

Highlights of Experiences of U.S. Alumni of the U.S.-China Teachers Exchange Program

A Program of the National Committee on United States-China Relations

After 18 years of existence, the U.S.-China Teachers Exchange Program (TEP) ended in the summer of 2014. Over those years, 117 U.S. teachers and 332 Chinese teachers spent a year teaching in China or the U.S. respectively. This report uses the U.S. teachers' survey responses to showcase the influence of the TEP on these teachers personally and professionally, on their students, colleagues, friends, and family, and on their U.S. schools.

Prepared by:
The InSites Team

September 2014

table of contents

page 3

introduction

This report uses the U.S. teachers' survey responses to highlight the influence, strengths, value and importance of the TEP.

page 5

influence on participant

The TEP provided teachers with professional and personal opportunities, choices, and experiences that often were “life-changing” or “transformative.”

page 14

influence on others

Teachers increased others' knowledge, understanding, and openness to China and their interest in travel to China.

page 22

importance of exchange programs

Exchange programs strengthen attention to China in U.S. schools.

page 25

concluding comments

Feedback consistently pointed to the value of the TEP in increasing cross-cultural understanding.

page 27

endnotes

the 18 years of the Teachers Exchange Program

Throughout the 18 years, the TEP participants have consistently commented on the exceptionally strong management of the program by the program director, Margot Landman. Such was the case both in the early years when the program was housed at the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS) and since 2002 (Year 7) when the program moved to the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations.

The U.S.-China Teachers Exchange Program (TEP), established in 1995 with funding from the Freeman Foundation, involved U.S. and Chinese teachers in enriching teacher and student understanding of the other country and culture, introducing or strengthening Chinese studies in participating American schools, and helping to improve English language instruction in selected Chinese middle schools. In its final two years, the program was funded by the Yihai Education Foundation.

Over the course of 18 years, a total of 20 states, 69 districts, and over 144 schools in the U.S. have been involved in the TEP. In China, 111 schools in 33 cities have participated in the program.

In the early years of the program, typically, 20 to 24 Chinese teachers came to the U.S. to teach Chinese history, culture, and/or language and 10 to 15 American teachers spent a year teaching English in China. In the last few years of the program with a decrease in funding, the number of Chinese teachers involved in the program decreased to about 10 Chinese teachers in each of the past five years. The number of American teachers participating decreased to about four or five for each of the past five years.¹

feedback from U.S. TEP teachers

The teachers' responses highlight the influence of the TEP on the teachers and on their students, colleagues, family, and schools. Their comments also focus on the strengths, value, and importance of the TEP.

Each fall and spring, as part of InSites' ongoing evaluation of the TEP, the current cohort of Chinese and American teachers reported on their exchange experience. As many of the TEP alumni have maintained contact with the program director, InSites was able to contact the U.S. alumni in the spring of 2014 and request that they complete an online survey related to the long-term influence of the exchange experience. Sixty-five alumni responded to this survey. We proposed doing this additional survey as a way to provide the National Committee and the funders with some final key points about the value of the program to the U.S. teachers.

The teachers' responses highlight the influence of the TEP on the teachers and on their students, colleagues, family, and schools. Their comments also focus on the strengths, value, and importance of the TEP.

influence on participant

influence on participant: professional and personal

The TEP provided teachers with personal and professional opportunities, choices and experiences that often were “life-changing” or “transformative.”

Personal growth (e.g., becoming more self-confident, patient, flexible, calmer, healthier, and happier), fulfillment of personal goals, travel, development of friendships and relationships, and increased cultural understanding and global perspectives were among the ways in which the TEP influenced the teachers.

some comments from the teachers...

“I grew on a personal and professional level as a result of living and teaching in China for a year. The opportunity for travel and experience of working with Chinese students and teachers allowed me to gain confidence and insight.”

“I have made solid friendships that have grown stronger over the years. With these continuing, sacred friendships I have learned more about China and Chinese culture than one could ever learn from a stack of textbooks.”

influence on participant

influence on participant: professional

Professional opportunities opened up within the field of education in the U.S., China, and other countries, and in fields other than education.

Opportunities within the U.S. often related to different roles in the schools/districts to which the teachers returned after their year in China. Teachers also began learning Chinese, teaching Chinese, pursuing additional education (e.g., doctoral program, ESL), incorporating China (e.g., literature, history) into the curriculum, maintaining connections with schools in China, and taking on leadership roles in schools and/or districts. Some also became more attuned to the challenges facing their English as a Second Language (ESL) students.

comment...

"I took courses in Chinese language upon my return. In 2003, the head of the World Language Dept. at the high school where I worked asked me if I wanted to start the Mandarin Chinese program . . . I started the Mandarin Chinese language program at my high school in 2004-2005. We now offer Chinese at the middle school in my district, just hired a second full-time teacher at the high school, and I've taught Mandarin to hundreds of students."

influence on participant

influence on participant: professional

“Due to my experience in China, I decided to learn a third language, Mandarin. Prior to China, I had no desire, nor drive, to enter into a doctoral program; however, creating lessons and sharing them with my fellow Chinese colleagues made me realize that I not only love to teach, but I love sharing what I know with other teachers. In the next two years, I plan to enter into a doctoral program on Urban Education with an emphasis on Teacher Education.”

“Continued to receive Chinese exchange teachers at my school for an additional ten years. . . . Having a native Chinese speaker in school provided me with an opportunity to interact in Mandarin daily, thereby enhancing my own linguistic abilities in Chinese.”

“As a professional, it gave me insight into my students’ experience in acculturation and assimilation here. . . . I teach ESL on the elementary level.”

influence on participant

influence on participant: professional

“I became much more interested in Global Education and China’s role in the world. I taught more about China in the classroom and created a History elective about Modern China. . . . My teaching has focused more on China. I have also traveled more with students, including to China.”

“My teaching is exponentially better! I will continue to stay in the classroom. I also develop curriculum that is influenced by the experience at my host school in Nanjing.”

“China enters into my class discussions, politics, religious views and economic perspectives. Conversations with students, colleagues, friends and family include China and a worldview that includes China. I also tied my life to China in a very personal way in that I married a Chinese national.”

influence on participant

influence on participant: professional

Teachers also reported opportunities to remain in or return to China to teach in Chinese schools or summer programs.

“By learning about China, we wanted to stay and learn more, but the program only offered the year, so we found an international school in Shanghai and have spent five years here and plan to spend at least two more. . . . The advantage of teaching in China has given us a world perspective. We view the world as a friendly place, not a fearful one.”

“I ended up teaching in an international school in China because of my presence in China for the TEP. . . . I was given additional training and am now a vice principal in the high school.”

“A whole new life. A whole new career. Life began at 60! . . . I am now the founding head of an international school in Beijing. I have lived and worked in Suzhou, Shanghai and now Beijing.”

influence on participant

influence on participant: professional

Teachers took advantage of overseas study programs, particularly the Fulbright-Hays program and NEH grants.

“I learned about China and it gave me an in-depth understanding of history, culture, and ever-changing world. I was also awarded a Fulbright-Hays scholarship to study in India, and NEH grant to study in Turkey and was invited to Beijing Normal University to speak to graduate students on the American media. . . . In addition, I have continued visiting China. I have been there six times since my year in Beijing. All of these experiences in China, as well as going to other parts of the world, have helped me be a better teacher in the classroom.”

influence on participant

influence on participant: professional

The experience in China was the beginning of international teaching for some teachers. Germany, Guam, Japan, Lebanon, and Vietnam are countries in which teachers have been or are teaching.

“I live in Hamburg, Germany now, with my wife and three kids. I teach English to corporations. I travel. I am currently learning German, and I am learning Russian with my son, and French with my daughter.”

“Upon returning to the U.S., I enrolled in a TEFL³ course and applied to teach in Japan. . . . By the spring of 2012 I was on my way to Japan to teach at universities there . . . I taught there for four consecutive semesters and am currently contracted to teach with them via their e-learning program while I am living in the U.S. I also teach Russian students online.”

influence on participant

influence on participant: professional

Two teachers mentioned continuing to be involved with the National Committee either through the CHINA Town Hall program or assisting with the TEP orientation. Some retirees described ways they had found in retirement to use their experience in China outside of the classroom.

"I have gone back to China with the TEP nearly every summer since 1998 to help with the orientation of new teachers who will be living for one year in the U.S. Since my retirement in 2003 I have become a tour guide doing bicycle tours. Both my Chinese language ability and my connection to the National Committee has allowed me the opportunity to conduct bicycle tours for Chinese exchange students as well as for diplomatic groups coming from China. . . . I also work as a disaster volunteer and instructor with the Red Cross, and my Chinese language skills have come in handy whenever there has been a disaster that has affected the Chinese community in New York or Chinese-speaking people."

influence on participant

influence on participant: personal

"I married a woman from Shanghai and now have three bilingual children."

"Also, personally, China has made me more calm, patient, and flexible. In other words, less stressed.

The lifestyle I lived in China made me realize that there are much more important things than just consuming one's self to work--the world is a place to enjoy and explore."

"Open-mindedness to new experiences fostered resilience and confidence. My sense of humor did not erode. I imagine the ultimate effect of the TEP program as a series of ever-growing concentric circles widening ad infinitum."

influence on others

influence on others: students

Eighty-five percent of the responding teachers indicated that they returned to teaching in the U.S. following their TEP time in China with most (75%) returning to the school they taught in prior to going to China. Those who returned to teaching in the U.S. indicated that their experience in China influenced their students in various ways including increasing students' 1) knowledge of China, 2) interest in studying in China, 3) interest in ongoing study of Chinese and/or Chinese culture, and 4) interest in a career related to China or international studies.

Teachers wrote about using their experiences to change the curriculum to focus more on China and developing lessons related to China. Teachers' lessons, discussions, and examples from their time in China helped to increase students' appreciation of and openness to China and other cultures. In some instances, students also were affirmed in their own heritage.

influence on others

influence on others: students

“My experiences taught [students] how to use chopsticks, to make paper cuttings, to paint with a calligraphy brush, to write simple characters, to count to 10 with correct tones, to enjoy artifacts brought from China including New Year symbols, embroidery examples, opera costumes, coins and bills, meaning of dragons, phoenix, terra cotta warriors, tai chi, kung fu, kites, simple patterned language, forming simple characters, the impact of a large population, effects of pollution.”

“My ELD⁴ students and their parents have expressed great gratitude and admiration for having a teacher who lived in China and knows a little bit of Chinese.”

“My students learned through my rich, personal experience and learned to make connections with other cultures through their own and the experiences of others.”

influence on others

influence on others: students

“I have had former students reach out and tell me that their choices to study abroad, travel, and choose jobs related to traveling the world were greatly influenced by what they learned in my class.”

“I have students that have told me they pursued international careers because of my teaching about China and other international experiences that occurred because I lived and taught in China.”

influence on others

influence on others: family, friends, community

Two areas of influence on family and friends stood out: 1) increasing family and friends' knowledge, understanding and openness to China and global awareness, and 2) increasing their interest in travel to China.

Forty percent of the teachers commented that family and friends visited them while they were in China and/or have traveled or lived in China. Teachers influenced the community through presentations and involvement in local organizations such as a library and museum to promote China, sparking interest in study or work in China, and encouraging family or friends to host Chinese exchange teachers or students. One teacher noted that he had 2500 Twitter followers who were interested in his experiences in China.

“Some family members did a complete “turn around” as to their preconceived feelings about the Chinese people and politics.”

“My next-door neighbors’ extended family has been influenced and I expect their granddaughter will have as her high school graduation gift a visit to China with her father.”

influence on others

influence on others: family, friends, community

“I continue to have a global perspective in decisions made in my community and with my family. Travel abroad is an important value to my family because of this experience I am a public library board trustee where I encourage Chinese programming and materials to be made available to our community.”

“My friend’s daughter asked me for advice upon entering college last year whether she should start learning Mandarin. She loved it and has now been accepted for her junior year summer term in a Chinese university.”

“Many friends came to visit while I was in China, and others have since gone because of how I spoke about it. A few taught in China (either in the program or in international schools) after speaking to me about the experience.”

influence on others

influence on others: colleagues, school, and/or district

Teachers' primary areas of influence on their colleagues, school and/or district were through increasing the knowledge about China that was shared and incorporated into classes, enlightening colleagues about China, increasing the interest of colleagues in teaching in China or other countries, increasing colleagues' travel to China, encouraging the development or continuation of Chinese language programs, encouraging the school to continue to host Chinese teachers, setting up or continuing sister school relationships.

The teachers' willingness to go to China... provided an example of an “adventurous spirit” and of alternative opportunities for teachers nearing retirement.

influence on others

influence on others: colleagues, school, and/or district

“With an emerging China in the last 15 years, colleagues and school administration have been interested in hearing about my experiences in China relative to teaching, traveling and general living in China. I have been asked to participate in Chinese culture programs in the district and have even talked with our district superintendent about the growing need and value of a Chinese immersion school.”

“We are a school district that has been blessed with Chinese teachers for several years now but to have “one of their own” go live in China was really enlightening for my colleagues. They have had so many meaningful questions about the children there and how the teachers teach.”

influence on others

influence on others: colleagues, school, and/or district

“Four other teachers from my school eventually went to China to teach. Other teachers in my district also went as a result of presentations and exposure to my experience. District accepted Chinese teachers from the program.”

“Though the School District of La Crosse is no longer in the Teacher Exchange (past 3 years), the exchange continues between School #2, the school district and UW-La Crosse.”

importance of exchange programs

the importance of exchange programs

Teachers focused on the importance of teaching about China, including the necessity of preparing students to have a global perspective and being able to engage with China economically, and the importance of personal contact between students and teachers from both countries, courses in Chinese language and culture, teachers' knowledge and awareness of China, parent involvement, and funding.

Teachers commented on the importance of having programs such as the TEP in order to strengthen attention to China in U.S. schools.

importance of exchange programs

the importance of exchange programs

“I think the emphasis needs to expand from a social/cultural/educational focus to a business/commercial one. Some of these large companies need to make known the range of international job opportunities within their organizations and then cite the skills/courses students should pursue in order to qualify for these positions/opportunities.”

“Nationally, evidence that links Chinese language or cultural programs to student success in post-secondary education or even more importantly to post-secondary career opportunities seems essential in getting district support.”

“Arrange contact between teachers and students from a school in China and a school in the U.S. via the Internet and, if possible, via a visit. The personal contact between one school and another would be very significant.”

importance of exchange programs

the importance of exchange programs

"I think they should get the parents involved. Many parents recognize that Chinese is an important language for the future and an asset for prospective university students. They should try to find people willing to teach an introduction class after school to hook the students into learning a fun and cool language!"

"Offer free courses for teachers at summer institutes that will provide hours or credits required for professional development. Provide training for administrators who might see the advantage of inviting TEP teachers from China."

"My thinking is that there should be a 'sister school network' established whereby the exchange would be school to school (instead random assignments) not only with teachers but also with students living and studying at their respective sister schools abroad. Peace!"

"Every district should have an Asian studies program covering multiple grade levels. Given the global nature of the economy, students need to understand that they will most likely be dealing with a variety of cultures at work and in their neighborhood."

concluding comments

concluding comments

Feedback from the U.S. alumni teachers consistently pointed to the value of the TEP in increasing cross-cultural understanding among teachers and students and increasing attention to China in U.S. schools involved in the TEP.

“Exchange programs with people developing lifelong friendships is probably the most important step to insuring world peace. It’s hard to have a war with someone who is your friend.”

“Accepting the kind of challenge TEP provides requires a person to be open-minded, inquisitive, and adventurous. It may not be for everyone, but the idea that even a few can have this experience is a starting place for valuing mankind beyond the borders that separate us geographically.”

“Just keep encouraging teachers to pursue opportunities to work overseas. It helps build bridges between cultures, and students from both sides benefit. ”

“One cannot put a price on the friendships that developed because of this program. I will always cherish the memories of my year in China and the people I came to know while there.”

concluding comments

concluding comments

Some of the aspects of the TEP that were specifically noted included the careful selection and preparation of American teachers, visits with the American teachers in China twice a year, the care and supervision of Chinese teachers, and the careful selection of schools.

Teachers also recognize the high quality of the TEP noting that the TEP is an example of “exemplary practice” and is “an outstanding, well prepared, thought-out program.”

“A huge thanks goes to Margot Landman for her great leadership and friendship. In my opinion, the program was a big success because of her ability to work with people from all walks of life.”

Teachers expressed gratitude for the program and the ongoing influence of their TEP experience.

“I am tremendously grateful for the opportunity given to me by TEP. . . . I avow that the ripples generated by those single stones dropped into a large pond will spread out to join with others to make a decided change in the surface of the water. ”

endnotes

1. No U.S. teachers went to China in Year 7 (2002-03), Year 10 (2005-06) or Year 13 (2008-09).
2. The 2013-14 cohort of teachers was not included as they were completing the spring survey that has been given to each group of teachers during the year they were in China. This left 112 teachers who potentially could complete the survey. No email addresses were available for five teachers and one teacher has passed away, leaving a total of 101 teachers to whom the email was sent. Sixty-five teachers (58%) responded to the survey. Of the sixty-five teachers who responded, fifty-five participated in the TEP for one year, nine for two years and one for three years. At least one person responded for each year in which U.S. teachers participated in the program.
3. Teaching English as a Foreign Language
4. English Language Department

thank you

Throughout the life of the TEP, InSites has conducted an ongoing evaluation of the program in order to provide the program director with feedback related to the teachers' exchange experiences and the influence of contextual changes (e.g., changes in technology, funding, and interest in China within the U.S.) on the program.

As the evaluators of the Teachers Exchange Program over these 18 years, we would like to close by expressing our appreciation for the opportunity to serve in the evaluation role. We trust that our involvement has been a useful contribution to the program.

