

November 2018 Rutland Herald Article about OV's Mandarin program and our exchange student:

OVUHS honors Chinese student, teacher

- [By Kate Barcellos Staff Writer](#)

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BRANDON — Thanks to a memorandum of understanding signed by Vermont and China in 2017, Otter Valley Union Middle and High School is cultivating a special educational relationship across continental borders, enabling senior Qian Kexin, OVUHS first Chinese exchange student, to study at the school.

So on Thursday, Rutland Northeast Supervisory Union Superintendent Jeanne Collins, Principal Jim Avery, Sen. Brian Collamore, Deputy Secretary of Education Heather Bouchey, and faculty and school board members for RNESU gathered in the library to welcome special visitors who have made it possible for OVUHS students to spend time in China, and for Chinese students and faculty to study at the school — Vermont International Academy President James P. Cross and John L. Holden, president and CEO of the US-China Strong Foundation.

“Otter Valley has always embraced and believed in the power of international and global connections, in particular with China,” Avery said. “We’ve been developing this friendship since 2004.”

After a sprawling banquet, (Hanban) Qian Wei, OVUHS Mandarin language and cultural studies teacher and member of the Office of Chinese Language Council International described how his time in America and in particular at OVUHS has profoundly changed him, after wanting to better understand American culture since he was a child.

“I grew up with American influences,” Wei said. “I’m fascinated by the idea of the American language. At 13, we were required to learn English to get into a university, and I really enjoyed it.” Wei said he was driven by his newfound passion for language and the connections it created for him, creating a verifiable path to America.

“I could understand the lyrics in the music, now,” Wei said. “I could understand the actors in the movies. There’s a power of language in building bridges across cultures.”

Wei, who said he’s used to teaching 100 students at a time, heard of an opportunity to come teach Mandarin in America, and he signed up immediately, though his own principal wasn’t quite so willing to let him leave the school.

But in the end, he made it, and Avery even picked him up at the airport.

“That was such a culture shock, for me,” Wei said. “An atomic bomb dropped in my head. He waited for 8 hours, and I felt terribly sorry about that. Then he told me he read some books, met some friends, all to make me feel better. That’s definitely not something I’d experience back home.

After learning that not every American household had a gun in the closet, Wei said the culture of the American education system gave him something he hadn’t had before in China — personal time to indulge in his hobbies: reading, calligraphy and a newfound love for hiking in Vermont’s mountains.

“I started to discover more of myself,” Wei said. “Here, you have this boundary between life and work. Back home, the pace of life is very fast. No sense of on-work or off-work. In China, from my area, it’s believed it’s the teacher’s duty to always be there for the student.”

Four of Wei’s five students then stood and offered passages that they learned in Mandarin, each ending with the word for ‘thank you:’ Xièxiè.

“Sometimes it can be hard,” said Malia Steele, 15. “It’s all part of the fun though. It’s different.”

Each of the students smiled and nodded eagerly at the prospect of one day visiting China. “We’d be kind of clueless,” said Kevin Odell, 14. “But I’d definitely want to go.”

Bouchey was impressed by the students’ proficiency.

"I wish I could give my remarks in Mandarin, but in the dinosaur days when I was in school, these programs didn't happen," Bouchey said. "This is such a great opportunity ... my lens is a little different because I'm representing the state. You're providing a role model for what this should look like in all of our schools."

The collaboration between the VIA and China began in 2011, when the Chinese economy was booming and more students were trying to come to America to study, Dr. Cross said.

"We tried to develop a Vermont-approved college prep high school curriculum and work with China," Cross said. "We wanted to create more opportunities for international students to come study in Vermont, and the state was so supportive — it would help support jobs and the economy, and diversity in the state."

So they started by recruiting 50 students in Shanghai, and have since established schools in the cities of Wuxi and Guangzhou, both of which want to host OVUHS students for their summer program, free of charge, with a goal start date of next year.

"Here in Vermont, you have not only wonderfully hospitable people, but such a beautiful environment to enjoy," Holden said perched on a knee scooter, cradling a broken leg he sustained in a fall from China's Great Wall weeks ago. "Right now, the ballast needs to be the people, connections and journalists working to help the two countries get to know each other and understand each other." Holden, life-member of the Council on Foreign Relations, raised concern about strained relations between the United States and China, and called on teachers and students to be the connecting force of good for the future.

"We need to figure out ways of working together," Holden said. "These are two countries in a bilateral crisis, in ways I haven't seen in our lifetime. People in America and in China to get us out of this current mess that we're in ... they're 1.4 billion people, the second-largest economy in the world, and it's going to be the first."

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