Minnesota’s Longstanding Connection with China

By Linda Mealey-Lohmann

One may wonder, “Why a China Garden in Minnesota?” In fact, the State of Minnesota has a long history with China. The first Chinese arrived in Minnesota in the mid-1870s. In 1883, in celebration of the completion of the Northern Pacific Railroad from St. Paul to the West Coast, a large Chinese arch was constructed across one of the main streets in downtown St. Paul. The arch was topped with a unique three-story pagoda and decorated with two hundred Chinese lanterns. (See Sherri Gebert Fuller, Chinese in Minnesota, Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2004, p. 15. available at Amazon.com.) As early as 1914, the University of Minnesota began enrolling students and scholars from China.

The Minnesota Chapter of the US-China Peoples Friendship Association (USCPCA-MN), one of 50 chapters in the United States (see www.uscpcfa.org), has been very active since it was established more than 30 years ago. USCPCA-MN has welcomed Chinese students and scholars to Minnesota since 1979. That year, USCPCA-MN welcomed the first group of scholars to ever come to the United States. This first group of 120 scholars came to the University of Minnesota as part of the normalization of diplomatic relations agreement with China, announced by President Jimmy Carter in December of 1978.

The University of Minnesota’s China Center also has worked since 1979 to strengthen the bridge of understanding, friendship, exchange, and cooperation between U.S. and Chinese cultures. See www.china-center.umn.edu. The University of Minnesota currently has the largest number of China students and scholars of any educational institution in the U.S. and more than 8,000 Chinese alumni all over the world. Moreover, Minnesota’s public school system has taught Chinese as a second language since 1970 and now has more than 10 public schools teaching Chinese, in addition to many private schools. The Twin Cities metro area has more than 30 China-related organizations, including the 140-plus member Minnesota Chapter of USCPCA.

In addition to working with students and scholars, USCPCA-MN has conducted educational symposiums, business seminars, and cultural events for more than three decades. See www.uscpcfa-mn.org. In the 1970s, USCPCA was the sole U.S. organization named to take groups of people to visit China. This exclusive arrangement changed following normalization of relations in 1979, when commercial travel to China commenced; however, USCPCA has continued to take groups of people to China to this day. USCPCA-MN also has hosted visiting government and business delegations from China each year.

Over the years, several USCPCA-MN members have served as elected officers at the national level of the US-China Peoples Friendship Association (USCPCA-National). USCPCA-MN founding member, Fred Ptasnke, served as USCPCA National President from 1987-1989. Bill Kirchner was USCPCA National Treasurer in the mid-1980s. USCPCA-MN board members Barbara Harrison completed 14 years as USCPCA National President in October 2005 and Charles Peterson completed seven years as USCPCA Treasurer in October 2005. Ken Puffer and founding member Mildred Ptasnke have served as USCPCA National Board members from the USCPCA-Midwest Region.

Beginning in 2005, USCPCA-MN is an alliance partner with the Minnesota Trade Office and the State of Minnesota. See www.mn-tradechina.com. The goal of the China Partnership Alliance is to facilitate collaboration on projects among the various public and private China-related organizations and to provide guidance for enhancing Minnesota’s relationship with China. In addition, the Minnesota Trade Office recently designated USCPCA-MN as the “Executive Agent” for all contacts between government and business with Minnesota’s Chinese sister relationships. More than twenty years ago, USCPCA-MN initiated the sister province-state relationship between Shaanxi Province and Minnesota, which resulted in the signing of a Friendship Agreement in October 1982. Likewise, USCPCA-MN initiated the relationship between the cities of Minneapolis and Harbin, Heilongjiang, which resulted in a signed agreement in September 1993. USCPCA-MN is also active with the city of St. Paul’s sister city, Changsha, Hunan, a relationship formalized in May 1988. In fact, USCPCA-MN’s volunteers play a vital role in maintaining these relationships through the hosting of visiting delegations and reciprocal exchanges.

In November of 2005, seven members of USCPCA-MN will be a part of Minnesota Governor Tim Pawlenty’s Mission to China. This Mission will celebrate and honor more than 130 years of friendship between China and Minnesota. The delegation will be composed of more than 200 government, business, and academic leaders from sectors that represent
Grigg Nanjing Friendship Chinese Garden
By Therese Kulla-Abbot, At-large Member, St. Louis

The Grigg Nanjing Friendship Garden features an authentic Chinese pavilion, bridge, and moon gate (see photo on p.10), accented by traditional stones, carvings, water features, and plantings. It is modeled on the “scholar’s gardens” of the southern provinces of China, near Nanjing, which are smaller and less ornate than the Imperial gardens of the north. This garden, designed by Chinese-born architect Yong Pan, is considered the most authentic of its size in the United States, and a showplace of extraordinary craftsmanship. The Grigg Nanjing Friendship Garden honors the sister city relationship between St. Louis, Missouri and Nanjing, China. This is a comprehensive link to information about the Chinese Garden: www.mobot.org/hort/tours/cgtourintro.shtml (St. Louis Botanic Garden)

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USCPFA appeals to members and friends annually for contributions to continue and expand our educational activities. We depend on vital support from volunteers to carry out our goals to build and maintain friendship and understanding between people in the United States and in China.

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