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Five years after moving to U.S., upcounty teen takes talent title

Chinese immigrant plays guzheng, tries to break down barriers

by Patricia M. Murrett | Staff Writer

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Five years ago, Rachel Wang of Gaithersburg was a new arrival to the United States from China.

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After reuniting with her mother and becoming a U.S. citizen, she began making friends and learning English from scratch, sitting alongside a Chinese-American friend in a classroom full of native English speakers.

Now, she's Miss Maryland Teen Talent.

"At first, I wanted to do it for the scholarships," said Wang, 17, a senior at Thomas S. Wootton High School in Rockville. "But after a while, I kind of forgot the scholarship idea, because I saw all the TV shows of the pageants."

Wang, who emigrated in 2002, noted a minority of Asian-American women — especially winners — among American pageant contestants.

"They are all white or native Americans or Hispanic," she said.

"At the same time, in New York, they had an Asian beauty pageant. So I thought: 'Why should Asians go to the Asian pageant?' This is America and we are Chinese-Americans and we should be able to go to the American pageant too."

By entering a pageant, Wang also hoped to break barriers within her own family.

"My parents [thought] they wouldn't take a traditional Asian girl to be a traditional Miss Maryland or Miss America," Wang said. "They [thought] they would pick a girl who is white or who looks similar to white, not like a girl with black hair and black eyebrows. I really wanted to show my parents and other people in the United States that Asians can win."

Wang's mother, Sophia Pang, who owns Magic Health Plus, an acupuncture and acupressure center in Lakeforest mall, said through an interpreter last week that she is supportive of her daughter, but she does not want anything to come



Laurie DeWitt/The Gazette
Rachel Wang recently was named Miss Maryland Teen Talent. The Gaithersburg resident and senior at Thomas S. Wootton High School is shown here playing the guzheng, a traditional Chinese string instrument.

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in the way of Rachel's studies.

Wang struck a deal with her mother: she could compete if she did well on her SATs.

She performed above average on the test this summer and was on her way.

The Miss Maryland Teen competition, a regional competition sponsored by the National American Miss pageant, was held in early August in Virginia, a spokeswoman said.

About 60 women 16-18 competed for the Miss Maryland Teen title.

Wang beat 14 other Maryland teens in the talent competition playing the guzheng, a traditional Chinese musical instrument with movable bridges and 21 strings.

"It's kind of like harp in the U.S.," she said. "We put nails on our hands and we use the fake nails to play it. And we actually play on the right hand ... we use our left hand to press the strings together to get the right sound."

Most of her competitors danced, sang or played the piano.

She dazzled wearing a traditional Chinese qi pao. "It's like a dress, it goes straight down. Mine is red and it has gold flowers on it and on the top it has a collar ... like a flower around your neck," she said.

Wang learned to play the guzheng about four years ago while still learning English as an ESOL and Honor Roll student at Kingsview Middle School in Germantown. She has played at church events, weddings and local Chinese schools and performed with the Washington GuZheng Society at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts and Baltimore Museum.

"I practice about two hours a day," Wang said. "And right before the pageant I practiced, like, four hours a day because I wanted to 'get it.'"

An oil painter too, Wang has lately dabbled in cubism, an abstract art form. At Wootton, she has joined the badminton and mural clubs, a community service group and a leadership program.

She also is a school Patriot Ambassador, helping new students and new teachers get oriented.

This summer, Wang spent several hours a day studying for her SATs, which she will take again in October.

If she earns a 2100 out of 2400, her mother said she will let her join 800 other young women to compete in the national All-American Miss pageant in Orange County, Calif.



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