

Chinese Teachers

By Charlotte Tallman Photography by Bill Faulkner

It is sometimes hard to experience a sense of passion that is completely moving, but I experienced that type of passion when I met three teachers from China at Tombaugh Elementary School for the *Las Cruces* magazine photo shoot and interview. I, having never interviewed someone from China, was anxious about the meeting. Would I ask the right questions? Would we understand each other? Was this really the best feature cover story for our magazine? From the moment I shook the hands of Jinyun Wang, Zheng Xing and Junna Liu, I realized my worries were all unnecessary. Questions didn't matter because we communicated through casual conversation, we understood each other most of the time (and when we didn't, we laughed about it) and this, most definitely, was the best feature cover story for our magazine.



in Las Cruces

The teachers arrived in Las Cruces as part of a teacher exchange program through the Confucius Institute at New Mexico State University (NMSU). The Chinese Language Council International in Beijing, China, which administers the Confucius Institutes throughout the world, provides trained teachers of Chinese as a second language and teaching materials to all the Confucius Institutes. Lucky for Las Cruces, Jinyun, Zheng and Junna, along with five other Chinese teachers, were assigned to our city.

The Confucius Institute at NMSU was inaugurated in August of 2007 and is currently run by Professor of History and Co-Director Dr. Ken Hammond, College Assistant Professor of History and Co-Director Elvira Hammond and China-side Co-Director and Professor Zhuoliang Mao. Stephen Vann, office manager, helps ensure everything in the Institute runs smoothly. The Confucius Institute is a joint partnership between NMSU and the Shijiazhuang College of Language and Cultural Exchange in Hebei, China – a partnership that developed in 2001 as a way to initiate Chinese language studies at NMSU and facilitate NMSU students studying in China.

“The mission of the Confucius Institute at NMSU is to provide opportunities for the southern New Mexico community to learn about Chinese language and culture through a variety of activities,” Elvira says. “Our

farmers and business-people are trading more with China, our students are learning more about Chinese history and culture at their schools and our citizens are more and more curious about this rising power across the Pacific.”

In addition to facilitating educational exchange between China and Las Cruces, the Confucius Institute offers a Speakers Series of world renowned experts on various aspects of Chinese history and culture and has held two major conferences: China-Mexico-U.S. Relations in 2008 and China in Africa in 2010. The office of the Confucius Institute maintains a resource room of materials on Chinese language and culture in both Chinese and English.

Teachers in the program first arrived in spring of 2008 to teach in Hatch Valley High School and Alma d’arte Charter School for the Arts. Since then, the Confucius Institute has discontinued teaching in Hatch due to the cost of commuting and budget restraints, but teachers remain at Alma d’arte. In fall of 2008, the elementary program began at Tombaugh Elementary.

“Principal Cindy Baker has an extraordinary team of teachers and staff who are dedicated to preparing their students for success in the 21st century,” Elvira says.

One teacher taught grades 1-3 for two 25-minute sessions each week and then kindergarten was added in the

spring of that academic year. That same year, Tombaugh applied for, and was awarded, a Teachers of Critical Languages Program Grant through the U.S. Department of State, which sent a teacher from China to Tombaugh in Fall of 2009. Kindergarten through fifth grade instruction also started at Hillrise and Desert Hills Elementary Schools in 2009. Next year University Hills Elementary School will begin K-5 Chinese language instruction.

“In a few years Las Cruces Public Schools (LCPS) will have hundreds of students completing elementary school with a foundation in Chinese language and culture, and looking for a middle school that offers Chinese language studies,” Elvira says. “That is something we are working with LCPS on establishing.”

The benefits of bringing Chinese teachers to Las Cruces are immediate. There is the benefit of second-language learning, enhancing mental flexibility and developing both literacy and numeracy, and the benefit of having a working knowledge of the Chinese language for students preparing to enter college and, later, into the job market that increasingly depends on trade with China.

According to the Confucius Institute, there are currently over 350 million Chinese schoolchildren studying English, however there are only 50,000 in the U.S. who have studied Chinese. Following the U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Department

of Defense identifying Mandarin Chinese and Arabic as “critical languages”, there has been strong growth in Chinese and Arabic programs in kindergarten through 5th grade.

“Our students understand their own culture better when they can compare and contrast with other cultures. Since Las Cruces itself is a multi-cultural community, our students already are prepared to learn that there are many perspectives in this world and that through valuing these different perspectives we are more creative, flexible and strong,” Elvira says. “It’s very important to us that we are not perceived as imposing one culture upon another. We want to work with bilingual and second language educators as an addition to programs already in place – not to replace them.”

Elvira also points out if a student is proficient in English, Spanish and Chinese they can communicate with 90 percent of the world.

Currently there are Chinese language programs in every state in the country, and Elvira does not want children in southern New Mexico to be left out.

“We are far too interdependent now to turn our backs on China. China is a rising force in the world – we must understand it in order to deal with it,” she says. “In these troubled economic times it really makes sense to develop these relationships.”

Jinyun Wang

Jinyun (pronounced gin-un) Wang, 37, is a quiet woman, but it does not take long to see she is full of wisdom. Around Chinese teachers Zheng and Junna, she is clearly revered, as is the Chinese custom to respect elders (although Jinyun does not physically appear to be an elder), so she speaks first, smiling and then carefully selecting her words. She has a kindness about her that comforts, and she seems to put everyone at ease during the interview, both Chinese and Americans alike.



Jinyun arrived to Las Cruces from Huai'an, Jiangsu Province, China in August 2009 and began teaching at Desert Hills Elementary School. She will return home May 2011, ready to take the American culture back to her students in China.

"We are able to introduce the students here to our language and culture, but at the same time, we learn a lot too," Jinyun says. "When I return to China I will be able to share my experiences with my students."

Intertwining the Chinese and American culture is so significant to Jinyun, she is in Las Cruces with her 10-year-old daughter, Elisa (her husband remains in China, but comes to visit when he can). Elisa attends Desert Hills Elementary, but also keeps up with her Chinese studies.

"Language was difficult for her, but she is very happy here because of the creative work she can do," Jinyun says. "Most important is that she has a lot of experiences that are treasures to her."

To Jinyun, when someone experiences different things, they have a better understanding of the world. That experience also allows for an indescribable learning experience that can only be achieved when immersed in a culture.

"The students here are curious and they want to know about Chinese students. I tell them Chinese students go to school more, but American students experience more," Jinyun says. "If teachers from China and America can learn from each other, education could be more balanced in both places."

Jinyun has learned something from both students and teachers that she will take back with her – a friendliness and concern that motivates learning and friendship.

"The teachers here care about their students, and the students care about the teachers," she says. "I have noticed people here are very friendly, and when they ask about China, I feel pleased I can tell them about my culture and experiences."

Zheng Xing

Zheng (pronounced shing) Xing, 32, is spunky and sophisticated. Her personality seems like a perfect fit at Alma de'arte where she teaches Chinese to grades 9-12, and her knowledge about global development is obvious as she talks about partnerships between China and America, and their need for each other more and more.

Zheng arrived in July 2009 for a two-year teaching period from Shijia Zhuang, Hebei Province, China. Out of the three teachers featured, she is the only high school teacher.

"High school is very different in China and America. When I show the students what a Chinese class is like, they are able to see how strict the schools are in China," Zheng says. "It is important to show them the Chinese way, especially the older students. We want to give them an experience of the culture and education."

The student reaction is welcoming and appreciated, and to Zheng, the results are defined.

"Some of the greatest moments as a teacher in America are when my students tell me they want to go to China, or when I see a student somewhere and they greet me in Chinese," she says. Zheng, whose husband remains in China, chose to be a teacher in America for specific reasons, both equally important to her – she wants to impact the hearts and

minds of Chinese and American students with her experiences.

"We bring the Chinese language and culture here and then we take back the American culture and language to our students. It opens their minds and their hearts to understand the whole world," Zheng says. "Nowadays, the world connects together. It is a global future. The kids, no matter where they are or who they are, need to open their eyes and see more of the outside world and different cultures."

Learning about other areas is what makes traveling so enjoyable for Zheng, whether she is working in a megacity like Shanghai or in a small town like Las Cruces.

"I like traveling because it gives me a lot of experience in different cultures. I've been to many places in China and parts of America. If my students can't go out to explore the world, I would like to be their eyes to see and be their hearts to feel," she says.

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Junna Liu

Junna (pronounced June) Liu, 30, is a breath of fresh air. The young, single Junna is shy yet confident; silent yet knowledgeable. She also has a style that seems to bring all the colorful fashions of China's fashion-forward cities to the streets of Las Cruces.

Junna arrived in Las Cruces from her hometown of Qiqihar, Heilongjiang Province, China to teach at Hillrise Elementary School in August of 2009.

Her awe of American children is refreshing, and she embraces their friendliness.



"I love the students. Their big eyes are so pretty and they are so friendly, coming up and hugging me around my waist all the time," Junna says. "The students are really so lovely and I am proud that I can spend time with them."

Junna is also proud to teach others about her own culture, something she feels is needed for a stronger exchange between the U.S. and China.

"The world is developing in a way that we need to know each other and learn from each other," she says. "The world is now a global village and we should know the world. We should learn from each other, especially China and the U.S. because we are two big countries."

To better teach about her culture, students stand and say good morning when Junna enters the room, and they stay standing until Junna tells them it is okay to sit down (this practice is done in all the classrooms

of visiting Chinese teachers). The students also stand when the teachers leave the room. While the presentation is a formalized practice that happens in all Chinese schools, it is something American teachers are embracing.

"It is a little challenging because the kids are so noisy," Junna says, laughing. In China, students must remain completely silent until they are asked to speak. "At the same time, it is easy to relax here."

When Junna arrived, many of her students didn't even know about China, so Junna offered her experiences of China. As a teacher in America, Junna learned what it is like to be creative.

"The rooms here are very colorful, and the students have a lot of opportunities to be creative," she says. "American students like to do things themselves, and then they come and show me to see if it is correct. I learn so much from them." ■

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For more information on the Confucius Institute visit www.confuciusinstitute.net or <http://international.nmsu.edu/confucius>.