

Why Dance in China?

by Susan L. English, Ph.D.

When I first drafted the grant proposal to send 14 traditional dancers and musicians to China on a cultural exchange, I predicted that we would “hold hands on the world stage.” Now that we are all back on American soil, I would say we did exactly that.

US State Department grants for cultural exchange in China are a rare and precious commodity. I had checked their postings monthly for several years and, when the posting finally appeared, called up Dr. Deborah Thompson, director of the Country Dance Programs at Berea College in Kentucky. The Country Dancers were already preparing for a Denmark tour the summer of 2017, she explained, but if this is our only chance... We had just a month to write the proposal and, working with the Berea College grants office, to develop a \$50,000 budget. Letters of endorsement would include an important one from Rima Dael, then Executive Director of CDSS.

To design a realistic but unique exchange, I contacted traditional musicians and dancers I knew had preceded us in China—Grigsby Wotton, Phil Jamison, and Al and Alice White. Surfing the web, I met Chris Hawke of the Yellow Weasels, an old-time band that had performed at the US Embassy in Beijing. Chris connected me with the Linden Centre in southwest China, and suddenly we had a regional focus. We would send students from Appalachia to share their music and dance with people of minority cultures in Yunnan Province.

I had been to Yunnan twice in the early 1980s, when I was teaching English for science and technology in China. My mid-career students had just survived the Cultural Revolution and were ready for something new. “Don’t Americans dance every night after dinner?,” a quiet gentleman asked. With thanks to a friend of mine in the US, who mailed a cassette tape of my favorite international folk dances, I started a dance group on the rooftop of the classroom building. I have been leading dance ever since.

For the 2017 exchange, Deborah Thompson would direct the program, with my assistance in planning, negotiation, language, and culture. We invited Jennifer Rose Escobar, leader of the Festival Dancers in Berea, Kentucky, to be artistic director. All three of us would lead dances and also perform when all hands (and feet) were needed. Deborah and



Jennifer selected nine dancers ranging in age from 14 to 24. They would prepare a dance program including Appalachian big set and clogging, English, Danish, and contra dances, plus stick and rapper dances by a Morris team led by Bryce Carlberg. Deborah Payne would play fiddle and contribute her extensive global expertise. To keep us up to tempo, A.J. Bodnar would play piano and bring along his accordion and endless enthusiasm.

My personal goals for the trip were (1) to share the joy of music and dance with people of both cultures, (2) to document the trip as a participant observer, and (3) to lay the groundwork for future traditional dance exchanges in China.

We spent our first week at the Linden Centre in the historic town of Xizhou, performing in the central courtyard, on the town square, at a flower farm, and at an open-air restaurant, where we interacted with local musicians. Our greatest delight emerged one rainy morning at the local kindergarten, where the children gleefully reacted to our music and dance, tried “Seven Jumps,” and then surprised us with their own undulating moves to modern pop music. After a farewell dance party with the Linden Centre staff, I promised myself to return to the Linden Centre in future years with dancers in tow.

After a five hour bus ride to the capital city of Kunming, we enjoyed a rare insider’s view of Yunnan Arts University, including a minority culture dance show that would dazzle audiences on a big stage anywhere in the world. We spent the second week at a private high school, AEUA International Academy, where they just happened to be gearing up for their annual talent show. Their teens and ours gradually melded through

Photo page 11: Susan English leads the clockspring windup in a participation dance with the Berea Country Dancers at the Sifangjie Square, Xizhou, China. Photo by Deborah Thompson. Photo page 12: Berea Country Dancers and local Bai musician and dance leader, Mr. Wang, on the steps of Sifangjie Square, Xizhou, China on a hot afternoon after their dance performance. They are enjoying popsicles, courtesy of their host, Yuqi Zhao of the Linden Centre. Photo by the Linden Centre staff.



a series of lectures, large and small group discussions, classroom visits, and a healthy diet of group dancing.

Altogether during our two weeks in China, we performed at least 11 times, danced together with Chinese nationals five to six times, and watched about five performances. We also participated in a wide range of Chinese cultural activities, including a tie dye workshop, dumpling-making session, and demonstration of traditional Chinese musical instruments. Still, it was the unplanned moments of the exchange that gave both youth and adults the opportunity for a deep dive into China, whether riding mopeds across the countryside, friend-making at a local restaurant, or hanging out in the dormitory with other teens.

What surprised me most, from having spent time in China in the 1980s, was the introduction of modern pop culture alongside a revival of interest in ancient Chinese culture. The teenage talent show, for example, alternated centuries-old music and dance with rap and hip-hop that would have knocked off my socks, had I been wearing any. Our teens and theirs found common ground instantly—using cell phones to communicate via photos, videos, social media, and even translation apps. The most poignant moment for me was a mock graduation ceremony that Jennifer put together for the two American dancers who had foregone their high school graduation events for the China trip.

As with any group experience, there were difficulties and challenges. These included illness, homesickness, tensions within the team, and many unexpected changes in the schedule (one thing that hadn't changed since the 1980s). Yet, during individual exit interviews, everyone in our group rated the trip overall a 4 or 5 or higher on a scale of 1 to 5, using words like “amazing” and “extraordinary” and “fabulous” to describe the

experience. One dancer reported, “While there were some hard days, they were a thousand times worth it to see a new place, meet so many wonderful people, and get to know people on the team better.” Another spoke of “being introduced to a culture that’s so polarly opposite to what I’m familiar with and yet so kind and inviting.”

Adults on the trip expressed satisfaction with “watching students’ perspectives change” and “seeing barriers break down.” One wrote, “I would say my head is spinning with ideas, my horizons have been expanded even more, and I am convinced/fatigued by how ignorant Americans are about China.” Another commented, “Art is such a great way to connect with people.”

So why dance in China? An inclusive and cooperative activity like traditional dance can serve as a tool for building interpersonal relationships and a sense of shared community. We all know that. Group dance is particularly appropriate in China, however, where cooperation and mutual support are important social values and where performance dance, not participatory, is the norm. Traditional dance, like many other art forms, can further serve as “soft” diplomacy, bringing people together in our increasingly global but conflicted world. That clearly was the view of the US Department of State when they awarded us the grant.

In my mind, this is just the first step, no pun intended. Now that we are into the sustainability phase of the project, our goal is to multiply the impact of our experience by sharing our story with others, like you, and by working with our contacts to design future dance exchanges between communities in China and the US. I believe in the power of dance to build interpersonal trust and understanding in China as it does in our own communities—one dancer and one dance at a time.

Participants in the China Exchange

Dancers: Aleyna Wilkie, Daniel Jacobs, Hudson Campbell, Levi Saderholm, Lydia Escobar, Bryce Carlberg, Alexandra Housley, Svetlana Dunlap, Kailyn Hess **Musicians:** A.J. Bodnar, Deborah Payne **Leaders:** Deborah Thompson, Susan English, Jennifer Escobar

For more information please contact:

Susan English, senglish@umich.edu, 330-347-8155 (cell)
Deborah Thompson, Deborah_Thompson@berea.edu, 859-985-3142 (office)
Jennifer Rose Escobar, jennifer@jenniferrose.com, 859-582-7014 (cell)

Susan English has been calling monthly contras and old-time squares since 1990. With her husband, Bill Alkire, she is artistic director of The Madrigal Dancers of Wooster, Ohio.

WEB EXTRAS! Find links to videos from the China exchange trip at <https://www.cdss.org/news>