

Cultivating friendship

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

By Maureen McMullen

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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,



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.

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.

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The exchange will take place in 2018, marking the 30th anniversary of the two communities' sister-city relationship.

Although Hsiao died in 2008, his wife and fellow Garden Society board member Joyce Hsiao said he would be proud of the group's accomplishments.

"Even though he was an engineer, he was very interested in Chinese calligraphy and Chinese art," she said. "He was interested in introducing this Chinese garden, which is artwork to increase and support the understanding of Chinese culture in the United States. ... He would be very happy to see the progress."

Architecture, poetry and plants

Research for the garden's design involved Mealey-Lohmann traveling to China several times over the years, taking thousands of photos for inspiration and reference.

Chinese gardens traditionally take inspiration from painting techniques and include pathways, arches and

strategically placed trees to create "framed views."

Art and poetry are typically incorporated, with architecture and plant that complement one another, Mealey-Lohmann said, "to create an artistic experience."

Designs for the garden also feature a Hmong cultural plaza to honor an additional connection between St. Paul and Changsha.

St. Paul is home to the United States' largest population of Hmong people, an ethnic group originally from southern regions of China — including Changsha.

The plaza will feature a motif that harkens to Hmong culture in both cities, such as an archway adorned with ox horns — a symbol of the Hmong community

educate the public only about Hmong culture as a whole, but also the differences and similarities between Hmong communities in the two cities.

Romi Slowiak, community arts activist and board member with the Friendship Garden Society, said she hopes the plaza can offer educational opportunities like visits from school groups and community events.

"I think all public art that's successful brings people together in wonderment over a source of beauty," Slowiak said. "In this case, it will have the extra element of cultural dimensions right in front of you. It will be a gathering and learning spot and a landmark piece of public art for Phalen Regional Park,

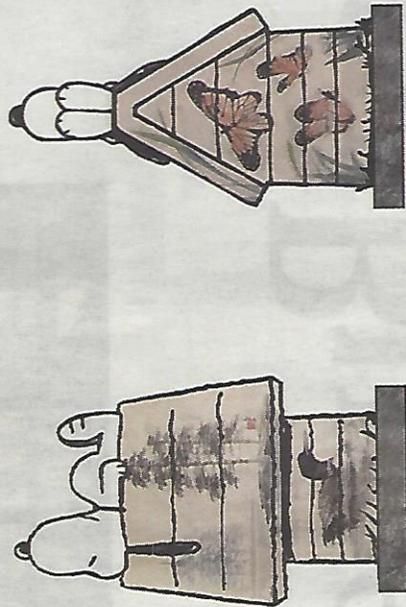


Image submitted by the Minnesota Friendship Garden Society Snoopy lounging on his signature doghouse decorated with Minnesota wildlife in traditional Chinese painting will be among six "Peanuts" character statues St. Paul will send to Changsha, its Chinese sister city, in a recently approved gift exchange to celebrate the 30-year relationship.

in Changsha — and an embroidery wall engraved with designs from both communities.

A majority of Minnesota's Hmong community migrated to the area from refugee

camp in Laos and Thailand in the 1970s after war pushed them out of their ancestral homelands in China.

A cultural advisory board helped guide the plaza's design to

for the city and for the state."

Friendship and understanding

In China, business starts with friendship. The garden, she said, will offer the perfect venue for Minnesota businesses to form bonds with potential Chinese business, government and educational partners.

It will also help further the mission of the U.S.-China People's Friendship Association: to foster friendship and create a better understanding between the two cultures.

"I think it's really important in these political times that people don't just resort to stereotypes and bad press that's out there," she said. "They really need an opportunity to learn about other cultures out there."

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