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Committed Faculty Help Zhang Forge Her Own Path

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Committed Faculty Help Zhang Forge Her Own Path

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.— Looking back over her time at Illinois Wesleyan, Ruomeng Zhang '16 smiles broadly, closes her eyes and shakes her head.

"I was afraid of everything," she recalled. "Afraid to speak in class, anxious about my future, afraid of making a mistake."

A native of Zhangshu, a small city in China's Jiangxi province, Zhang '16 wanted to attend college in the United States even though she had never traveled abroad before coming to Illinois Wesleyan. She reasoned that a U.S. college would provide a great opportunity to make friends with American students, improve her English language skills, and immerse herself in American culture.

Zhang chose IWU based on her impressions of the University's teaching philosophy and campus environment. Almost immediately upon arrival, she discovered she was right: professors and students develop strong bonds at IWU, and those relationships were critical for Zhang's success.

Initially declaring a major in chemistry, Zhang said Professor and Chair of [Chemistry](#) Rebecca Roesner offered "tremendous support and encouragement" as Zhang struggled with English, cultural differences, and IWU's academic rigor. For financial reasons, she was determined to finish her coursework in three years rather than four, adding to her stress. "I was very anxious about my future," Zhang said, recalling a difficult first year.

Then, after taking an introductory [physics](#) course, Professor Gabe Spalding encouraged her to add a physics major or minor. "He told me I had talent and strongly encouraged me to study physics," she said. However, her decision to finish her coursework in three years made a double major impossible, so physics and chemistry faculty assisted her in developing an interdisciplinary degree in chemical physics.

"I like to seek connections between different subjects," Zhang said. "And my experiences in the interdisciplinary fields gave me a broad view of looking at things from different perspectives."



Zhang performed on the pipa at the Lunar New Year festival.

Class of 2016

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Ruomeng Zhang '16 and Professor of Physics Narendra Jaggi at the Student Research Symposium at the Spring Meeting of ISAAPT, April 2015.

She found ways to make connections outside of the classroom as well. By the end of her first year, she'd founded Cross-Cultural Connections, a registered student organization seeking to bridge the gap between domestic and international students, with the help of tips and suggestions from Outreach Librarian and Professor Sue Anderson. "She was always concerned with my progress both in English and in my schoolwork," said Zhang of Anderson. And Zhang was often asked to perform on the pipa, a traditional Chinese stringed instrument, on occasions ranging from private dinners at the University President's home to the Lunar New Year festival on campus.

Zhang excelled in combining her love for chemistry and physics in research. She joined Professor of Physics Narendra Jaggi's lab to study the physics behind two well known oscillating chemical reactions: Briggs-Rauscher (BR) and Belousov-Zhabotinsky (BZ). "These two reactions are characterized by cyclic color changes. Even though the chemistry and physics of the reactions have been studied for over half a century, they are not completely understood," Zhang said. She and her lab partners designed techniques in hopes of developing a better understanding of these systems. "When I was doing research with Dr. Jaggi, he guided me in learning how to think like a real physicist and how to push our project forward," she said. Zhang's work on diffusion coupled chemical oscillators won second place at the Illinois Section American Association of Physics Teachers Student Research Symposium in 2015.

Zhang also took part in an undergraduate research program at Princeton University last summer. In the lab of Greg Scholes, a leader in the field of energy transfer, Zhang investigated ways to substitute semiconductors used to make solar cells with organic compounds that can undergo singlet fission.

"I had a taste of what research would be like in graduate school and also became familiar with the academic environment at Princeton," she said. Still, she struggled in deciding whether to take a gap year or start graduate work this fall. Exhaustion was one factor, but Zhang said the biggest reason she considered a gap year was because of her deep interest in so many things.

And Zhang seems to have talent in many areas. An English professor who loved Zhang's short story on a post-apocalyptic world urged her to submit it for publication. Her drawings have won awards. And, as a student in Professor of Sociology Chuck Springwood's course "Race, Racism & Anthropology," Zhang gained an entirely new perspective of American society. Springwood encouraged her to write a reflection of this perception for possible publication.

"I deeply feel that arts and sciences cannot be separated, and I like both," Zhang said. "All of the experiences with faculty from across the campus made me think I should take a gap year to travel and interact with people from different backgrounds."

In the end, however, after hours of conversation — with Spalding and Jaggi, in particular, discussing her truest passions and her strongest skills — she decided to enter the doctoral program in chemistry at Princeton this fall.

No wonder, then, that Roesner describes Zhang as "exceptional in doing all this and graduating in three years." Elected to both Phi Beta Kappa and Phi Kappa Phi national honor societies, Zhang graduated summa cum laude with research honors.

No longer terrified to speak in class, Zhang said she is now confident of her abilities, a change she partly credits to the many close relationships she developed with faculty and peers at Illinois Wesleyan. And she has some advice for other students:

"By the time you graduate, I hope you can say proudly to yourself: 'I played hard, I worked hard, and I lived fully at IWU.' I can say this today about myself."



Artwork by the multitasking Zhang

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