

By **DOUGLASS CROUSE**
STAFF WRITER

TEANECK – One of the joys Sholeen Lou-Hsiao anticipated as a new mother was passing on her native Mandarin Chinese to her son.

So around the time her boy Winston turned 2, she started looking for teaching tools that would suit his inquisitive, impatient mind. Few, however, passed muster.

Though the linguaphile in her was disappointed, her entrepreneurial side sensed opportunity. Her solution – a board game that teaches Chinese characters through memorization and matching – quickly won her son over and turned Lou-Hsiao into a business owner. The 41-year-old runs Kingka LLC out of the Teaneck home she shares with her husband and their son, now almost 4. Lou-Hsiao began selling the \$30 game on her Web site

Sound advice

Sholeen Lou-Hsiao offers these tips to entrepreneurs developing their own new product:

■ “Do your market research and as much testing as possible.” Make sure you’re selling something new and useful.

■ Don’t invest in making a large number of products before you confirm that demand exists.

■ Get feedback from experts. Lou-Hsiao met with small-business counselors at the Service

Corps of Retired Executives, who gave her product and plan high marks. “That reinforced my belief that this could work.”

■ Surround yourself with trustworthy people.

■ Patent products. Lou-Hsiao did, believing in the uniqueness of her game.

in November and is already working on a follow-up version for older kids.

“To the little ones, they’re just playing,” she said, laying out the game pieces in her living room Tuesday morning. “They don’t realize that they’re learning.”

The product’s arrival coincides with a growth in Chinese language instruction in the nation’s schools. This year the College Board is offering its first Ad-

vanced Placement test in Chinese, a complex tongue in which a change in intonation can alter words’ meanings. In 2000, there were about 5,000 students studying Mandarin Chinese in U.S. public schools, according to the American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Languages. That number is now between 30,000 and 50,000.

Lou-Hsiao, who also tutors students, is heading to Princeton today to meet with representatives from Berlitz in the hope that the venerable language-training company will use her game in its schools.

Kingka – from the Chinese words for king and cards – isn’t just for kids, however. Lou-Hsiao designed the game so that parents who don’t speak Chinese – for example, couples who have adopted children from China – can learn along the way.

“It’s meant to be fun for them, too,”

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Kingka: Teaneck woman creates Chinese language game

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she said.

Born and raised in Taiwan, Lou-Hsiao came to the United States after studying French and other languages in college. She initially translated Chinese opera in Manhattan, then got a master’s degree in business administration after feeling the tug of entrepreneurialism.

Her first project, a cosmetic product she repackaged and marketed in 1996, fell victim to the ballooning costs of advertising. With Kingka, Lou-Hsiao said she is on more solid footing, having refinanced her home and taken a loan from a cousin.

“When she saw the game, she said, ‘That’s really great! How can I help?’” Lou-Hsiao recalled.

“I said, ‘Well, if you really want to ...’”

Each game box includes two sets of 54 sturdy cards, six boards with characters on one side and corresponding images on the other and a CD with pronunciation tips.

Children start by matching characters on the cards to those on the boards, and can progress to a bingo-style game that tests their mastery of meaning.

Its creation was a family effort: Lou-Hsiao’s mother, a long-time teacher herself, offered advice on designing the boards; her in-laws suggested brighter colors for the packaging; her husband supplied the name; and their son and other youngsters tested the product.

A Chinese language school in

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Parsippany recently bought some of the games. And next month, when Lou-Hsiao starts teaching Mandarin to preschoolers at the Montessori Early Learning Center’s Englewood school, she’ll use Kingka to build her students’ enthusiasm.

Debby Robinson, the center’s executive director, welcomes that approach.

“When I heard about [the game], I said, ‘Wow, this is really innovative,’” she said.

“Our philosophy at Montessori is going from the concrete to the abstract, and a lot of what she mentioned to me fits that approach. With things that children can touch and hold and feel, they grasp the concepts much more quickly.”

School districts around the country – including 19 in New Jersey – have added Chinese courses to their curriculum.

It has been good timing for Kingka.

“When I started two years ago, I didn’t know Chinese would be such a phenomenon by now,” Lou-Hsiao said.

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TYSON TRISH/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Kingka teaches Chinese characters through memorization and matching. It can also be played bingo-style to test mastery of meaning.