**Xiaolin Wang**

What sets Xiaolin Wang apart, not just from other students but from other people in general, is her strong sense of duty and obligation, especially to her family. Considering her background, however, this should come as no surprise. Xiaolin was born in Dalian, China, into a military family. Both of her parents, her maternal grandfather and various aunts and uncles are veterans. In fact, her father will retire from the army in 2012 after having served his country for 30 years. Her mother will complete her 30 years of service the following year. Their dedication and loyalty has certainly influenced their daughter, who must certainly be a great source of pride for them.

Xiaolin arrived in the United States on New Year’s Eve 2006 after discovering only 13 days prior that she would be leaving her homeland. Unbeknownst to Xiaolin, her paternal aunt who already lived in Katy, Texas had applied for a student visa on Xiaolin’s behalf. This aunt and Xiaolin’s maternal grandfather had convinced Xiaolin’s parents that obtaining an education in the United States would be a wonderful opportunity. And so it was that this 17-year-old Chinese girl found herself spending the first few days of 2007 driving with her aunt from San Francisco halfway across the United States to Texas. She says that she spent the majority of the time sleeping, no doubt suffering from a severe case of jet lag and culture shock. Upon arriving at her aunt’s house in Katy, Xiaolin felt that her dreams had come true. Her aunt’s sprawling suburban house seemed massive compared to the apartment where she had lived with her mom and dad, and it certainly must have seemed palatial compared to the dormitory of the boarding school from which she had recently graduated.

However, this feeling of awe was soon replaced by a dose of reality – the challenge of mastering a new language and adapting to a new culture. A couple of weeks after arriving, Xiaolin began taking English classes at Lone Star College-CyFair. Initially, her aunt had hopes of Xiaolin becoming a nurse and therefore enrolled her at the CyFair campus having heard of the college’s reputable nursing program. Xiaolin began taking intermediate-level ESOL classes and was impressed by meeting classmates from a variety of different countries. She enjoyed the relaxed atmosphere in her ESOL classes and the small teacher/student ratio of approximately 20 students per class. In China, Xiaolin’s high school class was comprised of 98 students – so many students that every two weeks the students who sat in the back rows would rotate to the front rows so that everyone had a chance to hear the teachers’ lectures at least every couple of weeks. She also discovered that students in the U.S. have different relationships with their teachers. In China, students don’t talk to their professors, but now she could talk to her teachers face-to-face or communicate via email.

The ESOL instructors on the CyFair campus who made a difference to her are those who got to know her on a personal level and treated her as an individual, not just another nameless student lost in a sea of almost 100 faces. Professor Sharon Bippus was one of those teachers. A special memory that both Xiaolin and Professor Bippus share is Xiaolin’s 18th birthday in November. Professor Bippus’ class had already been planning a Thanksgiving potluck when they discovered that the youngest member of their class was turning 18. As a surprise, Ms. Bippus brought a birthday cake with Xiaolin’s name written in Chinese to the party. (Who knew that the Randall’s bakery was capable of such calligraphy?) Professor Bippus still has the email that Xiaolin sent her that same evening to say thank you, “I will remember today wherever I am, and I will remember an American teacher gave me a special present.”

Carolyn Ho is another ESOL professor who made an impact. Xiaolin especially enjoyed Dr. Ho’s TOEFL preparation class which tested all four language skills – reading, writing, listening, and speaking – and helped prepare her to eventually pass this demanding test so that she could continue her studies at the University of Houston. Dr. Ho fondly remembers Xiaolin, “While she was with us at Lone Star College-CyFair, her academic performance and interpersonal skills won the hearts of many teachers and classmates.” In fact, Xiaolin’s relationship with Dr. Ho did not end after Xiaolin completed the ESOL program. Dr. Ho enlisted Xiaolin’s help as a Chinese tutor to help prepare the English-speaking students who participated in the study abroad program that Dr. Ho co-sponsored in the summer of 2009. This valuable experience instilled a certain confidence in Xiaolin. Just two years earlier she was in a daze, trekking across an unknown country thousands of miles from her homeland, and now she was teaching American college students. How times had changed! Her hard work and dedication had paid off, and she was beginning a new phase of her life.

Xiaolin now attends the University of Houston and plans to earn her bachelor’s degree in accounting in 2012, but she has not forgotten about Lone Star College-CyFair, what she calls her “first step here in the United States.” She maintains contact with some of her former professors and she misses the library, in particular the language lab where she could practice her listening and speaking skills independently. She advises other English language learners to relish the time they spend in their ESOL classes because they will never again experience that same kind of happiness and camaraderie. Although she remains uncertain of her plans after graduation, her former ESOL professors feel certain that success is in her future.