

Vision possible

Almost blind, Jin Wei didn't let this stop him from pursuing his love for photography. **Shi Yingying** reports in Shanghai.

Shifting between two pairs of thick glasses — one for daily use and a magnifier, Jin Wei is nearly blind. But, he uses whatever little vision he has left to capture the beauty of the world — using a camera as his tool. “To be able to see is a gift,” the 44-year-old from Shanghai says.

“I'm moved to tears with small details, which most people consider ordinary.”

Even with spectacles, his vision is blurry and whatever he sees quivers, like a television without aerial. Thus, every photo he takes is a challenge. He has to stand still, pause for more than 20 minutes before his eyes can focus on a subject.

But no one would have guessed that Jin is visually impaired based on the quality of his photographs, which have been published in Popular Photograph, China's top photography magazine.

“Many would think photography is the last hobby a nearly-blind man would turn to. But I don't want to let my poor vision stop me. Like any other normal person, I've an equal right to press the shutter release button, to capture the moment, to record the world,” he says.

Born with several congenital eye diseases including cataracts and optic nerve hypoplasia, Jin was diagnosed as blind, with a vision of 0.08/6, which means he can only see things which are 0.08 meters from him. Good eyesight is called 6/6 vision, which means people should be able to see the alphabet when they are standing 6 meters away from an eye chart.

From the moment Jin held his first camera, he aspired to be a professional photographer.

“But my biggest concern was whether I would be able to focus. I was worried about what people would say about a blind photographer,” he says.

He uses his instinct and understanding of the equipment to aid him. He adjusts his aperture speed and uses the tripod all the time to ensure sharp pictures. He



Taking every photo is a challenge for Jin Wei, who is visually impaired. His ambition is to hold a solo exhibition.



Jin Wei edits his photos on the computer with the aid of a magnifier.

also keeps himself updated with the latest focus lenses.

Jin uses his listening skills to compensate for his lack of vision. He says by listening attentively, he can estimate where his subject is and the distance.

“All my photos were blurry before I bought the auto-focus camera,” Jin says. “Despite the initial sense of shame, I later found those unfocused pictures to represent the authentic me — a nearly-blind lensman trapped in those moments, unable to focus.”

Jin says he still remembers the first time he watched color television as a child.

“I cried the whole night because it triggered my desire to see colors and even to capture them,” he says.

When he entered college, he bought his first camera with the money he collected from singing ballads on the streets. It was fool-proof photographic equipment.

“Before I invested in a camera, I tried to borrow one because I wanted to take a photo of my girlfriend, my first love.” But nobody would lend him one, says Jin, who has more than 10 cameras now.

Although he was excited when he had his first camera, he didn't have enough knowledge about photography.

“I searched high and low for photography books, burning the midnight oil reading. Because my eyes tire easily, I have to rest every 10 minutes. During that period, I wore out five magnifying glasses to aid me,” he says.

The main themes of his photographs were related to the daily lives of the visually-impaired.

“For example, normal people won't be able to imagine how the blind play poker. I recorded that with my lens not only because I'm a cameraman, but also because I understand them,” he says.

But his greatest interest is press photos. “I admire news photos and I spend a lot of time searching online for them, to study the special visual angles. But most news photos do not have enough love in them.”

Jin hopes to hold a solo exhibition one day to share with fellow visually impaired people what they can do despite their weakness.

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Making friends and influencing German people

By XU LIN in Hanover, Germany
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For Hu Chunchun, 40, director of the Confucius Institute in Hanover, Germany, life at the institute is more interesting than his teaching career.

“I used to live at my ease as an university teacher. But my current job is so interesting and challenging, because I have to communicate with locals every day,” Hu, associate professor from the German Institute, Tongji University, says.

In 2007, Tongji University in Shanghai and China Center in Hanover co-established the Confucius Institute in Hanover, which now has six teachers and volunteers.

The China Center in Hanover, which was founded in 1997 with the support of the German and Chinese governments, is a registered association to promote Chinese language and culture.

“Many students are office workers, rather than university students. Our major task is to provide Chinese language courses and cultural activities for those who are already interested in China,” says Hu, who pursued his PhD in the philosophy and humanities department at the Free University of Berlin, from 1998 to 2003.

He only planned to stay one year at first, but changed his mind quickly after.

“I've made various friends here due to my work, including those from governmental departments and universities. They are very humorous” he says.

He says they often cooperate with local associations and institutions, because the institute doesn't have a regular activity place.

To organize an activity, he says, there are a lot of things one has to do, such as order a room about four months ahead and send many e-mails to lecturers to negotiate details.

The institute not only offers Chinese teaching for two universities and one college in Hanover, but also cooperated with the local government to provide three-day experience classes of the Chinese language for middle school students.

In 2009, the institute started the annual Summer Camp in China for German Middle School Students, to invite more than 100 German youths to spend two weeks in China, visiting tourism spots and schools, and learning about Chinese culture.

“Other Confucius Institutes in Germany also joined us, to call on students in Germany to apply for the program. The summer camp is very popular among the students,” he says.

“China and Germany have many things in common, such as perspectives on history and culture, but few people know that.”

Hu says a shortcut to promote Chinese culture is to let Germans know about what they share in common, which may stir their interest in China.

He gives an example: Everyone knows the Silk Road linked China and Europe some 2,000 years ago, but few know it's the German geographer Ferdinand von Richthofen that coined the term in the 19th century.

He says Westerners are direct and like to follow a prescribed order, but Chinese usually do things without a plan and communicate indirectly.

“Although I've stayed in Germany for many years, I can't say 'no' directly like Germans. Like most Chinese, I don't know how to refuse others. The problem is that it may stir misunderstandings at work.”

“Once a German asked, ‘Mr Hu, do you have time on the third day of the 28th week?’ I was dumfounded and had to check my calendar as I had no idea which day it was,” he says.

“When Germans ask me about an activity in June next year, it's difficult to answer because we make our annual plans at the end of the year. We have no method to keep up with each other's pace.”

He says he welcomes those who ask harsh questions about China, but these people are becoming fewer, as more people understand China.

“I've gained a strong sense of accomplishment here, because I can change a person's view by imparting new knowledge to him or her. I believe all teachers have the same feeling.”

Hu is going to finish his five-year tenure soon and he plans to write a book about his experience at the institute.

“European civilization emphasizes technological development and reason, while Chinese civilization explores Confucianism and relations among people. If we combine the advantages of both civilizations, the human kind will benefit from it,” the former president of the Parliament of Lower Saxony State Rolf Wernstedt, says.

Wernstedt says Sino-Europe dialogue has begun, but mainly in the field of the economy. He believes the Confucius Institute can play its role in promoting culture between the two countries.



Hu Chunchun demonstrates calligraphy to German middle school students at the Confucius Institute in Hanover.

Building a bridge across cultures

By XU LIN in Hamburg
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Carsten Krause, 40, the director of the Confucius Institute at the University of Hamburg in Germany, is more than happy to renew his five-year contract with the institute.

“Promoting cultural communication is an interesting job,” says Krause in fluent Chinese. “The Confucius Institute is more like my kid, a 5-year-old who has started kindergarten but doesn't need breastfeeding anymore,” he adds.

Krause graduated from the Department of Chinese Language and Culture, at the University of Hamburg, with a PhD, in 2001.

In 2004, the Chinese government established Confucius Institutes to promote Chinese language and culture abroad. These institutes are nonprofit organizations attached to foreign academic institutions such as universities.

In April 2012, there were 129 Confucius Institutes and 104 Confucius Classrooms in Europe.

In 2007, the University of Hamburg and Fudan University from Shanghai co-established the Confucius Institute. Krause spent about six months laying the foundations for the institute and became the director. Currently, it has 15 teachers and three volunteers.

As one of the most important Chinese training centers in the city, the center has three semesters a year, attracting about 120-150 students per semester.

About half of them are office workers, including those who travel to China for work. Nearly one fourth are middle

school and university students. The center conducts four 90-minute classes per week, and each class costs \$8 per student.

In addition to the classes, there are weekend activities such as a “Sino-German dialogue”, where Chinese and German experts in the fields including science, arts and history, give talks.

According to Krause, the institute has close partnerships with more than 20 teaching research centers as well as media and government departments in Hamburg. For example, they often cooperate with the city's theaters and cinemas to invite famous Chinese artists to perform, such as The National Ballet of China.

He says the institute has gained popularity in the city. The local government has been supportive and in 2011, invited them to join the mayor's delegation to visit China.

Krause used to work in the general office of the Hamburg government and was in charge of Sino-German cooperation. He took the University of Hamburg's invitation to join the institute immediately because he had just ended his tenure in the government and was job hunting.

“In my previous office, all my colleagues were Germans. I so much wanted to have a Chinese colleague, so that I could ask him or her questions about Chinese language and things about China. At the Confucius Institute, I've realized my dream, to work with people from both countries,” he says.

The Confucius Institute headquarter, or Hanban (Chinese National Office



Carsten Krause explains the meaning of Chinese characters to students at the Confucius Institute at the University of Hamburg.

for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language), regulates that both Chinese and foreign parties invest equally in the Confucius Institute.

While Hanban provides the funds, a Chinese director and volunteers, the foreign university offers office space, equipment and a foreign director. Both directors co-direct the institute.

“Krause and I complement each other perfectly,” says Chinese director Geng

Baosheng from Fudan University. “We often host culture activities together. It's our task to let more foreigners learn about the real China, as many Germans only read about China from the media.”

“I like the institute's unique way of governing, where there is cooperation between two directors. Geng and I have become best friends,” Krause says. He says he shares responsibilities with Geng, but there's no clear line of duties. They use their expertise, do their best and go with the flow.

For example, Geng, an associate professor with Fudan's Art Center, has groomed many of his students in Hamburg to win prizes in “Chinese Bridge” — a Chinese Proficiency Competition for Foreign College Students organized by Hanban.

“I can't do that. Instead, I shoulder more responsibilities in terms of financial affairs, because I'm more familiar with German laws,” Krause says.

His interest in the Chinese language grew when he went to a middle school in Shanghai for a brief exchange program in 1988. Later, as a law student, he was in Jiangsu province's Nanjing University for a one-year exchange program. The stint changed the direction of his life — he switched major from law to Chinese studies when he returned to Germany in 1994.

Hamburg Mayor Erster Bürgermeister says, “Krause has done a good job. Young Hamburg people have become more interested in China. I'm proud of the Goethe Institute, as well as Hamburg's Confucius Institute, which help our citizens learn more about Chinese language and culture.”