

The China Project

Educators in Vermont are busy building bridges between their small state and the world's most populous country.

STEVE GROSS AND WANG JUEFEI

Something important is happening in Vermont schools. International understanding is growing.

- In the farming community of Leicester, 1st graders greet a curriculum director with an enthusiastic outburst of "Ni Hao!" (Mandarin for hello!) The children giggle and ask scores of questions about China and the Chinese people.
- In suburban Colchester, teachers across grades and disciplines participate in an inservice program about China. The program includes 30 workshops and addresses a broad range of topics from language and music to cross-cultural comparisons of educational systems.

• In the small rural town of Hardwick, the high school stops its normal work for one week and becomes a multi-grade, interdisciplinary learning center focusing on China. Unexcused absences sharply decline, especially during the time when the whole school works together to create a 40-foot dragon from pine saplings.

• As Pittsford Elementary School starts its own week-long China Project, 34 parents and friends of the school eat Chinese food and listen to a visiting Chinese scholar.

In each of these cases, and in many more, new friendships are emerging: American teachers and their students

are working with distinguished scholars to find creative ways to learn about an ancient yet novel culture, and they are having great fun along the way. First organized at the University of Vermont, the China Project has afforded teachers throughout the state an exciting learning experience.

Bringing China Closer

Vermont teachers were not always so eager to learn and teach about China. Five or six years ago, learning about other cultures was rare in our rural environment. While the world was becoming smaller, China still seemed far away from the Green Mountain State — one half million Vermonters were cut off from one billion Chinese. When Chinese visitors did go to Vermont schools, they often found teachers and students enthusiastic but limited in their understanding of that country. Students would ask

questions such as "Is the school day for Chinese kids the same as ours?" "Do Chinese women still have their feet bound?" "Do the Chinese dogs bark?" Teachers tried to bring a taste of the Chinese culture into their classrooms, but their efforts were limited by the decades-long isolation between China and the United States, lack of instructional materials and human resources, and misleading information.

In 1986, a group of Vermont educators led by Professors Kenneth Hood and David Shiman of the University of Vermont decided to change the situation by designing a course on



China for teachers that would combine human resources across the state with financial resources of schools never before used for international education. In 1987, 40 teachers received training from the China Project. In 1988, 20 Vermont teachers traveled 5,000 miles inside China for 6 weeks under a Fulbright-Hays fellowship. In 1989, more than 160 teachers and school administrators participated in the second China Project. Since then, Chinese culture has become an important curriculum component in many Vermont public schools.

Teachers as Serious Learners

The China Project places great importance on treating teachers as serious learners. It emphasizes a close integration of content areas with successful teaching methods. The assumption is that once they know the content, teachers are able to create appropriate and effective instructional strategies.

During the first two China Projects, participants examined Chinese history, politics, economy, geography, philosophy, population, arts, ancient inventions, foreign policy, people's social life, women's social status, the Chinese language, and the Beijing Opera. Hands-on activities included cooking, using an abacus, Tai'Chi, Tibetan folk dances, Chinese paper making, brush painting, and kite making. The idea was to give teachers a whole view of Chinese culture — combining hands-on crafts with more abstract subjects and showing how they relate.

Each China Project consists of 9-11 one-day training sessions. The Project is usually offered during the summer with several days of intensive training, and continues during the fall and the winter on roughly a monthly basis. Participants start the day with a half-

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hour language lesson, followed by a two-hour-long presentation given by an expert of Chinese studies in a content area such as ancient history or calligraphy. Audiovisual materials then focus on the theme just presented.

In the afternoon, Chinese students and scholars join participants in small groups to share their perspectives on the theme of the day, tell of their personal experiences in China, or teach participants Chinese crafts. Chinese students and scholars are selected according to their own interest and the participants' needs.

While emphasizing the content areas, sessions support classroom application by offering in-depth workshops on instructional strategies given by experienced China Project teachers. Those taking the course for graduate credit are required to develop and implement projects that are related to classroom instruction in their own schools.

Widespread Cultural Learning

Nearly half of the school districts in Vermont have participated in the China Project over the past five years. Very few content courses in the state have had a similar impact. As a direct result of the China Project, many thousands of students and their families now

know about the world's most densely populated country. A number of specific achievements stand out:

- Teachers who traveled to China as part of the Fulbright-Hays program came back with an intense desire to teach about China and to rededicate themselves as educators. Since these are mostly veteran teachers in mid-career, this is especially significant to school development.

- Schools have used their participation in the China Project as a way to initiate instructional innovation. Schoolwide theme weeks have become frequent around the state. Cooperative grouping and interdisciplinary approaches have been used to good effect, as have heterogeneous grouping and multi-grade classes. A review of the journals that students compiled during most China weeks shows an increased sensitivity to the richness of the Chinese culture.

- New human resources have become available to the schools. For instance, a Middlebury College professor who had lived in the area for over a decade had never before been asked into a high school until the China Project.

- Students have begun to develop a fairer, richer, and deeper understanding of Chinese society. As teachers brought interesting lessons to school and brought more Chinese into classes, reality started to take the place of stereotyping. For many students in the more rural parts of our state, these contacts were their very first with people from another culture.

- Connections between Vermont and China have expanded. For example, several China Project school districts have hosted Chinese teachers through the American Field Services program. Because these teachers stay in the local communities for a year, they have become integral to a variety

of school-based programs. For many Chinese scholars and students, the China Project has provided new connections with communities beyond their college affiliations. During difficult times, these community connections become a much needed support.

- Schools have developed direct exchange relations with Chinese counterparts. The Hazen Union High School has established an official teacher-student exchange program with a high school outside of Beijing. After mutual visits of administrators and school board members of the two schools, two Hardwick teachers, Norma and Ron Weisen, and Alex Smith, a student, taught and studied in Niulanshan Secondary School for nine weeks in the fall of 1990. The two teachers became stars of inservice training for English teachers in the Chinese county. Alex Smith is now able to use the Chinese language in conversations. Norma Weisen recalls, "It was a life experience. I came back a different person. I now know that there is another way of life, and I learned so much from this experience. The friendships we developed with Chinese teachers will keep us working for mutual understanding."

- Parents and community members have become more willing to get involved in school activities. When they come into the schools to find out about China, they gain access to students and classes and the opportunity to be more involved in academic activities. More important, closer and more collaborative relationships are taking shape between schools and communities.

- Teachers have become interested in an Africa Project and a number of



Counselor Lu Rong, a Chinese student at Middlebury College, taught Chinese language and T'ai-Chi skills to high school students during last summer's China Project Summer Residence program.

will enlarge our scope to include China's neighbors that are deeply influenced by Chinese culture.

To provide a support system for teachers and administrators around the state who want to bring China studies into their schools, we will design an Outreach Initiative. The Outreach Initiative will assist schools in designing programs and identify Chinese scholars and students to visit schools upon teachers' requests.

The China Project Summer Residence Program, a pilot program for students, began last summer. Aimed at 10th and 11th graders, this program combines hands-on approaches, team work and problem-solving techniques, and student portfolios. Students who received scholarships to attend the residence program are expected to work closely with China Project teachers upon their return to their schools in the fall. This concept will be expanded to students of other grade levels in the future.

This fall, we started preparing for a program of China Project Weekends for community members in order to bring programs of interesting content to business people, professionals other than teachers, senior citizens, and community members.

We will strongly encourage the three audiences of the Consortium—teachers, students, and community members—to work together, because international education should become a lifelong process. Different perspectives based on participants' experiences will be beneficial to all. We will also use a variety of approaches to make the content of China studies meet the needs of various audiences. These approaches include special

other projects. The growth of international studies, whatever forms they may take, can only be beneficial to younger generations.

A Step Into the Future

The China Project took a major step into the future in March 1991. The presidents of Middlebury College, the University of Vermont, St. Michael's College, the Vermont Superintendent's Association, and Richard Mills, the Vermont State Commissioner of Education, joined 40 China Project members from the public schools and area colleges to launch the China Project Consortium. The consortium means growth and continuing services. With the consortium as the governing body, the study of China in Vermont will be expanded to audiences beyond school professionals.

Since the summer of 1991, we have held a third China Project, which will extend into the spring of 1992. *China Project III: China and the Pacific Rim*

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workshops for groups of different interests and regular field trips to China.

A Sense of Community

In October 1990, the project directors and Edward Ducharme, Interim Dean of the College of Education and Social Services of the University of Vermont, received a gold medal for community outreach on behalf of the Project from the Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE). The Project was one of only two programs in the nation to be so honored.

It may seem ironic that such a strong bridge now connects one of the smallest states in this country with the world's most populous country. But it

was the small size of our state plus the community spirit shared by all the people involved in the Project that contributed to the Project's rapid progress. As the 21st century approaches, we are making Vermont a place where people have a special understanding for our world's cultures.

The China Project will continue to serve as a wonderful starting point on a journey of discovery for educators, students, and community members. Seasoned travelers know this kind of journey never ends; it only leads to broader horizons and a sense of community with the whole world. □

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