

One Day With a Second Grader in Beijing



by Jing Gao

This article describes a day in the life of a second grade girl in Beijing, China. There are more than 1.3 billion people in China today. This story does not represent the experience of all Chinese children any more than one of your student's journal entries would represent the experience of all American children. Still, the story, which describes a day in the life of a young person in China today, is typical in many ways.

7:00AM “Ding, ding, ding,” the familiar sound of my alarm clock awakens me. The April morning light leaking from the big windows and light colored curtains into my bedroom makes it a little uncomfortable for me to open my eyes. I have a look at my bear alarm clock on the nightstand, and next to the clock, my dad and mom’s smile in the photo seems to remind me, “It’s time to get up.”

My name is Song Jiali, and I am eight years old. My dad, mom, and I live in the north of Beijing. Our home is on the 12th floor of a 15-floor apartment building, so we can see far-away places from our windows.

My dad and mom have decorated my bedroom so it is very pretty with light orange walls, a nightstand, wardrobe, and desk, and a light colored rug on the wooden floor. I have arranged my Barbie dolls, my teddy bears, and some souvenirs given to me by my grandpa, grandma, uncles, and aunts all around my room.

Students wear uniforms to school on Mondays because that is when we have a flag ceremony. Sometimes we wear our uniform on days when we have special activities or events, such as sports meetings. So although I look over the different colors and styles of my pretty clothes in the wardrobe, today I

will wear my school uniform: the blue clothes with white trim, a red scarf, and yellow hat. Our uniforms were designed by our school and made by the clothes factory of the Beijing Educational Administration. The yellow hat helps protect younger students. Car drivers know to slow down when they see a yellow hat.

I get my schoolbag and instrument bag with its clarinet for my music class this morning. My mom, dressed in jeans and her casual clothes, is arranging sheets of paper. My mom works as an editor in the office of the Chemical Engineering Newspaper. She has flexible working hours, so sometimes she takes some papers home to work on.

My dad, who wears formal business suits to work, is watching the morning news on TV in the living room. He owns a small company that services computer networks.



Opposite page:
Third grade
students in
Beijing racing in
a physical
education class.

At left: A teacher
guides second
grade students in
drawing pictures
in an art class in
Beijing.

My mom and dad often work in our home office at night. Their bedroom, opposite mine, is much bigger, equal to my bedroom plus the home office. We have two bathrooms, one beside my bedroom and the other is part of my dad and mom's bedroom.

My piano is located in the corner of the living room. One side of the living room opens on to the kitchen and dining room. Right now, the living room is splashed by the morning sunlight shining through big windows.

7:20AM Usually my dad drives my mom and me in his car, a new crimson Passat, to my mom's office before he goes to his office. The usual 20-minute drive to school takes 30 to 40 minutes on Monday because more vehicles are on the road on Monday. It is hard to drive on the third, fourth, even fifth ring roads, which circle the center of Beijing city

(and which other roads feed into).

My mom says that most people in Beijing still don't have cars. Most elementary school kids are taken to school on bikes or buses by their parents or grandparents. Only a few of my friends use the subway, since it is very crowded and their families think the crowds makes it unsafe for younger students. Still, there are so many families that have cars that the gates of the school will be jammed just before and after school.

7:50AM Many restaurants in Beijing sell breakfast, mainly steamed buns filled with vegetables and meat, deep-fried twisted dough sticks, milk, and rice porridge. Usually, my mom and I eat a bowl of rice porridge and eggs for breakfast in a restaurant, but on Mondays we are in a rush, so we take food with us. This morning we have delicious stuffed buns.

My mom's office is very close to my

school so it takes only two minutes for me to walk across the street. My school is one of the top elementary schools in the Western District in Beijing. I heard from my mom that special fees have to be paid by students who wish to transfer to this school from outside this district. There are three buildings, two classroom buildings and one with teachers' offices. The large playground is between the two student buildings, which have four floors. On the school grounds, there is a small-sized soccer field and ten basketball courts. My school has the first to sixth grade, with three to four classrooms devoted to each grade. From the first to third grade, there are about 25 to 30 students in each classroom, and from the fourth to sixth grade, there are about 30 to 35 students in each classroom.

8:10AM My schoolmates and I are on the soccer field in time for the flag rais-

ing ceremony. A team of older students marches to the mast and attaches the national flag to the cables. As they raise the flag, we begin to sing the national anthem, *March of the Volunteer*.

*Arise, ye who refuse to be slaves!
With our flesh and blood, let us
build our new Great Wall!
The Chinese nation faces its
greatest danger.
From each one the urgent call for
action comes forth.*

*Arise! Arise! Arise!
Millions with but one heart.
Braving the enemy's fire.
March on!
Braving the enemy's fire.
March on! March on! March on!
On!*

We like to sing the national anthem, and see our flag blowing in the wind.

8:30AM The class bell rings. My classmates and I hurry to be in the classroom on time. A big blackboard is in the front of our classroom, below which there is a table with a place for teachers to use a computer. There are pull-down screens above the blackboard for films and the computer, and a television is in the corner. The rules and responsibilities for moral and academic education are posted on the side of the wall. There are big windows on the other side of the wall. On the back wall in our classroom the teacher has placed some creative and artistic posters made by my classmates.

Today's first class is Chinese language.

When the teacher of Chinese language, Teacher Wang, walks into classroom, we stand up, say aloud "Good morning, teacher," and sit back in our seats. At the beginning of the class, she asks us to remember some Chinese characters taught last week. The teacher speaks each word, and we write each character from memory, such as 春 (spring), 风 (wind), and 雪 (snow).

Then the teacher introduces several new words and text. Sometimes I feel

that everyday my Chinese class is the same, the teacher at the table in front writing several Chinese characters on the blackboard, teaching students how to read them and what their meanings are, and then writing several examples of sentences by using these new words. In the remaining time, we read aloud and write these words. Sometimes I do not understand their meanings even though I can write them and speak them. The teacher calls on several students to stand up and read aloud or make sentences with the new words. She doesn't call on me today, but I know she will before the week is over. Finally, the teacher writes the homework on the board. We have to look at sentences in the book and write the correct words or phrases and then explain the meaning.

9:15AM During the 10-minute break between classes, my good friends and I run out of the classroom and talk about fun things we did during the weekend. Even though there are only two days where we don't see each other, we feel like we have been separated for a long time. Xiaolan tells us about her swimming class over the weekend. I know that most of my classmates attend weekend classes such as drawing, speaking English, math "Olympics," musical instrument (e.g. piano, clarinet, accordion, and violin), or dancing. However, it is rare for students to participate in sports on the weekend. I'm learning to play the piano, which is hard for me. Several boys are talking excitedly about playing computer games (they like car racing or fighting games). Some of my classmates go online over the weekend and use MSN or QQ for chatting with other people of the same age.

9:25AM My second class is English. Today there is a quiz for all of the English words taught in the last lesson. In this 5-minute quiz, Teacher Liu says, "eye," "nose," "mouth," and "ear," and we write them down from memory, using English letters, which we feel is easy. However, for the mid-term and final exams twice per year, we always feel very anxious as

we really want to achieve good grades. My mom always says that if I study well, I will be awarded as an excellent student, which is helpful for my future. On the contrary, if my examination grades are not good, my parents will not buy me the things I want, and in the future if I fail my tests, I cannot go to the top schools. Sometimes, I feel what my mom says is reasonable since my classmates with poor test performances are looked down upon by others, and some classmates won't play with them. And teachers sometimes arrange students' seats according to the rank of our test scores. But more important is achieving high grades so that I can go to a top middle school.

After we finish the English quiz, Teacher Liu begins today's lesson. She has us listen to an English recording that corresponds with the dialogue in our text. Teacher Liu thinks that this will enhance our listening ability and improve our English level. However, my mom, who majored in English, does not think so. She tells me that students learning English should read more and speak more and then apply those skills in everyday life. In school we don't speak English very often, so I don't yet converse in English very well.

10:10AM It's time for exercise class. During this break, the whole school goes to the soccer field. Many of us do exercises only because we have to. The teachers tell us that students need to build up a collective spirit to achieve a good place in competition so we will win honor for the community. The first and second grades are not counted in the competition now. But in September when we go up to the third grade, we will participate in the overall assessment of exercises across the school. Each class is scored each day, and then the school will announce the results for that week. The classroom with the highest score is awarded a flowing red flag. Young Pioneers, an organization run by the Communist Youth League of China, also uses these scores to award opportunities and fun activities to certain classes.

RESOURCES

People's Daily Online, english.people-daily.com.cn/. This is the largest newspaper in China. It is published by the Chinese government. Search on the word "education" for relevant news.

Erik Eckholm, "After 50 Years, China Youth Remain Mao's Pioneers," *New York Times* (September 26, 1999), enter the title at query.nytimes.com.

China Education and Research Network, www.edu.cn/english_1369/index.shtml. This website is run by the Chinese Ministry of Education.

China.Org.Cn, www.china.org.cn/english/index.htm. "China's official gateway to news and information." Search on the word "education" for relevant information.

China's National Anthem, www.geo-cities.com/ccparty2002/patriot.html. One can hear the song as well as read about it at this site.



10:30AM The third class is math. Teacher Zhang tells us about geometry and then divides our class into several groups for cooperative work. Groups research different math problems and ways to solve them. Our group works with triangles.

For me, math is a little bit hard. Even though I can understand what teacher explains in class and do the in-class exercises, my homework often has mistakes, and sometimes I have to ask my mom to help me. So I often complain about it to my mom. She thinks that doing well in math is necessary if I want to go to a top middle school, high school, and university.

11:25AM The last class of the morning is music. I like music class and have some musical knowledge from playing piano. And Teacher Wu likes me. In class today we sing children's songs and take turns playing notes on the clarinet, accordion, and piano. I enjoy traditional and modern music and like to play musical games. Music makes me feel very happy.

12:10PM My mom walks over to pick me up and take me to the dining hall in her office for lunch. Sometimes we eat in a restaurant in the neighborhood. We prefer to go to Sichuan Food Restaurant, which makes popular spicy food from Sichuan province in the southwest of China. I like their fried dishes and rice. Sometimes we go to the Malan Noodle Restaurant which features food from Lanzhou, in the Gansu province in northwest China. They have delicious noodles with beef in soup and salads.

Some students eat lunch in restaurants, but many go home for lunch since they live close to school. I want to go to lunch with friends, but my mom does not allow it. She knows that some kids do not buy a good lunch. Instead they buy snacks and spend most of their lunchtime playing games.

There is a regulation that students should go to school in the district where they live. But some parents pay extra fees so their children can attend a desirable school. I have been to what are called

"labor" elementary schools, which were established for the children of laborers coming from villages and rural areas of the nation. In my eyes, those schools are dirty, with simple buildings. The kids there don't have the nice clothes and good food that I have. However, my mom says that those kids are sensible, study hard, and do not waste money. My mom tells me that kids from well-off families spend money like flowing water, and their lunch money for one day could feed a poor family of three for several days.

Sometimes, after lunch, my mom and I go to the nearby malls for shopping. Today, however, I stay at my mom's office and work on math. Mom does not allow me to go back to school early. She thinks that I should wait until 2:00 pm when the afternoon classes start. If I went there earlier, she thinks I would play with the other kids instead of doing schoolwork.

2:00PM The first class in the afternoon is my favorite: social studies. Teacher Li often tells us stories about local and national history and geography. Sometimes we work on handicraft projects so we can learn how people long ago created art. I made a Chinese paper-cut of a kitten and took it home. My dad loved it so much.

Today teacher Li tells us the origin of the Zhang Zizhong Road in Beijing. General Zhang Zizhong led troops fighting the Japanese on Chinese soil during World War II. I like these stories. Sometimes we can tell stories, too. Last week I told the story about Da Yu managing the flood in 2000 B.C. At that time, Emperor Shun assigned Da Yu to manage the annual floods that often washed away roads and farmers' fields. Da Yu was on the job for 13 years, not pausing to go home even when he passed his house. Finally he achieved success in managing the floods. Then he went home.

2:55PM The last class is labor. We are divided into several groups to clean the classroom, playground, and other places.



Second grade girls in Beijing kicking a shuttlecock for an exam in a physical education class. A teacher records the score.

Some classmates and I are responsible for sweeping the floor of our classroom, cleaning the windows, and washing the blackboard. I don't do such cleaning at home, as my dad cleans the floors and windows.

The Labor Teacher Gu says that this class is needed to teach us about labor because so many children are not expected to do anything at home. He says we are like little emperors, and we need to value collective cooperation through each member's cooperation within the group. My classmates and I are all only children, without brothers and sisters, because China has a one-child policy of population control.

My mom feels that it is tough for me to do cleaning, but my dad is in favor of it because more chores in class provide more physical exercise. I think also that he'd like some help cleaning the floors and windows.

3:40PM The school day is over! Mom meets me at the school gate, and I stay in her office until she is off duty at 5:00

pm. Sometimes I do my homework in my mom's office. It usually takes 30 to 40 minutes to finish. Then, Dad picks up my mom and me in the car and takes us back home.

My mom always thinks that I ought to have more homework. Students in some top elementary schools have two to three hours of homework, and some kids even attend after-school classes. If I did not practice piano at 6:30PM each day, my mom would definitely register me for the after-school tutoring classes.

6:00PM Back at home, I can play outside for a little bit. Today I play hide-and-seek on the playground with some other friends in the neighborhood. I stay close by home to play except when my dad and mom take me to the zoo or a park.

Then my dad prepares dinner while my mom helps me practice piano. At first I did not want to learn to play piano. However, my mom says that since other kids go to the classes and learn specialties, I should go too. My mom says that learning to play piano will give me some

advantages. If I do well at the music recital, my score on the examination for entering a middle school will be higher.

7:30PM The fish dinner made by my dad is ready, and we sit down to eat in the dining room. After dinner, my dad and mom allow me to watch television for half an hour. Sometimes, I watch my favorite cartoons such as *Na Zha Legend*, *San Mao's Wandering Story*, and *Pig Bajie Falling from the Heaven*, or children's programs such as *Big Gale*. Sometimes, I watch a program with my dad and mom, such as World News, Current Affairs Report, or a TV series.

8:30PM Each night at this time, I go to bed with my teddy bear. Tonight I feel so tired I know I will fall asleep soon. Sometimes I have the same idea as I have heard adults say, "One tired day is finally over." 🌙

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