

LETTER FROM CHINA

CRAZY ENGLISH

The national scramble to learn a new language before the Olympics.

BY EVAN OSNOS

Accompanied by his photographer and his personal assistant, Li Yang stepped into a Beijing classroom and shouted, "Hello, everyone!" The students applauded. Li, the founder, head teacher, and editor-in-chief of Li Yang Crazy English, wore a dove-gray turtleneck and a black car coat. His hair was set off by a faint silver streak. It was January, and Day Five of China's first official English-language intensive-training camp for volunteers to the 2008 Summer Olympics, and Li was making the rounds. The classes were part of a campaign that is more ambitious than anything previous Olympic host cities have attempted. China intends to teach itself as much English as possible by the time the guests arrive, and Li has been brought in by the Beijing Organizing Committee to make that happen. He is China's Elvis of English, perhaps the world's only language teacher known to bring students to tears of excitement. He has built an empire out of his country's deepening devotion to a language it once derided as the tongue of barbarians and capitalists. His philosophy, captured by one of his many slogans, is flamboyantly patriotic: "Conquer English to Make China Stronger!"

Li peered at the students and called them to their feet. They were doctors in their thirties and forties, handpicked by the city's hospitals to work at the Games. If foreign fans and coaches get sick, these are the doctors they will see. But, like millions of English learners in China, the doctors have little confidence speaking this language that they have spent years studying by textbook. Li, who is thirty-eight, has made his name on an E.S.L. technique that one Chinese newspaper called English as a Shouted Language. Shouting, Li argues, is the way to unleash your "international muscles." Shouting is the foreign-language secret that just might change your life.

Li stood before the students, his right arm raised in the manner of a tent reviv-

alist, and launched them into English at the top of their lungs. "I!" he thundered. "I!" they thundered back.

"Would!"

"Would!"

"Like!"

"Like!"

"To!"

"To!"

"Take!"

"Take!"

"Your!"

"Your!"

"Tem! Per! Ture!"

"Tem! Per! Ture!"

One by one, the doctors tried it out. "I would like to take your temperature!" a woman in stylish black glasses yelled, followed by a man in a military uniform. As Li went around the room, each voice sounded a bit more confident than the one before. (How a patient might react to such bluster was anyone's guess.)

To his fans, Li is less a language teacher than a testament to the promise of self-transformation. In the two decades since he began teaching, at age nineteen, he has appeared before millions of Chinese adults and children. He routinely teaches in arenas, to classes of ten thousand people or more. Some fans travel for days to see him. The most ardent spring for a "diamond degree" ticket, which includes bonus small-group sessions with Li. The list price for those seats is two hundred and fifty dollars a day—more than a full month's wages for the average Chinese worker. His students throng him for autographs. On occasion, they send love letters.

There is another widespread view of Li's work that is not so flattering. "The jury is still out on whether he actually helps people learn English," Bob Adamson, an English-language specialist at the Hong Kong Institute of Education, said. The linguist Kingsley Bolton, an authority on English study in China, calls Li's approach "huckster nationalism." The most serious



"Conquer English to Make China Stronger!" Li Yang's co



PANOS PICTURES

nger!" Li Yang's cosmology ties the ability to speak English to personal strength, and personal strength to national power. Photograph by Ian Teh.

charge—one that in recent months has threatened to undo everything Li has built—holds that the frenzied crowds, and his exhortations, tap a malignant strain of populism that China has not permitted since the Cultural Revolution.

"I have seen this kind of agitation," Wang Shuo, one of China's most influential novelists, wrote in an essay on Li. "It's a kind of old witchcraft: Summon a big crowd of people, get them excited with words, and create a sense of power strong enough to topple mountains and overturn the seas."

Wang went on, "I believe that Li Yang loves the country. But act this way and your patriotism, I fear, will become the same shit as racism."

The global headquarters of Li Yang Crazy English holds about two hundred employees (another two hundred work nationwide) and sprawls across four floors of an office building in the southern city of Guangzhou. Li is rarely there. He likes hotels. Even in Beijing, where he shares an apartment with his wife and their two daughters, he often keeps a hotel room nearby so that he can work without distraction. (A third daughter from a previous marriage lives with her mother in Canada.)

For several days this winter, Li and his lieutenants were ensconced in the presidential suite on the top floor of Guangzhou's Ocean Hotel. The suite was furnished in a modern clubby style: a faux fireplace, white leather couches, a cavern-

ous Jacuzzi, a large wooden model of a schooner. Fresh air was needed. Li had just wrapped up an annual marathon of meetings with managers from around the country, and a dozen young men and women were huddled, heavy-lidded, over laptops. He fiddled with the thermostat and threw open the curtains to reveal a view, from the twenty-sixth floor, of dun-colored apartment blocks and blue-glass high-rises twinkling in the sun.

He sat down on a couch and began explaining to me a list of new projects, including a retail plan that would create, in his words, the Starbucks of English education. "People would get off work and just go to the Crazy English Tongue Muscle Training House and then go back home," he said. "Just like a gym."

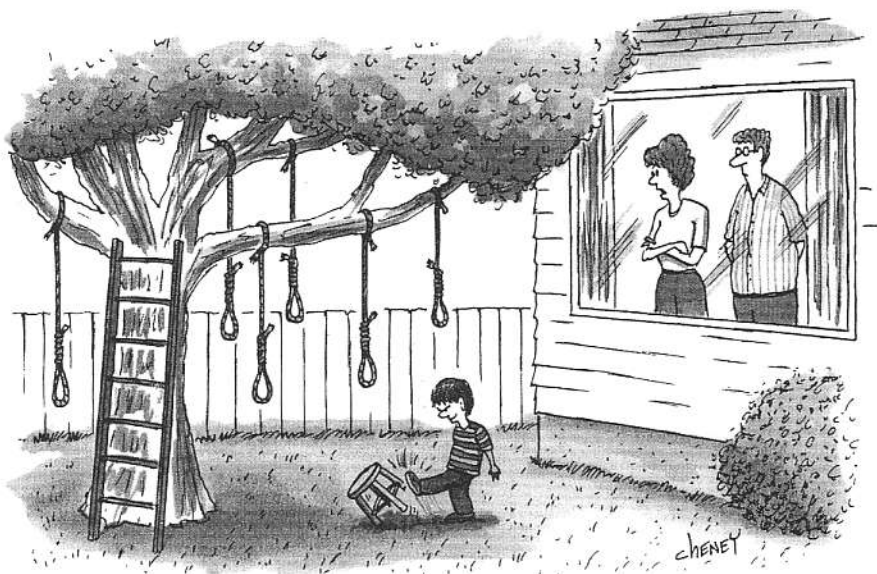
Li's name adorns more than a hundred books, videos, audio boxed sets, and software packages, such as the "Li Yang Crazy English Blurt Out MP3 Collection," which sells for sixty-six yuan—a little more than nine dollars—and his motivational memoir, which costs twenty yuan. He encourages companies to buy the memoir, whose Chinese title translates as "I Am Crazy, I Succeed," in bulk for employees; orders of a thousand copies or more receive a forty-percent discount. (The original title used a word that implied "I Am Psychotic, I Succeed," but the publishing house rejected it.) Most of Li's products bear one of his portraits: well groomed, rimless glasses, a commanding grin. He says that he has no idea precisely how many books he has

sold over the years. One of his publishers (he has several) estimates that the figure is in the millions.

China has been in the grip of "English fever," as the phenomenon is known in Chinese, for more than a decade. A vast national appetite has elevated English to something more than a language: it is not simply a tool but a defining measure of life's potential. China today is divided by class, opportunity, and power, but one of its few unifying beliefs—something shared by waiters, politicians, intellectuals, tycoons—is the power of English. Every college freshman must meet a minimal level of English comprehension, and it's the only foreign language tested. English has become an ideology, a force strong enough to remake your résumé, attract a spouse, or catapult you out of a village. Linguists estimate the number of Chinese now studying or speaking English at between two hundred million and three hundred and fifty million, a figure that's on the order of the population of the United States. English private schools, study gadgets, and high-priced tutors vie for pieces of that market. The largest English school system, New Oriental, is traded on the New York Stock Exchange.

Li long ago expanded from language instruction to personal motivation. His aphorisms mingle Mao with Edison and Teddy Roosevelt. Li's shtick is puckish and animated. He mocks China's rigid classroom rules, and directs his students to hold his books in the air, face the heavens, and shout in unison—a tactic known in Crazy English and other teaching circles as T.P.R., or total physical response, a kind of muscle memory for the brain. His yelling occupies a specific register: to my ear, it's not quite the shriek reserved for alerting someone to an oncoming truck, but it's more urgent than a summons to the dinner table.

Li's cosmology ties the ability to speak English to personal strength, and personal strength to national power. It's a combination that produces intense, sometimes desperate adoration. A student named Feng Tao told me that on one occasion, realizing that he had enough cash for tuition to an out-of-town Li lecture but not enough for train fare, "I went and sold blood." Collect a crowd of those fans and the atmosphere can be overwhelming. "There have been times when I've had to run in, or ask



"He has too many make-believe enemies."

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someone bigger, a guy, to go pull my daughter out of a crowd that is just pushing so much that I'm scared," Li's wife, Kim, an American teacher who met him on a trip to China nine years ago, said. "Those aren't like a 'Wow, he's famous' moment. Those are like an 'Oh, God—this is out-of-control famous' moment."

Li's indispensable asset is his voice, a full-throated pitchman's baritone. He delivers it in an accent of his own creation that veers between Texan and Midwestern, stretched by roomy vowels. He has spent only a few weeks in the United States and Great Britain, but he makes few mistakes. He exudes the restlessness of a performer who has long since mastered his repertoire. Even among professional speakers, who market their indefatigability, he is known for a startling energy level. After Li appeared in Shanghai last fall, as an interpreter for the peak-performance coach Anthony Robbins, Robbins told me, "Usually, I do my translations through headsets and burn through two or three different translators in an hour and a half to two hours—I go onstage for about ten to twelve hours a day—but he lasted the entire day." Robbins added, "It was really, really extraordinary."

At times, Li can be grandiose, comparing his business to Oprah's and claiming that he has sold "billions of copies" of his books. But at others he is self-deprecating, mocking his occasional English flubs or the strangeness of his approach. He knows that these shortcomings reinforce the image he has fashioned: that of the hardest-working man in the study of English, an archetypal Chinese citizen for the twenty-first century.

On the couch at the hotel, Li turned one of our interviews into a lecture for his employees, who crowded around to listen. (Someone recorded it on a video camera.) "How can we make Crazy English more successful?" he asked me, his voice rising. "We know that people are not going to be persistent, so we give them ten sentences a month, or one article a month, and then, when they master this, we give them a huge award, a big ceremony. Celebrate! Then we have them pay again, and we make money again."

He turned toward the assembled employees and switched to Chinese: "The secret of success is to have them continuously paying—that's the conclusion I've

reached." Then back to English: "How can we make them pay again and again and again?"

In late January, China faced its worst winter weather in half a century. The blizzards coincided with the travel weekend for Lunar New Year, the most important family holiday in the Chinese calendar. The havoc was unprecedented; at a train station in Guangzhou, hundreds of thousands of stranded travellers were sprawled in the streets around the terminal.

Still, some seven hundred adults and children managed to make it to a college campus in the southern city of Conghua for Li Yang's Crazy English Intensive Winter Training Camp. In a typical travel tale, one ten-year-old boy told me that he journeyed by car for four days, with his older brother at the wheel.

The camp had a military motif: supervisors dressed in camouflage, with megaphones, escorted students in formation around the campus. Li's face could be seen on oversized posters everywhere, accompanied by English phrases. Above the stairs to the cafeteria: "Have you thought about whether you deserve the meal?" Along the plaza where they lined up before lectures: "Never let your country down!" Above the doorway leading into the arena: "At least once in your life, you should experience total craziness."

Each student received a red backpack filled with books and a matching jacket emblazoned with the words "2008 International Elite Club." Shortly before nine o'clock on opening day, the students filed into the arena. It was unheated and frigid, like their dormitories. (The previous night, I had slept in a full set of clothes and a ski hat.) In his teaching, Li associates physical toughness with the ability to speak English. At one point this winter, he announced a new campaign for "physical intelligence and ability," and posted photographs on his blog of himself on a treadmill.

A long red-carpeted catwalk sliced through the center of the crowd. After a series of preppy warmup teachers, firecrackers rent the air and Li bounded onstage. He carried a cordless microphone, and paced back and forth on the catwalk, shoulder height to the seated crowd staring up at him.

"One-sixth of the world's population

speaks Chinese. Why are we studying English?" he asked. He turned and gestured to a row of foreign teachers seated behind him and said, "Because we pity them for not being able to speak Chinese!" The crowd roared.

Li professes little love for the West. His populist image benefits from the fact that he didn't learn his skills as a rich student overseas; this makes him a more plausible model for ordinary citizens. In his writings and his speeches, Li often invokes the West as a cautionary tale of a superpower gone awry. "America, England, Japan—they don't want China to be big and powerful!" a passage on the Crazy English home page declares. "What they want most is for China's youth to have long hair, wear bizarre clothes, drink soda, listen to Western music, have no fighting spirit, love pleasure and comfort! The more China's youth degenerates, the happier they are!" Recently, he used a language lesson on his blog to describe American eating habits and highlighted a new vocabulary term: "morbid obesity."

Li's real power, though, derives from a genuinely inspiring axiom, one that he embodies: the gap between the English-speaking world and the non-English-speaking world is so profound that any act of hard work or sacrifice is worth the effort. He pleads with students "to love losing face." In a video for middle- and high-school students, he said, "You have to make a lot of mistakes. You have to be laughed at by a lot of people. But that doesn't matter, because your future is totally different from other people's futures."

He strives to be as unprofessorial as possible. On book covers, he wears a suit and tie, with his cuffs rolled up to the elbow, like a bond trader. It affirms his image as the anti-intellectual who has wrested English from the grip of test proctors and college-admissions committees. At one point mid-lecture, Li called a student up from the crowd, a middle-aged man with glasses, and asked him for his story.

The man, whose name was Liu Donghua, responded in Chinese, explaining that he was the president and former editor of the magazine *China Entrepreneur*, in Beijing. "I just came back from the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland," he said. (Li, turning to the crowd, interjected, "Many of them flew in on their pri-

041-5

HERE NAME YOUR

My friend spends all summer
mending fence for the elk to blunder

back down and the cows to drag
the wires and the snow to sit and sag

on, so all the twist and hammer and tauten
and prop amounts at last to nought, knot, tangle.

The next year he picks
up his pliers and fixes

the odds all over again. There are no
grownups, and I think that all of us children know

and play some variation on this theme, the game of all join
hands so that someone can run them open.

Then war whoops, shrieks, and laughter
and regather together

as if any arms might ever really hold.
I'm trying to finger the source—pleasure of or need

vate jets!") The entrepreneur continued, "One of the greatest benefits was that I was irritated there—as I stood in front of thousands of the most important people in the world, I was as stupid as a fool, because my English is extremely poor."

Turning to the class, Li commended Liu's gumption: "If *he* goes crazy, *all* enterprises in China will go crazy!"

In the hours that followed, Li swooped from hectoring to inspiring; he preened for the camera; he mocked Chinese speakers with fancy college degrees. By the time the lecture ended, he had spoken for four hours, without a break, in numbing cold—and the crowd was rapt. In the days afterward, students would run together at dawn, shouting English. On the final night, they walked on a bed of hot coals. Between classes, the campus was scattered with lone learners, muttering like rabbinical students, Li's books pressed to their faces, their lips racing.

Li's parents were committed Communists who heeded Chairman Mao's call, in the late sixties, for students to train the peasantry. After college, they settled in the remote northwest province of Xinjiang, in a town so bleak and cold that the Chinese describe it as "a place haunted by the Devil." The family was privileged, with a house equipped with an indoor toilet. Li's father, Li Tiande, ran the provincial broadcasting bureau, and his mother was a senior engineer there. They were essentially high-ranking propagandists. Until he was four, Little Yang, as Li was known, lived thousands of miles from his parents, in the care of a grandmother, because his parents felt ill-equipped to raise him in rugged Xinjiang. After the family was reunited, Li's father spent most of his time on the road, returning every two or three months.

When Li Tiande was present, he was severe. Once, after Li and his friends were caught poking holes in melons on a farm, his father was incensed. "I felt I'd lost face," he told a Chinese interviewer years later. "When I got home, I hit him. This incident let everyone see that this quiet kid of few words also had another side." His mother was equally stern. She would watch as Li practiced his penmanship. If he made a mistake, she tore up the page. Even so, he remained an uninspired student.

In time, Li developed a crippling shy-

ness. A ringing telephone unnerved him. "I would count it: one, two, three, four," he recalls. "I'd say, Should I do it? Maybe something important? A phone call for me? Still I could not. I don't know why. It's really hard, even for me now, to directly address my parents. I cannot blurt out 'Mama!' or 'Baba!'"

In high school, Li grew his hair to his shoulders and considered dropping out, but, ultimately, he enrolled in the mechanical-engineering department at Lanzhou University, in one of China's poorest provinces. He failed his classes. Wu Jianjun, an older student who taught Li, recalls, "He was very introverted. He was not good at expressing himself."

Toward the end of 1987, with a mandatory English test looming, Li and a friend decided to practice reading in an outdoor campus pavilion every day at noon. Li discovered that the louder he read, the better he felt. "I could concentrate, I felt really brave," he recalls. "If I stopped yelling, I stopped learning." He had harnessed something universal—the cloak of confidence that comes with slipping into a language not one's own—and added a Chinese twist.

On Chinese campuses, there's a tradi-

tion of reading aloud to hone pronunciation. Li simply turned up the volume. He began reciting English everywhere. "Lights-out in the dorm was at eleven o'clock," Wu Jianjun, who is now a professor of mechanical engineering, told me. "After the lights were off, he would read English in the hallway outside his room. His reading drew criticism from other students, since it disturbed their rest." But when the annual English test came around, Li told me, he took second place: "I became instantly, instantly famous."

After graduation, Li obtained a state job at an electrical-research institute, and taught English classes to groups on the side; he charged students eight yuan per month—a little more than two dollars, at the time—a fine haul in 1989. With his father's connections, he soon moved to Guangzhou as an English-language host on radio and television. After two years on the air, he was well known but bored. He quit and founded a company whose name was a phonetic spelling of "crazy": the Li Yang-Cliz International English Promotion Workshop.

He hired his sister, Li Ning, and they rented a single room, which served as both the company's headquarters and their

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for—these enactments of resistance, if Resistance
is indeed their name. I'm trying to walk the parallels to terminus—

call them lickety-split over rickety bridge,
tightrope, railroad tie, or plank as you see fit—

trying to admit to seeing double,
innumerable,

to finding myself beset by myself
on all sides, my heart forced by itself,

for itself, to learn not only mine
but all the lines—

crow's flight, crow's-feet, enemy, party, picket,
throwaway, high tide, and horizon—to wait

in the shadows of scrim each night
and whisper the scene. Always, some part

of the heart must root for the pliers, some
part for the snow's steep slope.

—Dora Malech

home. They had desks but no beds, and slept on an oversized windowsill. They posted flyers for lectures, and they began to draw crowds. From across China, letters started to arrive, asking for teaching materials. Li's sister was in charge of the mail, which she carried home from the post office each day in a backpack. Soon, she needed two large nylon sacks to hold it all, and, eventually, a second person to help drag them. "Then we stayed up all night opening letters," she told me.

There was little reason to bank on the business of teaching English. China and the language didn't have an auspicious history. In 1636, King Charles I authorized a small fleet of four ships, under the command of Captain John Weddell, to set sail for the East. The expedition headed for Canton but encountered a firefight with a Chinese fort, and more clashes ensued. As the linguistics scholar Kingsley Bolton recounts in "Chinese Englishes," an exhaustive history, the British blamed their problems partly on a failure to communicate; they had no English-Chinese translators. By the eighteenth century, though, local tradesmen in Canton had begun to make sense of the alien language.

Eventually, they composed a pidgin-English vocabulary, using Chinese characters to capture the phonetics: January became "che-na-wi-le" and the west wind was "wi-sze-wun." They wrote it all down in "The Common Foreign Language of the Red-Haired People," a pamphlet of sixteen printed pages and three hundred and seventy-two entries, beginning with the numeral "one" and ending with "shoe buckle." The cover depicted a man wearing a tricornered hat and flouncy knickerbockers, and carrying a cane.

Speaking basic English was no virtue. It was the language of the compradors, the middlemen, who were so roundly reviled that they had trouble finding women who would marry them. "They serve as interpreters only because they have no other means of making a livelihood," the reformist scholar Feng Guai-fen wrote. "Their nature is boorish, their knowledge shallow, and furthermore, their moral principles are mean."

China urgently needed proper English for diplomatic negotiations. Feng called for special new language schools that would provide "double rations" to talented students and expose them to foreign teachers. "There are many brilliant people

in China; there must be some who can learn from the barbarians and surpass them," he wrote. And, by the twentieth century, a fresh crop of mission schools was spreading foreign languages in China in the name of God.

But when Mao Zedong took power, in 1949, he expelled the missionaries and declared Russian the primary foreign language. Within a decade, China had fewer than nine hundred secondary-school teachers of English in the entire country.

By the mid-seventies, the study of English had been cautiously restored, with limits. "Foreign language is a tool of class struggle." That was one of the first English phrases we learned," Zhang Lijia, who, at the time, was a teen-ager in Nanjing and is now a bilingual author, told me. "The other was 'Long live Chairman Mao!'"

Finally, in the two decades that followed, Deng Xiaoping thrust his country into the world and returned English to prominence.

In 1997, Li was trooping from city to city. In the soot-stained industrial redoubt of Zhuzhou, in Hunan Province, he met a man with a red face and an earthy farmer's accent. Ouyang Weijian was the deputy principal of Zhuzhou No. 1 Middle School. He had first heard Li speak in the city of Changsha, and was so impressed by his "magic English-study method" that he encouraged the local board of education to invite Li to lecture in Zhuzhou. Ouyang rented the city's largest venue, the Zhuzhou Sports Stadium, but he wasn't prepared for the response. "It was a three-thousand-seat arena," Ouyang told me. "We got five thousand people."

They were an improbable pair: Li, the scion of a cosseted cadre family, and Ouyang, one of five children raised in a dirt-floor farmhouse. He was the family's only college graduate. China, in the nineties, was crackling with new ventures, and Ouyang wanted to try his own luck. He was a natural salesman—he knew "how to talk," as the Chinese expression puts it—and he thrived among backslappers. "Even after I became a principal, my desire to do something big was still not satisfied," he said. After Li spoke in Zhuzhou, Ouyang quit his job and joined him as general manager of the company.

For their first big gig together, Ouyang badgered the radio station, the schools,

041-7

and the education officials in the southern city of Guilin to help him promote a show. This time, Ouyang recalls, "there were three thousand stuck waiting outside." The crowd toppled a stadium gate. The police arrived to try to control traffic on the surrounding streets. The city's vice-mayor approached Ouyang and urged him to call it off, because the temperature inside was climbing dangerously high. "I said, No, we can't stop now. Everybody is moving and sweating and happy. It's O.K. as long as everybody is moving. We can't stop this now."

With recognition came controversy. Li was harshly criticized by both newspapers and professors in the province of Guangdong and the western city of Chengdu. Yet the business continued to grow. On several occasions, Li received a rare disposition to lecture inside the ancient walls of the Forbidden City, in Beijing. He led English-yelling classes for soldiers on top of the Great Wall. A prominent Chinese filmmaker, Zhang Yuan, made a documentary entirely about Crazy English.

Li was teaching in the northern coal city of Jilin, in June, 1999, when he met Kim Lee, a tall, confident brunette from Florida who had been sent by the Miami teachers' union on a research trip to study foreign-language teaching practices. When Li introduced himself, he joked that he was a computer engineer from California. Kim brushed him off. He then approached her again, this time with the truth. "He said, 'I'm just kidding. I'm really an English teacher, and I've never even been to America,'" Kim recalls. "So, at this point, I just think this guy is a nut job."

Within days, Kim was teaching beside Li onstage. They had a natural rapport. Her dry wit and all-American looks were the perfect foil: an American Alice Kramden to his Chinese Ralph. They married four years later, in Las Vegas. Even there, on the Strip, Kim said, a Chinese shopkeeper spotted Li and chased down the newlyweds to shake his hand.

Kim was baffled, at first, by Li's antics, his fire-breathing. When she noticed how students responded, however, the educator in her came to see things differently. "This guy is really passionate about what he's doing, and, as a teacher, how can you not be moved by that?" she said. Today, she rolls her eyes at his critics—"P.C. crusaders," she calls those who object to Li's nationalism—and plays a major role in

Crazy English, both as an editor and as a performing partner. In social settings and in classrooms, he often glances her way for a nod of judgment or encouragement. She has imposed a "ten-day rule" on his tours: if he's gone for more than ten days straight, she gets on a plane with the kids. ("I'm just a mom who came into a bizarre life by happenstance," she says.) While we were having dinner one night at a neighborhood restaurant near Guangzhou, Li and Kim took turns depositing shreds of chicken on a plate for their two-year-old, Lila. At one point, Li was caught up in a conversation about management styles and the toddler got her tiny hands on a drumstick. Kim nudged her husband: "So you're just going to let her eat like a Viking?"

Last fall, Li's blog site posted photographs from a middle-school lecture in Inner Mongolia. One picture showed hundreds of students on their hands and knees, kowtowing. Bowing one's head to the ground is, in China, a potent symbol reserved mainly for honoring the dead. It was once required of visitors to the Emperor, and during the Cultural Revolution it was used as a tool of humiliation against those who were accused of committing political crimes.

The response to the photographs was swift. A columnist in the state-run *China Daily* pronounced Li a "demagogue," and his lectures "like cult meetings." "Cult" is a dangerous word in a country that affixed that label to the spiritual group Falun Gong nearly a decade ago and has been rounding up its followers ever since.

Li fought back. "I was pissed off," he told me. The students, he asserted, were bowing not to him but to their teachers, at his suggestion. The explanation did little good. An article in the *South China Morning Post* asked whether Crazy English was becoming "one of those cults where the leaders insist on being treated like deities." Kim's cell phone rang so much that she stopped answering. To her,



the storm felt unjust, as if they were being blamed for China's "burning passion" for learning a language.

"People have that within them," she told me. "He's just bringing it out."

For weeks after the kowtow story, Li avoided the spotlight. (The controversy "scared me to death," he said.) His most high-profile contract was on the line: the Beijing Organizing Committee had appointed one of his companies—a joint venture between Crazy English and Aigo, an electronics-maker—to teach as many volunteers as possible. Officially, Beijing wants half of its hundred thousand volunteers to be able to speak a foreign language. That seems unlikely, but the city is going to unusual lengths in the effort. Cabdrivers have been issued an "Olympic Taxi Handbook," a three-hundred-and-twelve-page primer on the world, which features not only a list of useful English expressions—"I want to go to the People's Hospital"—but also a section of do's and don'ts that account for purported national preferences and taboos: never rub the head of a Thai child; a Frenchman likes his handshakes brief and light; Americans shun "goods and packaging that use a bat-shaped pattern, believing that those animals suck people's blood and are inauspicious." (In China, bats signify good fortune.) The "Olympic Taxi Handbook" concludes with a section on emergencies, including how to escape from a burning cab (use your belt buckle to break the glass) and how to retrieve, bag, and ice a severed finger. When Li began to speak publicly again, Olympic officials told him to skip any signature Crazy English flourishes, like having students hold his books aloft, Mao style. The Olympic organizers were determined to avoid anything that might attract controversy, a hope that now seems quaint amid the clamor of protests abroad over China's hosting of the Games. Still, Li has mostly held back, and his Olympic campaign continues to thrive.

Among those I met at the Crazy English camp was Zhang Zhiming, a slim, inquisitive twenty-three-year-old with a plume of hair in the front that makes him look like Tintin. He prefers to use the name Michael, and has studied Crazy English for five years. He is the son of a retired coal miner and could never have afforded a ticket to the camp, so last

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and the education officials in the southern city of Guilin to help him promote a show. This time, Ouyang recalls, "there were three thousand stuck waiting outside." The crowd toppled a stadium gate. The police arrived to try to control traffic on the surrounding streets. The city's vice-mayor approached Ouyang and urged him to call it off, because the temperature inside was climbing dangerously high. "I said, 'No, we can't stop now. Everybody is moving and sweating and happy. It's O.K. as long as everybody is moving. We can't stop this now.'"

With recognition came controversy. Li was harshly criticized by both newspapers and professors in the province of Guangdong and the western city of Chengdu. Yet the business continued to grow. On several occasions, Li received a rare disposition to lecture inside the ancient walls of the Forbidden City, in Beijing. He led English-yelling classes for soldiers on top of the Great Wall. A prominent Chinese filmmaker, Zhang Yuan, made a documentary entirely about Crazy English.

Li was teaching in the northern coal city of Jilin, in June, 1999, when he met Kim Lee, a tall, confident brunette from Florida who had been sent by the Miami teachers' union on a research trip to study foreign-language teaching practices. When Li introduced himself, he joked that he was a computer engineer from California. Kim brushed him off. He then approached her again, this time with the truth. "He said, 'I'm just kidding. I'm really an English teacher, and I've never even been to America,'" Kim recalls. "So, at this point, I just think this guy is a nut job."

Within days, Kim was teaching beside Li onstage. They had a natural rapport. Her dry wit and all-American looks were the perfect foil: an American Alice Kramden to his Chinese Ralph. They married four years later, in Las Vegas. Even there, on the Strip, Kim said, a Chinese shopkeeper spotted Li and chased down the newlyweds to shake his hand.

Kim was baffled, at first, by Li's antics, his fire-breathing. When she noticed how students responded, however, the educator in her came to see things differently. "This guy is really passionate about what he's doing, and, as a teacher, how can you not be moved by that?" she said. Today, she rolls her eyes at his critics—"P.C. crusaders," she calls those who object to Li's nationalism—and plays a major role in

Crazy English, both as an editor and as a performing partner. In social settings and in classrooms, he often glances her way for a nod of judgment or encouragement. She has imposed a "ten-day rule" on his tours: if he's gone for more than ten days straight, she gets on a plane with the kids. ("I'm just a mom who came into a bizarre life by happenstance," she says.) While we were having dinner one night at a neighborhood restaurant near Guangzhou, Li and Kim took turns depositing shreds of chicken on a plate for their two-year-old, Lila. At one point, Li was caught up in a conversation about management styles and the toddler got her tiny hands on a drumstick. Kim nudged her husband: "So you're just going to let her eat like a Viking?"

Last fall, Li's blog site posted photographs from a middle-school lecture in Inner Mongolia. One picture showed hundreds of students on their hands and knees, kowtowing. Bowing one's head to the ground is, in China, a potent symbol reserved mainly for honoring the dead. It was once required of visitors to the Emperor, and during the Cultural Revolution it was used as a tool of humiliation against those who were accused of committing political crimes.

The response to the photographs was swift. A columnist in the state-run *China Daily* pronounced Li a "demagogue," and his lectures "like cult meetings." "Cult" is a dangerous word in a country that affixed that label to the spiritual group Falun Gong nearly a decade ago and has been rounding up its followers ever since.

Li fought back. "I was pissed off," he told me. The students, he asserted, were bowing not to him but to their teachers, at his suggestion. The explanation did little good. An article in the *South China Morning Post* asked whether Crazy English was becoming "one of those cults where the leaders insist on being treated like deities." Kim's cell phone rang so much that she stopped answering. To her,



the storm felt unjust, as if they were being blamed for China's "burning passion" for learning a language.

"People have that within them," she told me. "He's just bringing it out."

For weeks after the kowtow story, Li avoided the spotlight. (The controversy "scared me to death," he said.) His most high-profile contract was on the line: the Beijing Organizing Committee had appointed one of his companies—a joint venture between Crazy English and Aigo, an electronics-maker—to teach as many volunteers as possible. Officially, Beijing wants half of its hundred thousand volunteers to be able to speak a foreign language. That seems unlikely, but the city is going to unusual lengths in the effort. Cabdrivers have been issued an "Olympic Taxi Handbook," a three-hundred-and-twelve-page primer on the world, which features not only a list of useful English expressions—"I want to go to the People's Hospital"—but also a section of do's and don'ts that account for purported national preferences and taboos: never rub the head of a Thai child; a Frenchman likes his handshakes brief and light; Americans shun "goods and packaging that use a bat-shaped pattern, believing that those animals suck people's blood and are inauspicious." (In China, bats signify good fortune.) The "Olympic Taxi Handbook" concludes with a section on emergencies, including how to escape from a burning cab (use your belt buckle to break the glass) and how to retrieve, bag, and ice a severed finger. When Li began to speak publicly again, Olympic officials told him to skip any signature Crazy English flourishes, like having students hold his books aloft, Mao style. The Olympic organizers were determined to avoid anything that might attract controversy, a hope that now seems quaint amid the clamor of protests abroad over China's hosting of the Games. Still, Li has mostly held back, and his Olympic campaign continues to thrive.

Among those I met at the Crazy English camp was Zhang Zhiming, a slim, inquisitive twenty-three-year-old with a plume of hair in the front that makes him look like Tintin. He prefers to use the name Michael, and has studied Crazy English for five years. He is the son of a retired coal miner and could never have afforded a ticket to the camp, so last

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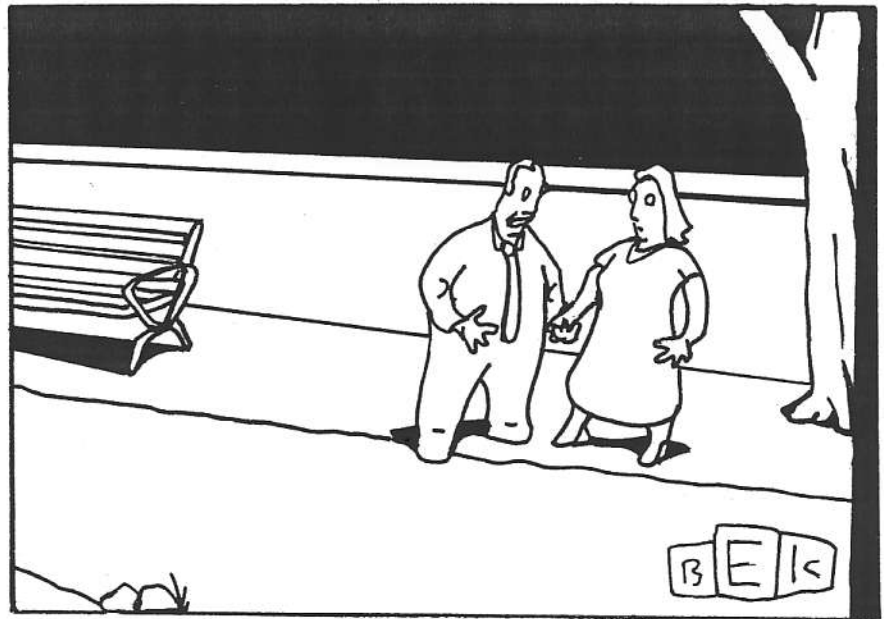
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year he got a job as a camp security guard and strained to hear as much as he could from the sidelines. This year, he was promoted to teaching assistant at the camp and received a small stipend.

"Usually when I see Li Yang, I feel a little nervous," Michael told me one morning, as we sat outside. "He is a superman." Michael had trouble sitting still. His enthusiasm was infectious, and I liked him instantly. "When I didn't know about Crazy English, I was a very shy Chinese person," he said. "I couldn't say anything. I was very timid. Now I am very confident. I can speak to anyone in public, and I can inspire people to speak together." Michael first encountered Crazy English through his older brother, who had worked for Li as an assistant. His brother never learned much English, but Michael was mesmerized by it. He began spending as much as eight hours a day on English, listening over and over to a tape of Li's voice, which sounded, to him, "like music."

His favorite book was Li Yang's "American Standard Pronunciation Bible," which helped him hone his vowels and punch up his consonants. Eventually, he got a job teaching at an English school, with the hope that, someday, he might open a school of his own.

I met scores of Li Yang students this winter, and I always asked them what purpose English has served in their lives. There was a hog farmer who wanted to be able to greet his American buyers. A finance worker, studying during his vacation, wanted to get an edge in the office. Michael had no doubts about what English might do for him. A few years ago, his brother got involved in a direct-sales network, pushing health drinks and potions. Schemes like that, known in Mandarin as "rats' societies," have proliferated in China's era of surging growth, fuelled by get-rich-quick dreams and a population adrift between ideologies. "He always wanted me to be involved in that," Michael went on, and I tried to picture him extolling the benefits of a health tonic with the same passion that he now expressed about English. "I spent half a year doing this business, and I gained nothing." Neither did Michael's brother, who flew to the United States six months ago to try to earn the money to repay his creditors. He now works as a waiter in New York, Michael said, and, until he returns, it's up to Michael to support their parents.



"Do you want to be ridiculously enmeshed?"

As Michael talked, the vigor in his voice faded. His brother wants him to go to America, too, to help earn money. "He has big dreams," he said. "But I don't really want to go there, because I want to have my own business. If you are a worker, you can't be a rich man. You can't buy a house, buy a car, support a family."

Michael stared at his feet and said, "I have no choice. This is life. I should always keep smiling. But, actually, I feel I'm under a lot of pressure. Sometimes I want to cry. But I'm a man."

He stopped. The air was silent, except for a warm wind that carried a trace of Li's voice, booming in the stadium behind us.

A few weeks later, Michael invited me for lunch at the apartment he shares with his parents in Guangzhou. It's in a cluster of modern high-rises on Gold Panning Road, in the center of the city, formerly known as Canton, where the compradors once chattered in pidgin English.

When Michael met me at the gate, he was in a good mood. ("I got promoted to teaching supervisor," he said. "I got a raise.") The family's apartment consisted of a living room, two small bedrooms, and a kitchen. His parents were cooking, and the air smelled of ginger. Michael and his father shared a bunk bed in one room, and his mother and his older sister occupied the other. Michael's room was cluttered

with English-study books, an overfilled desk, a laptop. English felt tangible, like a third—and messy—roommate.

He rooted around in a box to show me the homemade vocabulary cards that he carries, just as Li once did. He pulled out a card marked "Occupations: Astronomer, Baker, Barber, Barkeeper, Biologist, Blue-Collar Worker, Boss/Superior, Botanist..." He wanted to play some recordings that he'd been making for his students, as models of pronunciation. He clicked on a recording called "What Is English?," which he'd cribbed from the Li Yang Crazy English Web site. He had layered the sounds of waves and seagulls into the background and recorded it with a girl named Isabell, trading sentences as they went: "English is a piece of cake. *I can totally conquer English.* I will use English. *I will learn English.* I will live in English. *I am no longer a slave to English.* I am its master. *I believe English will become my faithful servant and lifelong friend...*"

It went on for another minute, and, while Michael listened intently, my eyes settled on a small handwritten Chinese sign, taped to the wall, at the foot of his bed: "The past does not equal the future. Believe in yourself. Create miracles." ♦

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