

A JOURNEY TO CHINA: EMBARKING ON A PROFESSIONAL AND PERSONAL EXPERIENCE OF GROWTH

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The following narrative describes a social work exchange program between an American university and a Chinese university. The instructor and one of the students share their thoughts about this unique experience.

Introduction

For the past sixteen years, our university (University of Denver) has had an amicable relationship with China Youth University, which is considered to be one of the pioneers in social work education in China. Over the years there had been a number of faculty exchanges and collaborations, as well as individual student exchanges. But there had never been a class that taught American students about Chinese social work that culminated in a trip to China. This was a new endeavor for our university and was unique to social work education in the United States. The faculty from the Chinese university was eager to teach our students about their understanding of social work, and hopeful that this would be the first step in creating a real exchange of students between the two universities. The following recollections describe the rewards and challenges of our experience.

Professor Julie Anne Laser - Instructor

I had been to China several times already. I was familiar with the world that we would be visiting and many of the people who would be greeting us twenty two hours later. I had been studying the Chinese language for three years, but as I waited at the airport for the others to arrive, I was filled with trepidation. "Why are you feeling this way?" I thought to myself. "You wanted this to happen. This was your idea. You worked hard to make it a reality. You've already thought through a million possible scenarios of unfortunate events and how they might be resolved. You are prepared.

Why are you so scared and having an almost surreal out of body experience?" Because this was different, different than anything I had done before, different than any experience I had known. This was all new and I was feeling the burgeoning weight of responsibility and a sinking feeling that I should have just followed a more Taoist philosophy of going with the flow of the river rather than trying to bridge the river with a group of students. I could be peacefully going to China with my own family right now. But instead I had decided to have twelve students accompany me. Why would I do this to myself?

What was my motivation to travel half way around the world with a group of individuals, many of whom I did not know well, but who would be looking to me to keep them safe, healthy, intellectually stimulated, and have an experience of a lifetime? How could I put it cogently in words? I believe it comes from my own experiences with the family I was raised in and the experiences I had as an exchange student myself. Since I was a child, my parents and my Nana—an immigrant herself—emphasized the fact that we were all members of a worldwide community of understanding and caring. Global peace and harmony could only be achieved if we understood and respected each other. To work towards this lofty goal, I was taught that we needed to be citizens of the world by going out in the world; to live with and learn from others. This has been the guiding principle of my education, practice, teaching, service, and research. As a child, my parents took us to

rural Mexico and small villages in the Caribbean to interact with people who lived there. Foreign language study was emphasized. When I was 17, I was an exchange student to Japan. At that time, Japan was not an economic power, nor was it a tourist destination. Japan made an enormous impression on my development and who I would become.

To better understand the complex world we live in, I pursued a double major in political science, with an emphasis on international relations, and comparative religion. During my junior year in college, I studied at the University of Geneva in Switzerland. While studying in Geneva, I was an intern at the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the International Institute of Humanitarian Law. Up until that time, it was my life's ambition to have a career in an international organization. Even though I was given the opportunity to do ongoing work at the Institute, I realized that my interest was much more related to direct service. So I returned to the United States to pursue studies in social work. Social work's emphasis on understanding the person in the environment was perfectly consistent with my experiences of living, learning, and working abroad. Since then I have lived and worked in Mexico, China, and Japan, and worked with many immigrants from a variety of countries here in the United States.

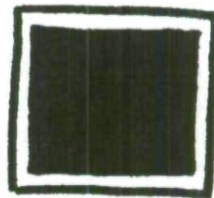
So now, many years later as a social work professor and feeling the effects of Erikson's middle aged struggle of generativity over stagnation, I wanted to connect my students to the greater world.

Elsa Campos Schutte - Student

From the first time I heard about the China class, I was captivated by the idea of experiencing a different part of the world. I was born in Mexico and was raised in Costa Rica, United States, and Canada. I have always considered myself to be internationalist. As a result of those varied experiences, a need to understand different cultures, perspectives, and people is ingrained deep within me. However, when considering the logistics of going to China to learn about social work from a Chinese perspective, I felt like my guts were being ripped out of my

stomach. I could not sleep and was not hungry, but I still could not make a decision either way. I kept thinking: Was I really supposed to go to China? What if something happened while I was gone? Would my partner be able to be a single parent for two weeks? Would I be able to appreciate being in China while missing my son? It had been two days after the pre-China class and I knew I needed to make a decision that day in order to enroll in the class when my partner said to me: "Our son and I will be here long after you get back from China, but this opportunity may not present itself again." That was it: I realized the decision was not about going to China, but rather about leaving my partner and my son for two weeks. I enrolled that night.

I did not sleep at all the night before leaving for China. I woke up at 4am with all my luggage packed, and sat in my son's room watching him sleep. I forced myself into the car and drove to pick up another traveling student. I cried all the way to his house and kept repeating to myself that I could still back out. I did not have to go. There was still time to change my mind; but I kept driving. I was consumed with these thoughts all the way to the airport. Once there, my thoughts turned to fear. I was sure that something tragic was going to happen and started looking for "escape routes" out of the airport. Reflecting back on these thoughts, I can identify that they were out of fear. But in the moment as I sat in front of the airport kiosk, they were very real and logical. I hesitantly pushed the buttons to confirm my flight to China and realized there was no way out: I was completely committed. The memories of my departure are still the most powerful and lucid than any other part of the trip. The anticipation and fear are still palpable to me.



Professor Laser

As the students arrived, I began counting. This would become a regular activity. They came individually and small groups. Eleven were present...where was the twelfth? She finally arrived and we entered the queue of one of the many lines we would wait in until we arrived in Beijing.

There were dyads and triads of students that knew each other well; however many of the students had not been in classes with each other before and were still relatively strangers. I had taught "Social Work from a Chinese Perspective" that fall, which gave the students an overview of the social, cultural, historical, political, and economic characteristics of China and how these attributes shape social work in the country. But many students only knew the others' names and areas of social work practice: children, youth and families, child welfare, community, and gerontology.

I had heard horror stories about inappropriate student behavior from our university's international center during the mandatory afternoon workshop for faculty leading travel classes, as well as cautionary tales from veteran travel course professors. As we waited to board our first flight, I looked at the students and wondered how I would feel about them later when we were in our home airport, and how would I feel about my decision to link the two worlds that I loved so much—academic life and China—through the conduit of students.

With a deep breath, I boarded the plane that would deliver us to Beijing. The flights were uneventful other than my having to translate for a group of Chinese businessmen, who were a little startled that I spoke Mandarin. We arrived in Beijing to the waving of my Chinese friends and colleagues and a sea of weary travelers. We collected our belongings, changed our dollars to Yuan, and boarded the minibus that would ferry us all over Beijing and the surrounding provinces.

Looking haggard but happy, the group met the Dean and Assistant Dean of the School of Social Work for *jaozi*: Chinese dumplings. We went around the circle and each of us introduced ourselves to our hosts and shared with them where we grew up. The concept of

"hometown" is very important for the Chinese, since most who live in Beijing grew up outside the city and are only able to travel home once a year for the New Year's celebration. To learn where we were from was the first step in the process of bridging the chasm from strangers to friends.

It was mandatory for Chinese students to participate in daily exercise. Many current and retired faculty members believed in the Maoist ideal of "strong body, strong mind" and also participated. The next morning and subsequent mornings, we awoke early to do morning exercises with the students and faculty on the athletic field. The athletic field was an area of enormous bustling social activity. People ran, walked, talked with their friends, and recited English phrases on the track. Along the edges of the field were jump ropers, weight lifters, and gymnasts. In the center of the field a large game of soccer was being played, and at one edge of the center field a group was practicing the martial arts of judo and swordsmanship. Just outside the athletic field, many retired faculty perform ancient exercise steps in unison to classical Chinese music.

The activity and energy from the athletic field was palpable. But at the stroke of 8:00, it would quickly desist. The students lined up and had their books stamped, which verified their participation, then rushed off to breakfast. We were left in an empty space where so much commotion had just been. It was time for us to eat too.

The Chinese are some of the best cooks in the world. They painstakingly combine ingredients that excite both the eye and the tongue. That being said, sometimes the food is outside the realm of a normal American palate. In the first days, I was afraid that two of the students might succumb to starvation because they refused to eat any unfamiliar foods. The kitchen staff would bring out dish after dish from the kitchen; many were recognizable, but others were not. Eating our meals together in this way contributed to the experience of cohesion and conflict resolution among group members.

Most mornings we would receive a lecture given by the faculty on the topic of their specialty: children and youth, families, child

welfare, community organization, rural social work practice, city social work practice, gerontology, and policy. The majority of Chinese faculty preferred to speak through an interpreter, though all were conversant in English. Delivery strategies ran the gamut of techniques: from reading academic papers to PowerPoint lectures and video diaries. The interpreters had varying levels of English ability and comfortability with social work terms. On occasion, there was a great deal of active discussion between lecturer and interpreter to emphasize the point that s/he was making, and that particular words should be chosen.

It became apparent from the morning lectures that these faculty members were not only teaching and researching social work, but were creating and working on the ground level of many of the social programs that were most needed in modern China. Many of the programs were pilot programs for the government, which were run on shoestring budgets and staffed by themselves and social work interns. It was social work education into social work action.

The American students asked many questions of their hosts. At times it was apparent that the answers did not fulfill the students' wishes for a definitive answer. The student would then repeat their question; sometimes with the same words, and other times with a variation on their phrasing. In some instances, the rephrasing of the question made the question easier to respond to. However, at other times the responses were no more understandable than the initial answer.

Another component of the class included nightly discussion groups to help process and digest the information and experiences of the day. Frequently, the questions that had not been fully answered (from the student's point of view) were asked again during the group discussion for comment and interpretation. It was here that I noticed the differences in culture and reminded them of our earlier discussions in the U.S. regarding the concept of "saving face." It seemed the students were moving toward a new level of understanding Chinese culture through their experiences. In this particular situation, it was the experience

of "saving face" that had challenged them into stepping outside their cultural paradigm. In China, one continually communicates in a style that minimizes the chance of oneself "losing face" (behaving or speaking inappropriately to others) and by maximizing efforts at "saving face" (communicating in a manner that will not bring shame or embarrassment to others). Even though this concept of saving or losing face for Westerners may sound negative, it is a cultural value and a normative behavior in communication. Therefore, Chinese children are taught from an early age to communicate in a style that conceals one's own thoughts and feelings so as not to embarrass oneself, one's family, or one's country, nor to embarrass those with whom one is interacting, as well as to be able to better anticipate the feelings of others. Because of this, communication is often indirect and may not reflect the speaker's true feelings or desires about a given situation.

Even though we were often exhausted by the 8:00 pm meeting, the evening discussions were very significant in the development of each student's understanding of themselves and for the process of group development. The evening sessions were a sounding board for each student to interpret what had been said or seen earlier and to discuss conflicting ideas and emotions; in Piagetian terms, it was an opportunity to assimilate or accommodate new information. The students on occasion used the evening meeting as a forum for calling out each other's behavior if they believed one of the other students had not treated our hosts with respect or had missed an important issue. Each group has its growing pains, and sometimes the evening forum was the place to voice both contentment and disenchantment. It served as a vehicle to move the class from a group of individuals to a cohesive community. Frequently in the evening sessions, revelations about one's own privilege and the multitude of individual choices each student possessed was elucidated. The transformation for some of the students was very visible and moving as they came to better understand themselves and the many options they had for the future. They had a hard time coming to grips with the fact that many of the people we'd met had far fewer choices than they did

in their lives. Some of our students had little to no experience living abroad before being part of this class, but this experience caused their worldview to expand so that they better understood themselves and their place in it.



Elsa Campos Schutte

The first couple of days in Beijing were dedicated to learning about social work in China. We had been prepared by Professor Laser to expect some vague responses to questions, the importance of “saving face,” and the relationship between the two, so our questions were carefully constructed to be polite and respectful to potential weakness in the system. We were given statistics that were meant to describe the need for social work practice in China, while also trying to “save face” about the extent in which social work is needed. Our process as students was to find where the balance between the two concepts was, even when the numbers did not match up. After our day classes (with a break for lunch and instant coffee), we had nightly meetings to discuss our experiences and the information that had been imparted to us throughout the day. During the meetings we discussed how China is growing both socially and economically, how social work fits into Chinese culture, the privilege that we hold as U.S. citizens, and our own biases. My experience with these groups was that they were intense and powerful in shifting all of our previous beliefs about social work and politics in China. We asked questions that we were not comfortable asking earlier in the day; however, the answers were not always available to us. At times there was tension between group members as we all had our own perceptions, experiences, and biases, but somehow we worked through the tension and

were able to become more cohesive and grow both individually and as a group.

What amazed me the most about the people, history, and social work in China was how change over a short period of time can shift a whole country into a completely different social, economic, and political system. The “one child” and “open door” policies were created out of necessity and good intent, but opened the need for social services not otherwise available. It is still unclear to me how social problems in China were dealt with (other than through force and regulation) prior to the open door policy. However, it does not seem to matter because the China of today appears to have an openness and willingness to deal with such problems by using methods implemented in other countries and tailoring it to their needs. The one consensus we had as a group was that social work in China was much different from social work in the United States, as it should be.

Professor Laser

Another component of the class included discussion groups with students at China University. Since many Chinese students had never seen anyone outside their own racial group, the students from the U.S. were an anomaly to them, and there was intense curiosity surrounding these discussions. Discussions with social work students were very meaningful and moving for both the students and myself. When we broke into small groups, the Chinese students were very candid about their feelings related to social work and the great benefit it could provide to Chinese society. Because social work had only been recognized as a profession in China for sixteen years, the students shared their hopes for the future as well as their fears at finding gainful employment in their field after completing their studies.

The Chinese students are truly pioneers in the profession of social work. Their mandate is to provide social work services to an enormous population—1.3 billion people—a population that is on an uncharted path of meteoric modernization and urbanization. The needs of the Chinese people are great as they cope with a vast migration of people from rural

villages to cities to participate in the transformation of China. However, the infrastructure to provide the needed services for so many people entering the cities and those remaining in rural villages has not yet been fully created. So even though progress is being made in social work policy, and funding has increased for social programs, the advancement of social work services has been unsteady. Paid full-time social work positions are difficult to find. Many social work positions are part-time or consist of working with non-governmental organizations.

We also participated in large question and answer forums open to all students attending the university. Most of the questions asked were about the American students' perceptions of China and their thoughts about China hosting the Olympics, intermingled with questions about American pop culture. The perceptions of the Chinese students about American culture and everyday living were highlighted as the students from the U.S., prepared to answer questions about social justice and policy, were instead asked pop culture questions about "Sex in the City" and "Prison Break."

Interspersed with lectures and discussions were site visits to local social work venues. We visited an after-school and weekend program that taught Chinese calligraphy, swimming, ballet, martial arts, vocal music, and jazz dancing to the children of Beijing. We toured a prestigious high school for gifted students which had technology and academic support that would make most American universities envious. We visited a state run orphanage that was extremely tidy and boasted a 1:3 staff to child ratio with infants, and a 1:5 staff ratio with toddlers. The children were well provided for, but, like children throughout the world who are lacking that important parental bond, many were somewhat sullen. We visited a home for the elderly that incorporated both traditional and modern Chinese medicine in its health care regimen. Some of the American students played pool with the senior citizens, which both groups thoroughly enjoyed. We also met with faculty at Beijing University who were amongst the initial creators of social work in China.

Elsa Campos Shutte

After the first three days of intense classroom instruction, we were given the opportunity to wander around a Chinese market and learn the skills of negotiating with vendors. As we wandered the crowded aisles armed with a calculator, each group of students was able to come out with some little gift or souvenir to take back as a reminder of our experiences. On another occasion, we were guided to a small town where we had lunch and experienced the true Chinese tradition of birthday celebration as one of our professors turned fifty. Our tour guide, an elder of the town, gave us a tour of the hospital, school, and playground, then dropped us off on the side of the road. After hiking up a hill we reached the entrance to The Great Wall of China not seen by many people. We were told it was a short hike to a neighboring town, where we would be able to speak with some of the townspeople. A "short walk" turned out to be a steep two-and-a-half-hour climb on slippery, worn down stones from the 16th century, with donkeys crossing our path. Once we entered the town, we spoke through a translator with an old man who owned a house he rented to travelers. He showed us the room he rented out: there was a picture of Mao hanging on the wall, and an eight foot long wooden bed heated from the inside out. This was not the first picture of Mao we had encountered, and were very aware of the present-day influence he has on the people of China. We continued our walk, noticing the drastic difference in architecture between Beijing and this small town. Once reunited with our group, we traveled back to convene for our nightly meeting. During our meeting, we exchanged stories of the people we encountered and our own perceptions of the differences between small town China and big city Beijing. Over and over we were told stories of people moving from rural areas to urban areas to keep up with the economic growth of China. It is a policy that is supported by the government and encouraged by success stories that circulate through the small towns. We struggled not to judge this forced exodus, but to understand the need for such a move,

and how it relates to some of the social problems and need for social work.

Professor Laser

We traveled outside the city to a rural community, where we first visited a school that had few (if any) of the “bells and whistles” that the gifted school in Beijing had available to its students. Even though the school was much more modest—a simple single-storied adobe brick structure and a black wall where students and teachers could write in chalk—the students were dedicated to their studies. Among the children and youth of China, there is a well-formulated belief that education is the key to future success for themselves and their country. With an enormous population, entry into elite Chinese universities is difficult; only the best and brightest are chosen. The competition centers on the student’s performance on their university entrance examination. Depending on their score, their options for the future will either be very great or very limited. The stress and pressure is extreme, and was explained to us as one of the social problems faced by the youth of China.

After we concluded our visit to the school we visited a modest rural health center. It was extremely clean and smelled of antiseptic. The hospital business accounts were being reckoned with an abacus, not a calculator. A number of older men sat in the waiting room talking quietly amongst themselves. One individual commented that in the Korean War he had fought “on the other side,” but now wished he could be friends with the Americans. It was sobering to think that our two countries had been in combat against each other in the not-too-distant past. It was common knowledge that American-Sino relations ebbed and flowed with current economic and human rights issues, but outright war seemed incomprehensible.

Our guide explained to us that we could make home visits if we wanted to travel by foot to the next village. Little did we know that travel by foot was an operative term. It meant quite a hike using a portion of the Great Wall that had fallen into disrepair, but was still widely used as a thoroughfare by the villagers.

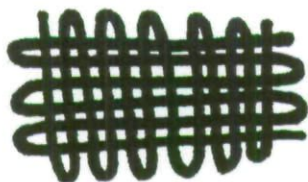
We followed the Wall up and over a mountain, forded a stream by jumping from boulder to boulder, negotiated our way around disgruntled livestock, and finally appeared at a small village. We separated into groups of three and four and set about visiting the villagers in their homes. The villagers shared their lives with us, explaining that because they had implemented mechanized crop techniques and had planted fruit instead of staple crops, they had ensured greater prosperity for themselves and the village. We left with a deeper understanding of the demands of rural life and the tenacity of the Chinese people.

In addition to our educational activities, we visited important cultural landmarks: Tiananmen Square, Forbidden City, Summer Palace, Ming Tombs, and the Great Wall. Having been to each of these venues multiple times, I still was in awe of the grandeur of these locations and the extraordinary burden that was placed on the Chinese workers to create such spectacles. It was easily conceivable how the emperor could be so revered and reviled in contemporary Chinese culture.

One of the great challenges of going on this trip was the Dean’s request to leave my children at home. I was jolted back into the reality of this challenge after receiving a phone call that, while we were visiting the Summer Palace, my son had collided with a park bench on his sled and had a severe concussion. I felt incredibly powerless to comfort my son or advocate for his best care from eighteen time zones away. My love and comfort could only be transferred through the phone; not through hugs, or supportive and caring looks.

I felt very guilty. If I had pushed for their inclusion on the trip, my son would not be having an MRI of his brain. I felt helpless to do anything for my son. In reality, what is more important than your child’s well-being? I was unable to be there for him when he needed me most and I was wracked with guilt. Why had I decided to take these students with me instead of my own children? I knew the answer; I have stated it already. But I had not imagined that my son would be hurt when I was so far away. As I looked out on the frozen lake that was the centerpiece of the Summer

Palace, I wondered how my son was feeling. Was he in pain? Was he scared? Would his MRI be clean? I said a silent prayer, shed some tears, and rejoined the group to board the bus home. On the bus, my satellite phone rang again. He had received a good report from the MRI and was being discharged home. We were on our way home for dinner and our evening meeting. My son was on his way home from the hospital. I reminded myself that women the world over faced challenges daily between their maternal desire to be involved and their need to work.



Elsa Campos Schutte

One of the experiences that impacted me the most while we were in China was building relationships with new people that had genuine curiosity about our culture as well as an urge to build a better China. Learning about social work practice in China helped me grow into a more conscientious person and social worker. I became more aware of myself and my biases as they relate to other people, and developed a better understanding of the Chinese culture. It is impossible to get a deep understanding for China and its people in ten days (or one class for that matter), but what I learned from going to China was that social workers in the United States have a lot to learn about community and being of service to others.

Aside from learning about the current social situation of the Chinese people in China, we also gained a greater understanding of China's vision for the future through our lectures and conversations with the Chinese students. In order to understand the culture and people of China and how social work intertwines with these two systems it's important to understand the idea of collectivism. Although innovation and capitalism may be idealized by the Chinese people, the real value of this culture comes from the sense of responsibility for each other

and taking care of the people in need. It amazed me to learn that the Chinese government had made considerations for the values of social work and social responsibility, something we can learn a lot about.

Professor Laser

On our last night in Beijing, the Chinese social work students and faculty put on a talent show and banquet. They showcased their musical abilities by singing excerpts from classical Beijing opera arias, juxtaposed with singing Chinese rap songs. Classical Mongolian dances were performed as well as hip-hop dancing. The Chinese students and faculty both embraced their past and reveled in their present. We were struck by their lack of shyness in sharing themselves with us; their kindness, generosity, and warmth at making us feel like friends. We had moved from the position of being "the others" to being part of their community. Certainly, we were different than they were, coming from a different culture, a different past, and different upbringings; but we had found common ground. Our hopes and desires for the future were much the same. We all wanted to see our countrymen and women live to their greatest potential, as well as see the citizens of the world live to their greatest potential. Though it might sound trite, all of us were committed to making the world a better place. We saw that each individual had many obstacles, many challenges, but we were all on the same path of growth. Perhaps we would travel on different roads and cross different topography, but we recognized in each other the desire to stay the course and do what we could for the betterment of our people and those around the world. We wished them the best for their fledgling social work profession and admired their pluck and determination at being on the forefront of such a great endeavor.

The next morning, we boarded our plane back to the U.S. We weren't all seated together, but we congregated in the back of the plane to laugh with each other and reflect on the experiences we had just shared, and the changes that had occurred in our own hearts. Even though this was not a mandated

evening group, we shared openly with each other over the hum of the engines and the gentle movement under our feet. Many students had come to a much deeper understanding of what it meant to be a social worker; what options they could pursue in their future and how their own worldview had opened considerably. Many stated that their experiences were the most profound changing experiences since they entered the MSW program.

I was feeling exhaustion from the continual activity and overseeing the needs of the group; but I was extremely satisfied with the experience that we had created for the students. They had gained information from what they had heard and seen from the faculty and students, what they had experienced by living on campus, and what they had witnessed by seeing social work from a Chinese perspective. They had connected to a group of people that they would never have met or became friends with had it not been for the trip. They had gained a certain worldliness and a deepening understanding of what it truly means to be a "person in the environment," and mindful that as the environment changes, so do the tools, techniques and emphasis of social work service. The students who allowed themselves to be fully open to the experience gained the most of all. Some who had little foreign travel experience were transformed by the entire experience and transformed into much more mature people than they were when they boarded the plane to China. I was filled with a sense of satisfaction at having created something that would live on in the hearts of these students. It was the finest experience of teaching I had ever known.

We had come to know each other very well. I thoroughly enjoyed getting to know them as people, not just as students in my class. I was extremely proud of them and how they carried themselves as representatives of our school and what they had to offer the profession of social work. Because of our time together, the boundary between faculty and student had blurred. I had come to see each of my students as incredible individuals full of pluck, enthusiasm, and tenacity. Over long bus and airplane trips, I had learned about their

personal and professional struggles. I counted them as friends and fellow explorers. We had moved from separate and distinct roles to lives that had been intertwined for at least a short period of time.

The following year when I was about to embark with my second student group to China, almost everyone from the first student group wished me good luck and reminded me of anecdotes from the previous year. Most importantly, the first student group shared with me how the experience in China had changed their lives, both personally and professionally.

The trip had changed my life too. I was not the same person as when I left. I loved seeing China through the students' eyes. Through the students' questions, I learned new ways of understanding China. I also learned that, although it had been both a physically and emotionally draining experience—due to the long hours and the constant questions and needs of the group—I was able to persevere and even shine in some moments. I felt as though I had found "my calling," though this may sound trite. I believe my Nana would be very proud of me; I was really connecting people from two worlds and supporting the concept of emphasizing worldwide understanding and caring. I was proud of myself to be able to make a contribution to social work education in the United States and China.

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