China in Arkansas
Lantern Festival to feature group from UCA

BY JEANNIE STONE
Contributing Writer

The venerable Sue Khoo of Jacksonville and the Confucius Institute for Arkansas at the University of Central Arkansas in Conway are joining their talents this year to offer the annual Asian celebration in Jacksonville, slated for Saturday, Feb. 19. The evening Lantern Festival serves as the final celebration in the 15-day festivities which begin today on the Chinese Lunar New Year.

"After the new year, Chinese people come out from their houses and greet everyone with concern and relief. They ask each other, 'Are you OK?''" Khoo said. "People want to make sure their friends and families have survived the legendary Nian beast."

Because this year is the Chinese year of the rabbit, rabbit lanterns are expected to be the most popular. At this time, people will try to solve the puzzles on the lanterns and eat special foods.

Lanterns played not only a decorative role in Chinese life, but they were used to guide people through the darkness in olden times, Khoo said. The 15th day of the new year is the first night for a full moon to appear. Lanterns allowed people to go outside to witness the spectacle, considered good luck, as well as lighting the way for the spirits back to the world beyond.

"There were no cell phones long ago, so red lanterns placed in front of the house signified happy news and encouraged friends to stop and share in their happiness," Khoo added. "White lanterns placed in front of the house signified death. People come into my shop wanting white lanterns, and I tell them about the Chinese belief."

"If we're coming from different places, we must communicate our differences, or how else are we going to be friends?" she asked. That philosophy underscores the mission of the Confucius Institute for Arkansas, housed at the University of Central Arkansas, which aims to teach Chinese language and culture around the state.

Alex Chen, associate vice president for international engagement, explained: "We decided we wanted UCA to be more globalized, so in addition to securing 13 Chinese language teachers to infiltrate nine Arkansas school districts and expose more than 1,000 students to Chinese through the institute, we also invited 100 students from China and Taiwan to participate on our campus as exchange students."

Those students represent a wide variety of academic pursuits, Chen said.

"They are studying art, education, mass communication, business and science, to name a few," he said. "The experience to study in America is good for them, and it's good for Arkansans, so it's a win-win situation."

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Even non-Chinese students at the university benefit from the exposure, Chen said.

"On Feb. 3, the real Chinese new year, we plan to decorate the UCA dining room with lanterns and other traditional decorations, and Chinese food will be part of the menu that day," he said.

He added that the department organized the Global Education Project to assist the exchange students in America. Each participant must room with an American and live on campus. Because many of the students are studying music or art, the organization gives them opportunities to spread the Chinese culture through the arts.

"These students have a lot of energy, and the Lantern Festival in Jacksonville gives them a special and unique way to share the beauty of China with participants," he said.

Two of those students who will perform at the Feb. 19 event are Yuan Wang and Qing He. Both are students of traditional Chinese musical instruments. Wang, 21, has been studying the ancient gu-zheng, a plucked string instrument that is part of the zither family and a core instrument in both chamber and solo forums. He, 16, is majoring in languages and will be playing the Hu Li Si, or cucurbit flute, made of three bamboo pipes that pass through a gourd.

The Lantern Festival is a free event, and it's a chance for the public to learn more about the Chinese culture.

"I've been hosting a New Year or Lantern Festival since 2003," Khoo said. "It's a lot of fun, and there's no better way to promote community harmony."

Chen agreed that the community support is very encouraging.

The Department of Education is heavily involved in our work," Chen said. "In the end, we are making Arkansas students better prepared for careers in the global community."

"That's the beauty of the U.S.," Khoo said. "There are so many people here from different places, and so even if there is a language divide, we can appreciate the beauty of each other's culture. And that can be the beginning of a long friendship."

For more information on the event, call (501) 985-8888.