

In any language, she's special

BY KUBESHINI NAICKER
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Professor Beatrice Tseng of Irvine Valley College does not feel insulted when new students walk out of her class the moment they get their first look at her.

"I've gotten used to it in the dozen years I've taught here, and I actually find it amusing," says Tseng. "Besides, such students always return in a couple of minutes."

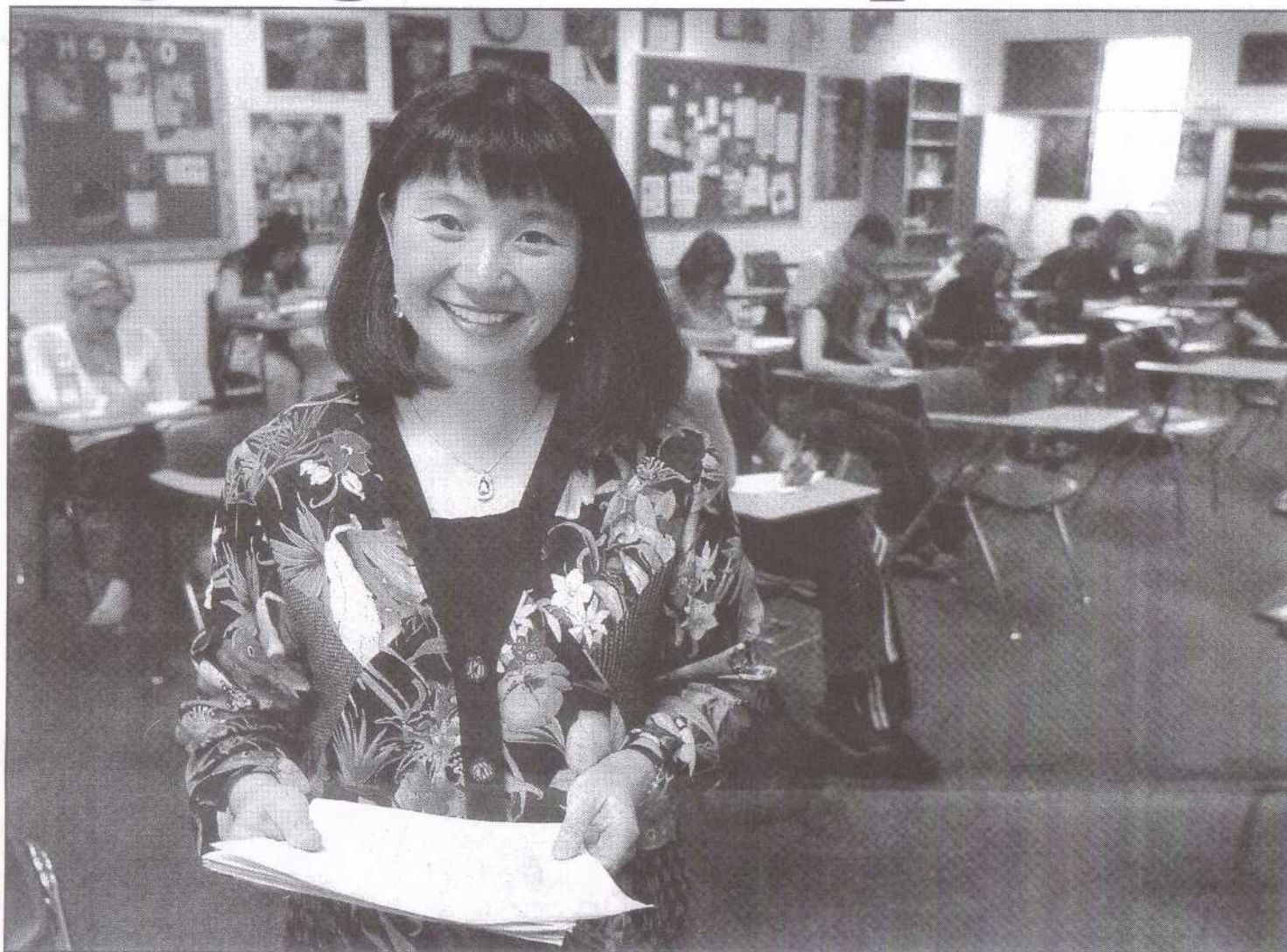
Tseng explains that the students walk out because they mistakenly think they've entered the wrong classroom.

"They're confused when they see a professor who's Asian in a room assigned to a class in Spanish," says Tseng (pronounced "seng").

"They don't expect to see a Chinese person teaching Spanish. They certainly don't expect that person to be a Chinese who is equally passionate about Chinese New Year and Cinco de Mayo, and who has the hand gestures and body language usually associated with Latin Americans.

"At any rate, I welcome the opportunity to raise their consciousness about multiculturalism as a foundation for mutual respect and, hopefully, world peace. Moreover, I believe multiculturalism helps prepare students for today's highly competitive global marketplace, where it is highly advantageous for an individual to be conversant in one or more foreign languages and to possess cross-cultural skills."

Professor Tseng's desire to promote multicultural awareness has been the driving force behind her career as an educator — a career recently capped by her being chosen Irvine Valley College's 2003 Teacher of the Year.



Beatrice Tseng is the teacher of the year at Irvine Valley College.

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As she noted in a statement she submitted to the Teacher of the Year award committee after students had nominated her for that honor: "My classes are an infusion of Spanish language and culture and the multicultural experiences I encountered growing up in different countries."

Tseng began earning her credentials as a Chinese Latina 33 years ago, at the age of 4.

"I was born in Taiwan, the Taiwanese and Mandarin-speaking daughter of a diplomat whose ancestors had migrated to that island from the Chinese mainland more than four centuries ago.

"When I was 4, my father was appointed consul-general in Sao Paulo, Brazil, where I absorbed that society's culture, and the Portuguese language, for four and a half years. I then learned Spanish, along with additional aspects of Latin American culture, when my family was transferred to Bogota, Columbia, for two years and then to Colon, Panama, for eight years."

In Panama, Tseng attended an American high school in what was then the U.S.-controlled Canal Zone. She continued her American education at UCLA, where she earned a bachelor's degree in Spanish and Portuguese literature, in-

terned at UCLA's Office of Education Abroad Program, participated in that program's Junior Year Abroad in Madrid, then earned a UCLA master's degree in Spanish literature.

In the fall of 1988, she taught English as a second language in Fukuoka, Japan, then returned to UCLA as a teaching assistant assigned to teach lower-division courses in Spanish.

In 1991, she joined the faculty at Irvine Valley College, where she has taught all levels of Spanish language, designed and taught the college's first online Spanish course for students who cannot attend class, and developed, raised funds for, and conducted the campus's four-week Summer Study Abroad Program in Costa Rica.

"Traveling abroad is, of course, the ideal way to learn other languages and cultures," says Tseng, whose travels from her native land have taken her not only to Latin America, the United States and Japan, but also to Singapore, Hong Kong, Morocco and most of Western Europe.

"So I try as much as possible to duplicate first-hand cultural discovery in my classes."

In pursuit of that goal, Professor of Spanish Tseng eschews what she calls

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"mindless repetition of vocabulary."

"Instead, I devote much of my 2 1/2-hour class periods to Spanish-language songs, movies, games and newspaper articles, and to essay-writing, and student-to-student dialogues about imaginary situations.

"I quickly memorize every student's name to help me tailor my teaching to each student's style of learning. For example, some students learn primarily by listening, some by talking, some by reading.

"And, because mistakes are an inevitable part of learning, I teach my students to view those mistakes as funny rather than frightening. For example, to illustrate the risks inherent in literal

translation, I tell my students about a sign in a Japanese hotel that reads, 'You are invited to take advantage of the chambermaid,' and a sign in a Paris dress shop that advertises 'dresses for street-walking.' "

In a further effort to duplicate first-hand cultural discovery, Tseng encourages (and sometimes assigns) her students to attend Hispanic plays, concerts, festivals and book signings by Latino authors, and to visit Latino museums and special art exhibits, explore Hispanic Web sites, and serve as volunteers for service organizations in the Spanish-speaking community.

"At the end of each semester, my classes have lunch or dinner at a Peruvian, Cuban or Spanish restaurant, where they are often surprised to learn that Hispanic cuisine is so varied. I remind them that, like the United States, Latin America is a potpourri of ethnicities."

Tseng also applies her multiculturalism at her home, where she lives with her husband, Kevin Chen, a Taiwanese-trained medical doctor who is the head of information systems at a hospital in Alhambra, and their American-born

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daughters, ages 2 and 4.

"My daughters are of course absorbing American speech and culture, and the older child is learning to interact with children of diverse cultures at a Montessori school. Meanwhile, their nanny speaks to them in Chinese, they come with me to Taiwan when I visit my mother and my now-retired father, and I plan to share with them my enthusiasm for Spanish language and literature.

"I want them to be at least trilingual, so that they can enjoy the many cultural opportunities I had when I was growing up. I also want them to feel free to choose their own path in life, including the choice of being a homemaker like my mother or a career woman like me, and including the choice of a husband regardless of his eth-

nic background."

Tseng says she is eagerly looking forward to becoming a U.S. citizen, when that becomes legally possible a couple of years from now.

"But," she adds with a smiling blend of Latin exuberance and Chinese understatement, "I already consider myself a Chinese Latina American, and I hope to serve many more years in the classroom as a worthy model of multiculturalism."

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