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China beckons for five MDC students - Five students won scholarships to study abroad in China as part of a special program at MDC that promotes the language and culture of the fast-growing nation.

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After competing in a worldwide scholarship competition, six students from Miami-Dade College have received scholarships to study abroad in China for the school year.

And while one student had to bow out due to illness, the other five are studying at Xuzhou Normal University, in Xuzhou City, Miami-Dade's sister city that's about nine hours south of Beijing.

"China is wonderful, almost every night there are fireworks that we can see from our dorm balconies," said Nicolas Gallo, one of the students. "Some people may stare at us like we are aliens from another planet, but they are nice all the same. China can be a little dirty, but it adds to its charm."

The students' journey began at the Confucius Institute at Miami-Dade College. Confucius Institutes have locations worldwide and are non-profit organizations that promote Chinese language and culture. Miami-Dade College houses the only one in South Florida.

Each year, the Confucius Institute awards scholarships to its students to study in China.

Students had to complete one year of Chinese language to qualify for the program, which pays for tuition, room and board. Instructor Iris Yang believes this task alone was a tough feat.

"I start off in my class with speaking some English, but by the end of the semester the whole class is entirely in Chinese," said Yang, who teaches at the Wolfson campus in downtown Miami.

Next, the students had to take the Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi, also known as the HSK or the Standard Chinese Language Proficiency test. The test is made for non-native speakers. Once they proved their language proficiency, the students had to get a letter of recommendation from their teachers.

"I want my students to learn everything about China by their own sight, not by books," said Kevin Yang, an instructor at the institute. "It will help them in their future, bilingual students can get very good jobs in international business."

Gallo figures his knowledge of Chinese will help him as an engineer.

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"I know that most of the world's goods come from China," said Gallo. "As an aspiring engineer, I can see the benefits in learning Chinese."

The students also had to write an essay in Chinese about why they wanted to study in China.

Yaacov Moshe, 19, wanted to cure his curiosity of the Far East.

"I wanted to take the challenge of learning the language," Moshe said. "Just the idea of me coming back home saying, 'Hey I speak fluent Chinese' will just make people go 'Wow!'"

Sean O'Connell, 25, wanted to learn about a new culture and has been surprised by the warmth of the Chinese people.

"One thing that amazes me, but also saddens me, is that I am shocked at how nice and willingly helpful the people are here," he said. "If you ask someone where to get good rice, there is a good chance that they will not only take you to the restaurant, but they will also dine with you."

Dayvis Cortes, 23, has been dreaming of visiting China since he was 15.

"My obsession with China started with old Kung Fu movies and eventually grew over time as I learned about Chinese history and culture," Cortes said.

Alejandro Mendez, 27, is a second-time winner of the scholarship. He studied in China for four months in 2010 and is thankful to be back again.

"There is so much to learn from a country so diametrically opposed in customs and culture from my own," Mendez said. "I feel like this will always be, without a doubt, a milestone in my life."

While there, the students will visit historical monuments and local sites. Traveling to other parts of China is also on their agenda. Upon their return, they will have to pass a level five language exam and provide plenty of photographs documenting their stay.

Cortes hopes to go beyond his academic goals.

"I am setting a personal goal of meeting different martial arts teachers and learning different styles of martial arts as well as make new international friends," said Cortes.

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