

THE INDIANAPOLIS STAR

Chinese scholar impressed with Americans' belief in their country

By: Pierre Atlas – April 10, 2013

In the United States, “the rule of law has been so widely accepted and exercised,” notes Shunji Cui. Non-arbitrary, rules-based processes offer a “greater possibility for openness and fairness. I think this is what China needs to learn.”

Cui, a professor of international relations at Zhejiang University in Hangzhou, China, is Marian University’s first Fulbright Scholar-in-Residence. She has been living on campus since August, and will return to China at the end of this academic year. Cui has lived in Japan and obtained her Ph.D. from the London School of Economics, but this is her first experience in the United States. She joined other Fulbright scholars in Reno, Nev., in November to observe the U.S. elections and she has recently seen the inner workings of Washington, D.C., all of which have enhanced her understanding of American democracy.

One of America’s “great strengths,” she observes, is that many Americans “believe in their country’s system and work hard to make it even better. I wish that more Chinese would have such attitudes.” But Cui also wishes that Americans knew more about today’s China. “Although China is still far away from democracy,” she notes, “it has been changing and is much more open and free than many Americans believe.”

Last month, Cui accompanied me and five Marian students to Washington for our annual Lugar Fellow spring break program. We met with Sens. Dan Coats and Joe Donnelly, former Sen. Richard Lugar, Reps. Susan Brooks and Andre Carson, and spent time with a former assistant secretary of state in the George W. Bush administration and a former trade ambassador in the Clinton administration. We visited National Public Radio and met with Morning Edition’s co-host and Carmel native Steve Inskeep, and discussed U.S.-China relations with diplomats at the Chinese Embassy. We visited the State Department, the Pentagon, Customs and Border Protection, the World Bank, the Brookings Institution and the CATO Institute. The program was an intense primer on American democracy and foreign policy, for both the students and our Fulbright scholar.

Cui was impressed with Washington and the American political system. She noted in particular the dedication and professionalism of all the people we met — from low-level staffers to high ranking officials and politicians — and the accountability and transparency of our governmental institutions. Americans may lose sight of these positive attributes with all the partisan bickering, but Cui brought fresh eyes to our nation’s capital.

I took the group to the Library of Congress to obtain their reader-researcher cards, free to anyone with photo ID. Cui comments, “I was astonished when I received a library card within five minutes, on the spot, even without making an appointment. This means that

as long as you go through the right procedures, follow the rules, these opportunities are open to you.” Cui was struck by the “Welcome, Please Come In” sign posted outside every congressman’s door in the House office buildings, noting that, “Whoever wants to see their representative can.” She marveled that “people in D.C. (including those with very high profiles) so openly and sincerely shared their experiences and thoughts with us.” Such accessibility does not exist in China or, frankly, in many other democracies.

The Fulbright Scholar-in-Residence Program, sponsored by the U.S. government, brings international scholars to American colleges and universities with the goal of increasing mutual understanding across nations and cultures. In addition to teaching courses at Marian, Cui has shared her expertise on Asia with the Central Indiana community by giving lectures at Kiwanis International, Sagamore Institute, and Butler University, and appearing on WFYI’s “No Limits” radio call-in show. She has also become active in the local Chinese community and regularly attends services at the Chinese Community Church of Indianapolis.

But the Fulbright experience goes both ways. Cui will return home enriched by her greater understanding of America, its people, culture, and democracy. She will take her knowledge and insights back to China, to share with her Chinese colleagues and students. We will all be the better for it.