Meet Zhang Kun

Job brings teacher from China to Kansas

By Anne Tjaden

Zhang Kun traveled halfway around the world from her home in the middle of China, to accept a job to teach in the middle of the USA: Clearwater, Kansas.

A delegation from the State Department of Kansas traveled to China to select six teachers to come teach Americans Mandarin Chinese.

In China, the last name precedes the first, so here in America Zhang Kun goes by Kun, pronounced "Quinn." She explains that she was among 20 who were interviewed for the job.

"They asked me how I would teach Chinese to a student who knows nothing about Chinese," she said, "And they asked me what I would do if a student was naughty and challenged me (in the classroom)."

She must have given satisfactory answers because she was hired to come to America for three years to teach, arriving in Clearwater on July 31.

She is well qualified to teach Chinese. Now in her final year of her doctoral program, she majored in English Literature and did her graduate thesis on Shakespeare's "Othello."

"My father was an English teacher and he was very good," she said, saying she and her two sisters were exposed to English literature at a young age.

In China, Kun taught English for 10 years at the high school and middle school levels, as well as some classes at the university.

Kun, 34, is also a wife and mother. She hopes her husband and four-year-old son will be able to join her as soon as the paperwork is completed.

She misses them but her job keeps her busy. She is teaching Mandarin Chinese, Chinese culture and history, using a variety of methods.

Five Clearwater students come to the Service Center to take Kun's Chinese classes every day from 12:30 to 1:17.

Mark Hermansen is one of the five. He said he loves the class and is getting a lot out of it. He said the teacher makes it come alive.

"One day there was a Chinese holiday she wanted to teach us about. She brought a lantern and some music and did a power point presentation so we could experience, as nearly as possible, what that holiday was like," he said.

Kun said it is impossible to learn the Chinese language without first understanding the Chinese culture. In the Mandarin Chinese class, she teaches the written characters, phrases and culture.

"Every day they study "Duigui," (the teachings of Confucius) because those teachings are what have shaped China for centuries. Her teaching is reaching beyond Clearwater thanks to Interactive Distance Learning (IDL) and the use of the online blackboard. The Service Center has the capability of transmitting her classes to eight different sites, so she is teaching up to 67 students in any given week.

The Kansas Department of Education predicts that by the year 2016, Chinese will follow Spanish as the third most widely spoken language in the U.S. Anyone who understands the language and the culture will have the advantage and Kun's classes are offering a method to prepare for the future.