

Xiongya Li (B.S. Economics/Minor Mathematics 2012)



Xiongya Li grew up in Dalian, China. It's an ocean city of more than 6 million people located in northeast China on the tip of the Liaodong Peninsula. It's a city known for its tourism, seafood and fanatical love of football (soccer). So why would Li leave Dalian to attend college in Emporia, Kansas—a landlocked town of 25,000 people with the nearest professional soccer team two hours away?

“Studying in the U.S. was my childhood dream,” said Li. After graduating from high school, Li was presented with an opportunity to study at ESU, and he took it. Dr. Yixing (Eric) Yang, a professor in ESU's Biology Department at the time and family relative of Li, mentioned ESU as a possible place of study. “ESU is a teaching school, so I believed I could have excellent teaching professors, which would make study abroad easier,” said Li.

From the moment he stepped onto campus, he found that to be true. “I didn't know what I should choose to study,” said Li, “but I was good at mathematics. After talking to Mr. Rob Catlett, he suggested me to study economics, which could help me engage many different fields of studies.” Li was convinced and decided to major in economics with a minor in mathematics.

Li said Dr. Larry Scott and Catlett impacted him the most while at ESU. “Both of them helped me on my study and career development. They taught me not only about the knowledge but also critical thinking of different studies,” said Li. He has many great memories of his undergraduate career at ESU but says there is one item that stands out the most. “In short, the best memory is people. During my study at ESU all of the professors were very nice and patient to me. They tried to help me out from different troubles, such as languages, cultures and knowledges.”

Dr. Scott was particularly instrumental in helping Li decide how to pursue his future studies. “Dr. Scott was the first person to let me know what statistics was. I became very interested in studying statistics because of him and finished my PhD in that later at Kansas State University. ESU professors provided me a very strong foundation of undergraduate educations, which helped me start my graduate study at KSU.”

Li took advantage of internships both in the Department of Statistics at KSU and at Monsanto Company while pursuing his graduate studies. All of his hard work paid off, and he was offered a position at Monsanto's research campus in St. Louis, Missouri, after graduating from KSU in December 2017. Since January 2018, Li has served as a Data Scientist on Monsanto's Global Breeding Analytics Team.

“As a data scientist, I’m using the data to discover the science, and I love my job,” said Li. “My job is to explore novel applications of genomic information to plant breeding programs and collaborate with plant breeders, molecular scientists and IT developers to develop innovative tools.” His typical day involves putting collected data through a computer program that runs modeling and statistical simulations. He then takes the results to other data scientists to discuss possible future research pipelines for the company.

When not working, Li loves playing with his three dogs, a Golden Retriever, Alaskan Malamute and Shih Tzu and watching football, American football now. Having grown up in “the football (soccer) city” of Dalian, China, Li has been a big sports fan all of his life and he quickly embraced the American version of football when he came to ESU. “The first time for me to learn and watch football was at ESU,” said Li. “I loved this sport and became a big fan of it very fast. I’m glad to have that special experience when I studied at ESU.”

But the love of football is not the only new love he found while at ESU. He also found his future wife, Yin hao Du, who will start an internship at Monsanto this spring, while at ESU. “Both of us were from the same hometown, but we didn’t know each other. Even our high schools were just a couple miles away. We were in the same majors and went to the same graduate school in the same department,” said Li. “After seven years, we got married in 2016 and became an ESU/KSU family.”

