

DREAM TEAM

U.S. Rotarians hurdled a 'great wall' of obstacles for the first GSE between the U.S.A. and China.

by Gary Millman

Rotarians in R.I. District 7570 knew that organizing a Group Study Exchange (GSE) between *any* two countries involves tremendous planning and organization. But when the Rotarians in the Virginia-Tennessee, U.S.A., district decided to carry out an exchange with the People's Republic of China, even they were surprised by the challenges and obstacles that lay ahead.

Without the usual channels of communication between Rotarians, planning an itinerary and finding a suitable team with a non-Rotary country can be difficult at best.

But this did not deter Edgar Hatcher, a member of the Rotary Club of Bristol, Virginia-Tennessee, U.S.A., and past governor of District 7570, who has had a lifelong fascination with China and its people.

"I first visited China in the mid-1970s, soon after it was first opened up again to Westerners," Ed recalls. "I could see even then that Rotary was a totally foreign concept there. I started to think about ways we could improve the Chinese perception of Rotary."

In 1989, Ed started the wheels turning on forming his dream GSE—an exchange of teams between the U.S.A. and mainland China.

"There were so many false starts," admits Ed. "In 1989, we identified one group in China that could possibly visit the U.S., but it soon became clear that they could not meet the demands of a Group Study Exchange.

"Two big stumbling blocks were the lack of information and the difficulty of communication," he says. "We just couldn't work out the details."

A second potential group then came to Ed's attention—the China Association for International Friendly Contact (CAIFC). "We thought this group would work out because, as their name implies, they seemed attuned to improving relations with the West," says Ed.

With the support of a Rotary Foundation of R.I. Carl P. Miller Discovery Grant, Ed traveled to Beijing, where he met with Mr. Fang Xiaoguang of the CAIFC. "It seemed like everything was in place, but in mid-January 1991, we received the news—totally unexpected—that the government had denied the team members' requests for visas. We explored many avenues to try to get the ban lifted. It was very disappointing when all of our requests were turned down, because everything we were trying to



A children's orchestra from a school for gifted children performs for the U.S. Group Study Exchange team in Hangzhou.

do was simply in the spirit of friendship."

Then in March 1991, a member of a medical delegation from China visiting the United States met with Foundation Services Officer Janet Halstead at Rotary World Headquarters in Evanston.

During a tour of the building, Dr. Xu Yun, deputy director of the Child Growth and Development Center of Hangzhou University, learned about the GSE program.

Members of the staff explained to him that in the program, teams of non-Rotarian professional men and women from two countries carry out exchange visits to each other's country. The Rotary Foundation pays all transportation

costs, while local costs are borne by the hosts. On their four-to-six week tour, the team members study the social, economic, business, and cultural conditions in their host country. During most exchanges, the GSE teams stay in the homes of Rotarians.

Dr. Xu left Evanston determined to lead a Chinese GSE team to the United States.

"Given what we had gone through just a few months earlier," Ed Hatcher says, "I was deeply skeptical Dr. Xu

would succeed in his plans. I could see no reason why his government would relent. But times change, people change, and I guess even governments can change, too. Much to my delight, Dr. Xu was granted permission to bring his team here, and we were granted permission to visit Hangzhou. It all just fell into place."

After months of communication between Ed, GSE Supervisor Mariann Ferrin, and Dr. Xu, the exchange became a reality. On 8 July 1992, Dr. Xu and his team of five members of the Child Development Department at Hangzhou University arrived in Bristol, Tennessee-Virginia, U.S.A. (the city of Bristol straddles the border between the two states).

Even though their plane landed well after midnight, the Chinese GSE team members were enthusiastically greeted at the airport by scores of local families.

For the next six weeks the team traveled extensively throughout the U.S. district, visiting everything from hospitals and universities to state parks and museums.

Like the members of most other GSE teams, the visitors were especially interested in how their particular professions are practiced in the United States. Wang Weiwei, a visiting team member who works in the university's Department of Computer Science, later observed, "Computers are almost everywhere in the U.S. I saw how production efficiency can be greatly increased by using computer-controlled machines in industrial manufacturing. This is something my country has yet to learn."

The team visited a number of historic sites in Virginia and in Washington, D.C., where they learned facts about United States history unavailable in Chinese books on the U.S. "Compared to China," observed Lai Shuimu, a psychology professor, "American history is very short, just 200 years. Still, I learned many things about it that were totally new to me."

The team also met then R.I. President-Elect Robert R. Barth and were the guests of 19 Rotary clubs. There was also time for baseball games, movies, television, and fast food to provide the visitors with a taste of contemporary U.S. culture.

"Staying with host families was the best way to understand the American lifestyle," said psychology professor Wang Ming. "Our hosts saw us as members of their own families; we ate dinner with them, went to movies with them, and played with their children.

"It moved me very much and made it hard to leave," she says. "Since I have been back in China, I am often questioned about my study tour. I tell my students about all of it, and especially about the disparity between what I expected before I left and what I actually experienced in the U.S. The friendship between our two exchange teams will last a lifetime."

In April-May 1993, the second half of the exchange was carried out, when a team from the U.S. arrived in China for a five-week tour. During their visit, the GSE team members stopped in Shanghai, Hangzhou, and other towns in Zhejiang Province in western China, as

DANIEL GROGAN



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Chinese GSE team members greet members of the U.S. team when they were reunited in China.

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DANIEL GROGAN

American GSE members lay bricks on the foundation of a new polio rehabilitation center in Hangzhou (above) and visit a much older structure—the Great Wall (below).



DANIEL GROGAN

well as Beijing and several other towns. Their tour brought them to a number of hospitals (including a traditional acupuncture clinic), a school, and a silk factory.

"It's hard to imagine two cultures so fundamentally different as those of the United States and China," says Ed, who served as the Rotarian team leader. The biggest difference, he noted, is that the Chinese have nothing even remotely commensurate to Rotary.

"There were Rotary clubs in China in such cities as Shanghai, Canton, and Nanking in the 1920s, '30s and '40s. But the few clubs that survived World War II disbanded in 1951. To the Chinese, any organization as large as Rotary had to be government controlled.

"We constantly had to explain, in depth, what Rotary was all about," Ed says. "Even before we left we knew we needed help in this area, so we decided that some kind of visual symbol was necessary."

To help communicate the message of Rotary, the U.S. team wore T-shirts with *Wai-Kong* (the Chinese characters for "Serve the People") blazoned on the back.

When team members arrived in Shanghai, they found a bustling city where business is now the order of the

day. "It was as if a whole new world was opening up right before our eyes," observed Ed. "The stock market craze had just hit with a fury. When the offices could no longer contain the traders, they spilled out onto the streets, shouting their bids."

Team member Howard Mayo, a teacher from Hillsville, Virginia, was impressed with "the quality of education among the Chinese. Everyone seemed willing to learn." William Hall, owner and operator of a summer camp in the mountains of Virginia, said he "met with several young businessmen who are ready to 'take the big plunge' and go into business for themselves. Instead of being frightened by the future, they were excited about it."

Dr. Roderic Owen, a philosophy professor at Mary Baldwin College in Staunton, Virginia, found his GSE experience fantastic and fascinating. "I know that several lasting friendships have been made both with our Chinese hosts as well as with GSE members."

Says Ed: "There is a tree now growing near Dr. Xu's home in China that symbolizes the harmony and goodwill experienced by all who took part in this endeavor. It will forever remind us of the success of this Group Study Exchange."

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ED HATCHER

GSE team members huddle around a computer in a Virginia classroom (above). "Computers are everywhere in the U.S.," one team member from China noted. At right, U.S. team members learn the secrets of Chinese cooking.



ED HATCHER

10 Years After ...

The first GSE team to China looks back – and ahead

JIM CHRISTIANSON led one of three Group Study Exchange teams to the People's Republic of China in 1993, a groundbreaking step toward Rotary's eventual return to the Chinese mainland, where provisional clubs now operate in Beijing and Shanghai.

The first team to reach China that year was led by Past RI Director Ed Hatcher, who recently hosted a 10-year reunion in Staunton, Va., USA.

"The reunion was lively and eventful," says Hatcher, who renewed acquaintance with team members and Rotary Foundation alumni Dan Grogan, John Hall, Mark Holberg, Howard Mayo, and Rod Owen.

The group reminisced and reflected on what Owen, a professor of philosophy

and religion at Mary Baldwin College in Staunton, describes as their "life-changing experience."

Mayo, a high school teacher and basketball coach, and Holberg, an official with the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation, recalled helping lay brick at a polio rehabilitation clinic in Hangzhou. Others remembered nighttime stargazing in the vast Gobi, sleeping in a small boat on the Grand Canal, and frequent requests to be photographed with Chinese couples vacationing in Hangzhou. "I guess we were celebrities," says Owen. Grogan, a professional photographer, reprised his 1993 role and took snapshots of the group and their families.

Since the 1993 visit, Hall, an entrepreneur,

has returned to China and participated in several joint economic ventures.

Hatcher, who has also returned to China, notes that perhaps the most lasting tribute to the team is the success of Rotary Ambassadorial Scholar Ian Zhou of Shanghai, sponsored by RI District 7570 in response to the 1993 exchange. Zhou earned his bachelor's and master's degrees at Virginia Tech and is now pursuing his doctorate in public administration at Harvard University.

A member of RI's Extension in China Subcommittee, Hatcher says that Rotary "has significant opportunities for service in China" and adds that the chartering of Rotary clubs there remains "one of my ardent interests."
— C.W.P.

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Glossary

This article was edited by Herbert K. Lau (劉敬恒) (Rotary China Historian) on 15 Nov. 2016

(1) Group Study Exchange

Group Study Exchange (GSE) was one of the most popular and rewarding programs of The Rotary Foundation of Rotary International. Since the first exchanges between districts in 1965, more than 70,000 business people and professionals ages 25-40 had participated in GSE. The program paired Rotary districts to send and receive study teams. Since 1965, approximately US\$100 million had been allocated by The Rotary Foundation for GSE grants.

Each GSE exchange consisted of three to four weeks. GSE provided an opportunity for the visiting team members to meet, talk, and live with Rotarians and their families in a warm spirit of friendship and hospitality. In addition to learning about another country through visits to farms, schools, hospitals, industrial plants, professional offices, and government establishments, GSE team members served as ambassadors of goodwill. They interpreted their home nation for host Rotarians and others in the communities they visited. In some years, teams of single vocation or cultural group had been exchanged. Some GSE teams had helped to create humanitarian projects between their countries.

The GSE program had provided Rotarians with most enjoyable, practical, and meaningful way to promote world understanding.

Policy was changed effective 1 July 1989. GSE teams would be composed of 5 non-Rotarian

professionals (all men, all women, or both men and women) and an experienced Rotarian team leader (male or female), or 4 non-Rotarian professionals (all men, all women, or both men and women) and an experienced Rotarian team leader (male or female) and spouse.

In approving the aforementioned combinations, the Trustees of the Rotary Foundation of R. I. had allowed for 3 major changes: mixed gender teams; women Rotarian team members; and accompanying team leaders' spouses. As in the past, the sending District may determine the composition of the team it sends. The Trustees, however, required that the sending District consult with the receiving District as early as possible in the planning process.

The Group Study Exchange program was phased out in June 2013.

(2) [Carl P. Miller Discovery Grants](#)

This was one of the grants offered by The Rotary Foundation of Rotary International made in 1988 by a generous gift from R. I. Past President Carl P. Miller (1963-1964), and his wife, Ruth. Discovery Grants provided “seed money” in the form of travel and related expenses for development of international Rotary service projects. The grants did not fund an international service project directly, but rather support the people-to-people contact needed in the planning stages to bring the project to fruition. Only a Rotary Club, District, or group of clubs or districts were eligible to apply for Discovery Grants, which were awarded twice yearly. This kind of grants has been phased out before the new millennium.

(3) [China Association for International Friendly Contact](#) = 中國國際友好聯絡會

(4) [Child Growth and Development Center of Hangzhou University](#) = National Clinical Research Center for Child Health, Hangzhou University = 浙江大學醫學院附屬兒童醫院國家兒童健康與疾病臨床醫學研究中心

(5) [Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province](#) = 浙江省杭州市

(6) [Canton](#) = Guangzhou = 廣州

(7) [Nanking](#) = Nanjing = 南京

