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Guest-Teaching Chinese, and Learning America



Matt Nager for The New York Times

Zheng Yue, who has been teaching Chinese in MacArthur High School in Lawton, Okla., working with a student, Raymond Veal.

By **SAM DILLON**

Published: May 9, 2010

LAWTON, Okla. — Zheng Yue, a young woman from [China](#) who is teaching her native language to students in this town on the Oklahoma grasslands, was explaining a vocabulary quiz on a recent morning. Then a student interrupted.



The New York Times

Two other Chinese instructors teach in the Lawton district.

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“Sorry, I was zoning out,” said the girl, a junior wearing black eye makeup. “What are we supposed to be doing?”

Ms. Zheng seemed taken aback but patiently repeated the instructions.

“In China,” she said after class, “if you teach the students and they don’t get it, that’s their problem. Here if they don’t get it, you teach it again.”

Ms. Zheng, 27, is teaching Chinese in Lawton — and learning a few things herself about American culture — because of a partnership between an agency of China’s Education Ministry and the [College Board](#).

China wants to teach the world its language and culture,

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Matt Nager for The New York Times

Students learning to hold a brush to draw Chinese characters. "In China, we study and study and study," Ms. Zheng said.

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Matt Nager for The New York Times

Ms. Zheng, with her mother, Dongping Yuan, is one of about 325 guest teachers from China working in American schools.

and Ms. Zheng is one of about 325 guest teachers who have volunteered to work for up to three years in American schools, with their salaries subsidized by the Chinese government. A parallel effort has sent about 2,000 American school administrators to visit China at Beijing's expense.

Ms. Zheng left her teaching post at a provincial university south of Beijing two years ago to come to Lawton. She is out of her usual element in this city of strip malls and car dealerships surrounded by cattle ranches and an Army base. The culture of American schools is also different.

"My life in high school was torture, just studying, nothing else," said Ms. Zheng (pronounced djung). "Here students lead more interesting lives," partly because they are more involved in athletics, choir and other activities.

"They party, they drink, they date," she added. "In China, we study and study and study."

In interviews, several other Chinese teachers said they had some difficulties adjusting to the informality of American schools after working in a country where students leap to attention when a teacher enters the room.

One Chinese teacher who has built a successful language program in Wisconsin, Hongmei Zhao, said a few students sometimes disrupted classes by speaking English so rapidly that she cannot understand them.

"Then the whole class laughs, maybe because of my accent," Ms. Zhao said.

Ms. Zheng said none of her students had been disagreeable, and Samantha Weidenmaier, an assistant principal at the school, MacArthur High, said that in Ms. Zheng's classes "the respect levels are kicked up a notch."

Still, Ms. Zheng said she believed that teachers got little respect in America.

"This country doesn't value teachers, and that upsets me," she said. "Teachers don't earn much, and this country worships making money. In China, teachers don't earn a lot either, but it's a very honorable career."

Ms. Zheng said she spent time clearing up misconceptions about China.

"I want students to know that Chinese people are not crazy," she said. For instance, one of her students, referring to China's one-child-per-family population planning policy, asked whether the authorities would kill one of the babies if a Chinese couple were to have twins.

Some students were astonished to learn that Chinese people used cellphones, she said. Others thought Hong Kong was the capital.

Barry Beauchamp, the Lawton superintendent, said he was thrilled to have Ms. Zheng and two other Chinese instructors working in the district. But he said he believed that the guest teachers were learning the most from the cultural exchange.

"Part of them coming here is us indoctrinating them about our great country and our freedoms," he said. "We've seen them go to church and to family reunions, country music concerts, rodeos. So it's been interesting to see them soak up our culture."

Ms. Zheng's situation is fairly typical of other guest teachers working in American schools: China pays about \$13,000 a year toward her salary, and the school district

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provides her with housing and a \$500 monthly stipend.

Some districts pay more, but Lawton is one of the few that lends their guest teachers a car — in Ms. Zheng’s case, a lumbering blue Buick Century once used for drivers’ education.

At MacArthur High, Ms. Zheng teaches three hourlong Chinese classes a day.

One day last week, Cynthia Thompson, a senior, worked with Ms. Zheng through a dialog in Chinese about attending the Beijing opera, showing considerable fluency. Another student, Raymond Veal, who said he wanted to be a plastic surgeon, stumbled often, confusing the Chinese words for movie theater and Beijing opera.

“I’m not good at memorizing Chinese characters,” Mr. Veal said.

Ms. Zheng has described to her classes the high-pressure schools she attended in the city of Pingdingshan, where students study six days a week from 8 a.m. through a mandatory evening study hall ending at 10 p.m.

“No way I could do that,” Mr. Veal said.

After her morning classes, Ms. Zheng drove west through Lawton in search of lunch, passing a seed elevator. The Buick fought a stiff wind that had kicked up a vast khaki-colored dust cloud. Pulling into a Burger King, she ordered a fish sandwich.

“I’ve gained 10 pounds in Oklahoma,” she said.

Between bites, she recalled how earlier this spring a student brought her newborn to school to show it off to admiring students and teachers.

“Teenage pregnancy is rare in China,” Ms. Zheng said. “I thought it was nice that when the girl brought in her child, people were happy for her. But I found it shocking, because we think girls should focus on their studies and get into college.”

That afternoon, Ms. Zheng taught classes at Central Middle School, drilling 22 eighth graders on how to count to 100 in Chinese and explaining some Chinese holidays before turning her back to write a Chinese tongue twister on the board.

Out of the blue, a girl with long brown hair asked her classmates loudly: “Where’s France at?”

“In Europe,” a boy with baggy jeans called out from across the room.

“France is not in Europe,” another boy said.

Ms. Zheng just kept writing Chinese characters on the board.

“American students don’t know a lot about the outside world,” she said later. “Mostly just what they see here.”

Ms. Zheng says she is hoping to do her part by teaching them more than how to write characters.

“I want my students to have a sweet, sweet memory of taking Chinese,” she said. “They won’t remember a lot of words, but I want them to remember the beauty of the language and the culture.”

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