

# ***Fang yazi—Releasing the Ducks***

## ***The University of North Dakota's Short-Term Faculty-Led Study Program in China***

By Colleen Berry

In the summer of 2000, students at our university participated in the first China Summer Study Program (CSSP), a short-term, faculty-led program sponsored by the College of Business and Public Administration. It was designed as a study abroad experience that would allow students to accomplish specific tasks on their own rather than being transported from place to place on a tour bus or spending time in classrooms and factory reception halls. In this program, students walk or use public transportation to get to most of the sites, and they use the cities as their classroom.

This year marked the thirteenth continuous year of the program, and as of summer 2013, approximately 150 students have participated. The program, which runs for about twenty-six days (Beijing, eight days; Xi'an, three days; and Shanghai, fifteen days), consists of three classes that all participants are required to take: Introduction to Business in China (spring semester on campus before the trip), and, in China, China Then and Now, and the Business Fieldwork Project in Shanghai. We have found the ideal number of participants to be about twelve.

Although the program is sponsored by the College of Business, it is open to any student at the university. Usually, about 50 percent of the students who participate have completed one or two years of Chinese, but this is not a requirement. We have found that, at our university, it is not possible to recruit enough students if we limit it to those from the College of Business or those who have taken Chinese. To attract a sufficient number of students, we have tried to define the term "business" broadly and give students as much latitude as possible in selecting the sites they want to visit and the fieldwork projects they want to carry out.

This article will describe the goals of each aspect of the program; how the program is designed; and what we do before, during, and after the trip. It will also provide what we have found to be best practices for this type of program in China.

### **Pretrip: Logistical Planning**

Although we coordinate the program with our International Programs Office, because it is a faculty-led trip, we are responsible for doing most of the planning, logistics, and other preparations ourselves. Early in the fall semester, we begin recruiting for the program by taking part in the university's Study Abroad Fair; distributing posters and brochures; taking out ads in the student newspaper and on the university TV channel; and, most importantly, visiting classes to introduce the program (preferably accompanied by one or two students who have participated in the program). We have found that making an appearance in person has been the most effective way of generating interest. Many of our students have said that they had never considered going to China until they heard us talk about it.

When we first started taking students to China, we relied on Chinese tour agencies such as the China International Travel Service (CITS) to make the transportation and housing arrangements. Later, we were able to hire a former Chinese tour guide to make these arrangements for us, making the trip much less expensive. One caveat

to using a private individual or a small company rather than a well-known tour agency is that you must have absolute confidence in their reliability. If you do not have firsthand knowledge of the integrity and experience of the individual or company, you should employ a reputable agency, even if it is more expensive.

In the spring semester, we make all the arrangements for accommodations and transportation in China. Although we use our contact in China to do this, it is also possible to make many of the arrangements online. Websites like Booking ([www.booking.com](http://www.booking.com)) are excellent because they allow room reservations with free cancellations. Our group has always traveled between cities by overnight train. This gives students a chance to experience train travel, and it is cheaper than flying and saves hotel costs. While it can be much easier to have someone on the ground in China take care of these logistics, it is not absolutely necessary.<sup>1</sup>

### **Student Preparation**

In the spring semester, the students who have been accepted to the program take a required three-credit class that prepares them for the trip. The class, a vital part of the program, has four main objectives. First, it allows the students to get to know each other and us before the trip. They have often commented that this gives them a much greater sense of security about going to a foreign country. It also gives us a chance to get to know more about the students and to reiterate some of the things we feel are important, such as how to avoid getting into trouble while in China.

Second, the class gives the students a cursory introduction to Chinese culture, history, and business practices. Obviously, only a small amount of information can be covered in a semester, but it does give the students a framework and a rudimentary understanding of some of the historical background and more recent issues and events. When they get to China, they are able to fit what they see and experience into a broader historical context.

Third, the map work and itinerary preparation parts of the class prepare the students to hit the ground running. The students purchase a Shanghai and a Beijing guidebook, as well as English-Chinese maps of both cities. There are a certain number of required sites to visit in each city, and the students choose others from a preapproved list. In the class, they locate all of the sites on the maps and then create a day-to-day itinerary that includes the closest subway stops. Then, they make a second itinerary arranged by area of the city and list the section of the city (N, NW, NE, etc.) where the site is located, so if they rearrange their schedules, they can do so efficiently.

Fourth, in this class, the students design their individual business fieldwork projects. We meet with each student to discuss possible fieldwork topics and how they might be carried out. The basic rule is that the project must be one that can only be done on the ground in China; it cannot be one that is unfeasible or that can be done solely with online resources. A project on Chinese prisons, for example, would probably not be approved because it would be almost impossible to carry out. A few examples of fieldwork projects have been "Real Estate

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in Shanghai,” “Buddhism in China” (the student stayed at a temple for three days), “The Business of Tattooing in China,” and “NGOs in China” (the student volunteered for a week, in addition to doing interviews). At the end of the term, the students make presentations on exactly how they plan to carry out their projects and discuss the contacts they have made.

Finally, immediately before the students leave for China, the first China Then and Now assignment is due. In this pretrip part of the journal, students answer questions about their goals for the trip, their expectations, and the skills they have for negotiating China. It is essential that this part be turned in before departure because the questions cannot be accurately answered once the students have arrived.

The pretrip journal includes questions such as:

- What are your expectations of what China will be like?
- What are you unsure or even a bit nervous about?
- What are your goals during your stay in China?
- What questions do you have about China that you hope to answer on this trip?

### In China

While in China, the students are enrolled in China Then and Now, a class that consists of visiting the required and self-selected sites that the students chose in the spring class and keeping a directed journal about them. Before visiting each one, students read about it in their guidebooks or online, and afterward, they respond to general or site-specific questions. An example of a general question would be, “Is this site primarily for tourists or for locals? What is significant about it?” A site-specific question for Tiananmen might be, “What kinds of people are represented on the Monument to the People’s Heroes? Why were they considered heroes?”

While in China, we collect the journals a few times to ensure that the students are keeping up; otherwise, it becomes an exercise in creative writing after they return home. Also, by doing this, we can also let the students know what improvements they need to make before they submit the final version.

The Business Fieldwork in Shanghai class involves carrying out the project the students designed in the pretrip class and writing a report on it. We check with the students regularly to ascertain their progress and discuss any problems they have encountered. Although students who find that their project is just not feasible are allowed to make changes to it, part of the project’s intent is to demonstrate to students how they have to be flexible and that not everything they plan may go as expected.

Because in the pretrip class the students compile an itinerary of where they are going each day and how to get there, little time is spent in China on planning daily activities. However, there is still some flexibility; with our approval, they can make some changes. For example, if one student goes to a site that is really interesting and others want to go as well, they can often make that change.

### Posttrip

When the trip is officially over, most of the students return home immediately, but some stay to travel to other places in China or to nearby countries. Because not everyone returns home immediately, we give the students about one month to turn in their final journals and field-work project reports.

The posttrip part of the journal asks the students to reflect on their experiences in China. This part is very useful because we ask the students what changes they would recommend and what advice they would give to future students. It also gives the students the opportunity to compare their initial goals and expectations to what they actually accomplished in China. Some examples of the posttrip journal questions include:

- Who was the most interesting or memorable person you met in China and why?
- What have you learned about the lives of people in China that stands out?
- How has this trip changed your life? Give some specific ways that your experiences on this trip will make your life and your actions different when you return home.
- What were some of the cultural aspects of China that you felt unprepared for or frustrated by? How did you deal with them?
- What did you bring on the trip that was the most helpful? What do you wish you hadn’t brought or didn’t need?
- What would you suggest to students going next year? What could the instructors do to make you feel better prepared? What could you have done to be better prepared?

We have found that the posttrip journal also provides the most important insights into student perceptions of the trip. The question that often evokes the most interesting responses is, “How did this trip change your life?” The most common answer is that it has given the students much more self-confidence, often in their personal lives as well as in their ability to negotiate travel in places completely new to them. Other student reflections show how the experience changes the way they look at others and society at large. This part of the journal can also be very useful as an assessment tool.

### Best Practices

Over the years, we have discovered a number of practices that we highly recommend. Some of them are especially applicable to faculty who are arranging and leading their own trips and not going through an agency.

1. Every student and leader should have a Chinese cell phone. Cheap cell phones and SIM cards can be purchased in China with contract-free, pay-as-you-go plans. The purchase only requires a valid passport. The phones can usually be used for several years, even though the SIM cards may have to be replaced. We recommend that students not use their US cell phones in China because of the exorbitant cost. Most students use Microsoft’s Skype or Apple’s FaceTime to stay in touch with friends and family. Everyone should have the numbers for the group leaders and the other members of the group in their phones.
2. Having at least one group leader who speaks Chinese is a huge asset, especially if he or she has traveled in China before. If that is impossible, you need someone in the country that you trust and who can help you if necessary. Not having anyone who speaks the language and is available at all times can be frustrating at best and dangerous at worst. What would you do if you had no access to someone who

spoke Chinese and one of your students called you at two in the morning and said he was drunk and lost?

3. We do not buy air tickets for the students. There is no longer a significant financial advantage in flying as a group, and some students may prefer one airline to another. They may also want to make changes to their itinerary. It is much easier if the students book their own flights and make their own changes.
4. We have daily meetings with the students. This allows us to see how they are doing, discuss the day's events, and make announcements. This is also when they can share their experiences and discoveries.
5. The importance of health forms in case of emergency is paramount. Before the trip, we collect a completed form from everyone (leaders included) that includes an emergency contact number at home, allergies, health history/conditions, and medications (be sure to get the generic name—Chinese doctors often do not recognize brand names). The forms can be kept on a smartphone, but the most important thing is to have them with you at all times. If an emergency arises, you may not have time to go to the hotel to get them, and doctors often need the information immediately.
6. Emphasize to students early and often the importance of not getting into trouble while they are in China. The issue of drinking is often a significant concern on faculty-led study abroad programs. We tell our students that they are adults and we are professors, not chaperones; therefore, we expect them to behave appropriately and stay out of trouble. Of course, if you are leading a younger group, you may have stricter rules. We do not tell our students not to drink (in China, the legal drinking age is 18), but we do tell them, repeatedly, to be responsible. Our grading rubric includes a section on behavior that allows us to factor it into their final grades. In addition, we clearly state in the syllabus that we have the permission of the administration to send students back to the US for behavior we deem inappropriate.
7. Finally, we encourage other faculty to participate in the program as guests. This means that they tag along with us, and while we bear no actual responsibility for them, we include them in our visa, hotel, and transportation arrangements. This creates good relationships and makes strong supporters for our program.

## Results

Some of the results that demonstrate the success of the program are the significant numbers of students who return to China to work or study, who decide to major or minor in Chinese studies once they return to campus, and who have reported that participation in the trip was a direct factor in a successful job search. One of the most gratifying aspects for me personally has been the opportunity to get to know the students on a much deeper level than is possible in the classroom; I have developed numerous relationships that have lasted well beyond the students' time at the university.

In short, this trip helps students better understand China and Chinese culture; to be more comfortable with people from other cultures who may not speak their language; and to feel confidence in many aspects of their lives, including travel and the experience of living in a new or different culture. Students who participate in this trip perceive significant changes in the way they see themselves and their own culture, in addition to an increased knowledge of China and Chinese culture. The following comments reflect some of our goals:

*In just six short weeks I feel that I have learned a lot about who I am. This experience took me 9,000 miles from my comfort zone and placed me in a very foreign place. . . Looking back on it, I feel very proud and empowered by my ability to accomplish what I did.*

*The most powerful aspect of this trip is how it has changed my mind on the words fear, doubt, and uncertainty.*

*I really do feel that I'm ready to stop acting like a ghost and begin to act like I'm alive.*

*One of my goals was to learn about the life of an average Chinese citizen. I think I met this goal, not because I learned about the "average Chinese citizen," but because I learned there really isn't such a thing.*

*For the past twenty-three years of my life, I lived as a minority, and I never really had the chance of knowing what it feels like to be a nonminority before, and setting my foot into China (as an adult) gave me the chance to feel what it is like to almost be a majority.*

We constantly reevaluate and make changes to the journals, to the way we prepare the students, and to almost every other aspect of the trip. One of the most important components of the program is the project reports and journals. For the students, the journals are valuable as a means of self-reflection and as a memento of the trip; for the instructors, they are a constant reminder of why this is such an important program. Another vital part of the program is the required class that the students take before going on the trip. It provides an overall introduction to the culture; creates a sense of community among the students; and prepares the students so that when they arrive in China, they are out the door and on their way immediately with no in-country time wasted figuring out where and when to go. In addition, the pre-trip class is the best opportunity for the teachers to advise the students of their expectations and reiterate the message that the students are expected to act responsibly.

Finally, this trip is a short-term study abroad opportunity. It does not necessarily involve language study, although students who have taken Chinese do have a chance to practice what they have learned. It also does not produce students who are experts in China. But it does motivate many of the students to start or continue their Chinese language and culture studies, and it gives them confidence in themselves and their ability to negotiate a foreign culture. If these aspects are realized, then the program accomplishes the main goals we have set. ■

## NOTES

1. For information on train travel in China, see "The Man in Seat Sixty-One," *Seat 61.com*, accessed March 17, 2014, <http://www.seat61.com/China.htm>.

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