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ASU Faculty and Staff Recall Their Chinese Exchange Program Experiences

Since 1979 when the United States and Chinese governments normalized relations, many ASU faculty and staff members have gone on exchange programs to China. According to the Chinese Ministry of Metallurgy, Appalachian State University was the first American university to engage in such exchange programs. Following are some memories of those visits to China.

My first trip to China was in 1995 as Dean of the Walker College of Business. There is no doubt about it—this was a life-altering experience for me. As I visited universities in Beijing, Nanjing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou, I was amazed at the construction under way, impressed by the beauty of the country, intrigued by the culture, and touched by the kindness of the people—people who knew much more about America than I knew about China. My initial impressions were that this is a land of opportunity (a market for American products), a land of challenges (environmental and labor concerns), and the driving force for the global economy of tomorrow.

Kenneth E. Peacock, ASU Chancellor

Settling into our life in Shenyang, my favorite place and time was the early morning market featuring gold fish, pots of ferns and roses, bicycles parts, clothing, fresh produce (including 6-foot strings of garlic), peppers of every kind, fresh beef, pork, fish, and poultry, spices, fruit, candy, dried tobacco leaves, and pastries deep fried on the spot. We were privileged to experience China in that time of transition between the end of the Cultural Revolution and the beginning of the new era of market transformation—the very best of times.

Patricia Beaver, Director, Center for Appalachian Studies

Respect for teachers and acceptance of their authority are amazing compared to what is found in our American schools. Students all stand when the teacher enters the room and remain standing until given permission to sit. Students stand to recite and recitation is the primary means of student participation—no literature circles, no cooperative learning here. Students are expected to master facts and test well. They study long and hard. The regimen includes occasional breaks for exercise but students have little free time.

Charles R. Duke, Dean, Reich College of Education

When I went to teach composition and American literature at Suzhou University in 2002, I knew no one in Suzhou, and I didn't speak or write Chinese, so the experience could have been a lonely one for me. But when I think of Suzhou, what I remember first, last, and best are my sweet students. They welcomed me into their classrooms and into their hearts, and they became my windows into Chinese culture. I became especially close to a group of seniors who formed a reading group that met evenings in my room. The other day I received an e-mail from one of my former students, now a good friend. She wrote, "Last night I dreamed you came back to China. And I was at the airport to meet you." She wants to come to America some day. If she does, I'll try hard to be at the airport to meet her.

Grace McEntee, ASU Professor of English

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As parents of the only tow-headed three-year-old in Manchuria, my wife and I saw China and were viewed by virtually every Chinese person we met as a family. While certainly foreign, we were seen as safe, non-threatening, and while hugely and fairly described as curiosities, at the same time we were welcomed into the circle of family that is in fact one of the primary, nay the central descriptive elemental marker of Chinese Culture and History. We thus had an experience in China that was unique and extraordinarily different from every other Westerner present in those early days in terms of the level of engagement we enjoyed with China and her people.

Robert A. White, Associate Director, International Programs

I am planning my fourth visit to China. You get to Beijing exhausted, jet lagged, and grumpy. The air is dusty and it stinks. You can't drink the water, people are shoving, you can't understand the language, but you have this rush of excitement and impending adventure. You have just become the stared-at minority; a Martian couldn't feel much different. We are old hands at this game and bargain over the taxi cab price, go to an out-of-the-way restaurant for lunch and then hunker down in front of the train station to wait for the next leg of the journey to begin. Days drift into weeks, weeks to months, and you feel more at home in Asia than America; new friends, favorite noodle shops, train rides to exotic mountains are the norm now.

David Domermuth, ASU Associate Professor of Technology

We were impressed by the determination of Chinese university officials to rebuild the education system that had been virtually destroyed during the Cultural Revolution. This reconstruction effort was taking place in an environment of extreme poverty. The ASU faculty unselfishly donated several hundred text books and reference journals to the Northeast Institute of Technology, and the university assisted with computer parts for the few computers that the Chinese educators were piecing together.

Official government relations were still guarded, military presence was ubiquitous, and unescorted travel was prohibited. None-the-less the Chinese people were very friendly. This exchange program, and others established over the years, continue to productively contribute to friendly relations and mutual respect and understanding between the United States of America and The Peoples Republic of China.

John E. Thomas, former ASU Chancellor and Professor of Management

The chance to travel in China with students from ASU's Walker College of Business has been the most meaningful opportunity in my more than thirty-year career. This year, 2005, marks my tenth year of traveling to China. In the past decade I have seen China transformed before my very eyes. Very honestly, it is nothing short of a miracle that a country the size of China, 1.3 billion citizens, could progress this far this fast. My reward has been the opportunity to bring this to the experience of ASU students.

Lyle Shoenfeldt, Chair, Department of Management, Reich College of Business

Some of my most vivid memories include the following images and events: the crowds of people that followed us as we shopped in the outdoor markets; the kindness and generosity of strangers (my son left his watch on a train traveling to Beijing; it was returned within 2 days!); at the same time, the caution and shyness people felt interacting with foreign visitors (we lived in a fenced-in compound with a guard at the gate.); the incredible country-side seen from bicycle and train trips; the early morning music (The Blue Danube at 6 a.m.!) that filled the campus to get people up for exercise; and the students' determination to learn English (even reading an English book while running!).

Joan Woodworth, ASU Professor of Psychology