

二十五

It was in Oklahoma
kids learning Chinese
thought they should go too
they even said “Please!”
from a high school in Tulsa
six students departed
on a life-changing trip
destinations, uncharted



Chapter 25 – When Oklahoma said, “Ni Hao”

According to the Oklahoma Historical Society, the Chinese were the first Asians to settle in Oklahoma. Soon after the 1889 Land Run, a Chinese entrepreneur set up the Tom Sing Laundry in Guthrie (near Oklahoma City). Other laundries and restaurants followed. The 1940 census showed only 110 Chinese living in Oklahoma. By 1980 that number had increased to 2,461. The 1980's was a good decade for improved connections between Oklahoma and China.

- In 1980, Tulsa established a “Sister City” agreement with Kaohsiung in Taiwan.

Booker T. Washington High School and G.W. Carver Middle School offered Mandarin Chinese as a part of their foreign language curriculum in the Tulsa Public Schools. B.T. Washington High School published the “American Express” 美國快報 Měiguó Kuài Bào which later became the “Chinese American Express” 美中快報 Měi Zhōng Kuài Bào, a student newsletter which invited young students of Chinese from all over America to contribute their experiences and perspectives regarding the learning of Chinese.

- In 1981, I accompanied six high school students and a news crew from KJRH-TV in Tulsa to Xiamen University, in southern Fujian Province where we spent 8 weeks studying Chinese language and culture. Xiamen had only been open to foreigners for one year at that time. In 1981 KJRH won a Peabody Award for their documentary, “Project China.”



- In 1985, Oklahoma state and Gansu province became “Sister States.”
- In 1987, Tulsa established a “Sister City” agreement with Beihai in the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region in China. Later, in the same year, the Tulsa Global Alliance put together “Operation Breakthrough: China’s Middle America Initiative” in Tulsa where former President Gerald Ford was the Keynote speaker and Chinese scholar, Perry Link (林培瑞 Lín Péirui), exposed Oklahomans to Chinese comedy in the form of Cross Talks 相声 Xiāng Shēng. One hundred Chinese governors, mayors and business leaders from 14 Chinese provinces met and set up business deals with entrepreneurs from Oklahoma and middle America.
- In 1989, 15 year old Booker T. Washington high school sophomore, Jon Bandurski became the first Tulsa Public School student ever to live for six months with a Chinese family in Shekou, near Shenzhen in south-eastern China where he studied Chinese and art for six months at Yucai School. Jon was the best unofficial ambassador the United States ever sent to China. When he wasn’t studying, he played soccer for the school team and even DJ’d for a school radio program.

Fast forward to the 21st century:

In 2004, Confucius Institutes (孔子学院 Kǒngzǐ Xuéyuàn) began springing up all over the USA. Their stated mission was to promote knowledge of Chinese language and culture abroad, as well as to promote commercial and trade cooperation. At their peak, there were approximately 100 Confucius Institutes in the USA and over 400 world-wide. In 2019, due to the affiliation of the Confucian Society with the Chinese Communist Party and a growing awareness of political issues involving Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang, there was a concern that Confucius Institutes might influence the way Chinese culture and language would be presented to students, even though the US Government Accountability Office released a report stating that they were “unable to find any widespread attempts to restrict academic freedom with people directly involved in the programs.” By 2023, the number of Confucian Institutes in the USA had been reduced to about five. Sadly, Oklahoma Confucian Society connections between the Tulsa Public Schools and Oklahoma University were severed.

Although there are still Chinese language immersion and bilingual programs in the US, the number of Americans studying Chinese in China has dramatically decreased since President Barack Obama’s “100,000 Strong” initiative encouraged over 15,000 Americans to study in China in 2009. During COVID, that number was reduced to around 200 and according to a March, 2025 NPR report, there were only about 1,200 American college students per semester studying Chinese in China. Compare that to 277,398 Chinese students enrolled in American universities at the end of 2024 according to the LA Times - down from 369,000 Chinese students enrolled in American colleges in 2019.