

The Ambassador of Chinese Language and Culture

A Report on the Two Year Anniversary of CISDSU

Among the beautiful Spanish style yellow-stucco haciendas, and red tiled-roof buildings, there is a grand six-story structure at the northwest corner on San Diego State University campus. The Confucius Institute is located on the first floor of this building. The small size of the three offices it occupies and the few staff members it has on its roster list may not attract much attention from people passing by; however, the glory of Chinese culture is spread out radiantly from this tiny space to the greater San Diego area. The charm of Chinese language has captivated a great amount of fans among American students. Like a rainbow, the beauty of Chinese culture serves as the bridge connecting people on both sides of the Pacific Ocean. Not just American people, but also visitors from China have expressed their amazement at how remarkable the Confucius Institute at SDSU has accomplished in the short 2 years since it was founded.



Arising at the Historic Moment

As China is experiencing a rapid growth in economy and frequently appearing at the global stage, the demand to learn Chinese language is growing fast around the world. Since 2004, the Chinese government founded Hanban, Confucius Institutes Headquarters, and began to establish Confucius Institutes in foreign countries.

The mission of CI is to expand cultural exchange activities between China and other countries, promote Mandarin as a second language, and to deepen the friendship between Chinese people and citizens around the world.

Founded in 1897, San Diego State University is the biggest and oldest university in San Diego county. SDSU also is the fifth largest university in California. With its proximity to the Mexican border and a high Chinese population, San Diego is an ideal site to host a Confucius Institute.

As the first university funded by overseas immigrant in Chinese education history, Xiamen University is founded by a prominent Chinese immigrant, Mr. Jia-Geng Chen. It's also the only university located in the special economic zone in Xiamen that received government grants, such as '211 Project' or '985 Project'. Having partnered with seven other international universities by 2009, Xiamen University has compiled a wealth of experience which enables it to expand further. With the joint effort from both universities, and the support of Hanban (Confucius Institute Headquarters), Confucius Institute at San Diego State University (CI/SDSU) was unveiled on Mar. 26th, 2009.

To pledge its commitment and support, San Diego State University appointed Dr. Lilly Cheng as Managing Director of CI/SDSU. Dr. Cheng is well recognized for her affluent management experience and entrepreneurial expertise. SDSU further provided office space, equipment, and funding for CI's daily operation. From Xiamen University, Prof. Yuxiu Chen was assigned as the first Co-Director through which several other teachers came to teach Mandarin at schools under partnership with CI. With her personal wealth of network contact, and her active engagement with the Chinese Consulate in Los Angeles, Dr. Cheng took the initiative to solidify CI/SDSU's mission and goals.



Hard Work and Initiative Ideas Lead the Growth

After founding 282 CIs in 88 countries since 2005, by 2009 it really does not seem to be such an event to open another one. The simply stated mission of CI, "promoting Chinese language and culture" does not seem too complicated either. Yet CI/SDSU has its own profound definition and brought this statement to a new platform.

With more than 5,000 years of history, Mandarin is considered one of the most complicated languages in the world. It's always challenging to teach Chinese to foreigners

who are used to a completely different linguistic and culture system. The biggest challenge people face at the beginning is how to generate American people's interest in Chinese culture.

All CIs are affiliated with universities, and the common assumption is that the CI operation should be associated mainly with college students. However, with her extensive expertise on speech pathology and linguistic analysis, Dr. Cheng firmly believes that the sooner a student begins to learn a new language, the higher proficiency he/she may achieve. CI's motto of 'lay deep the foundation, catch young the learners' hence was born. Little did anyone realized how much more difficult the work became because of it.

"The first step is always the most difficult". The first step of CI's work was to convince the educators in K-12 schools the importance of learning Mandarin. Common American public have little knowledge of the profound significance of Chinese language and culture. Dr. Cheng paid personal visits to many local schools, demonstrated the positive impact of starting Mandarin programs and stated all the possible solutions for the initial obstacles of establishing a Mandarin program. Despite of her previous retirement status and arriving in San Diego not too long ago, Prof. Chen, CI Co-Director, learned to reach each school by public transportation; even when it might take three or four transfers and further walking by foot to reach her final destination, Prof. Chen never complained or missed any meeting. Their devotion and dedication finally paid off. Within one year, seven schools were approved as Confucius Classrooms by Hanban.

Every CI staff member still remembers the uphill struggle they face at the beginning. They participated at any opportunity to promote Chinese culture, or Mandarin day and night, weekday or weekend. In addition to their own staff, they also rely heavily on volunteers. It wasn't long before all the principals, teachers and other faculty of these schools became close friends with CI staff as they enjoyed the fruits of their labor by witnessing the Mandarin class take off at their schools.

With years of losing students in attendance, Barnard Mandarin Chinese Magnet School was once on the brink of being closed down. With the introduction of a magnet Mandarin program, and getting Hanban's approval as the first Confucius Classroom in San Diego, Barnard had since expanded with new Mandarin immersion program, the enrollment tripled in less than 3 years. Now it is one of the "California Distinguished Schools". Furthermore, a Mandarin class for parents was requested and opened as parents were eager to learn Chinese language and culture along with their children.

Another Confucius Classroom is Riverview Elementary and International Academy.

Principal Kyriakidis worked diligently to secure grants from federal government and school district for the expansion of their Mandarin program in order to provide Mandarin course to all students. A Mandarin Immersion Program was introduced in the fall of 2010.

With the expansion of Confucius Classrooms in San Diego and the evident effects of Mandarin programs, the demand for CI work is completely reversed. Principals and educators actively approach CI for advice and support to establish Mandarin programs at their schools. Applications for Confucius Classroom from 15 schools were submitted to Hanban by CI at the later part of 2010. This transition implies all the endeavors of the CI team.



Highlighting the Features with Rapid Development

Engaging in various events and activities on campus is also a major part of CI's routine work. Supporting the existing Chinese courses at SDSU became CI's top priority. CI co-founded Chinese Studies Association; since then, CI continued to sponsor periodical lectures on Chinese culture, and different sessions of Chinese language competitions. Prof. Chen and Wendy Huang from Xiamen University taught 'Chinese 201', 'Chinese News Journal' and 'Business Chinese' for students on both SDSU main campus and Imperial Valley Campus.

In addition, CI also offered Mandarin classes in local communities. Even though each class might be a few hours only, it would take hours of preparation. First, CI staff needed to scout out the classrooms from neighboring schools or community centers taking hours of communications back and forth to confirm; then they would invest hours of soliciting volunteer teachers. The CI staff then would assist these teachers in selecting teaching materials. In addition, they might need to arrange transportation arrangements and classroom set up for the teachers. They would always arrive earlier and leave last; often utilizing their own cars and paying for their own meals.

To satisfy the increasing interest in Chinese culture from the students after their learning of Mandarin, CI would facilitate study abroad programs to China for students to gain hands on experience. While this was a wonderful opportunity for the students, the logistics of all such arrangements meant pressure for the organizers. From announcing the event about 6 months in advance, they preceded making alternate arrangements for the different requests from the applicants. Even during the period of their stay in China, CI staff would prepare themselves to deal with the uncertainties. Despite of this intensive investment of labor, the strong conviction of dedication sustained every CI staff member to continuously face every challenge for the success of the program. The students might have stayed in China for three weeks only, but the impact to them was life-long. They wrote about visiting the world's famous tourist attractions and attending variety of cultural events in China. They called their journey to China "a miracle" and "a turning point in life". Some of them even delved into the research of Chinese history and some of them decided to work in China after graduation because of this trip. This event didn't only change the life of these participants, but also positively impacted their surrounding environment. Their parents, relatives and friends all talked about China with excitement whenever they met and showed new admiration towards Chinese culture.

In May 2010, commissioned by the Chinese Consulate in Los Angeles, CI/SDSU hosted "the 9th Chinese Bridge-Chinese Proficiency Preliminary Competition for Foreign College Students". This competition was a big challenge for CI as many participants came from various age levels ranging from Elementary school to college students. However, never shying away from challenges, CI took upon this task without any second thought. The phone would be ringing nonstop in the office and a continuous stream of people came to inquire about it. Everyone from full/part time staff, to interns and volunteers put in long hours of work with great enthusiasm; they didn't get any break until all the qualifiers boarded the plane to Beijing for the final competition. The work of hard labor finally paid off, all the contestants selected by CI performed well. Three undergraduate students went to the final competition, and one of them went into the semi-final. Two students from Barnard Elementary, Eddie Kapelczak and Victor Otero were invited to observe the 4th Chinese Bridge-Chinese Proficiency Final Competition for Foreign Secondary Students. Eddie also performed at the 2011 CCTV Spring Festival Gala Evening. He especially gained tremendous attention from the public for being the youngest foreign performer at the show.



Promoting Chinese Culture to Fruitful accomplishment

CI recognized that they couldn't do any development without support from local government. CI also aimed to bring Chinese culture and other familiar messages to local Chinese community. Hence, they were able to rely upon social resources from local organizations in the community and governmental endorsement for many of their work.

The support from the Chinese Consulate in Los Angeles, San Diego County and City government attracted the attention news media. The World Journal, American Chinese Times, San Diego Chinese Weekly News, Duowei News, The Capital Chinese News, San Diego Chinese Press, Chinanews, 5zhou4hai.com and Journal of Xiamen University had covered numerous CI activities. CI often was the center of attention after every popular event.

CI gradually gained attention from many local residents of Chinese descent for guidance and support. CI became the cementing element to introduce Chinese culture to a broader spectrum. During the Spring Festival, CI would organize assortments of Chinese cultural events, such as martial arts and traditional folk music performances. During the Dragon Boat Festival, they organized students from SDSU and volunteers to participate at the dragon boat race. During the Moon Festival, they led students from Barnard Elementary School to perform at the Southern California Moon Festival Gala in Los Angeles.

In October 2009 was the first time that CI attended the San Diego Asian Cultural Festival. People of every Asian country, from Philippine, Thailand, India, South Korea, Cambodia, Lao, Vietnam, Indonesia, Burma to Japan and China showcase their unique culture. The visitors demonstrated great interest in Chinese culture and waited in long lines in front of CI booth to have their names written in Chinese calligraphy by CI staff. Among them there were some children with hearing and speech disability, they felt very excited when CI staff translated their Chinese names with sign language, and took pictures with CI members. In November 2009, CI sponsored the 7th San Diego International Children's Film

Festival, and was invited to the award ceremony.

CI's work and achievements are highly praised by the local society. In July 2010, CI was awarded the "Asian Heritage Award" with over ten thousand votes. They were named the "Ambassador of Chinese culture" and the "Rainbow of friendship between China and America". In December, 2010 at the Fifth Confucius Institute Annual Conference held in Beijing, CI/SDSU was honored as one of the top 30 "Confucius Institute of the Year".



Written by Zhimin Wang, professor at Zhejiang University of Media and Communication, Dean of Hending College of Film & Television. She was a visiting scholar at San Diego State University from 2010 fall to 2011 summer. During her stay, she participated in editing Chinese news report on CI website and other activities of CI.