

**Integrative Cultural Research Project:
Reflective Essay**

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Introduction: Integrative Cultural Research Project

The culmination of a Kalamazoo College student's study abroad experience is exemplified in the Integrative Cultural Research Project (ICRP). Over the past eight years, projects have included ethnographic studies, field research, internships, service learning, and community service. Placing great emphasis on participation, informed by observation and traditional research activities:

The primary goals of the project are to more effectively integrate students into the local culture, to promote the development of an ability to appreciate how the local people organize their daily tasks, and facilitate the switch in perspective from 'they do things this way' to 'we do things this way' (CIP, Kalamazoo College, September 2000).

Improvement of language use, increased interaction with locals, and the development of analytical and problem-solving skills are also important facets of the ICRP.

The ICRP consists of two major segments - the field experience and reflective essay. The 2000-2001 academic year China study abroad program's field requirements consisted of the following: three 25 hour weeks (Tuesday-Friday) of work at a field site within Beijing city limits conducive to an intensive Chinese language atmosphere. Due to unforeseen time restraints imposed by an early Chinese New Year (January 24, 2001), the time requirements were lowered to 40 hours and 25 hours in extreme cases. Aside from a specified length in stay, students were also required to keep weekly field notes (written in Chinese) which were reviewed in one-on-one sessions with teachers at the Beijing Institute of Education (BIE). These one-on-one sessions occurred every Monday and were accompanied by a 50-minute class discussion period mediated by BIE staff.

Field Site: History

Beijing Chaoyang Mentally Retarded Children Rehabilitation Center was founded in 1989 and originally named the Xiang He Yuan Community Welfare Kindergarten. On August 1, 2000 the Center was moved to its new address at #16 Beiyuan, Xi Ba He Dong Lu, Chaoyang District, Beijing, China. Housed in a two-story complex, the Center covers 300 square meters containing eight rooms and an outdoor play area. Eight staff members, one professional doctor, one driver, one lawyer, and numerous volunteers service the Center. Specializing in the rehabilitation of mentally disabled children between the ages of 3 and 18, the Center has an enrollment capacity of thirty-five with thirty students currently attending. The Center has helped 187 children since its founding eleven years ago. Following rehabilitation, eighty-nine former students are now enrolled in Beijing schools for the retarded, eleven are currently attending regular primary schools, and 18 have found jobs with local agencies.

The Center offers two programs for students. One is a daily commute program that allows students to return home every day following classes. The second is a weekly program offering overnight stays for students who return home on the weekends. Courses include Language Training, Reading, Music, Physical Education, Hygiene, Self-Care, and Labor Training. The Center also offers training for teachers and parents and promotes family activities throughout the year. Both local government and private donations from individuals, groups, and businesses fund the Chaoyang Center. These donators include: Chaoyang Deformed Persons Association, Huifeng Bank, Jiali Hotel, Yanfeng Shopping Center, Beijing Toy Association, as well as many private individuals.

Field Site: Role as an Intern

The Beijing Chaoyang Mentally Retarded Children Rehabilitation Center frequently accommodates weekend volunteers, however rarely are they assisted on a daily basis during normal working hours. Thus, a model for my role as an intern had not yet been developed by the Center. Fellow Kalamazoo student Kate Lee and myself in cooperation with the Center's manager, Yáng Yùhúa, set out to formulate an internship framework that would not only meet Kalamazoo College ICRP requirements, but also provide a fruitful and enjoyable experience. Originally we had planned a three-week work period, Tuesday thru Friday between the hours of 9 AM and 4PM, equaling 25 hours per week with a grand total of 75 hours. Again, because of the early Chinese New Year, we were forced to reduce this plan to a two-week work (January 2, 2001 – January 12, 2001) period totaling 50 hours. My main role as an intern was to assist other staff members with the daily tasks of caring for students enrolled at the Center. A large amount of my time was spent in one-on-one sessions with students. These one-on-one sessions included such things as speech drills, reading drills, physical exercise, playtime, and eating.

Field Site: Experience

The Beijing Chaoyang Mentally Retarded Children Rehabilitation Center offers an interesting perspective on the dynamics of modern Chinese life. During our preliminary work researching possible internship venues, Kate Lee, Andrea Bartuski, and myself visited the Center to discuss our plans with Yáng Yùhúa. Traveling to the Center by taxi, we were confronted with a scene that typifies the current state of Beijing and much of China. Rapid modernization in which the old is razed and the new is built in a

blink of the eye. The Center stood on the fringe of where old Beijing, complete with Hutongs and donkey carts, was being overrun by the new Beijing boasting glistening office buildings and BMW's. The Center was spearheading this move forward; nestled between old and crumbling buildings it had only just been completed a few months earlier. The appealing exterior of the complex was reinforced by an interior that seemed more western in nature than a typical Chinese structure. Clean rooms, bright colors, comfortable chairs, and desktop computers portrayed an institution still in its infancy but with a clear and stated direction.

Accompanying the material element of the Center was a jovial staff intent on representing their place of work in the best manner possible. Led by Yáng Yùhúa, our coworkers made every attempt to accommodate our needs and answer our questions. They patiently helped us build a rapport with the students and counseled us on the "do's and don'ts" of their daily routine. It was apparent from the beginning that although the teachers at the Center most likely lacked the training their western counterparts had received, their compassion for the students had a great and lasting impact on those around them. Every staff member, from the cleaners and driver on up to manager Yáng Yùhúa, appeared to have a genuine respect for their students and those who lent their time and effort to the cause. Having spent countless hours with their students, often sleeping and eating with them, the teachers had created a bond that rarely exists in prototypical western schools, let alone public schools in China where teachers still rule with an iron fist atop podiums.

Due to the limited on-site time we were allotted, prior training in mental retardation rehabilitation was infeasible. Therefore our role at the Center developed into

one of interaction and observation. Although making a conscious effort to constructively educate our students congruent to our Chinese speaking abilities, we lacked a vast knowledge of specific rehabilitation techniques. Therefore, Kate Lee and myself chose to concentrate our efforts towards one-on-one sessions with students and carefully noted our observations of these encounters. A great deal of our time at the Center was spent playing with the students. It was during these periods that I sought to evaluate the students' level of competence with such rudimentary skills as color recognition, counting, motor-skills, speech proficiency, listening ability/understanding, and visual aptitude. From there I noted what the Center was doing to improve these skills on an individual and group basis.

Gradually I became aware that the Center lacked a methodical course of action for the rehabilitation of its students. Although extremely caring, the teachers were ill equipped to deal with the problems their students' disabilities produced. Upon closer inspection, the Center resembled a day care Center responsible for looking after children rather than an institution outfitted to properly improve the situation of its students. To say that the Center was completely without a schedule or daily regiment would be inaccurate. The Center did adhere to a daily time chart in which various activities were performed at predetermined times. The problem was that during these activities, whether they be dressing, eating, exercising, reading, or speaking, the teachers were unable to give each student the attention and distraction-free environment he or she required for progressive learning.

Despite these limitations, the Center actively pursued a rehabilitation process that they deemed necessary and beneficial. It is important to keep in mind that mental health

institutions in China were only established a mere twelve years ago. When compared to similar institutions in Europe and North America, the techniques employed by the Center are outdated and inefficient. However, twelve years into European and American endeavors, patients were subjected to horrible injustices including lobotomies, water torture, food deprivation, and rat infested disease ridden living conditions. This is hardly the case at the Center, where students are clothed, fed, nurtured, and attended to. With the support of government funding and private donations, the Center and its staff continues to search for new and better ways to service its students.

Field Site: Student Profiles

On Wednesday January 10, 2001 we had a question answer/period facilitated by Yáng Yùhúa, in which eight students from the Center were examined and the following set of questions were answered by Yáng:

- 1) Age
- 2) Sex
- 3) How long has he/she been enrolled at the Center?
- 4) What is their disability (severity)?
- 5) Do they take medicine?
- 6) Do they return home every day or every weekend?
- 7) Have they improved since they first started at the Center?

Student #1

- 1) 7
- 2) Male
- 3) 1 year
- 4) Hereditary mental disability, speech impediment (mid)
- 5) Should take medicine but parents cannot afford it
- 6) Every weekend
- 7) Speech improvement

Student #2

- 1) 14
- 2) Female
- 3) 4 years
- 4) Epilepsy, speech impediment (severe)
- 5) Takes medicine

- 6) Goes home with a teacher (not parents) every weekend
- 7) Now helps with laundry and cleaning

Student #3

- 1) 13
- 2) Male
- 3) 5 years
- 4) 213 body disease, speech impediment (severe)
- 5) ?
- 6) Goes home with a teacher every weekend (has not seen parents for 1 year)
- 7) Can now do things on his own

Student #4

- 1) 6
- 2) Female
- 3) 8 years
- 4) Epilepsy, speech impediment (mid)
- 5) Doctors tried to give her medication but mother would not accept disability
- 6) Every weekend
- 7) Recognizes characters, counts, independent actions

Student #5

- 1) 6
- 2) Male
- 3) 1 month
- 4) Solitary disorder, speech impediment (mid)
- 5) ?
- 6) Every weekend
- 7) With improvement could attend normal school

Student #6

- 1) 6
- 2) Male
- 3) 1 ½ years
- 4) Epilepsy, speech impediment (mid)
- 5) ?
- 6) Every weekend
- 7) Communication, independent eating

Student #7

- 1) 9
- 2) Male
- 3) 5 years
- 4) Epilepsy, speech impediment (severe)
- 5) ?
- 6) Every weekend
- 7) Better relationship with mother

Student #8

- 1) 5
- 2) Male
- 3) 1 month
- 4) Build up of brain fluid, mute
- 5) ?
- 6) Goes home with a teacher every weekend
- 7) Too early to tell

Field Note Excerpts

Thursday January 4, 2001

9:00am-10:00am

Vegetable Flashcards / One-On-One Sessions

-Male (4-6), unresponsive, wanted to play with cards, made audible sounds but only responded to cards when asked by female worker.

-Tried to connect with male (4-7), unresponsive, scared, turned away, shook head, tried not to make eye contact with me.

10:15am

Put On Coats for Outside Recess

-Previous male allowed me to put on coat although still hesitant

10:30am-11:30am

Recess

-Played on trampoline with students. One child constantly wanted the door to the trampoline cage closed if it was open. Assisted children on tricycle.

11:30am-12:15pm

Student Lunch

-Assisted students with eating lunch. Some children able to eat independently. Others distracted and forgot to eat unless assisted.

*Notes:

- (1) Flashcard routine is inefficient. Students often distracted and unable to concentrate. Suggest one-on-one sessions separated from other students and teachers in order to command greater amount of attention from students.
- (2) Eating should focus on children helping themselves and developing their independent eating skills. Teachers often assist when students are capable.
- (3) Overall, teachers are too quick to assist students. Teachers are extremely outgoing and compassionate, leading to overprotection and lack of constructive teaching.

Wednesday January 10, 2001

9:00am-10:30am

Student Cast

-Assisted Center doctor with cast forming for female student whose legs were deformed.
*Question the usefulness of a cast in this situation. Crudely made and appeared to cause the student discomfort as her toes were contorted due to the shape of the cast

10:30am-11:00am

Snack Time

-Assisted students with peeling oranges, unwrapping cracker plastic covering, drinking water.

11:00am-12:00pm

Interviews

-With the assistance of Yáng Yùhúa, we interviewed eight students.

Reflections:

*"Some trees grow very tall and straight and large in the forest close to each other,
but some must stand by themselves or they won't grow at all."*

Oliver Wendell Holmes

Having heard countless horror stories of American mental institutions, coupled with my knowledge of China's still developing economic resources, I expected the worse from the Beijing Chaoyang Mentally Retarded Children Rehabilitation Center. To my surprise, the conditions at the Center were better than what I would have anticipated at a similar institution in the United States of America. From the moment I set foot in #16 Beiyuan, Xi Ba He Dong Lu, I felt the warmth of a staff determined to help young children in desperate need of assistance. Despite my limitations both in the Chinese language and as a rehabilitation technician, I immediately felt that I was a part of something special. This feeling of belonging was only reinforced by the following story.

On my first day at the Center, I was immediately intrigued by a six year old boy with epilepsy named Hǎi Yánsōng. Unresponsive and clearly upset by my attempts at communication, Yánsōng avoided any type of contact with me during a session of flashcard practice. Extremely agitated and fidgety he refused to look in my direction and

even went so far as to change chairs to the opposite side of the table when I moved my chair closer to his. Following the flashcard session, the children were offered oranges and crackers to eat. Because many of the children were unable to peel the oranges or unwrap the crackers, staff members and myself did this for them. Yánsōng was one such individual who needed assistance, however he would not accept the food I offered him. Although he was hungry, Yánsōng only would eat the food given to him by other staff members.

Similar situations between Yánsōng and myself occurred in the following weeks, however he seemed to be increasingly more comfortable with my presence. Still sheepish and occasionally agitated, Yánsōng was showing signs of trusting a person that must have seemed quite odd to him. Even to middle aged Chinese men, a 6'2" white male such as myself who speaks their language, can seem very imposing and peculiar. I can only imagine what young Yánsōng must have been thinking during our time together. After two weeks of hard work trying to communicate with Yánsōng, a series of events occurred that I will not forget for some time to come. It was my last day at the Center and we again were helping students with their snacks. I was sitting with various students peeling oranges and unwrapping crackers when Yánsōng got up from his seat and sat on my lap. Handing me an orange he motioned for me to help him peel the fruit. Astonished, I quickly peeled it and without a care or hint of agitation he promptly ate his freshly peeled orange resting in the palm of my hand. Speechless, I could only sit and watch as this boy of 6 who only two weeks earlier was too scared to look in my direction now ate food I had helped prepare for him. Sadly, it was soon time for Kate and myself

to say our final good-byes to the students and staff. Yánsōng again surprised me with a hug and exuberant “Zài jiàn!” (Goodbye!)

My time at the Center has ended, but I will take with me a host of memories and experiences I could not have attained anywhere else in the world. Not only have I met the Kalamazoo College ICRP requirements and objectives of integration into the local culture, appreciation for local traditions and dynamics, and improvement of language skills, but I have made a lasting impact on a few of Beijing's children. Because of that, I feel my ICRP experience has been a fruitful and beneficial one. I also believe that I have learned a great deal about the mental disability rehabilitation system of China. In the future I hope to remain in contact with the Center and hopefully return some day to see my former students and the progress they have made. Although Chinese mental institutions are only in their infancy, I believe people such as Yáng Yùhúa and her staff will continue to improve their curriculum and techniques. With compassion and vigilance, the Beijing Chaoyang Mentally Retarded Children Rehabilitation Center strives to make a difference for children all too often forgotten in the midst of China's rapid modernization.

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