

# Turkey is antidote for the loneliness of Chinese Students

katherine kersten columnist



What's the loneliest day of the year? Thanksgiving, if you're a foreign student at the University of Minnesota. While everyone else celebrates with family members, turkey and pumpkin pie, you're

stuck in an empty apartment.

But for Yang Lin, Jing Jing Zheng and his wife, Yi Hui Lei, things are different. They are spending Thanksgiving by the warm hearth of Ross and Karin Olson in Minneapolis.

China Outreach Ministries (COM) has been connecting Chinese students at the U with people like the Olsons since 1994. The organization works with volunteers, many from churches, to help visiting students meet the challenges of daily life. It also sponsors monthly dinners and outings to places such as Taylors Falls and Orchestra Hall.

**WE UNDERSTAND WHAT IT'S LIKE TO STRUGGLE WITH A NEW LANGUAGE, TO FEEL ILLITERATE AND INARTICULATE IN A NEW PLACE.** — Ross Olson

Each November the group hosts a "Chinese-American Afternoon" to introduce Chinese to the Thanksgiving holiday.

The need is great. The university has about 1,300 Chinese students and scholars, more than any other university in North America, according to Joan Brzezinski, associate director of the university's China Center. They are drawn by the U's strength in fields such as health and computer sciences and a relationship stretching back to 1914, when the university's first Chinese student arrived.

**Kersten continues:** The Olsons were medical missionaries. **B7** ▶

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The Olsons are ideal hosts. Ross, a retired physician, and Karin were medical missionaries in Hong Kong in the 1970s. They have adopted two Chinese children. "We understand what it's like to struggle with a new language, to feel illiterate and inarticulate in a new place," Ross said.

The Olsons do all they can to make Chinese students feel welcome. They meet them at the airport, put them up while they search for housing and help them open bank accounts. They've also given driving lessons and invited students to a lake cabin for July 4th. Years ago they took a student who was just off the plane to the hospital with them to see their first grandchild. Another grateful student asked their advice in naming his daughter.

Yang Lin, who arrived in Minnesota in August, says the Olsons' help has been critical. "Many international students think their daily life is a bit boring," said Lin, a graduate student in education. "They have not so many friends and are so far from their families. Sometimes they have too much academic pressure. They have no joy."

The isolation can be compounded by communication barriers. "Sometimes my American friends tell me a joke," Lin said, "and I don't know why they are laughing."

The Olsons smoothed the bumps for Lin.

"Ross helped me shop for a bicycle and a computer, and showed me where I can buy cheap food," Lin said. And the two went to Dairy Queen, where Lin first tasted coffee ice cream — now his favorite dessert. He has eagerly anticipated his first Thanksgiving. "We have so few chances to go to



Provided by the Olson family

Starting with the empty chair and going counterclockwise, Karin Olson, KaWan Olson (daughter), Stanley Olson (Ross' father), Rachel Olson (daughter-in-law), Laura Olson (granddaughter), Jeff Olson (son), Susan Anderson (daughter), Eric Anderson (son-in-law), Tao Xu, Edythe Falck (Karin's mother).

an American family's home," he said. "I want to know more about American daily life."

Tao Xu, a visiting scholar in law at the U's China Center, attended the "Chinese-American Afternoon" with the Olsons on Nov. 12. There he learned about the holiday's history and meaning, including traditions such as pulling the wishbone. Afterward the Olsons took him home for a typical Thanksgiving feast.

Like most Chinese, Xu had never eaten turkey. "It was delicious," he said. "I liked it very much, also the pumpkin pie and the stuffing."

Karin Olson added: "It was Tao's first time in an American home, and he loved it. He videotaped Ross carving the turkey, and then we showed him all around the house." Chinese visitors are often fascinated with American homes, she said. "They're interested in everything — the water heater, the furnace." Xu took pictures of every room to send to his wife in China.

Chinese often arrive with

misconceptions about Thanksgiving. Most think that the first American settlers initiated the holiday to thank the Indians for their help at a difficult time. They are surprised to learn that the Pilgrims held the feast to thank God, she said.

Yang Lin learned about Thanksgiving while in China from the TV show "Friends," which he said is wildly popular there. "Thanksgiving: turkey and football," he said.

Xu first heard about the holiday from his high school English teacher. "And my friends in the USA told me about Thanksgiving and then Black Friday: You have a very big sale." No misconception there.

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