South Pasadena resident awarded Fulbright grant to China

Lauren Goldberg, Staff Writer

South Pasadena resident Ping Yao was born in China the year of Mao Zedong's Great Leap Forward, the precursor to the Chinese Cultural Revolution. Her mother and grandmother were both uneducated, poor and worked as child laborers.

Yao, 54, had no formal childhood schooling and even lived for a few years as a peasant on a commune in the countryside. Forty years, a bachelor and master's degree and a Ph.D later, she's returning to her birthplace on a Fulbright senior research grant to study Buddhist women from China’s ancient Tang Dynasty.

Starting next month, Yao, a history professor at California State University, Los Angeles, will spend six months researching in Shanghai, China. Yao is one of 1,100 faculty and professionals who will travel abroad through the Fulbright U.S. Scholar Program this year.

Yao’s research focuses on Chinese and Western perceptions of Chinese culture and her current project looks specifically at the role of Buddhist women in Chinese culture from 618-907.

Yao has gathered more than 6000 ancient epitaphs from the Tang era and said she has discovered that there were many women who influenced Buddhist culture during that era.

"People call the Tang Dynasty the golden age of Buddhism," she said, “but when we look at the history that talks about famous Buddhists it’s all men. I wanted to see the female side of the story."

Separate from the Fulbright grant, she also plans to teach a seminar at her host university, East China Normal University, about western scholarship on Chinese history and culture.

Yao attended ECNU in 1977 as a member of the first class of students to attend college after the Cultural Revolution ended in 1976.

Yao has already written a number of academic papers on Buddhist women, but said traveling to China will allow her to expand her research and complete her book on the topic. While there, she will have access to source material and expert Buddhist scholars that aren't available in the U.S.

"I have 6000 epitaphs but I know there are at least 2000 more that are not published in collections I have access to," Yao said.

Yao said the Fulbright grant will help her build a bridge between Chinese and American students and cultural scholars.

"I really like the fact that the Fulbright advocates cultural exchange and I feel my won goal as a scholar is to tell my students here what Chinese culture is and also to tell my students in China what Western scholarship is like in the U.S.,” Yao said.
Yao has been a professor at CSULA since 1997 and was a 2010 recipient of the school's Outstanding Professor Award. She was also a visiting professor at Harvard University in 2008-2009.

She has a Ph.D. in history from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and has published and edited many scholarly articles and volumes in English and Chinese.

Yao has received a number of awards and recognition for her work. She was on the board of directors of Chinese Historians in the U.S. and served as the organization's first female president.

Former CSULA history chairman Stanley Burstein, who hired Yao, said he and his colleagues are proud of Yao's many accomplishments.

"When you look back at (her life experience) it's simply quite remarkable," he said. "She made the jump from one culture to another very successfully, without losing her ability to function in the original one. She's quite an amazing person and we're amazed at how much she can accomplish."

Yao said many of her students, like her, are first generation college students and some are also immigrants. She said she hopes to inspire them with her journey from an uneducated laborer in the Chinese countryside to a respected scholar and author.

"I always felt like my story might inspire my students to dream big," she said. "I always show them a picture of me in the countryside holding a rifle."

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