

New Yorker

Great Toddle Forward

To make their babies competitive in the global economy, parents are making them learn Chinese.

By [Alexandra Wolfe](#)

Hilton Augusta Rogers, 1 year and 10 months old, as blonde and blue-eyed a baby as ever was born in Manhattan, looked at the waitress taking her parents' order at [Shun Lee West](#), and said, "Bao bao!" which means "Pick me up!" in Mandarin. Startled, the waitress picked her up. Soon, other wide-eyed waitresses gathered around. One said, "Point to your nose" in Mandarin, which Hilton Augusta promptly did—as her parents, Jim Rogers and Paige Parker, a private investor and an aspiring author, looked on, beaming.

In an age when even a venerable New York institution like IBM has sold its most visible element to the Chinese, the city's mandarins have realized, for class-preservation reasons, their children must adapt. Which is why Hilton Augusta knows more Mandarin than English: She has a Mandarin-speaking nanny. The lycée is passé (old Europe has no trade surplus), and some parents are scouring Craigslist and placing ads in the *China Press* for sitters who speak Mandarin, China's official language.

JaNiece Rush of Lifestyle Resources, a placement agency, says 35 percent more families have requested Mandarin-speaking nannies this year than

last. At the Pavillion Agency, requests for Mandarin-speaking sitters are up tenfold since 2000, says Clifford Greenhouse, mainly from “extremely affluent” parents. Some of these parents are Chinese or have adopted Chinese babies. But others want to give their toddlers a leg up in globalized society.

Private schools have caught on, too. Chapin, Brearley, Collegiate, and Dalton recently added Chinese to their curricula, and St. Hilda’s & St. Hugh’s will start a pilot program for 3-year-olds next year. “We were thinking, *How do we prepare them to be citizens in a global economy?*” says headmistress Virginia Connor. Even though Mandarin tones can be tricky, she says, “I would argue that if they can say *bonjour* in French, they can say ‘thank you’ in Chinese.”

Chiefly because of the program, Hilton Augusta’s father is sending her to St. Hilda’s & St. Hugh’s in the fall. With signs all over their house labeling things in English and Mandarin, she will probably be ahead of her class. Her nanny, whose English name is Shirley, says she was told to communicate with her only in Mandarin, and the toddler even has her own Mandarin name, Le Le, meaning Happy.

Finding Shirley was no easy task. Jim Rogers put an ad in the *China Press* and at first got responses only from people who spoke no English or were illegal immigrants. Then, before hiring Shirley, he had friends (Rogers travels to China frequently) test her Mandarin to find out “whether she

speaks gutter Mandarin or a queen's Mandarin.”

“I don't want my daughter to grow up and suddenly start talking like a tramp at age 9,” he says. Shirley now lives in the family's Upper West Side home, and Rogers is feeling good about his investment: “Even if my little girl weren't very smart, she's always going to get a job because she'll be totally fluent in Chinese.”