

Families with Children from China

Austin, Texas Chapter

Summer Newsletter

July, 2013



President's Note

Hello Everyone,

Summertime in Austin! Rain?! Heat. Vacations. Camps. More heat and a lot of great events with Austin FCC. This chapter surely must be one of the leaders in offering enrichment activities for our members. After a year of preparation, this June's Xishuangbanna Cultural Exchange Learning Project was a huge success. Five FCC youths, their mothers, and leaders Rowena Fong, Ed.D., and Amy Wong Mok went to China to meet teachers and students in five different schools in Austin's Chinese sister city. It was simply an incredible, possibly life-changing, experience.

Returning to your birth country is the theme of this summer's newsletter with four compelling articles. Claire Dubiel, a junior at Anderson High, shares with us the details of her three-week trip to China with her school's Mandarin program. Becky Roberts interviewed Carol and Zoe Watts, whose post-Xishuangbanna trip took them to Zoe's orphanage and the discovery that Zoe had a foster family. Melanie Chung-Sherman's therapist column is a deeply profound piece about what her return trips to Korea have given her. My summary of the Xishuangbanna experience rounds out the offerings.

Our summer series offerings are going well. Both cooking classes were sold out and very well received. Our teen/tween group made dumplings and wonton soup with Yang Cao. Houston's renowned chef, Dorothy Huang, returned to teach egg roll and sushi wrapping to a parent/child class. For our educational component, we are partnering with Adoption Knowledge Affiliates for an excellent workshop about race, adoption and living in Austin. Of course, our 4th annual Chinese culture camp starts August 5th and should be an awesome week as we once again create this amazing Chinese American village of fun.

All of these activities continue to build and support our thriving FCC Austin community. In fact, it's my understanding that we had an FCC Austin encounter on the Great Wall of China this June as Claire Dubiel and the Bear family, touring after the Banna program finished, had an unexpected meeting there! How cool is that?! Wow, that makes me smile.

And as we celebrate community, we need to say goodbye and a deep thank you to Denise Davolt and her family, who are moving to Chicago in a few weeks. Denise has been a powerhouse board member these past three years and it's an understatement to write that she will be missed. Thank you, Denise, for everything. You rock.

Take good care,
Becky

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RACE, ADOPTION & AUSTIN: BECOMING A TRANSRACIAL FAMILY

We are partnering with Adoption Knowledge Affiliates for this parents-only event. Rowena Fong, Ed.D., from the UT School of Social Work will moderate the panel of guest speakers that includes Amy Ford, Jade Jones, Nyla Lengacher, Genevieve Norman, and Zach Turner.

When: Monday, August 19, 2013 at 7:00 p.m.

Where: Settlement House, 1607 Colony Creek Dr., Building B

Cost: Free to members



Rowena Fong is the Ruby Lee Piester Centennial Professor at the University of Texas at Austin in the School of Social Work. She does teaching, research and training in the area of transracial adoptions with a specific focus on intercountry adoptions from China.



Amy Ford is a former foster parent and adoptive mother of three daughters ages 10, 8, and 5. Taking all of the mistakes she made and lessons she learned in the process of parenting children of a different race, Amy wrote the book *Brown Babies Pink Parents* to help other parents navigating the same unfamiliar waters.



Nyla Lengacher, LCSW is an Interracial adoptee from a closed adoption. Within the last three years she has been reunited with her biological family on both sides. She currently serves on the board of Adoption Knowledge Affiliates and has a private psychotherapy practice.



Genevieve Norman was the first baby in Texas adopted from the People's Republic of China through an accredited adoption agency. "Growing up, finding a balance between American culture and Chinese culture was very important to me. I recently graduated from Austin College with a double major in Business Administration and Chinese Studies. I'm excited to be a part of FCC."



Zach Turner is 20 years old and attending the University of Texas in San Antonio. He was domestically adopted as an infant by caucasian parents and has two siblings who were also adopted transracially. Jade Jones is 19 and also attending the University of Texas in San Antonio. She is biracial with parents of Hispanic and African American descent.

FCC Prepares for August Culture Camp

Our 4th annual FCC-UT Chinese culture camp is set for August 5–9, 2013 at Summitt Elementary School in north Austin. This year, the roster features 105 campers along with 26 counselors, 24 teachers and 40 parent volunteers. Camp Co-Directors Rowena Fong, Ed. D., and Becky Harding have designed a curriculum that keeps the popular foundational sessions yet adds some new and different components from the Asian/Asian American spectrum.

Adoption Therapists Em Hardy, Ph.D., and Pat Morgan, LPC., will once again teach the Adoption Journey sessions with the younger students, working with books *Star of the Week*, *A Mother for Choco*, *The Three Names of Me*, and *Stick Up For Yourself: Every Kid's Guide To Personal Power & Positive Self-Esteem*. The oldest group will watch and discuss the adoption film, *Somewhere Between*, and then have the opportunity to Skype with Jenni/Fang Lee, one of the girls featured in the documentary. All of the classes touch on tools for dealing with possible bullying situations as well as learn about famous Asian Americans.

On Wednesday of camp, almost all of the classes have adoption panels comprised of adult, college and high school aged Asian American adoptees. This year Dallas-based therapist and Asian American adoptee Melanie Chung-Sherman, LCSW, will join us to talk about her experiences and will answer any questions our campers might have for her. Becky Harding believes that, "These adoption panels are truly one of the most important pieces of the camp. Our kids get to hear directly from individuals who are like them as they share their

joys, struggles and profound outlook on their lives. It is often very powerful, always interesting and sometimes silly. I am so grateful to these panelists who give so generously of their time and spirit for this piece of camp."

The Asian cultural activities this year include the popular Mandarin and Food classes that feature the "read it, write it, say it and eat it" philosophy. These sessions will focus on spring rolls, dumplings and fruit associated with Chinese New Year traditions. In addition, the campers will have classes that feature lion and dragon dancing, yo-yos, Taiko drumming, dumpling making, ping pong, paper cuts, bartering, the silk road, the monkey king, the Xishuangbanna cultural exchange program experience, empowerment skills, contemporary Asian music, mahjong, video production, provinces of China, dragon boat making, tangrams, pandas, zodiac animals, and calligraphy.

"While all these activities are awesome, the heart of the camp is the counselors," added Becky Harding. Returning college counselors Lane Allison, Tiffany Chen, Genevieve Norman, Kathy Tian and Angie Wong will be joined by newbies Tim Chang, Jeanne Feng, Beth Hsieh, Isabella Kuo, Savannah Luu, Isabelle Seto, and Allison Yeh. Harding suggested, "Many of these new counselors should be familiar faces as they are active in the current UT China Care program. These counselors will be assisted by 14 FCC high schoolers who work directly with the students all week from 8:30 am in the morning until 2:30 pm every day, earning service hours as well as having some serious fun." ❖

Save the Date for Families with Children from China's Autumn Moon Festival

By Abby Turner

With the big drum pounding, the lions will leap and lead us down toward the water's edge in a parade where we will send our wish-bound tea lights off on our bamboo raft.

When: Sunday, September 15th, 4:30 p.m. to 7:30 p.m.

Where: Central Market, 4001 N. Lamar Blvd., Austin, TX 78756

Free community cultural celebration open to members and non-members alike!

Activities for kids, including face painting and a MOON bounce.

A number of small volunteer activities are available that are fun and helpful. If adults or teens (volunteer hours) would like to be involved and help out, please email Abby Turner at abbyo814@icloud.com. ❖

Mom's Night Out

Wednesday, July 31 @ 6:30

CRU in the Domain
(11410 Century Oaks Terrace
near the Steeping Room)

Contact: Abby Turner at
abbyo814@icloud.com

If you can't catch the group this summer, they actually meet every month of the year. Typically the person to contact is Sandi Ross, however, Abby Turner is coordinating this week. ❖

An Amazing International Exchange

By Claire Dubiel

My name is Claire Dubiel, and I will be a junior at Anderson High School. I have studied Mandarin at both Murchison Middle School and at Anderson, and this summer I had the opportunity to travel to China with teachers and classmates on an educational trip. Last year the Anderson/Murchison teachers received a grant to set up a Chinese exchange program, and traveled to China to establish our itinerary. This was the first time students from our school's Mandarin classes have traveled to mainland China, and it's planned for this trip to occur every other year for future students.

We left Austin at 5 a.m. after the last day of the semester. Our first stop was Changzhou, Jiangsu Province—which was coincidentally where I was born. We stayed with host families who have children our age. The kids attend class from 7:30 a.m. until 8:00 p.m. (with a lot of breaks!), then return home for a quick dinner before working on homework and studying for finals for the rest of the evening. Each day the Anderson students attended several classes, which included physics, chemistry, and algebra—I even took an advanced level chemistry test in Chinese (for every open-ended answer I wrote 熊猫, which means panda)—while the Chinese host students had three English classes each day. The Changzhou Gao Zhong school is designed to prepare Chinese students for the TOEFL (English language proficiency exam required by many colleges), with their ultimate goal of acceptance by any Ivy League school.



These students and their families represented a very wealthy section of Chinese society. The family that I stayed with had several luxury cars and a nice home with a very fancy Japanese toilet. Every morning we ate mushroom dumplings before everyone left for school or work. Some of my classmates were served congee for breakfast. There was an early dinner at school, like a quick dumpling or street food from a nearby market, and then a second dinner, like noodles or fruit, at home with the family.

In the afternoons, the Anderson students and teachers had time to prepare for upcoming day trips and explore the city. Changzhou has a fabulous underground mall just a few blocks from the school, and shoppers are expected to bargain the prices down. We also navigated around using the bus system; fare was one yuan (about 15 cents). On my last weekend there, my host father drove me to the original site of my orphanage (now closed) and its new location, as well as the police station that I had been taken to as a baby.

It was sad to see the abandoned orphanage building, with broken windows and stacks of discarded furniture. The size and appearance of the new orphanage reminded me of Dell Children's Hospital. I was not allowed to tour but could hear children's voices.

Some of our short trips included Suzhou, Shanghai, and Nanjing. In Suzhou, famous for silk, we visited the first silk factory and learned about the steps of silk production, from worms to cocoons to thread to weaving. We stayed at youth hostels for one night each in Shanghai and Nanjing; the rooftop terraces were where we stayed up talking and playing cards until early morning. We toured the Bund in Shanghai, but the city seemed very westernized in appearance and in the prices of everything. At the Shanghai office of National Instruments we were given a tour and

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a presentation about their robotics program. At the Shanghai Museum we were each assigned an exhibit about one particular aspect of the city's economics or history; we then presented our findings to the group. Nanjing featured the Ming emperor's tomb, which we had to walk a long distance to see. The actual tomb is under the building so if anyone tried to loot the tomb, the building would collapse on the looters.

On my last evening with my host family, they treated me to a special hot-pot dinner. There were all sorts of meats and seafoods with orchids decorating the platters, a sauce bar, and special plastic baggies to keep each person's cell phone clean. The restaurant was very fancy, with crystal chandeliers and cushy leather seats, so I thought the bill would be high—but my host family used the Chinese equivalent of a Groupon to pay for the



meal so it ended up under \$50 for the four of us.

After two weeks in Changzhou, we took a four-hour high-speed train ride to Beijing. Now the classroom part of our trip was over and we could just shop and be tourists. Highlights included the Great Wall, Tiananmen Square, hutongs (traditional neighborhoods), and a delicious Peking duck meal. We visited a lama temple, the Forbidden City, the Temple of

Heaven, and a touristy area called Wang Fu Jing, with overpriced souvenirs and snacks like seahorse-on-a-stick. On our last day in China, our teachers took us to a three-story bargaining mall, and we challenged ourselves to bargain for the best prices while spending the last of our yuan.

This trip was a wonderful experience and gave me a firsthand understanding of Chinese culture and student life. Chinese students don't use Facebook, but we stay connected with our hosts through an instant-messenger equivalent called QQ (pronounced "cue-cue.") Many of these students will visit America (including Austin) this fall to tour various universities, so my travel group will have an opportunity to show them a bit of our lives here. We're already planning events around barbecue, Barton Springs, and the bats under Congress Avenue Bridge to show our students what makes Austin special. ❖

Tweens/Teens Activities

By Suzanne Danuser

We ended our first year of putting forward more activities for the teen/tween ages with a June 1st Chinese Cooking Class lead by Yang Cao. A total of 12 girls attended this event, where they were split into small "task teams" to handle the chopping, mixing, cooking and cleanup for three tasty dishes. The food was delicious and the girls really enjoyed gathering together to visit and learn.

Several teens and tweens are participating in this August's Culture Camp as both attendees and camp counselors. And looking ahead to the fall there will be another pool

party with UT China Care members (date and place TBD). We hope to schedule a few more events with the UT China Care members in the course of next year.

As difficult as the scheduling is with this age group, with everyone involved in school and other activities, I have come to believe even the small group gatherings have been worthwhile. I have seen new acquaintances move to recognition to now familiarity and ease of interaction among some of those who have been able to participate. For our one year "trial" at attempting to offer more events for teens/tweens, I would say it has been fairly successful.



New ideas for potential activities are always welcome from the kids, as well as more adult input (Donut eating contests? Barton Springs Pool? Skydiving? House Painting? Tree Planting? Caterpillar races? well maybe not all of these, but weird and wacky ideas are good too!)

So if you have an interest in getting more involved with these efforts please contact Suzanne Danuser at suzerd@yahoo.com. ❖

Book Review: Bethany Morrison

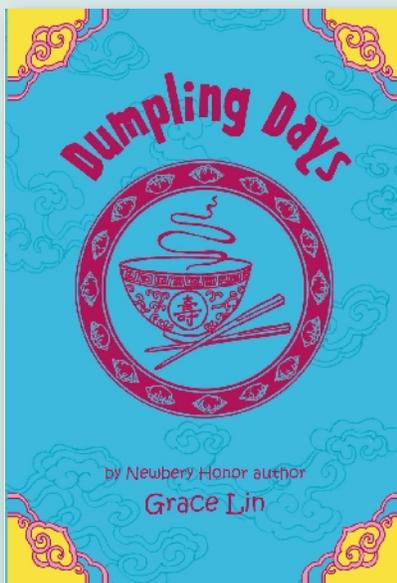
Dumpling Days

By Grace Lin

“You’re Taiwanese-American,” Mom said. “And, no matter what, that’s what you’ll always be.”

“Forever, I thought. I’d always be Taiwanese-American, no matter if I spoke Chinese, made my eyes bigger, or was called a Twinkie. Even if I didn’t like it. Being Taiwanese-American was like making a brush stroke. The mark couldn’t be erased, and the ink and the paper could never be separated. They were joined forever.” (221)

Pacy (from *Year of the Dog* and *Year of the Rat*) visits Taiwan with her family for a month to experience her parents’ homeland and to attend her grandma’s 60th birthday celebration. She finds herself there during Ghost Month, and can’t help but feel like a ghost herself. She often feels invisible, out of place, and even sometimes disliked by people in this unfamiliar land. She can’t speak Chinese and often doesn’t understand the culture. Along the way, she learns not to compare herself to others, who she is in this world,



and what is important to her. Pacy finds out the meaning of her Chinese name and eventually embraces it as an important part of her own identity, as evidenced by what she finally decides to put on her name chop. Over time, after many adventures and a lot of tasty dumplings, Pacy starts to appreciate and even develop a love for Taiwan.

Even though its plot was at times slow-moving, I consider *Dumpling Days* to be an important read because of the massive

amount of cultural information it would take us a lifetime to otherwise accrue. Topics touched upon include squatty pot-ties, Chinese opera, fortune tellers, paper cutting, artificial eye folds, restaurant etiquette, etc. I felt like my nightly readings of this book to my six-year-old daughter were essentially short courses in Chinese culture appreciation. She said, “It was boring in parts and good in others,” but overall she liked it. She laughed aloud heartily on several occasions, especially after learning of the “Four Pleasures in Life” statues (yawning, picking your ears, scratching your back, and picking your nose). I guarantee this will be a book we revisit over the years. Recommended for readers in grades 3–6. 272 pages. ❖

FCC Board Member, Bethany Morrison, resides in Austin with her husband, two young kids, and a tiny flock of backyard chickens.

The Narrative

By Melanie Chung-Sherman, LCSW

It has been close to five years since my last trip to my birth country. Prior to my son's birth, I had the privilege, as an adult, to return to Korea a total of ten times. Every trip back unearthed pieces of me. That archaeological dig did not happen overnight or during the course of a singular trip. It has taken years to reflect and digest my journeys back. I will continue to do this throughout my life.

On my inaugural trip, I searched amongst the crowds and subways for any physical resemblance to me. I hoped biological connectedness would be transmitted through the massive crowds of people. I sought her [my birthmother's] face and secretly hoped that she sensed my presence, too. The disparity of privilege that adoption can bring was revealed as I watched Korean parents care for their Korean children with the stark realization that not all Koreans place their children for adoption. Their lives became a mental "I Spy" game of Korean Norman Rockwell scenes as our group toured the countryside. Privately, I entertained a fantasy of what it may have been like to be raised by my birth family and immersed in thousands of years of culture and ancestry that Koreans were so proud of—yet, it was that same pride which reinforced a barrier for me to have

stayed. I grappled with the reverent beauty of Korea's landscapes while trying to understand the tremendous incongruences regarding the reason that I, and thousands of fellow adoptees, had been placed for adoption through the decades. The language and cultural barriers spoken by foreign tongues and dialects combined with intangible expectations created a cacophony of entertainment, confusion, and exhaustion. I desperately tried to love a country that I felt abandoned by as well. There were several moments when I broke away from the group and took private walks up the mountains outside of Seoul and wept. No longer having to keep the façade that everything was "all right," I needed to be close to the land that I had left so long ago because words failed to express the depth of what I was trying to process. Oma... Korea... perhaps, she, too, felt my anguish and conflict over the many sons and daughters that also have left her fold.

Over time, I confronted the deep sadness, shame, anger, and rejection associated with my placement that I tried to contain for the majority of my young life. Facing the ambiguous loss that adoption brings in a genuine way was difficult and messy. Essentially, I had to leave the adoption story I had learned as a little girl. I recognized that the story I was told as a child



merely coated the surface. It was now my decision regarding how I would traverse those rough layers underneath in an effort to bring healing, forgiveness, and reconciliation—which I still work through today.

Today, it is about building the narrative so that I can impart this with my children and the generations to follow. My husband and I fully intend to return to Korea when our children are older. This is their story as well. It is my hope that portions of Korea will become infused in their lives as much as they are comfortable and that they are proud of who they are and where they have come from... for that is the underlying narrative that we all seek. ❖

Melanie Chung-Sherman is an LCSW who specializes in adoption-sensitive therapy. Melanie and her husband live in the North Dallas area with their two sons.

Family Focus: Xishuangbanna Delegation—Carol & Zoe Watts

By Becky Roberts

Two families in the Xishuangbanna delegation arranged to travel to their orphanages after their week in Yunnan province. Janet McCormick and her daughter Katie travelled to Hunan province. Their trip will be chronicled in the fall newsletter. Carol and Zoe Watts' journey is described below.

Once upon a time, a baby girl was brought to a police station in a small city in China's Shaanxi Province. Baby girl was transferred to the Yulin Children's Welfare Institute (Yulin CWI) and named Yu Juan. Eighteen months later, Yu Juan became Zoe Watts, daughter of Carol Watts.

In telling a story of our child's life in China, we adoptive parents can supply a beginning, based on what the Chinese government provides, and an end, based on our own personal experience. But what about the middle?

When Carol Watts travelled 14 years ago to China to meet Yu Juan, she didn't have the opportunity to travel to her daughter Zoe's orphanage. Furthermore, the orphanage officials made no mention of Zoe being in foster care, so a foster family was not part of Zoe's story. Carol heard years later that there was a possibility that the children adopted from Yulin CWI had been in foster care, but this only added "foster care?" to a long list of unconfirmed possibilities regarding the "middle" of Zoe's life in China.

During elementary school, Zoe Watts remembers being asked questions about her family, "Why don't you have a dad?" being a common one. "Oh, I just have a Mom" she would breezily reply. But as she entered middle school, Zoe began to reflect more on these questions. "I do have a dad somewhere—but where?" She wondered about her first family, and what they remembered of her. "Is my first family together? Do I have siblings?"

All of these questions were part of the reason why, when FCC organized an opportunity to travel as a delegation from Austin to China, Carol and Zoe Watts not only signed up for the trip to Xishuangbanna, but also arranged for a trip to Zoe's orphanage.

As part of the Xishuangbanna delegation, Zoe traveled to schools in the region and saw herself in the students she met. She realized, "This could have been my life. I could have grown up and gone to this school." She marveled at how hard the students worked, and joined them in playing basketball games. She says "I felt like I got to experience the Chinese part of myself as I am now, and to see beyond the superficial stereotype of the smart Chinese student."

The week in Xishuangbanna had been full of presenting personal stories and singing, sightseeing and eating. After flying to Xi'an in Shaanxi Province, Carol and Zoe enjoyed

additional sightseeing on their first day, biking on the Xi'an city wall and visiting the Terracotta Warriors. But as Carol and Zoe took the sleeper train from Xi'an to Yulin, Zoe turned her focus away from her current life and what it could have been. She returned to where she came from—to as close to the beginning of her story as she could get.

After a day in Yulin to acclimate, a driver arrived the next morning to transport Zoe, Carol and Sarah Gao, the Adoption Travel Manager for Sun Travel, to the orphanage. As they were en route, the driver looked in the rear view mirror and told Zoe that she looked familiar. Both Carol and Zoe nodded and smiled, privately thinking "Oh, I bet you say that to all the travelling families." But the driver persisted. "My grandmother, Li Junying, fostered children while I lived with her—I wonder if she fostered you." Carol perked up, recalling the possibility of Zoe being in foster care. The driver, Zhang Rui, called his grandmother and quickly they confirmed that Zoe, aka Yu Juan, was indeed one of her foster daughters. Moreover, Li Junying wanted to see Zoe, and asked Zhang Rui to drive Zoe and Carol to her house that afternoon. In this way, Zoe gained a foster mother and a foster brother before she even arrived at the orphanage.

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The tour of the orphanage itself was sobering. The children there were all older or had significant medical needs. Carol was distressed that these children would most likely never have a family, while Zoe was comforted that at least the children had a home at the orphanage, and that they would be taken care of.

From the orphanage, Carol, Zoe and Sarah Gao travelled with Zhang Rui to his grandmother's current home, a 20-minute drive from the Yulin CWI. She offered them hot water, and brought out photo albums containing pictures of Zoe that Zoe and Carol had never seen before. Li Junying provided some details for the "middle" of Zoe's adoption journey.

Baby girl Yu Juan spent only a short time at Yulin CWI before coming to live with Li Junying. For eighteen months, Li Junying fostered Yu Juan and one other girl alongside her granddaughter and grandson. Zhang Rui, her grandson, was roughly 7–8 years old at the time; but he remembered playing with Yu Juan. Li Junying remembered that Yu Juan developed a taste for steamed buns, and often walked around carrying one clutched in her hand.

Li Junying brought out more photo albums, including one with pictures of another foster daughter who had returned to China to visit. Li Junying said that she had fostered six children in all, before the repeated good-byes made it too hard to continue. As they wrapped up their visit, Zoe took pictures of the photos in Li Junying's photo album, and then posed with Carol, Li Junying, and Zhang Rui to create new pictures for a new photo album.

When asked what they would do differently if they did this trip again, Carol and Zoe both felt they should have prepared more questions. Of course, prior to the cab ride to the



Asian American Resource Center to Open in September

More details and a map to the location can be found here:

<http://austintexas.gov/department/asian-american-resource-center>

Mark Saturday, September 28 from 10 am until 4 pm on the calendar—the grand opening of the Asian American Resource Center located at 8401 Cameron Road in Austin. This center is funded by the City of Austin Parks and Recreation department with money made available from a 2006 bond election. Construction was completed in late May of this year and the staff has been moving into the facility this summer as they prepare for the September opening.

The facility features nine classrooms, a library/computer lab, conference room, an assembly hall, exhibition and display spaces,

orphanage, neither had any idea that they would be meeting Zoe's foster mother, but Carol regretted not having brought a photo album of Zoe's life in Texas to share. Zoe wished she had learned more Mandarin so that she could ask questions herself. None of the orphanage officials or anyone in Zoe's foster family spoke English. All exchanges depended on Sarah Gao to translate them, so

as well as an outdoor Asian garden. Executive Director Leslie Varghese shared with FCC president, Becky Harding, "We are interested in working with FCC-Austin to provide programming/support with a multitude of opportunities for collaboration." According to the website, the center is "dedicated to the preservation, exhibition, cultivation and celebration of Asian/Asian-American culture and heritage through educational programming and community outreach." ❖

the conversation wasn't as free as it could have been.

But even while most of her questions remain unanswered, Zoe returned to Austin with addresses, photos and stories from people in China who remember her as a child and who can join her now as she continues her adoption journey. ❖

Featured Friend: Yang Cao, Mandarin & Food Teacher at our Chinese Culture Camp

By Becky Harding

Becky: You teach the Mandarin and Food class at camp and, just recently, you taught a fabulous cooking class to the tween/teen group for which we are very grateful. What are your favorite Chinese foods to cook and what is the importance of our young people learning to create some of these dishes?

Yang: I'm not a picky eater, I pretty much eat everything that's brought to my table, so it's really hard for me to pick a favorite food. I like fresh healthy food. But I do have a Chinese stomach, so when I go out to eat, I prefer a Chinese restaurant, even though there aren't many good authentic Chinese restaurants in Austin. I believe in a healthy living style, eat fresh, balanced meal is very essential to us. That's what I've been trying to teach my daughter and even my friends' kids whenever I get chance. So when you asked me to do a cooking class for the young girls from FCC, I agreed right away, because 1) I love to cook, 2) cooking with those young ladies would be a good chance for them to get a little experience with real healthy family style Chinese food, and Chinese culture through our food, and 3) I love being around kids.

Becky: What is your professional background?

Yang: I worked as a Electrical Engineer for three years after I graduated from college, before I came to the U.S. I am a webmaster at the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower center now. I also worked as a web designer at AMD for six years before joining the Wildflower Center.

Becky: What is the best aspect of working with our community?

Yang: I get to see a big warm family. I'm often amazed and touched by the love from the parents I met from FCC, how much they devote to their children. I learned a lot from them, they also give me help when I need.

Becky: You told me you are pursuing becoming an American citizen. Do you mind sharing with our membership what led you to this decision?

Yang: I've had green card for many years, it allows me to stay here, and go back to visit China easily. So it didn't occur to me that citizenship makes big difference in my life. I think of myself more like an earth citizen. Austin is my home, I love it here, also I noticed how Chinese I am after I came here, and I'm very comfortable to be a Chinese who lives

in a fairly liberal city. The first time I realized that something was missing was the 2008 presidential election, I wanted to vote, but didn't have the right to vote. Then it was the time when my sister wanted me to take Lillian to travel to Europe with her family. Being a Chinese citizen, I had to apply for a visa, it was a lot of hassle, and I ended up not going for some other reasons. But after that, I realized that I get more freedom if I become a US citizen. Needless to say it's the freedom we take for granted every day. ❖



Xishuangbanna

By Becky Harding

I knew I wanted to take my daughter back to China on a trip that didn't involve adopting a baby. I want her to be rooted in her birth country and I just didn't see how that could happen if we didn't travel to it. I knew that the best time might be right before the full-on throes of adolescence. I want to go to China when she will still be happy to be seen in public with me and as she is in middle school, I believe 12 is just about the right age. When we talked about a heritage trip, returning to her orphanage and revisiting that part of herself, she didn't seem to think she was ready for that yet.

Last year, in February, over the drums of Chinese New Year Lion dancing performance, Amy Wong Mok, the director of the Asian American Culture Center here in Austin, asked me if FCC members would have any interest in a trip to our sister city Xishuangbanna. I said yes without hesitating. I also asked Rowena Fong, our camp co-director, to join the project as this seemed to be an extension of the educational components of our Chinese culture camp. Here was a way for our children to wade into the water of discovering their Chinese roots.

So Amy, Rowena and I created an essay and interview application and by November of last year, we had five young women and their mothers, Pema and Janna Bear, Emily and Suzanne Danuser, Katie and Janet McCormick, Zoe and Carol Watts, Claire and I ready to go on this transformational journey. We will go into Chinese schools, show media about their lives, speak about their routines and then sing several songs before, hopefully, breaking into small groups for more personal engagement. We met monthly and since this type of exchange program has never been done before, we prepare our power point presentations, oral reports and songs, hoping they will be well received.

“Hold on to me as we go
as we roll down this unfamiliar road
and although this wave is stringing us along
just know you're not alone
cause I'm gonna make this place your home.”

—Home, by Phillip Phillips



Parent Janna Bear dances with the students and teachers at the Wanjing Elementary School.

Xishuangbanna Dai Nationality Autonomous Prefecture is in Yunnan province, far on the western side of China, bordering Laos and Myanmar. Because of its agricultural base, it's unlike the big cities of Beijing and Guangzhou and the capital, Jinghong, and feels like a small, friendly town right away. Palm trees line the streets and the countryside is breathtakingly beautiful. The region is known for its Asian elephants, rubber plantations and Pu-erh tea. Named in 1955, Banna, as it is nicknamed, is home to 26 ethnic minorities, specifically the Dai people. Because of this, the one child policy doesn't not apply here. We found ourselves explaining the circumstances of our Chinese American families several times during the week.

Austin and Banna became sister cities 15 years ago. Austin has, as a matter of fact, 12 sister cities and 4 friendship cities that promote Austin's educational, cultural, and economic presence in the international community. We stress to the girls that they are ambassadors of their city, state and nation and we expect excellent behavior. We review expectations for group dynamic, table manners with a lazy susan protocol, respect for elders, what types of comments are best saved for the privacy of the hotel room and how to drink from a Chinese tea cup.

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We meet in Shanghai on June 14 and spend one day exploring The Shanghai Museum, the Bund, old town and Yu Gardens. The excitement is thick. Amy brings Ms. Hong Zso to serve as a translator and she seamlessly fits right into the delegation. We fly to Xishuangbanna on Saturday and we are met by Mr. Chen Jinqiang, the Deputy Director of the Foreign Affairs Office at the airport. He will serve as our host and guide throughout the week. We arrive at the hotel and immediately are served a feast of fabulous foods from the region. The plates stack up on the lazy susan and the flavors and tastes of Banna fill us completely. We practice for our presentations for two hours. Later, Amy leads us to the night market and we see all sorts of local crafts featuring peacocks and elephants. Rowena and I wonder about the rocks for sale and later are told they are called gambler's stones as they may or may not have jade inside of them. This area is known for its jade. Some of us will buy some of this beautiful jade at excellent, bargained prices.

On Sunday morning, it takes about an hour on the bus to get to the wild elephant sanctuary. We cross the Lancang-Mekong River heading north. The sanctuary is a popular tourist attraction and we pass by a lot of exhibits and vendors before getting on the chair lift that takes us over the elephants' protected area. We don't see any elephants (footprints and poop though) but the serenity of the ride and the peacefulness stays with some of us a long time. After another amazing lunch of local fish, pork,



One of the many amazing meals the group enjoyed on the week long exchange program in China.



Students at the Mankai #3 Middle school await the beginning of the exchange program presentations.

greens and, of course, fresh fruits, we head to a shopping district and a tea house where we learn just how special the tea is from this area.

On Monday, we take a short ride to the XSBN Cultural Middle School. We are greeted like rock stars with cameras flashing as we get off the bus and are escorted to the presentation room. Children wave and squeal when they see us. We are invited to watch the traditional Monday morning flag raising ceremony and are cheered as we walk out in front of the 3,000 students and their teachers. A sea of black hair turns to look at the flag and Emily, standing next to me, gasps a little and whispers to me that she has never seen so many black heads in her life. The presentations go very well but the small group is a blast and before we know it the Chinese school children are sweeping the girls off to show them their classrooms, where each class has 60 students or so, and take them to the lunchroom. The chopstick skills improve greatly this week for the amateur chopstick users in our group. Many of the Chinese students all want to practice their English and the girls are engaged completely.

Monday afternoon, in a formal ceremony at the city government office, we meet Mr. Tang Jia Hua, the governor of Xishuangbanna, who gives each of us a certificate as an honorary citizen of the region. Amy presents him with a plaque from Lee Leffingwell, our Austin mayor, and Rowena and I are interviewed for the local television news. Emily speaks for the

girls on camera explaining how friendly and beautiful this part of China is to her. The girls sing *Deep in the Heart of Texas* for the governor. Then we go to dinner at a traditional Dai restaurant and the girls are invited to sing again. This time, they sing Phillip Phillip's *Home* and the lyrics seem to take on even more meaning.

On Tuesday, we visit XSBN Wanjing Elementary School which is Austin's Doss Elementary sister school. The exchange goes very well and the students, once again, giggle and delight in our presence. Pema uses a large inflatable turkey to talk about Thanksgiving traditions. It cracks me up every time she grins and holds it up and says 'It's kinda like a chicken!' The arts programs here have prepared a lot of entertainment and we are invited to dance in the courtyard in what becomes a magical moment.

On Wednesday, we get off the bus at the Buddhist Institute in Xishuangbanna, and our delegation is escorted to a large room with media equipment at the front of the room. About 30 young Buddhist men begin to fill up the room. They have shaved heads and bright orange robes and placid expressions on their faces. After our presentation, the principal, in perfect English, tells us about the school and the community service the monks do, specifically with HIV awareness. He then gives each of us a wooden bracelet and tells us that 108 monks

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chanted all night blessing these gifts for us. We are deeply honored by the gesture. Our gifts of homemade bookmarks and pencils with Texas written on them seem woefully inadequate at that moment.

Once outside, Mr. Chen encourages the girls to play some basketball with the monks. Without much hesitation, all five of the girls were running up and down the court playing basketball. We then toured the amazing temple next to the school with a large statue of Buddha that can be seen for miles. Only Amy, Carol and Claire climb all the way to the top and have their photograph taken with the city in the background. My daughter Claire seems to have a nose for finding possible popsicles that come in a wide variety of flavors such as red bean paste and mung bean. However, mango leads the pack as the flavor of choice.

On Thursday, we travel an hour and half through the mountains to the XSBN Mankai #3 Middle School and are awed by the technology at the school. The students have created beautiful cards for us and we are provided a tour around the facilities before being given another amazing lunch of local foods. Another basketball game happens. We stop by the Jingjing temple on our ride home and the old, wooden structure is a contrast to the temple we toured just the previous day. A light rain hitting the top of the bus is the only sound on the long ride by to Jinghong and everyone falls asleep as we roll through the mountains of China.

On our last day, we visit the XSBN Jinghong #1 Middle School and are surprised as we are treated to contemporary dancing and songs by the Chinese students. Katie starts lassoing students as a part of her presentation talking about ranch life. After listening to *Deep in the Heart of Texas*, *Home*, and *O Mama*, the Chinese students ask for another song and our girls quickly give them a rousing version of *Call Me Maybe* before touring their campus.

As we walk to bus, leaving this last school, I realize just how much we asked of these girls—the huge public speaking component, playing basketball, singing, climbing up a plethora of steps, eating exotic food



The girls play a friendly game of basketball with the young men of the Buddhist Institute.

(this was a non-issue actually. They seemed to enjoy everything they ate all week), maintaining a positive attitude and learning mindset. We definitely pushed their comfort zones more than a few times and they did great.

I am so proud of them. The mothers did very well, too. Stepping in when needed but not helicoptering at all. As I climb on the bus, I know I don't have words to express the gratitude I feel for having Amy and Rowena, the Chinese-American Aunties, to guide them through the week. So many, many special connections and lessons.

Before we all disperse back to our separate lives on Saturday, I ask the girls some questions about the experience. What are the highlights and what did you learn? Pema and Claire loved the chairlift ride through the elephant sanctuary, Katie loved the food, Emily and Zoe loved visiting the schools and meeting the kids. As far as what did they learn? Claire said she was appreciative of everything she has because some people don't have these things or opportunities. Katie said she was really grateful for what she has as well and she is glad she doesn't have to go to school for 10 hours and promises not to complain about it so much. Pema learned that the students receive things with both hands, and that they are respectful and welcoming. Emily told me that she learned how to interact with people even if you don't speak the same language. Zoe said she learned how different life is in China and how hard the kids work and how grateful they are for everything. "They are kind

and generous even though they don't have a lot," she told me. Pema wanted me to know this as well. She told me, "I feel like I kinda found myself. I can step out into my Asian-ness."

As we are leaving on our flight to Beijing, I look out at China and remember this from a few nights ago. It's a warm June evening at the night market. My daughter, Claire, and an older woman/vendor are engaged in a friendly yet fierce bartering exchange for a pair of Tom's shoes the woman is selling. The woman's voice gets louder and slower as she patiently explains something in Mandarin to Claire who repeatedly tells her in English she doesn't speak Chinese. The lady simply doesn't believe her and Claire finally looks to me for help. We somehow settle on the equivalent of \$8 for the shoes. As we walk through the market, we talk about how the people we have met in China acknowledge Claire's Chinese self and it's the Caucasian mothers on the trip who are obviously considered tourists. Claire thinks about this a long time. Finally, when she speaks, we talk about how we both wish we had learned more Mandarin for the trip and make a promise to do a better job with this aspect of our Chinese-American home. Next time, when we return to China, we vow we will speak both languages. ❖