

Living Well

A monthly special section of news & information for seniors



Celebrating Chinese culture

With bilingual classes and group activities, center fosters diversity and sense of belonging

Story by Chris Kenrick | Photos by Magali Gauthier

On any given day, Avenidas Chinese Community Center in Palo Alto is abuzz with older adults learning how to speak Mandarin, trying their hand at Chinese paint brushing, practicing tai chi or enjoying Lunar New Year festivities.

The center, which celebrates Chinese traditions and culture, has become a go-to destination for a growing number of seniors throughout the community.

Many participants are Chinese immigrants who speak little English; others are Chinese Americans wishing to explore their roots; and some just have an interest in Chinese language and culture.

Palo Alto resident Joan Beit-Zuri is among those who frequently use the center. She said she feels “very included” there even though she is not Chinese and does not speak Mandarin or Cantonese.

“I’m a minority (here), but I don’t feel like that,” she said.

Beit-Zuri discovered the community center while looking for a class in Chinese brush painting. Now, she’s hooked on learning more about Chinese culture.

She not only takes the painting class, but she’s enrolled in an “Everyday Cantonese” course, as well as a baduanjin exercise class at the center.



Above: A lion is fed a red envelope during a performance at the Lunar New Year celebration hosted by Avenidas Chinese Community Center in Palo Alto on Jan. 26. Top: People dance to “Gong Xi Gong Xi,” which translates to “Congratulations, Congratulations,” during the celebration.



Attendees watch and record a dance performance at the Lunar New Year celebration hosted by Avenidas Chinese Community Center at Cubberley Community Center.

Providing a space for the area's aging Asian population to connect with others who share a similar heritage was one reason that Avenidas launched the center in 2018. In Palo Alto, 15% of the aging population currently identifies as Asian, and in neighboring Mountain View, Asians represent over 20% of the senior population, according to data from Avenidas.

That was not the only reason, however, the nonprofit opened the center: Bringing together people of different backgrounds was a high priority, Tracy McCloud, Avenidas director of programs, said.

The center hired Hong Kong-born Pinki Fung, who is fluent in English, Mandarin and Cantonese, to make sure bilingualism was integrated into all aspects of the center. "It was 100% by design that all activities are offered in English and Mandarin," McCloud said. "The idea is to expose people to each other so they understand each other and get along better."

Before the center opened, Fung organized focus groups in both Mandarin and English to learn what would draw seniors to a Chinese cultural program.

"People said they wanted tai chi, health and wellness, but that language was the most important thing," Fung said.

She then set about finding "some good teachers who could attract a crowd," she said.

A tai chi class came first, followed by singing and karaoke. Later, a group of seniors asked Fung to add conversational Cantonese so they could bargain while shopping in San Francisco's Chinatown. Fung recruited longtime community volunteer Ingrid Lai to teach the class, which has since become a popular offering at the center.

"We want people to mingle, have fun, make some more friends and not feel any barriers because of the language or culture or anything," Fung said.

Currently, more than 900 people receive the center's monthly newsletter, and more than 250 seniors are typically enrolled in classes at the center. Fung said about a quarter of the center's current participants are Chinese-speaking with limited English.

In interviews translated by Fung, several of those who use the community center said the programs have boosted their mental and physical health, especially the online classes

that were offered during the pandemic.

"The scariest thing for elderly is being home alone," said 81-year-old Ruby Liu of Palo Alto. "This helps us reduce chances of getting depressed. I feel I am a happy senior, and even my kids are happy with no worry about me."

For Kim Rogers, a retired engineer from Sunnyvale, the center has helped her reconnect with her Chinese roots. Born in Hong Kong, Rogers was adopted by an American family and spent her childhood in the Midwest where, she said, there was no opportunity to learn about Chinese history and culture.

When she found the Cantonese class at Avenidas, she alerted friends in Hawaii and London, who also have joined the class online.

Rogers said she appreciates the inclusiveness and tech-friendliness of the program. As an Asian who could not understand the Chinese language, Rogers said, "I often felt like I didn't quite belong."

She soon realized she had much in common with other Chinese Americans who had never learned to speak Chinese.

"Their parents might have spoken it, but growing up in the U.S., they didn't, so they also felt that same feeling of not quite belonging," she said.

Additionally, Rogers said, "Pinki holds in-person events around every Chinese holiday, and they have made me feel so included."

Palo Alto resident Ellen Wallace, a student in the "Chinese Culture in America" class taught by retired engineering manager Andrew Chang, said Chang's bilingual approach is "seamless."

"He's either showing slides in Chinese and speaking in English, or vice-versa," Wallace said. "It just works."

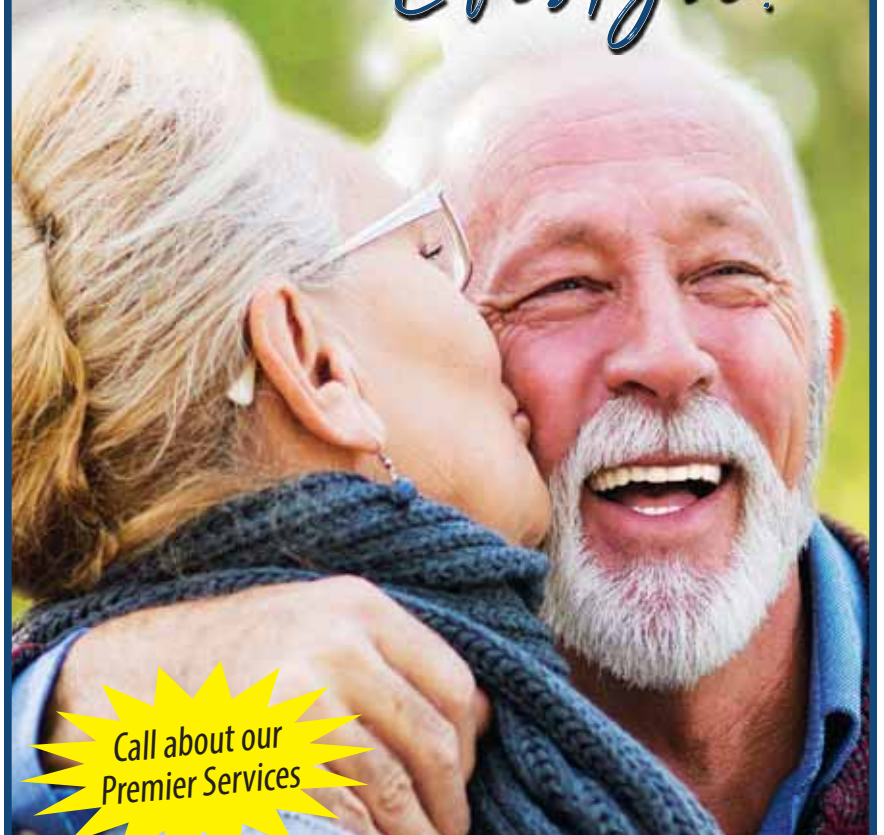
Wallace, who said she's been studying Mandarin for years, though is not fluent, has continued in Chang's class for at least two years.

"I see several non-Chinese faces on Zoom in the class who are obviously enjoying it as much as I am — and learning a lot in a very entertaining fashion," she said.

For more information about the Chinese Community Center at Cubberley Community Center, go to avenidas.org (click on "Programs"). ■

Contributing Writer Chris Kenrick can be emailed at ckenrick@paweekly.com.

Live a Vibrant Independent Lifestyle!



Call about our Premier Services

Live Independently... take time for what you crave!

Relax and delight in our desirable and spacious apartment homes. Every home is equipped with a full all-electric kitchen, washer and dryer. And should the need arise, Assisted Living is always available within your own home. You would never need to move. Enjoy many happy hours with new friends, gourmet dining, fun events and excursions.



THE MAGNOLIA OF MILLBRAE

(888) 862-6915 | (650) 697-7000 | www.themagnolia.com

RCFE# 415600154 201 Chadbourne Avenue, Millbrae, CA 94030

The Peninsula's Premier Retirement Community