.com) with any follow-on questions.*