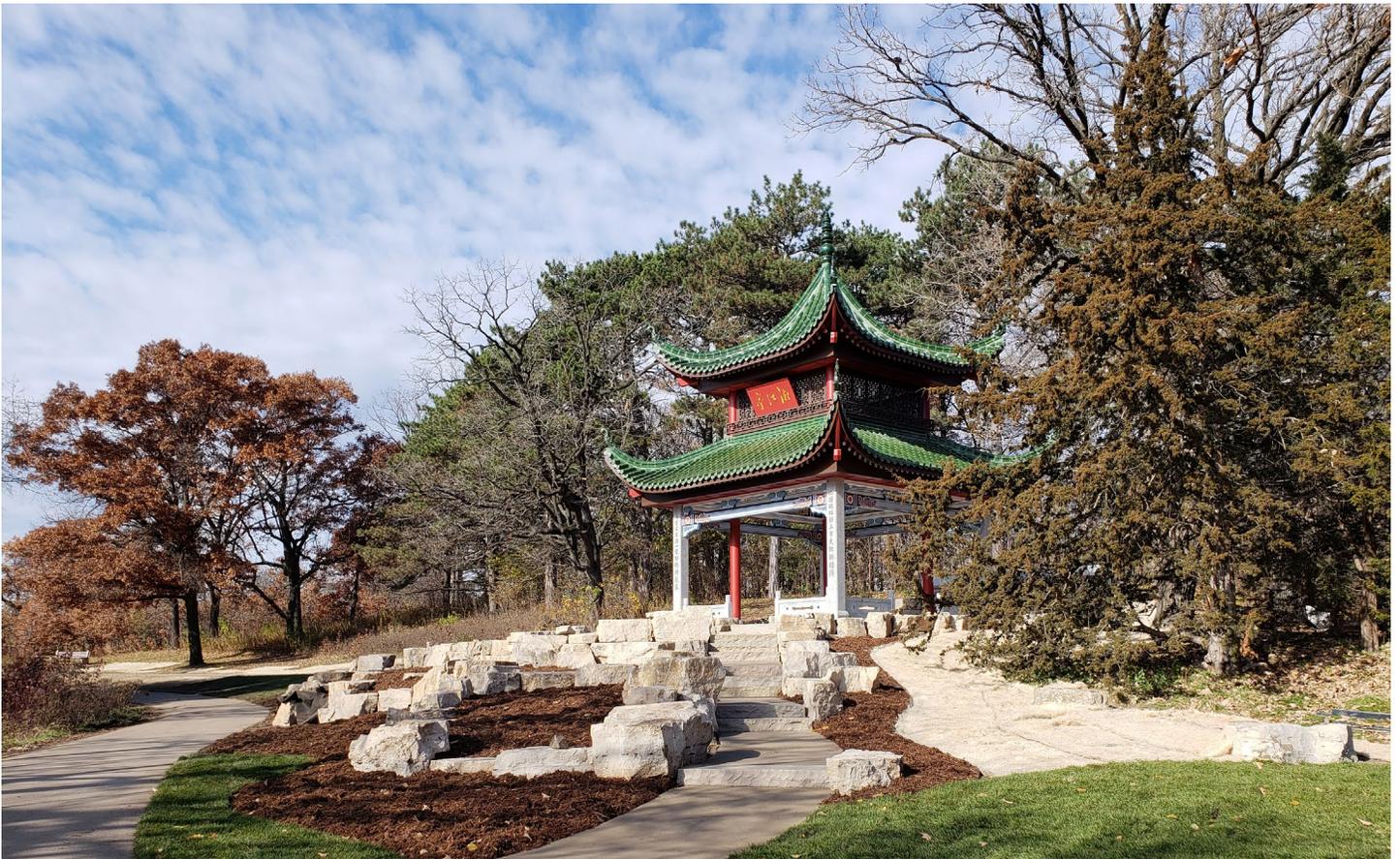




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Building Bridges of Friendship

By Linda Mealey-Lohmann

The Minnesota China Friendship Garden Society, sister organization to the USCPFA-Minnesota chapter, was proud to host an Open House for the public on November 3, 2018, at the St. Paul-Changsha China Friendship Garden of Whispering Willows and Flowing Waters at Phalen Regional Park in St. Paul, Minnesota. This event marked the 30-year anniversary of the sister-city relationship between St. Paul and Changsha, Hunan province. The centerpiece of the China Garden, the Xiang Jiang Pavilion, is a gift from Changsha. This event and incredible gift were the result of decades of work and countless hours by dedicated volunteers whose only goal was to build bridges of friendship between the peoples of Minnesota and China.

How did this sister-city relationship begin? It began 30 years ago with an exchange of letters of interest between mayors that culminated in Mayor George Latimer and Weiming Lu traveling to Changsha for the signing of the sister-city agreement in 1988. This relationship has been nurtured over the years by USCPFA-Minnesota with numerous cultural, educational, and business exchanges. Saint Paul Mayor Chris Coleman visited Changsha in 2008 for a 20-year anniversary signing event and again in 2015.

Where did the dream of a China Friendship Garden come from? The dream surfaced between two longtime USCPFA-Minnesota

board members, Professor C.C. Hsiao and Linda Mealey-Lohmann, in the parking lot after a USCPFA-Minnesota board meeting in 2000. Professor Hsiao mentioned there were five Japanese gardens in Minnesota, but no Chinese gardens. Professor Hsiao and Linda decided then and there to remedy that situation. They created the China Garden Committee of USCPFA-Minnesota, and began researching China gardens in the United States and China. In 2005, they created a nonprofit organization, The Minnesota China Friendship Garden Society, with a board composed of USCPFA-Minnesota members. The goal was to build China Friendship Gardens in Minnesota to further its mission of promoting friendship and understanding between the peoples of China and Minnesota. Since that time, board members have worked tirelessly, building friendships in Changsha, and with the local Minnesota Chinese community and Minnesota Hmong community.

The web of friendships

Working on people-to-people diplomacy, USCPFA-Minnesota brought Changsha Sculptor Master Lei Yixin to participate in Public Art Saint Paul's "Minnesota Rocks!" stone carving exhibition in 2006. Master Lei created the beautiful "Meditation" sculpture and chose a specific site at Phalen Park for it. Fortuitously, the China Friendship Garden now forms a backdrop to this beautiful sculpture.

Master Lei's friendship with us over the years eventually led him to help the China Garden Society build another bridge of friendship in 2015 with the establishment of the sister park relationship between St. Paul's Phalen Regional Park and Changsha's Yanghu Wetlands Park. That path of friendship eventually led to the exchange of sister-city gifts between the two sister cities and sister parks in 2018. The gift from Changsha, the Xiang Jiang Pavilion, is a replica of the famous Aiwan Pavilion in Changsha, and was designed by Changsha architects Jon Youhua Wen and Jennifer Junfang Fan of Changsha Hunan Jianke Landscaping Company. Changsha engineers created this replica in Changsha in early 2018, held an unveiling ceremony there, then disassembled it and sent it to Minnesota in five shipping containers. A group of Changsha artisans arrived in Minnesota in July to help unload those containers and begin the installation of this Pavilion. Friendships between the artisans and the China Garden Society board and the construction workers flourished during the construction in the summer of 2018.

At the same time Changsha was building the replica Pavilion, we were creating a set of five Peanuts statues as a gift to Changsha. These iconic characters, made famous by St. Paul native, Charles M. Schulz, included two customized statues, Lucy and the Snoopy Doghouse. Nkauj Hmong Lucy wears traditional Hmong



Bon Voyage event in St. Paul. Photo by Jijun He.



Unloading materials shipped from China.

clothing (designed by Minnesota artist Kao Lee Thao) and the Snoopy Doghouse was decorated in Chinese brush painting style with four Minnesota state symbols (designed by Minnesota artist Shen Yudong). These statues were installed at Changsha's Yanghu Wetlands Park Science Museum during the summer of 2018.

Another bridge of friendship that has resulted is the relationship with the local Minnesota Hmong community and the resulting Hmong Heritage Wall that sits next to the Xiang Jiang Pavilion. This elegant sculpture was carved in pink granite and contains symbols from both the Minnesota Hmong culture and the Hunan Hmong culture in China and shows the historical and cultural connection of the 80,000 Minnesota Hmong to their ancestral homeland in Hunan province, China, where nearly two million Hmong live today.

The dream becomes reality

As we stood at the foot of the completed Xiang Jiang Pavilion and Hmong Heritage Wall at the Open House on November 3, 2018, and gazed up at its incredible beauty, tears came to our eyes. The realization that we had accomplished something really important just washed over us. Who could have imagined that a small group of dedicated unpaid volunteers would realize their dream of more than a decade? Who could have imagined that this same group of unpaid volunteers could raise over \$1 million dollars, without professional help, to fund the construction in 2018? Who could have imagined that this group would overcome the enormous hurdle of the U.S.

government holding one of the shipping containers at the border and issuing an order for its return to China in July 2018? And who could have imagined that this group would be welcoming the public to enjoy these two completed structures, the Xiang Jiang Pavilion and the Hmong Heritage Wall, at the first sister-city China Friendship Garden in Minnesota on a chilly day in November 2018?

But there we were, arm in arm, looking up at these tangible symbols of the cultural bridge of friendship we had built between St. Paul and Changsha to be enjoyed by all for all time. All this from those first humble imaginings that Professor C.C. Hsiao and Linda had in 2000. As C.C. Hsiao's daughter Caroline Van said so well in her Haiku poem at the Open House:

*Liu Ming Yuan rises
With her stunning Xiang Jiang Pavilion!
Let friendships flourish.*

Founding and still current(!) MCFGS board members: Linda Mealey-Lohmann (president), Joyce Hsiao (vice president), Mary Warpeha, Walter Graff, Barbara Harrison, and Weiming Lu. Other board members: Romi Slowiak (secretary), Bill Zajicek (treasurer), Jeff Vang (Hmong Advisory Group chair), Chu Wu, and Chen Zhou (Chinese Advisory Group chair). 友

Linda Mealey-Lohmann is co-founder and president of the Minnesota China Friendship Garden Society. An attorney, she is a longtime member of USCPFA-Minnesota who served as both secretary and vice president of that chapter.



Arm in arm: Mary Warpeha, Linda Mealey-Lohmann, and Caroline Van (daughter of Joyce and C.C. Hsiao).

The Shade of Willows and Bright Flowers

Excerpt from a speech given by Linda Mealey-Lohmann, president and co-founder of the Minnesota China Friendship Garden Society on the occasion of the July 14, 2018, St. Paul-Changsha China Friendship Garden Groundbreaking Ceremony at Phalen Regional Park, St. Paul, Minnesota.

Welcome Mayor Carter and honored guests to our St. Paul-Changsha China Friendship Garden Groundbreaking Ceremony. My name is Linda Mealey-Lohmann. I am the president and co-founder of the Minnesota China Friendship Garden Society.

Today we celebrate the 30-year anniversary of the establishment of the sister-city relationship between St. Paul and Changsha. This relationship was started in 1988 by Mayor George Latimer. One of our board members, Weiming Lu, served as First Chair of the St. Paul-Changsha Sister-City Committee, the group that made this happen, and he and Mayor Latimer traveled to Changsha in 1988 when the sister-city agreement was signed. We owe them a great debt of gratitude for their foresight and efforts.

Today we also celebrate the groundbreaking of the St. Paul-Changsha China Friendship Garden of Whispering Willows and Flowing Waters—the first Changsha-style China garden in the United States. The path to get here has been long. This is a sister-city project that was initiated by the Minnesota China Friendship Garden Society in 2005. At that time, we were just a committee of the USCPFA-Minnesota. Joyce Hsiao, who is here today, and her husband C.C., who has passed, and I had a dream of creating China gardens in Minnesota based on the sister-city

relationships with China. The President of US-China Peoples Friendship Association-Minnesota at the time, Mary Warpeha, supported this dream and the three of us have been working on this project for the last 14 years. Today our dream is being realized, so let's thank them for their dedication.

We have been working in collaboration with the city of St. Paul, St. Paul Parks & Recreation Department; and the city of Changsha, Yanghu Wetlands Park; and the Changsha architects, Jennifer Fan and Jon Wen of Hunan Jianke Landscape Company, who created the beautiful conceptual designs for the China Garden.

It has taken thousands and thousands of volunteer hours and dedication by the Minnesota China Friendship Garden Society board and its advisors to get us to today. These hardworking volunteers raised more than \$800,000 for the 2018 construction. This is an amazing feat!

We are also here to celebrate the gift exchange between Changsha and St. Paul. The gift from Changsha to St. Paul and Phalen Park is the beautiful Xiang Jiang Pavilion, a replica of Changsha's famous Aiwan Pavilion, one of four famous pavilions in China. The Xiang Jiang Pavilion was designed and fabricated in Changsha, then disassembled, and shipped here for installation. Part of that gift also includes the time and expense of the 13 artisans who arrived from Changsha this week. They are here to supervise the installation of the Xiang Jiang Pavilion, and are experts in the ancient architectural techniques of carpentry, masonry, and painting.



Joyce Hsiao and Linda Mealey-Lohmann at the Pavilion

In addition to the Pavilion, the Hmong Heritage Wall and West Entrance Arch were fabricated in Changsha and shipped here for installation. The Hmong Heritage Wall contains symbols from both the Minnesota Hmong culture and the Changsha Hmong culture. Through our engagement with local Hmong historians, we have learned that the Hmong here trace their ancestral roots back to the Changsha area of China and that there are about two million Hmong living in the Changsha area. This has added a deeper significance to this sister-city China garden. You can see that this has been a great cross-cultural collaboration and learning experience for all of us on the Minnesota China Friendship Garden Society board,



the Phalen community, and the Hmong and Chinese communities.

The Minnesota China Friendship Garden Society, on behalf of the city of St. Paul, has presented a gift to Changsha of a set of five Peanuts characters sculptures. The design for Lucy was created by Minnesota Hmong artist Kao Lee Thao and the design for the Snoopy doghouse with Minnesota state symbols in a Chinese brush-style painting was created by Minnesota artist Shen Yudong. These will symbolize St. Paul, the birthplace of Charles Schulz, and bring a bit of our Minnesota Hmong and Minnesota Chinese culture with them when they arrive in Changsha in a few days. They were installed in a state-of-the-art science museum in Yanghu Wetlands Park in Changsha.

The name in Chinese of this China Friendship Garden is even more fitting today than when it was first approved by the board earlier this year. The name 柳明園 *Liǔ míng yuán* literally means “willow | bright | garden.”

First, look around at all the beautiful willow trees that “light up” this park.

Second, this name has a deeper symbolic meaning. These three characters, 柳明園 *Liǔ míng yuán*, reference a line from a famous Chinese poem expressing beauty and hope:

山重水复疑无路，柳暗花明又一村。

shān zhòng shuǐ fù - yí wú lù, liǔ àn huā míng - yòu yī cūn.

“After endless mountains and rivers that leave doubt whether there’s really a path out; Suddenly one encounters the shade of a willow and bright flowers, leading to lovely village.”

In other words, after encountering many obstacles on one’s journey, suddenly there is hope. To quote MCFGS Treasurer Bill Zajicek: “It’s hard to keep track of the various obstacles that this endeavor has encountered over the years, and at each obstacle, the support for the project in the community has grown and our resolve has strengthened.”

And so with strengthened resolve, we celebrate today the unity, friendship, and determination that 柳明園 *Liǔ míng yuán* symbolizes. We hope you will appreciate and enjoy the cultural richness that this China Friendship Garden brings to this community. Thank you. 友



Completed Hmong Heritage Wall with Table.

China Garden Timeline

- 1988 St. Paul-Changsha sister-city relationship established
- 2000 Formed the China Garden Committee of USCPFA-Minnesota Chapter
- 2005 Formed the Minnesota China Friendship Garden Society as a separate 501c(3) nonprofit with a mission to build China Friendship Gardens in Minnesota based on the sister-city relationships
- 2006 Changsha Sculptor Master Lei Yixin created “Mediation” sculpture to be placed at Phalen Park
- 2008 St. Paul Mayor Chris Coleman traveled to Changsha for 20-year anniversary
- 2011 China Garden concept approved as part of Phalen-Keller Regional Park Master Plan
- 2015 Minnesota Legislature approved \$50,000 grant to create conceptual designs of China garden by Changsha Hunan Jianke Ltd
- 7/2015 Site dedication of China Friendship Garden held at annual Dragon Boat Festival
- 11/2015 MCFGS delegation travels to Changsha to meet Changsha architects
- 1/2016 China Friendship Garden conceptual designs unveiled
- 2/2018 Sister-city gift of five Peanuts statues “Bon Voyage party” sent to Changsha’s Yanghu Wetlands Park Science Museum
- 5/2018 Unveiling ceremony of sister-city gift of Xiang Jiang Pavilion held in Changsha
- 5/2018 Sister-city gifts shipped from Changsha to St. Paul and St. Paul to Changsha
- 5/2018 Feng Shui Ceremony and Hmong Blessing Ceremony held at China Friendship Garden site
- 5/31/2018... Groundbreaking and site preparation began at Phalen Park
- 7/14/2018... Ceremonial groundbreaking event with St. Paul Mayor Melvin Carter held at Dragon Boat Festival
- 7/24/2018... Four of five containers arrived at Phalen Park; one detained by Department of Agriculture at border
- 7/26/2018... Installation of Hmong Heritage Wall began; completed on 8/3/2018
- 8/6/2018..... Final container arrived at Phalen Park and Pavilion construction began
- 8/26/2018... Farewell party for Changsha artisans
- 10/2018 Pavilion Plaza and landscaping work began; completed on 11/2/2018
- 11/3/2018... Xiang Jiang Pavilion Open House is attended by hundreds of community members

My Friendship Legacy

By Mary Warpeha

*May I suggest ... May I suggest to you ...
This is the best part of your life.*

—A tune composed by Susan Werber,
performed by Ellis Paul

So goes the inspiring tune on my car
SCD player as I made my daily summer
trek to Phalen Regional Park to volunteer
time and talent. The lyrics fascinated
from the get-go. Most mornings I arrived
awed by the beautiful building framing
up. As one of a team dedicated to the 30-
year sister-city friendship of St. Paul with
Changsha, Hunan China, I was heavily
invested. For years, we had been wait-
ing for something really monumental to
come about. Honestly, the gift giving of
the “Sisters” was beyond wildest dreams.

Through leadership and funding by
the nonprofit Minnesota China Friend-
ship Garden Society, St. Paul presented
Changsha Yanghu Wetlands Park with five
Peanuts Gang figures. Lucy had a stunning
dress designed in Hmong traditional fash-
ion. Snoopy’s bland doghouse displayed a
Minnesota Showy Lady Slipper, Common
Loon, Red Pine, and Monarch Butterfly in
Chinese watercolor. “They were too cute.”
The Minnesota symbols are official, but
why Hmong clothing? As it happened,
the Hmong community became active
partners upon learning that St. Paul and
Changsha have significant Hmong pop-
ulations with shared ancestry.

More about the title tune (which I had
pretty much memorized while driving),
“May I suggest to you ... this time is bless-
ed and shining almost blinding bright.”
The arrival of five containers housing
Changsha’s monumental gift absorbed
my summer. Computer renderings of
the Pavilion gift of a replica of China’s
famous Aiwang Pavilion had circulated.
The Pavilion was constructed in Chang-
sha by a crew of designers, engineers,
and laborers using ancient timber frame/
interlocking methods. High-glaze green
tiles were specially fired for Phalen Park’s
frigid freeze-thaw weather. Eight green
Water Dragons would be sentinels on the
dramatic sweeping eaves. In Changsha, the
Pavilion had been assembled, parts labeled



Mary Warpeha and Linda Mealey-Lohmann at the completed Pavilion. Photos on pages 9–12
courtesy of Linda Mealey-Lohmann.

and then disassembled. Five containers
sailed with precious cargo. Later at the
Phalen worksite, a crane began the task
for reassembly. The first placement was
Hmong Heritage Wall panels displaying
China and Minnesota Hmong ancestral
items on sparkling rose granite. An extraor-
dinary gift worth a 30-year wait!

A forever-to-be-treasured element of
the exchange was arrival of an assembly
crew of 13 artisans. Their skills were essen-
tial in directing placement of the pieces,
reading their own Mandarin notes and
measurements on blueprints and carvings.
Throughout the five weeks of their stay, we
shared friendships, cultures, foods, peo-
ple, and places. An unanticipated bonus.
A replica of an A.D. 1792 pavilion—and
skilled Changsha artisans joining with a
local firm for reconstruction in our own
Phalen Park. All the blessings of my tune
were there: “like a treasure chest to you ...
the hope of seven generations ... comes
from the west, comes from the slowly set-
ting sun.” Most days, I arrived exhilarated
as I stepped into the fenced worksite.

But there were days when the lyrics were
essential to face the worksite. Like the day
a terse email arrived from U.S. Customs
and Border Protection stating presence of
agricultural contaminant. The lead con-
tainer was to be shipped back. Can’t be.

Day really, really spoiled. Or the container
that was lost and found—only to be days
from release in a jammed rail lot. And 13
artisans impatiently anticipating their
labor of love erecting the mother-of-all
reconstruction projects. Due to delays, I
was tasked with extending reservations,
housing, and more. In trying times, I
was blessed to sing along, “The thousand
reasons that were just beyond your sight
... Why I suggest this is the best part of
your life.” Not always so sure about this.

Needless to say, challenges of this once-
in-a-lifetime project have been overcome
by volunteers with a mission. The aus-
picious Xiang Jiang Pavilion towers as
a centerpiece of the St. Paul-Changsha
China Garden of Whispering Willows
and Flowing Waters. It’s an honor to be
part of the legacy of a 30th Anniversary
Sister City gift exchange. By volunteer
involvement, I have met new friends in
the global community—people who also
put their hearts into a dream project. Upon
reflection, this may very well be the best
part of my life—my friendship legacy. 友

Mary Warpeha is a past president of
USCPFA-Minnesota and former Midwest
Region board member.