

SUNY | NEW PALTZ

Living, learning

Chinese, American students
mix in novel SUNY program

By Mike Townshend

IN THE BASEMENT of Crispell Hall, Anja Allnach, Heather Rae and Danwei Zheng show visitors through their dorm room. On the walls around them hang a poster of a Dalek from Doctor Who, a fashion poster in Chinese – with no translation for hapless Americans – and framed calligraphy.

In the dorm suite's living room, an old tube television stares out, cold and black, like a silent sentinel – only slightly less gloomy because of an accent of purple plastic from a Nintendo Gamecube. For the most part, the girls' living space could be like any in the newly renovated dormitory. Students get into the state-of-the-art residence hall with electronic, hotel-style keycards and their floor is co-ed, with separate suites for men and women, complying with the latest trends in college living.

One key difference is that most of the time the students speak to their roommates in Chinese. The suitemates are part of a SUNY New Paltz language immersion experiment called the "China-U.S. Living-Learning Community."

"It's basically a big cultural exchange," explains Rae, an American student studying Chinese at SUNY New Paltz. Each room pairs an American studying Mandarin Chinese with an international exchange student from China. If either one of the roommates has questions – about American slang or the subtleties of Chinese culture – they can ask and learn.

"It actually really does help," says Allnach.

One of the biggest problems for students of Asian languages, or most any foreign language, is that sooner or later they get around to living, learning and thinking in an English-only environment. Even a few minutes back in the university dining hall hearing English again, and those once-bright foreign language brain cells dim and flicker like a broken light bulb.

For a foreign student in America, the confusion might lie in knowing passable English, but not having the exact right word to convey a newer, deeper shade of meaning.

"If I hear something that I didn't hear before,



PHOTO BY LAUREN THOMAS

SUNY New Paltz students Heather Rae and Danwei Zheng are roommates in Crispell Hall as part of the new China-US Living-Learning Community program at the college.

I just ask," says Zheng, an international student from China. "I feel like I'm not just sitting in a classroom learning a language. Some things I just can't learn from a textbook."

When Ian Weitz came back from his stint abroad at Nanjing University, he knew that without language immersion he might lose the skills he developed there. He heard about the China-U.S. residence program and signed up. He ended up being paired with a Chinese student who also went to Nanjing.

"It gave us some common ground," Weitz says.

According to Kristine Harris, the professor of Chinese history who helped set up the program, the China-U.S. Living-Learning Community is based, in part, off of an old program SUNY used to run in the 1970s. The East-West Union pro-

gram had once had American students studying and living with Chinese roomies.

"SUNY New Paltz has a long history of connection with mainland China and Taiwan, really the whole Chinese-speaking world," Harris explains.

University officials are hopeful that the new program will become a model for other foreign language dorm residency programs.

For more information about the Asian Studies program at SUNY New Paltz, head to <http://www.newpaltz.edu/asianstudies/>. ++