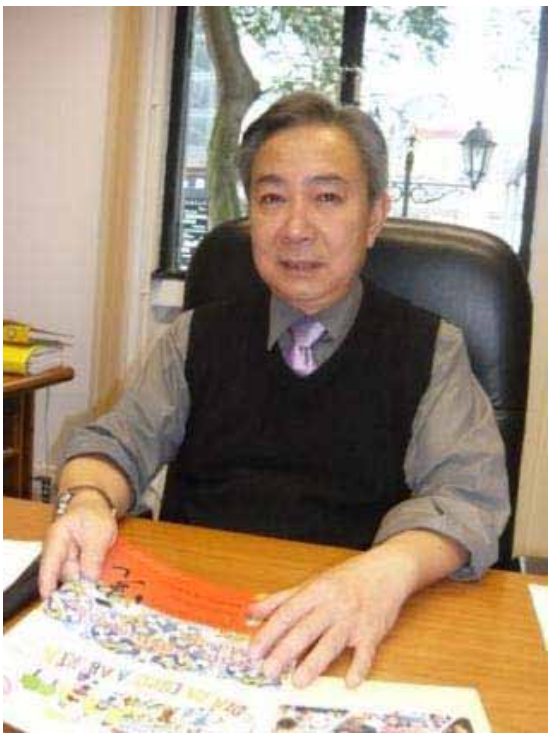
Prep year attracts non-Portuguese students



Peter Wang is a US citizen that is established with his family in Zhuhai, mainland China. Every day, his 17-year-old daughter gets up at 5:30 am to cross the border to Macau and go to school. It is hard, but "it's worth it", he says. She is one of the 13 non-Portuguese speaking students of the Portuguese School of Macau (EPM) that are participating in the preparatory year. It is an intensive one-year of Portuguese classes for students from other schools and education systems. Its objective is to "gain more students", as the school is losing 30 students per year, viceprincipal of EPM, Pedro Xavier told the Macau Daily Times. "It is an attempt to open the school to other local communities. We [the school] cannot be closed to the several communities that exist in Macau. We realised it is possible to open the school to other kinds of students, and not only to the Portuguese-speaking communities," he added.

Peter Wang considers himself an expert on schools in Macau and in neighbouring cities. "We came from the United States and my daughter always has studied at private schools at S. Francisco. She speaks Mandarin but I didn't want to put her at a Chinese school because they kill the intellect and the creativity," he said. So the American investor embarked on an odyssey, looking for a suitable international school for his daughter. He tried one in Zhuhai and another one in Zhongshan, but he did not like them. So he came to Macau.

"I was at the city's centre, when I met two kids from the EPM. They were well mannered, spoke English very well and I decided to come here," he said. Peter Wang met the teachers and the vice-principal and found the place perfect for his daughter. "They are educators. They care about the children and didn't regard the Education as a business," he explained. "I also met Portuguese families and they are different from the American. It opened another world to me. Here, I feel like family," he added.

Open School Day

Friday, EPM is having an open day from 10 am so that the public may get to know its facilities and operations better. It is a way of attracting new students, as the enrollment period for the school year of 2010/2011 is starting in March. In the next year, Peter Wang's daughter will join a new class. The first preparatory year is ending on June. Afterwards, students will join regular classes and start learning the Portuguese curriculum. "Before, when students from non-Portuguese communities enrolled here he was put immediately in a regular class. But that was not so good. So we decided to create this preparatory year, which aims the students to manage the basic Portuguese language," Pedro Xavier explained. During the first year, students learn with a certified Portuguese language teacher, in very small groups. There are two age groups, the first coverings grades 1 to 6 and the second from grade 7 to 12. Currently, there are around 10 students in the first group and 3 in the second. Along with the 12 hours per week of Portuguese language lessons, they also attend classes in Mandarin, English, Visual Arts, Music, IT and Physical Education. Currently, EPM has 465 students and 45 teachers.

The number of students is dropping, with a loss of 30 every year. While it struggles to attract more students, the school is promoting its multicultural characteristics. According to Pedro Xavier, around 10 percent of students come from non-Portuguese speaking communities. Among the Portuguese Schools worldwide, EPM is rated as the number one. Its students achieved the best grade averages in the National Exams of Portugal. To face the problem of an ever decreasing student body, the school set the English and Mandarin classes from the first grade, among other initiatives. “Our students are prepared to study at any university of the world,” the vice-principal said. Peter Wang is planning to visit Portugal with his daughter in the Summer. While the opportunity to learn Portuguese was not what led him to choose EPM for his daughter in the first place, he now sees some “commercial advantages” to that. “It is very similar to French, Spanish and English, so she can pick up another thing and go around,” he concluded.

(Alexandra Lages - Macau Daily Times / 03-02-2010)