Zao C. Xu, professor of anatomy and cell biology at the IU School of Medicine, received the 2013 Indiana University John W. Ryan Award for Distinguished Contributions to International Programs and Studies. He was recognized as founding director of the Confucius Institute at IUPUI, established in 2007 to promote Chinese language and culture.

In its six years, the Confucius Institute has offered credit courses in Chinese, assistance to the business community, and community outreach. As a result of these efforts on and off campus, enrollment and retention in Chinese language courses has improved, K–12 educators all over the Midwest have completed workshops in teaching Chinese, festivals and exhibitions have introduced many Hoosiers to Chinese culture, and three Confucius classrooms for China study have been set up in Brownsburg and Indianapolis. New efforts are explored every year. Next year the Confucius Institute will support a major exhibition at the Indianapolis Children’s Museum, “Take Me There: China,” which follows a similar effort that focused on Egypt. And the institute will have its own float in the Indy 500 parade.

The institute celebrates Chinese culture, but the ultimate goal is understanding. Xu himself lived through a period in China...
that few would wish to celebrate and that, for many years, the country did not want the world to know. Xu was a young child in Guangzhou, southern China’s largest city. His father was a civil engineer in charge of building roads and bridges. One of the boy’s early memories was the period 1958–61, dubbed the “Great Leap Forward” by the Maoist government. “Mao wanted to catch up with Britain and America,” Xu explained. “Everywhere people had to help produce steel—countryside, city, my backyard. There were furnaces everywhere; metal frames of doors and windows of our houses were melted down.

“Also Mao wanted to become the leader of the Third World. Our crops went to Africa, Albania, and even Russia. With few left to harvest and grain being sent abroad, in the countryside, there was no food, and 30 million people died of starvation. I was lucky. My father was a high-ranking engineer. The government gave him coupons, so that every week we could have one dish with some meat.”

Xu graduated from middle school in 1966, just as Mao’s Cultural Revolution was getting under way. In Mao’s topsy-turvy world, education was to be reserved for the favored classes. Children of his military, of farmers, and of poor laborers had the opportunity to study. Children of the unfavored classes, the intellectual elite, the professional, and the wealthy, were sent to the countryside. Instead of going on to high school, Xu was sent to the countryside to work on a farm.

“When I was in the countryside, I was a good boy and worked very hard. I was selected to be a teacher for the villagers’ kids. First I taught ninth-grade math, even though I had graduated only from ninth grade myself. I liked to do things with my hands. There was a power shortage in China during those days. In Da Tang Lang Village, electricity was shut down from time to time, so I built a power station for the village, using a gasoline motor to run the generator. It was not good enough for running machines, but it was good enough for lighting at night. I also played basketball, and our village team became the champion of the commune; our small village beat big towns. The village leader liked me.”

By 1972 the country’s economic objectives had changed, and cities needed workers for manufacturing, so officials went back to the countryside to retrieve a labor force. “With the help and urging of my village leader, I became
an electrician and moved back to the city. Farmers did not earn much. I got 17 cents for a whole day's work, and 34 yuan (about $6) for a year. For electricians in the city, the salary was better.

“I had lots of energy. I found records of English language instruction, and just out of curiosity, I taught myself some English. I had no one around me who spoke English. My mom and grandmother told me not to study English; people will think I am a spy.”

The Guangzhou area, just northwest of Hong Kong, was the only place in China at the time that could engage in trade with the West. A semiannual fair brought English speakers to the city. One time when Xu was fixing streetlights, he came upon a man from Canada who had gotten lost. “I said, 'Can I help you?’ and he was surprised to find someone who spoke English. I took him back to his hotel. I never talked to people in English, just listened to books and recordings, but he understood me and I understood him. I thought this was fun and I was proud that I could use what I learned.”

The Cultural Revolution ended in 1977. Xu said, “I went to medical school by accident. For the previous ten years, college admission was decided not by academic performance, but by your father's occupation. I was
among the first group of students from the unfavored classes to apply to college after the Cultural Revolution. I wanted very badly to go to college. Because I had not been to high school, I had a lot to prepare. I studied the high school subjects intensively for a month before the entrance exams and did okay. I wanted to study electrical engineering, but didn’t get picked for that. I was assigned to Guangzhou Medical College because I knew English, and they thought that was an advantage because prescriptions were in English. My whole family were engineers. I never in my mind thought I would be a doctor, but any college was good.

“I was a good student and president of my class when I graduated in 1982. But I did not have connections. I wanted to be a surgeon, but if I followed that specialty, without connections, I would be sent to places a long way off. So I chose anatomy.”

Xu completed a master's degree in neuroanatomy at Sun Yat-sen University in 1986. At that time, students were beginning to study abroad. Xu applied to continue his studies at a U.S. institution. He was offered scholarships from two of them. The University of Tennessee had a specialty in electrophysiology, and Xu chose that program. “I thought I could use my electrician experience.”

Xu finished his Ph.D. in four years, but about the time he was contemplating returning home, word of hundreds, perhaps thousands, of protesting students killed in Tiananmen Square reached him. Xu was president of the Chinese Student Association, but the news was shocking. “We all cried and paraded on the street to protest.”

He stayed in the United States, and his career eventually brought him to the Department of Anatomy and Cell Biology at the IU School of Medicine. He became a full professor in 2004 and has published more than 70 articles and trained postdoctoral students who now hold positions on both sides of the Pacific Ocean. His laboratory studies the mechanisms that damage the brain after a stroke with the goal of identifying new and better interventions for stroke victims.

In 2006 IUPUI was investigating ways to expand its linkages with Sun Yat-sen University in Guangzhou. Because Xu was a graduate of that institution, he was invited into the discussions. The Chinese government had begun funding Confucius Institutes two years before. These supported the study of Chinese language and culture in university centers around the world. IUPUI was eager to bring the institute to Indianapolis, but it needed strong support from a Chinese university and the Chinese Ministry of Education.
As Xu was negotiating that arrangement, he was asked to direct the institute at IUPUI. Because of their focus on language and culture, most Confucius Institutes were headed by individuals whose background was language teaching. Xu’s background as a medical man has given a special stamp to the Indianapolis branch. “Because I am from the medical field, I have no boundaries. I do not have to focus on teaching Chinese, as most directors do. Because we are in a big city and near city and state government, I thought we should go outside the university. I am most proud of our success in community involvement. Not just language diplomacy, but citizen diplomacy.”

To generate interest in China through community outreach, Xu (“Joe” to his American friends) likes “to display the colorful things. American people are very open. What’s this? What’s that? So we don’t talk about the serious stuff. Just fun. Kung Fu. Lion dance. For the last six years, we have worked together with the mayor’s office and local communities to put on a Chinese festival in Indianapolis. We have Wednesday culture hours.” The institute offers Chinese instruction for those who want to learn enough to visit China. The program for IUPUI faculty meets on Monday at noon; there is a substantial waiting list. Another successful program has been the language camps for children. “The kids come, and then their parents join us. Now it’s not just curiosity that draws interest, but economics. Parents can be very practical; they are concerned about their children’s futures and know that it is a good idea to understand China better.”

Beyond the understanding of different times and different cultures, Xu offers one main insight. “When you first look, you see big differences, but the more you look, the more you see that we are not so different. Human nature everywhere is fundamentally the same.”
Young people have good hearts and want to believe in their leaders; they want to do something for their country. Because my father was a professional and an intellectual, he was not part of the favored classes, so I could not join the Red Guard. But even so, my friends and I formed our organization, and mimicking the “Long March” of the Red Guard, we traveled around on foot telling farmers about the Cultural Revolution. The photo shows me during our “Long March” in 1967 with the Red Guard armband.

My father began his career before World War II; he built highways and bridges. During the war, he was an officer under Chiang Kai-shek. When Mao came to power, my father was associated with the old regime. During the Cultural Revolution, he was sent to the country and almost died. When he designed bridges, he had a lot of people under him working to build the bridge. During the Cultural Revolution, workers said, “You just draw pictures and do nothing. It’s the workers who do the real work.” They built a bridge without engineering help and it collapsed. My father was lucky not to be under it at the time. The photo shows him (at right) with two colleagues. Behind them is the Green Wave Bridge at the Conghua Hot Spring resort. It was designed by my father and built in 1960. Richard Nixon visited Conghua on a state visit in 1971.