

In touch with their roots

An Asian mother's quest to teach her kids their heritage turn into a growing business

By Yenni Kwok

At her home in Florida, Qian Yinjie tries to teach her 12-year-old daughter Diana something about the country she left nine years ago. "China has such a splendid history and culture. We should let our children be proud of their rich heritage," says Qian. At home, she converses in Chinese with her daughter and tells her stories from Chinese history. However, transferring one's heritage from generation to generation is not easy. Parents who shop for toys with an ethnic slant find that choices are limited. Dolls are mostly blond, blue-eyed Barbie look-alikes. Stories and fairy tales are drawn from Europe. Children's songs are in English; language- instruction books are designed for adults.

Like many other Asian parents, Qian wondered whether her child would grow up with no sense of her great heritage. Then, she happened upon Asia For Kids, a print and online catalog that sells books, toys and other materials with Asian themes. The inspiration behind the catalog is Korean-born Selina Yoon, who, like Qian, was also worried that her children would forget their heritage. Married to a Chinese-American, Yoon, 39, wanted her two children, Michael and Vivian, to speak their parents' languages as well as English. "I began researching my options and found there were no products to help me," she says.

Why not buy materials abroad? Not as easy as it sounds. Whenever she traveled overseas, she looked for children's literature in Korean or Chinese but did not find any. Every time a friend or an acquaintance went, she would ask them to look too, with equally disappointing results. It seemed almost impossible to find children's literature in those languages, let alone materials that were relevant for a child growing up in America. Suitable toys and games were equally hard to come by. While decorative dolls abound in Asia, it is not so easy to find dolls with Asian features to play with.

So in 1994 Yoon formed Master Communications, and in 1995 she came up with the idea of Asia For Kids with a \$150,000 investment borrowed from relatives. Before long this Cincinnati, Ohio-based business had moved from

Yoon's home to a proper office. Now she handles more than \$1 million in sales a year. Asia For Kids has grown from a 16-page black-and-white booklet hand-stapled by students to become a glossy 64-page, full-color catalog, containing more than 1,000 items with a circulation of more than 500,000 copies. The budding Internet entrepreneur doesn't limit herself to America's 50 states. She now accepts orders from 22 countries in Asia, Europe and Latin America. The Asia For Kids' own website (www.afk.com) enables her to reach potential customers no matter where they live. In a kind of coals-to-Newcastle twist, she even ships Chinese-language books to China. This is not as strange as it sounds, according to Yoon. "If you live in Los Angeles, New York, or even Asia, it's hard to find the appropriate things."

With the design talent of another Chinese-American mother, Chan Hing-man, originally from Hong Kong, Yoon produced a line of "Baby June" dolls, an Asian-looking cotton doll with black hair dressed in a Chinese suit or batik dress. Yoon also sells "Kea," a slim, teenage-looking doll, that is dressed in either Chinese, Vietnamese or Korean costumes to suit various ethnic preferences. She offers Asian boy dolls too.

Master Communications also produces "Sing 'n Learn" cassettes, which teach children languages through music. They are available in Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese and Japanese. Literary offerings include: fairy tales such as Jouanah: A Hmong Cinderella and Little Oh (about a Japanese origami doll that comes to life in a tale reminiscent of the Little Tin Soldier). Asian-American biographies, books and even cookbooks form part of the swelling catalog.

Asia For Kids just won the sole distribution rights for the videos Big Bird in China and Big Bird in Japan, which feature the globe-trotting journey of the beloved giant, yellow-feathered character of Sesame Street fame. Yoon has also registered the websites "Europe for Kids" and "North America for Kids" to sell more ethnic products. They are not up and running yet, but she says she is ready for bigger things next year.

Sheer demographics suggest a growing market for such specialized products. Asian-Americans constitute the youngest and fastest-growing segment of the U.S. population, with the highest household incomes. That is a potential market of about 10 million people. Other possible customers include the thousands of American families that have adopted Asian children.

Another growing segment of the American market, the nation's six million Muslims, is also attracting the interest of entrepreneurs. The 123Greetings company sells more than 7,000 greeting cards from its website every day during the fasting month of Ramadan. Most Muslims used to import these hard-to-find products from abroad, but as some 60% now are born in the country, a market has arisen for products addressing the specific needs of those growing up in the U.S. There is money to be made from diversity.

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