The China-Missouri Reporting Project: Final Report

At first glance, Missouri seems about as far from China as you can get -- culturally, geographically and otherwise. But after diving under the surface, our three team members found the connections between them are often close and surprising. The result of our reporting is “The China Connection,” a multimedia project on this under-reported topic for mid-Missouri’s NPR affiliate KBIA.

In this project, we explored the growing number of hidden connections between mid-Missouri and China. We discovered that China’s growth as a world power has already had subtle effects across our state -- on the students of a military academy in Mexico, Mo., on an aspiring singer in Warrensburg, on a scrap metal dealer in Moberly, and on other Missourians, too.
For our research portion, we surveyed 5 percent of MU’s Chinese international students on their experiences and challenges coming to an American college. Our study was conducted in Chinese to put participants more at ease, and our data provides a rare look into one of MU’s fastest growing groups of students, including specific financial figures. We found that an overwhelming majority of Chinese students come to MU through an “agency,” that many of them spend thousands of dollars on test-preparation classes, and that Chinese undergraduates very rarely receive any financial aid. Our survey also provides qualitative data on Chinese students’ experience at MU and their goals for the future.

This project was challenging, as we were covering stories with a huge geographical reach with limited reporting resources. However, we wanted to tell stories from small towns to show that the China story is not just about big cities and big businesses. In the end, we chose to highlight stories in Moberly, Mexico, Norborne and Warrensburg. Our primary reporting site was Columbia, where we focused on finding stories that have not previously been reported by the local media, but are still very relevant for KBIA’s viewership.

This project provided us with the opportunity to report and produce a unique body of work for KBIA, while improving our understanding of international issues. Each of us read extensively on our chosen topic (either education, culture or economics), developed contacts in this field, and then used this knowledge base to find stories that had previously gone unreported.
Our project demonstrates that a student reporting team can localize one of the biggest international stories -- China’s economic rise -- in a way that is relevant for a local Missouri audience. It also provides a model for multimedia issue coverage at KBIA: We created a standing page of rich content that can be added to in the future. Indeed, KBIA has already started using our China Connection page as an anchor for other China-related stories.

REPORTING

Each of us developed and reported four stories on a different subject: Rachel on education, Chenfei on culture, and Eva on the economy. Many of our stories explore hidden connections to China in Missouri’s small towns -- from a military academy in Mexico, to an aspiring singer in Warrensburg, to a scrap metal dealer in Moberly. Very few of these stories have previously received much attention in our area. Although our primary outlet is radio, each of our stories incorporates at least two media forms to create a richer, multi-faceted experience.

-EDUCATION/RACHEL

I was designated the Education beat within our reporting series. It was interesting to me that according to our research(1), Chinese families are sending their children to America to get an education in increasing numbers. The Chinese, as I have gathered in the interviews I’ve performed, regard America as the very best in education. However, it takes a pretty large investment on the part of Chinese families. American universities offer few scholarships to Chinese students, because often, the Chinese families will accept the full burden of tuition, making Chinese students economically beneficial to American colleges. It also presents the challenge to Chinese families of applying to an American school when the application process is
so very different for enrollment in a Chinese college. I reported on all of these factors for Chinese students coming to America, and specifically to Missouri.

But there’s another side to the education story. In an increasingly global world, many American students are finding it prevalent to study Chinese. America has strong business ties with China (something Eva expounds upon in the economic reporting beat) and so the Chinese language has practical applications for American students.

The first story I reported on was about the Confucius Institute at the University of Missouri, established a year ago to help local businesses establish business ties in China, and more generally, to bring the Chinese culture and language to mid-Missouri. There are several dozen Confucius institutes at universities in the U.S., and over a hundred worldwide. The institutes were established by the Chinese government, ostentatiously to improve their image in the eyes of other countries. In my preliminary research(3)(4)(5), I came across several instances of controversy at other universities concerned that the Confucius Institutes were established there to spread propaganda for the Chinese government. However, no one had spoken out yet against the Confucius Institute at the University of Missouri. I wanted to ask the institute what they were doing to further education in mid-Missouri, but I approached this story with caution because of the circumstances.

I interviewed Handy Williamson, vice-provost to the university and Confucius Institute co-founder, and he of course disregarded any notion that the institute might be a tool for propaganda for the Chinese government. (I also talked to other people about this in the district, who said that no one was making a fuss about it.) I also interviewed Wen Ouyang, the current director of the Confucius Institute. They gave me a long list of the things that the Confucius Institute was currently working on and helping with. After talking to them, I focused my story on
the Columbia public schools that the Confucius Institute has partnered with in order to implement Chinese language programs there. I interviewed Suzanne Yonke with Columbia Public School District and Beth Gardner with Columbia Independent School. I found that the Confucius Institute was providing Chinese teachers to these schools, as well as setting up a curriculum. According to Ouyang, the schools are following a national trend of becoming increasingly interested in the Chinese language.

The second story I worked on was about the Chinese students who come to America to go to college. I wanted to do a piece about why they came here and what the process was like. I also wanted to breach the subject of Chinese agencies that assist students who want to come to school here. Because of my research(6), I was aware that agencies often did underhand things like write essays for their student clients or forge recommendation letters. The Chinese families that hire them want the help because the process for applying to schools in China is very different, so applying to an American university could be very confusing for them. I tried to contact an agency in St. Louis (an unusual find, as most of them are based in China) but they never responded to my calls. However, I did get to interview three Chinese students at MU with different perspectives on agencies, and different experiences in enrolling at MU. Zephrah was neutral in perspective, though she had considered using an agency to come here until she found the ‘Two-Plus-Two’ program. Bea was very against agencies because she believed that it was the
wealthy’s method of cheating their way into college. Yuanchi, who spoke very little English, came here through an agency. I also interviewed Ernest Zhang at the Journalism International office about the school’s ‘Two-Plus-Two’ program for Chinese students wanting to come to MU. I did this story as a video piece to add more multimedia to the education aspect of the China Connection page.

The third story I did was on the Missouri Military Academy. I had heard that they had a new Chinese language program, so I went to Mexico, Mo., to talk to the administrators there, as well as a few students. I found out that the Missouri Military Academy was doing a lot with China this year. They were just starting their Chinese language program, they were receiving student recruits from China at an increasing rate, they were sending students to China for the first time this year, and a group of Chinese boys came to MMA for an ‘American experience’ for the first time this year. I talked to the president of the school, the dean, and the Chinese language teacher. They told me that because Missouri Military Academy was a very college-oriented school, they wanted to only teach the students things that would help them in the future. The president explained that Chinese had begun to eclipse French in usefulness as a language, so they switched. He also expressed interest in starting an exchange program with a school in China. I also talked to a Chinese student and a student in the Chinese
language class. Because this story had so many different points to it, I struggled to put it together into a script, but Amy helped me out and it eventually got there.

Instead of doing a fourth story, the team and I determined that it would be more worth my time to work on an information graphic with which to present our survey data. We had all contributed in writing and passing out the survey, and we eventually got 50 respondents. I wanted to present this information in a way that was both clear and visually appealing. After making sure that the KBIA website could support Flash, I made an interactive graphic with several tabs: “Getting Accepted”, “College” and “Agencies”. All of the survey questions are answered on the graphic so that people looking at the graphic can notice trends.

-ECONOMY/EVA

The growing volume of China-Missouri trade is an important story, especially in light of a new $4.4 billion trade deal struck last year (2). But this story can sometimes also a “boring” one, full of numbers and jargon. In reporting the economic story, I tried to tell the story of the numbers in engaging ways, through the stories of individual Missourians. Thus, the economic stories focused on people in a variety of locations and professions: A scrap metal dealer in Moberly, a soybean farmer in Norborne, a stockbroker in Columbia, and a mid-Missouri immigration lawyer.

My first story was about the little-known -- but huge -- scrap metal export business. I decided on this story after requesting export data from the Missouri Department of Economic Development and individual business groups. From the data, I found that “waste and scrap” was the largest export category to China -- a fact that is often overlooked. Officials generally try to downplay the volume of scrap exports (it is not grouped as “scrap” in the data but separated into different sub-categories) and the true importance of this industry is not evident without a close
look at the figures. My story appears to be the first in mid-Missouri to delve into scrap exports, even though this has long been the state’s biggest export to China. The audio story tells how China’s growing demand for metals and construction materials led one Missouri scrap dealer to set up an office in Hong Kong, and how it boosted business for another scrap dealer who doesn’t even sell internationally. The goal was to show the interconnectedness of today’s markets -- the construction of a skyscraper on the other side of the world trickles through the supply chain to a little junkyard here. This story also included a video and photos to provide a multifaceted look at this industry.

The agricultural story was challenging, because at first, it was difficult to narrow down the vast subject of China-Missouri agricultural trade into a unique and compelling narrative. After cold-calling more than a dozen people on the list of the 2011 China-Missouri trade delegation, I found the soybean farmer who is the focus of this story. The farmer, Ron Gibson, has never previously been featured in mid-Missouri media, and I believe his trade trip to China after 70 years on a Missouri soybean farm is a unique window into this subject. His
schedule was also difficult to coordinate with, and I had to shoot the photos between bouts of rain with a tornado warning.

The other two economic stories were a video about a Columbia start-up company that translates Chinese financial reports into English, and a radio report about the promise and risk of “investment immigration” in Missouri. The story about the start-up gives a close-up look at how China-Missouri trade works on the micro level -- how an individual business deal is struck. In this case, it was simply a phone call to a stranger on the other side of the world. The immigration story (story waiting to be aired; this is the audio file) focused on a Columbia company, but also included mention of a St. Louis businessman who planned to build an entire town based off Chinese investment; I had found him through phone calls to the China-Missouri trade delegation list, and this was the first time his story was told. I chose these topics as fresh and underreported facets to the topic of trade with China. The goal was to show that Missouri’s economic links to China extend beyond the obvious ones of agriculture, cheap clothing and iPods.

-CULTURE/CHENFEI

By looking at how Chinese culture spreads in mid-Missouri, we find that the story is bigger than just the individual interesting characters.

People are learning Chinese languages because they see it as an important business language in the future. People have more opportunities to be exposed to Chinese culture because more Chinese immigrants are coming here. Culture is not a part which just stands alone.

The culture part of “The China Connection” explores three main stories with four characters. The first one is about how the Chinese traditional martial art tai chi tied a Missouri English teacher and a Chinese family together. First, I told the story from the perspective of the English teacher, who has long been a tai chi lover. One day, in her class, she talked about the fan...
used in tai chi, and a Chinese student in her class then asked her if she likes tai chi and invited her to practice together. Since then, the English teacher became exposed to Chinese culture more and more, and she was invited to China in 2009. Through her story, we can see what China is like in an ordinary Missourian’s eyes. Then, I have the story of that Chinese student’s father, who just moved to Missouri and is now making a living as a tai chi master. Through him, we not only see how his American students benefit from tai chi, we can see how he is getting help from them to adjust to a new life here.

The second story is about a college student’s singing dream. In this story, you will not only listen to her singing Chinese songs, but also learn why she picked up Chinese and what struggles she has gone through. Two slideshows add more layers to the story by telling how her family’s attitude has changed. This story gives the readers a chance to look into the pop Chinese culture, which has not been paid much attention to by Western audiences.

The last story is about a Columbia woman who has many ties to China. There are two videos, one of which will lead us back to her grandparents’ early stories of Americans in China,
and it shows us how that changed her life and determined what she is doing now. The other one focuses on one of the many things this China-Columbia liaison is doing - operating a Chinese immersion pre-school. This supplements with Rachel’s Chinese language program story very well by illustrating those efforts from grassroots.

**RESEARCH**

For our research portion, we collected survey data on the experiences and challenges of Chinese international students coming to an American college. We decided to do this because Chinese international students on MU’s campus are easily accessible, but not many people in KBIA’s audience understand how different the college application and acceptance process is for Chinese students. We wrote the survey in Chinese to make it easier for the participants, administered the surveys one-by-one around campus to 50 students (about 5 percent of MU’s Chinese student population), then translated the responses. The end result was an interactive graphic displaying the data we had collected from the Chinese international students at MU. We surveyed about 5 percent of the Chinese international student population at MU and asked questions about their major, how they made the decision to attend MU, what the process was like, and what they plan to do afterwards. We were particularly interested in ‘Chinese agencies’ that offer services to college students, such as helping to find and apply for the right school. We were interested in them because of the nature of some of the agencies, which were rumored to resort to cheating in order to get students into American colleges. We wanted to get an idea of the extent of the problem at the University of Missouri. In the end, we were successful with our research goals.

Our data reveals some interesting findings, such as:
-80% of the undergraduate students received no financial aid and paid the $32K cost of attendance entirely out-of-pocket.

-More than 50% of Chinese undergraduate students applied to MU through an "agent", generally paying thousands to have their application professionally prepared.

-Almost three-quarters of respondents paid for SAT/GRE training classes.

-Most would prefer to stay in the U.S. rather than return to China.

WORKING WITH KBIA

After deciding on our topic, we researched local media outlets and decided KBIA to be the ideal host of our project, because of its wide geographical reach and its focus on multicultural issues. We pitched the project idea to KBIA director Janet Saidi and received quick approval. She thought it would be a good step forward for KBIA's multimedia development. In planning our series, we researched previous radio stations’ multimedia projects, such as KBIA’s “40/40” and “My Life, My Town,” and NPR’s multimedia report on a group of Russian islands.
The name of our project - China Connection - was born with the help of KBIA. With the guidance of content director Scott Pham, we wrote the intro and anchor tag, and designed a logo (at right) to get our project set up on the website.

KBIA was also part of our editorial process. After we did the peer- and mentor-editing, we sent our stories to KBIA for polishing. Usually, for audio stories, we sent either Janet or Ryan Famuliner the script to look through before we voiced over and did the production; for video stories, we sent the videos and got feedbacks. All the story packages finally went to Scott Pham for publishing on the website, and Scott would send the link to us to make sure there was no problem in the way the whole story was presented.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

The challenges we faced as a capstone mostly had to do with the sheer size of our topic, in both geography and subject matter. For one thing, a significant portion of our story takes place on another continent, so we had to be creative in finding local sources who had recently made trips to China. Another distance issue that we came across was that many of the compelling China stories in Missouri are located quite far from Columbia. We traveled to several other towns to report, but there was a constant balance between newsworthiness and resources. For instance, we had to give up pursuit of several interesting stories because of distance. We discovered a previously unreported St. Louis agency that sources Chinese students to MU (they’ll even make sure the students aren’t lonely on their birthdays!) and also an EB-5 “investment immigrant” project in the Missouri bootheel whose CEO has a shady past. But when the sources for these stories stopped responding to phone calls, we did not have the resources to press the matter in person -- as this would have required a full-day trip for an exceedingly slim
chance at an interview. This goes to show that the China Connection is far from an exhausted topic; with further resources, there are many more good stories to tell. We were mindful that our stories needed to be both global and local, covering international issues while appealing to local audiences. This is a challenge that many global-reporting focused capstones will face.

Another challenge was that this was a self-pitched, self-directed project, so there was little direction from our client. Communication with KBIA was slightly disorganized at first, as they sometimes missed our emails, and at the beginning, we didn’t realize we needed to coordinate with Scott for all aspects of posting content instead of just sending our stories to Janet. However, things went smoothly once the China Connection topic page was set up and we had posted several stories. Also, it took us more time than most teams to figure out what to do for our research portion, as we were a reporting team and our client didn’t require market research or analytics research.

One difficulty was the length of time it took our stories to be completed. We would report a story, then show it to our teammates, then show it to Amy, re-edit, show it to KBIA (and sometimes Harvest Public Media, if there was a chance it would also run there), re-edit, do a read-through, then re-edit again before final production and the listen-through. Each stage often took a day or more, as this was not breaking news, so editors generally scheduled it around their more immediate duties. After the story was complete, Scott might require more changes for the web version, and it was usually several more days before it hit the website. This could take a very long time for radio stories, and longer for video. Although we had no problem completing our stories, our interview subjects sometimes asked why our stories were taking so long to be published. Future capstone groups pursuing a similar project might consider how they can streamline this process.
In doing this reporting series, we had the opportunity to hone in and learn about a specific topic that we could then build on and continue to report on. Creating this series and making it into a cohesive whole was really satisfying. We learned practical aspects of localizing international issues and planning a big, sprawling series for multimedia. The China Connection page on KBIA will be a good addition to our portfolios, especially if we choose to pursue international reporting in our future careers. We also got to help KBIA expand its multimedia presence, by providing stories with visual appeal for its website.

We had the opportunity to expand our cultural horizons. Rachel learned a lot of things about Chinese culture that she had not previously known, and Chenfei and Eva became more knowledgeable as well. They also had the unique opportunity to write about Chinese culture - something they grew up with - in a way that appealed to an American audience. The connection between Missouri and China is an underreported topic, one that many newsrooms have not pursued to the extent that it deserves, either due to lack of resources or interest. We were able to get ahead of the curve on this story, reporting proactively, spotlighting previously untold angles, and making this entire topic into a cohesive whole.

**CONCLUSION**

By reporting on this under-covered topic, we gave our mid-Missouri audience a chance to look deeper into the China-Missouri connection, and provided KBIA with a topic section that serves as an anchor point for its future China coverage. We shed more light on Missouri’s global ties, and showed a different side of the local community -- a side that is expanding its cultural horizons.
Sources: