

Margot Landman

Interviewed by Kelly Ann Long



Photo courtesy of Michael De Yoe.

Margot Landman is director of the U.S.-China Teachers Exchange Program, established in 1995 with a generous grant from the Freeman Foundation. The one-year exchange brings Chinese teachers to school districts in the United States, and sends American teachers to schools in China. The Chinese counterpart in this thriving exchange is the China Education Association for International Exchange (CEAIE). In summer 2002 the program moved from the American Council of Learned Societies to the National Committee on United States-China Relations. Reaching far beyond the individual classrooms in which participating educators teach, the program has had a lasting impact on the schools and communities beyond. It is a striking example of the positive use of funds and implementation of the outreach efforts of the Freeman Foundation.

Kelly: *Margot, can you tell us a bit about how your interest in China developed?*

Margot Landman: I inherited my interest in China from my parents, who were correspondents in Shanghai from 1948 to 1950. I was born after their return to the U.S. and grew up hearing about China. I had the good fortune to go to a high school in New York City that offered Chinese. I signed up, thinking that Chinese would be fun and different. It was! The teacher was among the best I have ever encountered. Of the six of us in the first year class, four went on to use Chinese professionally.

I continued language study and added Chinese history at Brown University. I wanted to go to China upon graduation. There was one hitch: it was 1978, before diplomatic recognition, and there were few opportunities for Americans to spend an extended period in China. The Chinese authorities were, however, considering inviting a few Americans to teach English in China.

On December 15, 1978, I received a call from the then-Liaison Office of the PRC asking if I were still interested in going. That night President Jimmy Carter announced to the nation that the U.S. and China would establish diplomatic relations effective January 1, 1979. On January 4 I received an invitation from the Foreign Experts Bureau of the State Council of the People's Republic of China to spend two years teaching English at Xinxiang Normal College in Henan Province. My teaching experience had consisted of tutoring through a Big Sister program, giving private flute lessons to a friend or two . . . certainly nothing that qualified me to teach English to college students and teachers. Nevertheless, I accepted the invitation, asked when and how I should go (there were no direct flights back then), and hung up the phone. What had I agreed to?! I called my parents, and later my undergraduate advisor, Professor Jerome B. Grieder. Everyone was excited and delighted. Some of us were very ner-

vous! Ten days after receiving the invitation I turned twenty-one years old, and ten days later I left for China.

Living and working there was an extraordinary experience, exciting and thankless, wonderful and painful, full of friends and loneliness. I returned to the U.S. in 1982, having spent two and a half years teaching in Xinxiang and one year in Beijing studying at the Beijing Languages Institute and working part-time at CBS News.

Kelly: *How did you use that experience after your return?*

Margot Landman: I worked in New York for the Asia/Pacific program staff at AFS International/Intercultural Programs, Inc., and then moved to the Center for U.S.-China Arts Exchange at Columbia University as a program assistant. I enrolled part-time in a master's degree program at the Columbia School of International and Public Affairs while working at the Arts Exchange. After graduating, I worked as program coordinator for the Committee on Legal Education Exchange with China at the Columbia Law School. After one year as associate director of the East Asian Legal Studies program at Harvard Law School, I returned to Columbia for three years as assistant director of the East Asian Institute.

In 1995 I joined the staff of the American Council of Learned Societies to develop the U.S.-China Teachers Exchange Program funded generously by the Freeman Foundation. From an idea in a few creative minds grew a program that by summer 2003 had brought 141 Chinese secondary school teachers to the U.S., and had sent sixty-nine American K-12 teachers to teach in Chinese secondary schools.

Kelly: *Margot, I can attest to the impact the program has had in the Poudre School District in Fort Collins, Colorado. Through the exchange the district implemented Chinese language, first and second year, at two high schools. The*

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A major issue is in the concept of “guest.” From the Chinese perspective, Chinese teachers in the U.S. and Americans in China are guests. That means that they must be taken care of.

An American host may consider it a great compliment to say to a guest, “Welcome. Please make yourself at home. Let me know if you need anything.” From the Chinese perspective, such a reception is inhospitable. The needs of a guest should be anticipated; a guest should be feted, especially upon arrival; guests are to be treated with honor and respect.

Chinese teachers have also been guest presenters in other classes and at community events. They have influenced lives in the community. Is such impact felt in other places?

Margot Landman: Absolutely. There is now more Chinese language and culture instruction going on in American schools than in the past as a direct result of the teachers exchange program. Thom Sandvick has taught Chinese and French for about fourteen years in La Crosse, Wisconsin. He spent the 1998–99 school year teaching in Luoyang, and the district hosted Chinese teachers in La Crosse. Whereas Thom usually taught two or three sections of Chinese and a section or two of French, during the 2002–2003 school year, there were *nine* sections of Chinese, including two level three sections. A middle school also decided to offer Chinese.

A second La Crosse teacher spent the 2001–2002 school year teaching in Luoyang. Upon her return to La Crosse, Carmen De Yoe, a kindergarten teacher, offered a professional development series on China to her colleagues. The entire school, grades K-5, participated in a China Week held in conjunction with the 2003 Chinese New Year. Classroom teachers; art, music, and gym teachers; administrators, students, and members of the community were all involved in an intensive study of China, a first for the school.

Many forces are at work promoting the study of Chinese in La Crosse. One is Thom himself; he works hard to encourage Chinese language study. Additionally, an extremely supportive senior district administrator believes that the study of Chinese language and culture is very important for the children of La Crosse. Many children from the large Hmong population select Chinese as their foreign language. An active sister city committee promotes a wide range of exchanges between La Crosse and Luoyang, including medical exchanges, agricultural technology exchanges, and others. Clearly, the teachers who traveled from Luoyang to La Crosse under the auspices of the Teachers Exchange Program have had a tremendous impact. In addition to teaching language classes in the high schools, teachers have worked in middle and elementary schools. The successes in La Crosse and Fort Collins are district-wide accomplishments.

Kelly: *Those are good examples of the reach and influence of the program. I assume that the exchange has also had dramatic impact on the Chinese participants involved.*

Margot Landman: Yes. There are many successes and achievements for the teacher participants. One teacher wrote after her return to China:

When I recall my one-year experience in the U.S., I always feel thrilled. The teaching experiences, all the school activities [in which] I participated, the American friends I made, especially my American [host] family, all the places I got to see, all of these have already had a tremendous, positive and prolonged impact on me, both professional and personal . . . Maybe this is the most convincing evidence that our exchange program is very fruitful . . . due to the strenuous effort of many people involved in it . . .

Kelly: *Have American teachers expressed equal enthusiasm about their experiences?*

Margot Landman: An American teacher gave a farewell speech shortly before leaving China in 1999. NATO forces had bombed the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade just weeks before. Times were tense for Americans in China, but this teacher found people even friendlier and warmer in the days that followed the bombing than they had been earlier in the school year. The final words of his speech were:

This week I asked my students what they thought I should teach Americans about China. One student said this, and I will never forget these words. He said, “. . . [W]e are entering a new century—the twenty-first century. Teach Americans it will not be America’s century. Teach them it will not be China’s century. Teach them it will belong to all of us.” My friends, hold on to your dreams for a better, more peaceful world. You are not alone in that desire and we need every one of us. I won’t say good-bye because I will always have China in my heart and will surely return some day again.

Kelly: *Margot, I know that such successes do not develop without some hurdles. What have you learned that might help others in planning an international exchange?*

Margot Landman: This is a big and important question. Thorough preparations should be made on all sides for exchanges to get off to a good start. That is, the teachers have to “expect the unexpected,” as I tell them repeatedly during their pre-departure orientations. Host schools, families, and communities must try to anticipate the needs of their guests.

A major issue is in the concept of “guest.” From the Chinese perspective, Chinese teachers in the U.S. and Americans in China are guests. That means that they must be taken care of. An American host may consider it a great compliment to say to a guest, “Welcome. Please make yourself at home. Let me know if you need anything.” From the Chinese perspective, such a reception is

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inhospitable. The needs of a guest should be anticipated; a guest should be feted, especially upon arrival; guests are to be treated with honor and respect.

American teachers going to China are generally received with great excitement and enthusiasm, and are treated with great respect. Chinese teachers coming to the U.S. may find that less fuss is made over them than over foreign teachers going to their schools in China. We try to prepare the teachers, and hope that they will adjust their expectations, but disappointment and hurt feelings may be inevitable.

Academic or pedagogical issues also arise. Most of our Chinese teachers come from “key” (selective) schools where the majority of students are hard-working, highly motivated, and quiet, if not fully attentive, in class. Most host American schools have an array of students, ranging from those who will go on to the best colleges to those who struggle to complete high school. For the Chinese teachers, walking into an American classroom for the first time can be quite a shock—hair dyed every color under the sun; incredibly tight or extremely loose clothing; gum and/or food in the classroom; and very different attitudes towards teachers, learning, and education.

Kelly: *How have you prepared the Chinese teachers for these differences?*

Margot Landman: Before the teachers leave China, we offer an intensive orientation program. We spend a lot of time talking about American school culture. Upon arrival in the U.S., having an identified “buddy teacher” or mentor to whom to turn for explanations of unfamiliar behavior, attitudes, and manners is essential.

Kelly: *Readers of EAA may be aware of nationwide initiatives to improve teaching about Asia in America’s classrooms. How do you envision this exchange program fitting into that larger project?*

Margot Landman: The many projects and programs working to enhance teaching and learning about Asia can be thought of as overlapping circles. They consist of everything from one-day workshops to a school year overseas, and various options in between. A teacher might get a taste of China, Japan, or Korea through a summer or term-time course or institute—the National Consortium for Teaching about Asia (NCTA) offers courses in many states around the country; the National Endowment for the Humanities funds summer institutes; many colleges and universities offer programs designed specifically for K-12 teachers. Our teachers have participated in a variety of other programs, enhancing their effectiveness in their own classrooms and beyond. Here are some examples:

A high school history teacher in Connecticut was so fascinated by what he observed in China as an exchange teacher that he asked about study opportunities before he even returned. I recommended a summer institute at Primary Source. He applied, was admitted, and had a terrific learning experience. Several years later, a teacher from a district in Maine, interested in introducing Chinese language, asked me about participation in the teachers

exchange program. These two teachers had participated in the same Primary Source institute, had kept in touch, and had talked extensively about the teachers exchange program and how it might enhance the Maine district’s efforts.

Whenever I receive program announcements on the CTA list that I think might be of interest to returned teachers, I circulate them. Several exchange teachers have been accepted to such programs. For example, the Yale Program in International Educational Resources (PIER) ran a summer institute called Understanding Frontiers: Xinjiang, Mongolia, and China’s Search for Security, in 2000, and one of our alumni spent a fruitful few weeks studying in New Haven. In another case, the China Institute in New York administered an NEH summer institute at Columbia University in 2001 on China and the World. Two of our alumni attended. A third example is an experimental online course offered by PIER for which two of our teachers were selected.

In addition to the organizations and programs noted above (by no means an exhaustive list), there are many wonderful resources for teachers available online. Readers may refer to back issues of *EAA* for details.

Kelly: *In what other ways have participating schools, districts, and individuals built upon the exchange program?*

Margot Landman: During or following a successful exchange experience, some American teachers, schools, and districts establish sister school relationships with Chinese schools. Such relationships can develop into long-term, self-sustaining exchanges of

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Submissions may be in a variety of formats, including print, film, video, CD-ROM, or web-based formats. They may be designed for any grade level, elementary through adult. Factual accuracy and likely impact upon the intended audience are criteria for the award. The 2003 prize will be awarded at the Annual Meeting of the AAS in March 2004. Materials must have been published after January 1, 2002.

The winner will receive a year's membership to AAS (including journals) and a small monetary award.

Send submissions by November 1, 2003 to:

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students and teachers with support from and impact far into the surrounding community. I have worked extremely productively with the China Exchange Initiative in Newton, Massachusetts, which is funded by the Freeman Foundation to nurture such exchange relationships.

Kelly: *I think one of the striking aspects of these programs is the wide range of teachers they attract, and the powerful impact on individual teachers.*

Margot Landman: Yes. The four mentioned above include a high school Chinese language teacher from a small city in Wisconsin; a fourth grade teacher from Ann Arbor who participated in two of the programs; a high school ESL teacher from New York City; and a middle school librarian from a Connecticut suburb.

There is no doubt that the experience of a year in another country and culture has a profound impact on participating teachers personally and professionally. During a conference of returned American teachers, several participants talked about the impact of the program. One man decided, on the basis of his year of teaching in China, that he wants to spend the next period of his life teaching English to foreigners in the U.S. He is now studying ESL. Another person, an accompanying spouse with no teaching experience until she worked part-time at a preschool in Hohhot, Inner Mongolia, has also returned to school to get a degree in early childhood education. For these two, the experience in China was truly transforming.

Less dramatic, perhaps, are those who return from China with renewed commitment to teaching, and increased enthusiasm and passion for teaching about a part of the world they believe is neglected in American education. A high school ESL teacher who went to China seven years ago wrote to me saying:

You know, for me, a large part of my China experience is/was getting to know people and sharing life stories, experiences, joys and sorrows. Thinking about MY STUDENTS as "Little Emperors" [only children who are spoiled by their parents and grandparents] against the background of their social/political education at school; their closeness as classmates and love and respect for their parents (for the most part). Even though it was always brief, not much more than an introduction, I enjoyed meeting their parents on parent days, too, seeing their pride in their kids and trying to figure out something about their socioeconomic status by their clothing and the look of their faces. This aspect of the program shouldn't go unexamined as we continue to reflect on our experience. As teachers, I'm convinced that all of us pass on the results of these interpersonal experiences as much as we do the culture/history/facts about China. . . .
. . . I think I'm a better teacher for all my Asian students—including the ones from the sub-continent—because I know what their education has been like in their home countries; I'm also better at meeting their families and addressing their concerns about their kids. I'm aware of both the "cultural distance" they have traveled and of how their previous education helps and hinders both their acquisition of English and their adaptation to life in the U.S.

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When reflecting on his experience of “reverse culture shock,” a Chinese teacher wrote:

It was ok to have a little bit of reverse culture shock when getting home. It didn't take me long to get acclimated to everything. Reverse culture shock is not terrible. . . It is different cultures that make our world so meaningful . . . It is not which is good or bad. Neither is it which is better [or worse]. It is just different and we need some differences in this world. Otherwise the world would be quite boring and lack beautiful colors.

Kelly: *What might you say to encourage a teacher interested in but uncertain of how to pursue an exchange?*

Margot Landman: We encourage teachers to apply to the U.S.-China Teachers Exchange Program. A sojourn overseas is not just a wonderful opportunity for an individual teacher—although it certainly is that! It is a means of integrating the study of China (in this case) into the curriculum in a logical, structured, coherent way. That requires active support from administrators and school boards. If administrators and members of school boards find opportunities to visit schools in China, they will return even more committed to teaching and learning about a country that will play an ever larger role in the world—economically, politically, environmentally, demographically, militarily. In addition to these practical reasons for the study of China, there is also an aesthetic or intellectual reason: it is an extraordinary place and people, with a long and complicated history and culture, endlessly fascinating to many of us whose curiosity is whetted one way or another—in the classroom, through travel, or by a compelling book, film, or piece of music.

Kelly: *The exchange program moved more than a year ago to the National Committee on United States-China Relations as its home base. What does this mean for the exchange program, and how might interested readers contact you about the program?*

Margot Landman: The National Committee was established more than thirty years ago to promote mutual understanding through exchanges in many fields. The Teachers Exchange Program complements existing and potential future projects in education administered by the National Committee, and the strengths and experience of the National Committee support and benefit the exchange program. A wonderful synergy has developed.

Readers interested in the exchange program may reach me at the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations, 71 West 23rd Street, New York, NY 10010-4102; tel.: 212-645-9677; e-mail: mlandman@ncuscr.org.

Kelly: *Margot, thanks for sharing with us about this opportunity.*

Chinese Cities involved in the Exchange

Beijing, Changzhou, Chengdu, Dalian, Hefei, Hohhot, Luoyang, Nanjing, Suzhou, Tongling, Yangzhou

American districts/cities

Colorado: Boulder Valley School District; Cherry Creek School District, Denver; Poudre School District, Fort Collins

Connecticut: Westport Public Schools

Florida: Saint Edward's School

Maine: Portland High School; Bangor Public Schools

Massachusetts: The school districts of Belmont, Boston, Brookline, Lexington, Longmeadow, Melrose, Milton, Quabbin Regional School District (Barre), Sandwich

Michigan: Ann Arbor Public Schools; Birmingham Public Schools; Royal Oak Public Schools

New Hampshire: Henniker School District; Kearsarge Regional School District

New York: public elementary, junior high, and high schools throughout New York City; two private K-12 schools

Oregon: Portland Public Schools

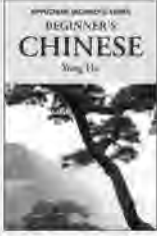
Pennsylvania: Plum Borough Public Schools

Wisconsin: The School District of La Crosse; Milwaukee Public Schools


KELLY ANN LONG is an Assistant Professor of History at Colorado State University. Her teaching and research interests include Pacific Wars, U.S.-China relations, and Social Studies Methods for teachers. She taught at the secondary level for many years and remains involved in K-12 outreach. Recent publications include “Friend or Foe: Life's Wartime Images of the Chinese” in *Looking At Life Magazine*, Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001. She is co-author of a humanities based curriculum unit *Revolutionary China (1839–1989)*, Social Science Education Consortium, 2002.

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