Cultivating friendship

Woodbury woman's passion for Chinese culture, art helps inspire state's first Chinese garden

By Maureen McMullen
mmcmullen@rivertowns.net

For a trained vocalist like Linda Mealey-Lohmann, a tonal language like Chinese make perfect sense: different inflections evoke different meanings.

She studied different languages through diction courses as a vocal major in college and took four years of Spanish classes, but few other languages "clicked" with her quite like Chinese.

During a 10-week course she took over the summer, she said her background as a singer helped her detect and mimic tonal differences her classmates would miss.

"I had the world's best professor and (teaching assistant) that just opened my eyes," she said. "I loved Chinese, and it fit the way my brain worked much better."

She soon switched majors to East Asian studies with an emphasis in Chinese and went on to complete a master's degree in Chinese language and literature before earning a law degree.

Her education sparked a lifelong passion of Chinese art, literature and calligraphy — one that she shared with C.C. Hsiao, a retired University of Minnesota engineering and mechanics professor of more than 30 years.

The two met through the U.S.-China People's Friendship Association-Minnesota Chapter, for which Mealey-Lohmann has served as a board member since moving to Woodbury 25 years ago.

Noticing a distinct lack of Chinese gardens in a state that already had eight Japanese gardens, Mealey-Lohmann and Hsiao founded the Minnesota China Friendship Garden Society in 2005 as part of St. Paul's sister-city relationship with Changsha, China.

City officials recently approved a gift exchange between the cities: St. Paul will send off a custom-painted collection of its signature "Peanuts" character sculptures to place in Changsha's Yanghu Wetlands Park, and Changsha will gift a replica of its famous Aiwan Pavilion to place in Phalen Park.

Image submitted by the Minnesota Friendship Garden Society

St. Paul's Chinese sister city Changsha gifted the city a replica of its famous Aiwan Pavilion to place in Phalen Park next summer, marking the two cities' 30-year relationship.
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