

Shin Freedman

The Fulbright experience

Teaching Library and Information Science for one semester in China

I spent the fall of 2016 as a Fulbright Scholar in China. I was interested in China in part because of China's rising intellectual power and increasing economic power in the global market. I was excited and anxious to arrive in China after the end of the 2016 G20 Summit in Hangzhou, my new home. Hangzhou is famous for its history: West Lake, the longest manmade canal in the world, Dragon Well Tea (Longjingcha), and innovations, such as being the home of Alibaba's online enterprise.

My teaching life

My Fulbright letter specified that I was to teach two graduate courses in the Information Resources Department (IRM), School of Public Affairs (SPA) at Zhejiang University, one of China's top ten universities. I had anticipated my teaching with excitement and had diligently prepared for my two courses because I was concerned about pedagogical adjustments in my teaching and whether the Chinese students would accept it easily. Moreover, I had a healthy dose of apprehension about the seminar course that I had just developed for the Chinese graduate students.

My students were delightful in their devotion to studying and learning.¹ Arriving early in the morning for my class, I noticed that my teaching assistant had already placed a cup of hot tea on my table. A box of tissues was placed on the side near where I placed my laptop. At the slightest hint that technical assistance might be needed in viewing my lecture PowerPoints, three or more students would jump right in to help me. Whenever my students saw me on

campus, they would take my bag and carry it for me. This respectful attention would be highly unusual in the United States, but common practice here, given my age and position as a Fulbright Scholar.

During my lectures, students were attentive, respectfully taking notes, and recording my lectures almost verbatim. However, when the discussions started, they were often hesitant, not because the instructional language was in their second language of English (all my graduate students were quite proficient in spoken and written English), but because they were unaccustomed to taking the risk of expressing their individual opinions openly for fear of contradicting their classmates or the professor's point of view.²

In each classroom activity, I organized students into groups either in a mixed level of ability or in a mix of their academic year ranking. Initially, the group activities I planned for the class were received with reluctance. As I continually emphasized the value of collaboration in discussion and research projects, my students seemed to get the hang of it. During discussions on "Intellectual Property and Copyrights,"³ one student expressed indignation at my requirement to use international standards of scholarship and research. In fact, another

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asked point blank, “Why should Chinese intellectuals follow the American standards of publishing guidelines when the Chinese standards are as good as any?” Taking this as a teachable moment, I introduced critical thinking and evaluation to continue this active discussion.

Aside from teaching, the Fulbright Guest Lecture Program was a personally rewarding and professionally enhancing experience. The Council for the International Exchange of Scholars, in collaboration with the American Embassy in Beijing, created a list of lecture topics and sent out the list to all Chinese universities early in the fall. I started getting invitations from various universities across the country to talk about my research. In one instance, I spoke to an audience of university librarians from 11 institutions around Beijing about the professional identity of academic librarians in the United States. A lively Q&A followed, facilitated in Chinese and English.

I also had many opportunities to socialize and learn culturally from my gracious hosts, including my Chinese-language tutor Rachel, who warmly welcomed me into her home for the traditional Mid-Autumn Festival dinner, and the university dean, who included me in a dinner party complete with Beijing roast duck after learning that I had missed Thanksgiving.

Reflections

My one semester sojourn in China was a period of time when I experimented with my teaching and theoretical practices within a new framework. Almost at the end of the semester, I learned that a majority of my students were auditors who had already completed their course work, as they were second year graduate students and Ph.D. candidates. I wondered what made them stay throughout the entire course. Was it because the course materials were new to them? Was it because of the English-language instruction? Was it due to my American teaching style? I also wondered whether these postgraduate students’ participation was made mandatory by the administration. Nonetheless, what impressed me the most was that these auditing

students fully participated in the class with the weekly readings, discussions, and class assignments, including the final research paper. The class discussions were greatly enhanced by these auditors. I felt sheer joy being around all the students in my courses and the other students I met on my lecture program.

Having had such an intense crosscultural experience abroad in teaching, living, and learning, it took me a while to readjust back to my life at my home institution. When a major snow storm welcomed me back to Boston, I had two snow days to contemplate the meaning of my Fulbright experience in China. I reflected whether I had made any real difference in the education of my Chinese students. As I reviewed the assessment of the students’ evaluations, I felt a deep sense of satisfaction about the semester I had spent in China. Someday soon, I hope to see my former Chinese students join me in the professional world of LIS on a global scale.

Notes

1. In my home institution, the majority of the graduate students have jobs, are married and study part-time. However, the Chinese graduate students study full-time, and all my students were unmarried and lived in campus dormitories. Studying is their job.

2. Helena Hing Wa Sit, “Characteristics of Chinese students’ learning styles,” *International proceedings of economics development and research* 62 (2013): 36.

3. There was a landmark intellectual property case finally won by former basketball star Michael Jordan against the Chinese Sporting Company’s copyright infringement which had been lost in two previous cases. The verdict, from the Supreme People’s Court, reversed previous rulings by lower courts in Beijing that said Qiaodan, based in the southern province of Fujian, could use the Chinese characters for Jordan to sell their goods. Then the Chinese Supreme Court finally admitted the wrongdoing of copying the trademark of Michael Jordan. I used this case ruling as an example in our discussion to elicit students’ reactions. ❧