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The Chang-Lan Fellowships: Reflections on the Value of Experiential Learning

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The Chang-Lan Fellowships: Reflections on the Value of Experiential Learning

🕒 June 3, 2020 👤 Michael C. Wenderoth

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Two years ago, I flew back to a small town in Minnesota, the unlikely place that sparked my interest in China more than two decades ago. I went to see friends and former professors, and learn about the progress of the Chang-Lan Fellowships, which my mother and I established there almost 25 years ago to foster a better understanding of China through experiential learning.

On that trip, the trade war was kicking in. Presidents Trump and Xi had many of us, accustomed to years of deepening ties and growing prosperity, extremely concerned about deteriorating relations. And as I write, the global pandemic, far from bringing us together, appears to be pushing the U.S. and China even further apart.

I'm deeply worried. Just when we need *more* personal connections, *more* constructive dialogue and a *more* nuanced understanding of China – which I discovered the experiential focus of the Chang-Lan Fellowships fosters extremely well – we are dangerously close to a new era, in which borders and minds might be closing down those important activities.

My observations on the Chang-Lan Fellowships began with my questioning whether experiential learning was even relevant today, given dramatic changes in technology, globalization, and financial pressure on colleges. But reaching out to the more than 60

fellowship alumni made me realize experiential learning still has a powerful role. In fact, I'm even more convinced that we should be doing everything possible – particularly in our current crisis – to ensure experiential learning not only survives but expands.

A brief history of the Chang-Lan Fellowships

In 1996, my late mother, Judy Chang Wenderoth, and I set up the [Chang-Lan Endowed Fund](#) at Carleton College, in memory of her parents and my grandparents, Drs. Sing-Chen Chang (张信诚) and Chien-Wei Lan (蓝乾蔚), who came to the U.S. in the 1940s. The Fund supports independent undergraduate student fellowships and has two key requirements: projects must be experiential in nature (versus formal academic study), and Fellows must share their experience with the larger community upon return.

We wanted more Americans to better understand China, which we believed would become increasingly central in the world. But we were worried about the race to specialize in our studies and work, so we wanted the fellowships to encourage curiosity and exploration outside of one's major, drawing students who never had thought much about China.

My mother, an architect, believed learning often came from doing and exploring, not solely through traditional academic study. So, we hoped the fellowships would generate personal contact with Chinese, which might lead to memorable stories, fresh perspectives, and closer relationships.

Past fellowships have included David Riedel's retracing and re-sketching of the 1934 Barbour expedition of the Yangtze (2002); David Jenkins' journey to understand changing worker culture in Manchuria through bathhouses and noodle shops (2003); Nicki Catchpole

and Molly Patterson's examination of the transformation of teahouses (2004); and Pierce McDonnell's exploration of how China understands and presents its maritime history (2018).

Past Fellows have shared their experiences publicly at Carleton, and today can reach an even wider audience through the internet. For example, Pierce McDonnell's [presentation](#) at the San Francisco Maritime Museum; Erik Lagerquist and Nyla Worker's [website](#) to share solar insights; and Christian Heuchert and Alan Zheng's recorded [discussion](#) on tourism in pastoral Gansu communities.

Conversations with Past Fellows: Benefits of Experiential Learning

Stepping back on campus, I was struck by change. One hundred students, about five percent of Carleton's student body, is mainland Chinese, versus zero percent when I graduated. History, which I studied, has plummeted in popularity, replaced near the top with computer science, the closest to a pre-professional major you can get at a liberal arts college. Tuition and fees have skyrocketed (\$65,000 a year today, versus \$17,000 in 1990). And, of course, the campus is wired with technology: resources around the world are available



David Riedel, Chang-Lan Fellow 2002, retracing the 1934 Barbour Expedition of the Yangtze.

with a few keystrokes.

When you've got Chinese voices on campus, and you can WeChat video with Sichuan villagers from tiny Northfield, Minnesota, do you really need to send students to China? When there's immense pressure to land internships to secure well-paying jobs to justify tuition, is there still a place for off-the-resume exploration?

Reaching out to alumni who received fellowships as early as 2001, I came away with a much better understanding of how experiential learning addresses these questions:

1) Experiential fellowships foster ***independence and confidence***.

How easy it is to forget what it was like to be 20. Fellows said they grew immensely from designing their projects and executing them themselves, abroad.

Kyle Schiller, who explored Buddhism by visiting temples across China with Adam Rutkowski in 2017, said he matured quickly having to travel on his own. His fellowship spurred further desire to contrast China with Japan, where he went the following year. An engineer at Airbnb, Schiller credits the fellowship with giving him confidence to pursue diverse interests in learning, innovation, and improving global health. Rutkowski worked on energy sustainability at Otherlab, liquid thermodynamics at SpaceX, and will soon start a PhD at Princeton.

In 2001, Sarah Karbeling traveled with Akiko Nakano down the Yangtze to understand the human impact of the Three Gorges Dam. A high school physics teacher in Iowa, she said that summer gave her a strong sense of independence. That's something I heard from many

women, who received more than half the Chang-Lan Fellowships, and from science majors, who often have brutal major requirements that afford little time to go abroad.

David Riedel, who re-sketched sections of the Yangtze, credits his fellowship with helping him see where art could lead him. The Chang-Lan boosted his application to Yale's School of Architecture, which led to a career with Kohn Pedersen Fox in Shanghai. Now he is cofounder of AI SpaceFactory in New York, which develops advanced construction technologies for space exploration.

With parents and our educational system “[snowplowing](#)” the way for today's youth, it's easy to forget that most learning comes from forging out on your own, going in new directions, and making mistakes. Fellows emphasized how their independent, in-person exploration of China accelerated that process.

2) Experiential fellowships widen our perspectives, ***challenging what we've read and been fed.***

Remember your first trip to China? All Fellows grew up with the internet, but stressed the importance of seeing China with their own eyes.

“We're living in an echo chamber, with the internet reinforcing our beliefs, with much of it misleading information,” Anthony Wong told me. “So, I tell younger people today that it's more important than ever to go out and see for yourself.”

Wong, a banker and now regulator at the Hong Kong Securities and Exchange Commission, received a fellowship in 2005 to explore Chinese identity, contrasting overseas Chinese communities (he is from

Malaysia) with his distant relatives in Fujian.

Karbeling, the high school physics teacher, admits that she doesn't do much related to China these days. But those conversations with displaced villagers helped her reconcile what she read at home and saw in the news, a human element she can even bring into discussion about physics.

Pierce McDonnell, a math and history major, combined his passions in shipping and history by working at the Shanghai Maritime Museum. He didn't just explore the archives and exhibitions but also worked alongside museum staff and hosted Chinese visitors. That provided multiple perspectives on China's maritime history, gave him a lifelong contact with the director there, and deepened his interest in the travels of Zheng He.

Sharing their experiences upon return forces Fellows to make sense of their experience, both in their own minds and to people back home. Using multimedia, story, and analogies to connect with their audiences, all said they saw their home country in a new light. Many grappled with differences between what they experienced and what they had read, studied, or assumed. This year will be particularly interesting, as the college awarded fellowships to two mainland students, a first.

3) Experiential fellowships ***lead to jobs, foster long-term success.***

"Success" is dependent on how you define it. But contrary to turning them into wandering poets, Chang-Lan Fellows said the experience aided them professionally.

Nicki Catchpole had to postpone her fellowship due to

the SARS outbreak in 2003. She said her conversations in Sichuan over tea made her more adept at conducting research, and helped her land her first job upon graduation. That eventually took her back to Asia, and now has her analyzing business technology in New York.

“The open nature of the fellowship... there’s nothing like it,” she said. “Figuring how to create structure to make sense of something and deal with obstacles that arose was invaluable.”

David Jinkins said he was madly curious about how China’s economic shift was affecting worker culture in northeast China. Though his focus today has shifted from China, the fellowship took him to Taiwan for a master’s and Penn State University for a doctorate. Now he is in Denmark, where he serves as associate professor of economics, specializing in international trade.

Jessica Lilu Chen fell in love with the stories of Muslim minorities on her fellowship. That started a journey to a PhD in religious studies at Stanford University, the recent publication of [her book](#) on Islamic history in early modern China, and her current work as a hospice chaplain in California.

The fellowships helped many stand out in job interviews and has served them in the longer arc of their careers. But most recalled how tough it was to convey to recruiters how the experience could be applied to their first jobs. That’s not surprising since top executives cite soft skills (adaptability, assimilating information, communication, creativity) as critical, but they generally don’t do the entry-level hiring. There’s also increasing [evidence](#) that those same soft skills, not the quantitative ones, may be more valuable in a world

of increased automation, and that generalists with wider-ranging experience, not narrow specialists, produce more cutting edge scholarship and innovations, given their ability to make disparate connections.

Expanding Experiential Learning

There's a price to funding students and providing the critical support to make experiential learning work well. Patience, in short supply these days, is also needed to allow exploration to take its course. So, student fellowships like the Chang-Lan may not be possible at all institutions, nor be right for every student.

But there are many ways to integrate experiential learning into courses, study abroad programs, and independent study and work. At IE Business School, for example, I teach a course on business in China. One course I deliver entirely on campus; the other includes a weeklong immersion in Shanghai.

With the course on campus, I have drawn inspiration from Chang-Lan Fellows. For example, we conduct live WeChat video conversations with diverse experts in China; I integrate rich video, interactive articles, and simulations into coursework; and students deliver exercises and projects that pair them with mentors across China.

These changes have deepened student understanding of China, but I still can't find a substitute for taking them there and sending them on their own explorations. When a student suddenly finds her internet sites blocked, she learns to navigate and live the experience, and then reflect on the broader implications. I see minds opening in our blogs, discussions on the bus, and group chats (we use

WeChat, another way to enable the lived experience). Executives are no different: they can read a McKinsey report or hear my lecture, but until we buy a beer at a corner shop using WeChat pay, the vast implications of a mobile ecosystem usually escape them.

Those who go to China and explore seem to have deeper empathy and perspective than they had before their trips. The most valuable part is watching them grapple with contradictions between what they read or thought and what they see and experience, such as the trade-offs between convenience and personal privacy, between more individual rights and top-down rule.

When they've spent their time in China well, they become humbler, and I find they are less prone to demonize – or overhype – China. We could definitely use more of that these days.

There's of course a balance between in person, experiential learning and time in the classroom. Fellows and the students I take to China need background on China's history, political economy, culture, and language. But I find giving them too much information stifles refreshing questions that even seasoned experts overlook or have become too jaded to ask. And as a professor, there are benefits for me: seeing China through their eyes challenges my own views, particularly the constructs I've formed over the years.

When the pandemic ends, I hope we can safely mix more in person, and not retreat behind our walls into our online echo chambers. For those seeking to heighten the experiential in their organizations, I attribute the modest success of the Chang-Lan Fellowships to four sources:

- ***Dedicated professors who see themselves as***

mentors. Carleton has been nationally recognized for leading the way in [undergraduate teaching](#), which comes down to people. The number one reason Chang-Lan Fellows apply is because a professor encourages them. Riedel, who sketched the Yangtze, said the late Professor Roy Grow not only pointed out the opportunity but also challenged him to use it to explore his interest in art. You can't have a journey of a thousand miles without that initial step (and yes, sometimes a loving push helps).

- **Strong fellowship support.** Professors are under heavy pressure and are not always accessible. That's where strong, professional staff steps in. Carleton is lucky to have Marynel Ryan Van Zee, PhD, Director of the Office of Student Fellowships. She handles all internal and external fellowship opportunities, serving as adviser and coach to guide student applications so they are set up for success.
- **Adjusting (or experimenting) as necessary.** We faced a Catch-22 at Carleton: we wanted more students without China backgrounds or Mandarin skills to apply, but that group wasn't thinking about China, and often were the least prepared to take advantage of an independent summer in country. To address the challenge, we opened half the fund to support summer internships. While adhering to the Fund's core aims, internships enable students with less China background to experience the country. For most, the summer sparks greater appreciation and gets a good percentage of them to consider applying for the more independent fellowships.
- **Re-examining what "experiential" means.** Do you have to be physically in China to experience China? It may in fact be wiser to explore some sensitive

topics from outside the country. With lockdowns in place worldwide, the five Chang-Lan Fellows awarded for 2020 are re-examining this topic, proposing creative approaches. Changlan Wang (no relation) may be able to conduct her research into emotional response online. Marianne Gunnarsson, who will examine doctor-patient conversations, has already deferred to the winter.

I don't have a quantitative measure on the impact of the fellowships, but Fellows I spoke to had thoughtful views on current events and had plenty of examples of how their experience enhanced their life trajectories. Even if few of them continue to work in China, one alum said it best, "Doesn't matter. Pretty much everything anyone does today has some connection to China. Americans are doing ourselves a big disservice if we don't understand what's happening there."

Are the experiential Chang-Lan Fellowships playing their part to enhance U.S-China relations? My answer, to use an expression I picked up from my time in Minnesota, is a resounding "You Bet." I hope we consider how to dramatically increase the experiential learning of China for more Americans. The future of U.S-China relations greatly depends on it.

Quotes have been condensed or edited for clarity. The author takes sole responsibility for any discrepancies in transcription or interpretation.

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吃水的人，不忘挖井的人 (Those who drink water, should not forget who dug the well): Michael would like to express his gratitude to key Carleton staff and faculty who have made the

Chang-Lan Fellowships successful over the past two decades: Chris Solso, Dean Liz Ciner, Marynel Ryan Van Zee; to Professor Penny Prime and the late Professor Roy Grow, for co-designing his first experiential experience in China in 1992, a program decades ahead of its time; to Professor Prime for providing advice, years later, on ways to design his courses and immersions on China at IE Business School; to the 60+ Carleton Chang-Lan Fellowship alumni who shared their stories and who have gone into leadership positions around the world; and to his mother, the late Judy Chung-Yung Chang Wenderoth, and his grandparents, Drs. Sing-Chen Chang, and Chien-Wei Lan, from whose well he continues to drink.

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Discussion with Barry Naughton, January 24, 2020 »