

# TSAI-FONG: “WHEN THE WIND BLOWS, THE GRASS BENDS”

By Kristeen Ruddle '97



## *Dr. Phylis Lan Lin*

In 1997 the baccalaureate program in social work at the University of Indianapolis was accredited and appropriately named “The Phylis Lan Lin Program in Social Work.” Since beginning her career with UIndy in 1973, Dr. Lin has served under four “excellent” University presidents. She has been the driving force behind the development of the The Phylis Lan Lin Program in Social Work, Asian Programs, and University of Indianapolis Press.<sup>1</sup>

Her career reaches far beyond the University of Indianapolis. In 1996, Mayor William Hudnut III proclaimed July 26, 1991, as “Dr. Phylis Lan Lin Day” to honor her contributions in strengthening the family unit all over the world. In November 2001, Dr. Lin was designated a member of the “Good Old Girls” in the *Indianapolis Business Journal's* issue on *Women in Business*, which named her as one of the 33 most influential women in the city of Indianapolis. She was highlighted in the March 2003 *Indianapolis Woman* as a person of inspiration because of her survival of breast cancer. If you do an internet search, you will find hundreds of “hits” on Google, recording her many accomplishments.<sup>2</sup>



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Dr. Lin is much more than her accomplishments. She is a mixture of modesty, humility, passion, energy, dedication, vision, and humor. She tells you that she was born in Taiwan to a “modest family.” Modest, maybe! She is also, interesting, caring, civic minded, and full of life.

#### EARLY INFLUENCES:

Dr. Lin was born on Dec. 15, 1942, the first-born of five children— four girls and one boy—to Yun-teng Lan and Dr. Yu-chiao Liu. Her father gave her a beautiful Chinese name, “Tsai-Fong,” which means “When the wind blows, the grass bends.” Dr. Lin’s father, an artist and philosopher, did his painting even at age 87. Dr. Lin describes her mother as a strong female role model. Dr. Yu-chiao Liu Lan maintained her career and marriage while raising five children. Yun-teng Lan and Dr. Yu-chiao Liu Lan were married for 56 years.

Her mother was an ophthalmologist, and her father owned a pharmaceutical company. Her father and mother worked together to develop an eye medicine to cure an eye disease prevalent in Chinese children. The medication was patented and produced for free use in Taiwan through her mother’s volunteer services for school children for many years. Humanitarianism was imprinted in Dr. Lin at a young age through observing her parents on “free clinic” days when they dispensed the eye medication to children at no charge. She learned about the importance of giving to others from her parents, a lesson which is still part of her life.<sup>3</sup>

#### EDUCATION:

Her parents gave Dr. Lin a strong foundation in the areas of education, civic engagement, and art. Education was important to her parents and to Dr. Lin. She struggled as a student in her early years. In the fourth grade, she became ill and was considered “too fragile” to go to school. She repeated the fourth grade and took remedial classes every summer. In her educational pursuits, Dr. Lin was a slow learner, yet she strived to succeed. She persevered and graduated after five years from Tunghai University (a Methodist, private, and liberal arts university) in 1966 with a degree in sociology, and minors in social work and psychology.

Dr. Lin describes herself as a “rebellious” student. Ten percent of the faculty at Tunghai were American. She found some of the Americans to be kind and others to be somewhat ethnocentric. She recalls having to sign a paper, requested by a British instructor to all students, at the end of taking a test, stating they had not cheated. She had not cheated, but she did not want to sign the paper. She thought this international teacher was insulting Chinese students by not trusting their honesty. She learned from those who were ethnocentric to be objective and respectful, and from those who only half-taught to always put her whole heart into every lecture as a professor. She was greatly influenced by a quiet, gentle American, Paul Alexander ’49, a graduate of Indiana Central College (now UINDY), who taught biology, and his wife, Lucille ’49. The Alexanders, Christian missionaries, loved their Chinese students at Tunghai. The Alexanders’ ad-

opted Asian children. Dr. Lin saw their kindness to people of different races. Observing the Alexanders’ faith in action, Dr. Lin defines the meaning of “being Christian” in her own way.



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Dr. Lin emulated the Alexanders’ compassion and empathy. Dr. Lin embraces the same life orientation from her native culture, the teaching of the Goddess of Mercy (Guanyin).

Initially, Dr. Lin began her college courses with a major in biology. However, her involvement in community service led her to change her major. She participated in work camps on the weekends: digging ditches and cleaning up neighborhoods. As a sophomore she took a summer job through the Christian Children’s Fund, receiving \$20 USD, for interviewing 200 indigent families applying for financial aid. As a result of her experiences in the community, sociology and social work became her passion and life-time commitment.

Dr. Lin wanted to pursue a graduate degree in applied sociology. Her parents wanted her to see the real world and encouraged her to go to the United States. Her father used to tell her, “We live on a small island just like a frog that lives in a well. You only see that much of the sky. You must jump out of the well and go to America to see the big sky country.” She went to Montana where even the sun and the moon looked much bigger. An American host family opened their home to her and she has determined to reciprocate the kindness she had received from this American family to Americans whom she has encountered. She graduated from Montana State University in 1968 and went on to earn her Ph.D. in sociology from the University of Missouri-Columbia in 1972.<sup>4</sup>

#### CAREER:

Dr. Lin’s first teaching job was at Missouri Southeast State University. She and her husband, Dr. Leon Lin, an aerospace engineer, graduated together. He took a position with General Motors in Indianapolis. When Dr. Lin finished her first year at MSSU, she looked at colleges in the Indianapolis area. Her reason for applying for a teaching position at what was then known as Indiana Central College demonstrates her sense of humor and her practicality. When asked why she chose ICC, she replied, “I did not want to drive on the interstate and I wanted to relocate with my husband.”

She interviewed with the president of the University. By the end of the interview, she was offered a teaching position. Since beginning her teaching at UINDY in 1973, Dr. Lin has worked an average of 10 hours a day, 6 days a week. She believes that education and hard work will lead you somewhere whether you are American or Chinese. Dr. Lin became an American citizen in 1975. She calls herself a Chinese-American, dressing in Chinese outfits 95% of the time, eating both Chinese and American food. She says this has caused her to gain 30 pounds since arriving in America! Throughout her career at UIndy, Dr. Lin has brought a greater awareness of the two cultures together for students, faculty and community members.<sup>5</sup>

Dr. Lin worked full-time while raising her daughter, Toni, who is an orthopedic surgeon resident. Dr. Lin says that she is proud of two women in her life, her mother and her daughter. And both of them are medical doctors. Dr. Lin considers herself fortunate to have been able to combine motherhood and career. She believes this is because of her supportive husband. She says that the number one secret for a married professional woman to balance work and family is to have a supportive spouse.

Dr. Lin is as full of energy and zest today as she was when she first began teaching 34 years ago. She believes in providing the best quality education for students. She brings her cultural heritage to her students, to the faculty and to the larger community through her work as an educator. She considers her cultural heritage her best collateral. She stays abreast of the societal-political changes in Taiwan and mainland China, traveling to Taiwan and China frequently. She has reached out to the university and to the community and brought opportunities for others to reach out as well. At the fifth International Symposium on China, Dr. Phylis Lan Lin observed, "My whole idea of education is service. We not only try to serve our university community, but we try to serve the real community of Indianapolis and Indiana. I try to bring my part of the world to Indiana...through the promotion of cultural understanding, we will realize

more about our humanity" (Indianapolis Star, September 28, 1995).<sup>6</sup>

You do not have to look far to know how much she has accomplished during her career as a sociologist and a college professor. She has done research in the general areas of work, stress, marriage, and the family. This has led her to write many articles and books and to lead workshops and lectures since beginning her career in 1972. A prolific writer in various subjects, she is the author and co-author of many books (in both Chinese and English). She has presented at over 60 conferences in the United States, Taiwan, Mainland China, Europe and South Africa. She is a member of the North America Chinese Social Scientists Association, the North American Chinese Sociological Association, the Western Social Science Association, Indiana Council on Family Relations, Inter-University Consortium for International Social Development, and more. She serves as a member of the Board of Directors for several community and professional organizations, including the International Center of Indianapolis and the American Association for Chinese Studies.<sup>7</sup>

In 1997, Dr. Lin was diagnosed with breast cancer. In keeping with her "take charge" approach to life, Dr. Lin was proactive in her fight to turn it into the most positive experience possible. She fortunately has had a full recovery. She broke through cultural norms and shared her experiences with others. Recognizing the reluctance of Asian women to talk about such things, she wrote "Dance with Cancer" to encourage other women to be proactive in their fight against cancer. Her fight with cancer did not slow her down. She was in the midst of treatment when she was the speaker at the inauguration of the Phylis Lan Lin Social Work Program in 1997.<sup>8</sup>

Dr. Mary Moore, Vice President for Research, Planning, & Strategic Partnerships describes Dr. Lin as an ambassador for the university. Through her tireless work, Dr. Lin has drawn positive recognition to the university and the community. As a "benefactor," she creates forums for her colleagues to be involved and recognized. Dr. Lin's work is much more than teaching, writing, research, and all that goes with



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higher education. Few know about the many ways in which she reaches out to students, both American and international. She has a special affinity for the international students, understanding the challenges of being away from home and learning to use a second language. She welcomes students into her life and into her home. She has dinners at her home for students at least twice a year. She mentors students and challenges them to think analytically and grow in their desire to learn. She gives generously of herself and her resources to help individuals and programs.

Dr. Moore emphasizes that Dr. Lin has chosen to stay at the university and in so doing has enriched the lives of many. Dr. Lin's approach to life and work reflects the paradox of who she is: humble, yet visionary, practical, yet generous, scholarly, yet humorous. Dr. Lin has a strong desire to be recognized, not for herself, but for the strength and value of what she believes in. Her values are reflected in the programs she has implemented, the beauty she has brought to the physical environment of the campus, and through her mentoring role with students and faculty.<sup>9</sup>



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## CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND ART

With the strong foundation formed in her childhood, it was inevitable that Dr. Lin would use her position as an educator, and her love of art and music, to enrich the cultural lives of her university and her city. One way Dr. Lin brought together her love of America and China was by offering her services to the International Center of Indianapolis. In 1995, Dr. Lin sought out Cathy Blitzer, Executive Director for the International Center. Dr. Blitzer welcomed Dr. Lin's offer to help and considers Dr. Lin her "sister." There was an immediate feeling of kinship and sense of focus. Dr. Blitzer shared how Dr. Lin "pushes people beyond the brink." Dr. Lin invited Dr. Blitzer to be the keynote speaker at the 2000 Annual Meeting for Chinese Americans. Dr. Lin challenged Dr. Blitzer to not only speak, but to publish her speech. Dr. Blitzer admits that without the push from Dr. Lin she would never have attempted this, but grew through the experi-

ence and values the lessons she learned. Dr. Lin is often called upon to act as a hostess for families or individuals from other countries. Dr. Blitzer knows that she can call upon Dr. Lin at any time, and she will make time to share the city of Indianapolis with visitors from other countries.<sup>10</sup>

Dr. Lin continues to seek ways to enrich the cultural lives of her community and university. In 2003, Dr. Lin arranged for Bonnie Kwan Huo, a Chinese artist, to have a 3-week solo exhibition at the Christel DeHaan Fine Arts Center. Dr. Lin arranged for Bonnie to lecture on "Tea in Chinese Culture," as sold-out book, best-selling book *Tea Appreciation*. In Bonnie's own words, Dr. Lin "makes people think, work hard, and expand horizons."

In 2004, Dr. Lin realized her dream to have a Chinese art museum at the University of Indianapolis. Through her twenty year friendship with Master Artist, Au Ho-nien, and the University of Indianapolis now hosts a museum of Master Au's art. One of the greatest living Chinese artists, Master Au Ho-nien epitomizes the very best of the traditional Chinese scholar: master calligrapher, skilled seal carver, connoisseur and collector of the arts, cultivated expert on Chinese classic literature. Scholars of Master Au's level of refinement were all but wiped out during China's upheavals of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. Students, faculty, staff, visitors, and community members are able to view the collection free of charge, reinforcing Dr. Lin's and the University of Indianapolis' commitment to promote awareness of cultural diversity.<sup>11</sup>

Her latest endeavors have included bringing opera and art together through collaboration with Indianapolis Opera. Dr. Michael Sells, from Butler University, discussed Puccini's "Turandot" and the principal cast members of Indianapolis Opera production performed selections from the opera at an event held in the Au Honien Museum, hosted by Dr. Lin. After 33 years with the University of Indianapolis, Dr. Lin shows no signs of slowing down in enriching the lives of those around her.

## PERSONAL PHILOSOPHY

At any given time, Dr. Lin is involved in countless organizations and is elbow deep in a variety of projects. One might wonder if there is any connection between the seemingly unrelated events that consume her precious time. Dr. Lin says her greatest joy comes from serving others. When considering how to spend her time, she always asks if and how many people will benefit from it. If she can do one thing that will positively affect a large number of people, then she knows she has spent her time wisely. Her greatest sense of accomplishment comes not from awards and recognition, but from the feedback of students and others that have been positively affected by her efforts

With so many accomplishments under her belt, and so many years of experience, it is conceivable that Dr. Lin would always find herself in a teaching position, but this is not true. In keeping with her humble spirit, she always strives to learn from others in any way she can whether it is using the latest technology or handling university policy or working with students or administrators. When she is met with objection or criticism, she tries to seriously look at what she can do to understand what the issue is and uses personal reflection to consider what is right and what needs to be done. She unselfishly speaks out for the greater good with honesty and conviction.

Dr. Lin's Chinese name seems to describe her way of life. While others only daydream of the things they want to accomplish, Dr. Lin works tirelessly until her goals are accomplished. Her resourcefulness is astounding on account of the fact that she builds and maintains professional and personal relationships with such a variety of prestigious individuals and organizations all over the world. In her endeavors, she sparks inspiration in almost everyone she comes into contact with. Through her intense focus and unmatched work ethic, she is certain to have a great impact in any way she is inclined. "When the wind blows, the grass bends," and Dr. Lin is the wind.<sup>12</sup>

## PHOTOGRAPHS

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- A Phylis Lan Lin with UIndy faculty and staff: Charlotte Templin, Cam Flora, Steve Maple, Jeff Adams on their visit to China (2004.) Personal photograph used with the permission of Dr. Phylis Lan Lin.
- B Dr. Lin at five months old with Mom.
- C Statue of the Goddess of Mercy, a Buddhist image that has inspired Dr. Phylis Lan Lin's involvement in service at UIndy over the past three decades. Personal photograph used with the permission of Dr. Phylis Lan Lin.
- D Dr. Phylis Lan Lin and Master Artist Au Ho Nien at the opening of the museum on the lower level of the Schwitzer Student Center (2004) at the University of Indianapolis. Personal photograph used with the permission of Dr. Phylis Lan Lin.
- E Dr. Phylis Lan Lin speaking at the Christel De Haan School in South Africa (2005). Personal photograph used with the permission of Dr. Phylis Lan Lin.
- F Phylis with Chinese Muslim woman, an example of her work as International Ambassador for the University of Indianapolis. Personal photograph used with the permission of Dr. Phylis Lan Lin.
- G Dr. Lin with daughter Dr. Toni Lin and husband Dr. Leon Lin.

## ENDNOTES

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- <sup>1</sup>. See "The Legacy of Dr. Phylis Lan Lin" by Kris Ruddle in *Social Work Newsletter* (Fall 2003), p. 4
- <sup>2</sup>. Interview with Dr. Phylis Lan Lin, July 2003
- <sup>3</sup>. Interview with Dr. Phylis Lan Lin, April 2006
- <sup>4</sup>. Interview with Dr. Phylis Lan Lin, April 2006
- <sup>5</sup>. Phylis Lan Lin, "Education and Work Life" speech given at the Northwood Women's Salon Connecting Cultures Seminar, Sept. 29, 2005
- <sup>6</sup>. Catherine Gregor Blitzer, "Images of Chinese Americans in Central Indiana", publication of speech by IACA, given at Joint Annual Meeting, Nov. 18, 2000, p. 6
- <sup>7</sup>. Interview with Dr. Phylis Lan Lin, April 2006
- <sup>8</sup>. See article "2003 Breast Cancer Handbook" in *Indianapolis Women's Monthly*, March 2003, p. 60
- <sup>9</sup>. Interview with Dr. Mary Moore, University of Indianapolis, May 2006
- <sup>10</sup>. Interview with Cathy Gregor Blitzer, Executive Director of International Center of Indianapolis, May 2006
- <sup>11</sup>. For more information on Au Ho nien Museum check the website, [www.uindy.edu](http://www.uindy.edu)
- <sup>12</sup>. Interview with Dr. Phylis Lan Lin, May 2006