

Assessing Learning Outcomes of a Two-Week Agricultural Study Abroad Experience To China

R.C. Bott-Knutson¹
South Dakota State University
Brookings, SD



S. Clay²
South Dakota State University
Brookings, SD

M. Gonda³
South Dakota State University
Brookings, SD

J. Walker⁴
South Dakota State University
Brookings, SD

R. Thaler⁵
South Dakota State University
Brookings, SD

Abstract

College students from the Upper Great Plains Region of the United States often come from small towns (pop. <2000), and many have very limited world experience. Experiential exposure to global perspectives is critical to prepare undergraduates for a better understanding of the world and their future. An International Travel Abroad China Experience (3 credits) was initiated in 2012 through the South Dakota State University College of Agriculture and Biological Sciences with the objectives of exposing students to cultural norms and agricultural production practices of China. In class, students engaged in cultural and agricultural studies and interacted with strategic local and global partners to enrich their learning in-country.

The semester-long class concluded with a two-week tour of China to provide travel experience far outside their everyday norm. Pre- and post-trip surveys were used to assess what students gained from the experience and how they perceived the experience prepared them for a life-long career. Here we summarize 2013 to 2016 survey results from 96 students enrolled in the class. Students reported gaining a comparative perspective of agricultural practices as well as a greater understanding of global agricultural markets, career opportunities, and open-mindedness about international travel in relation to their future careers.

¹Van D. and Barbara B. Fishback Honors College, 605-688-5268, Rebecca.Bott@sdstate.edu

²Department of Agronomy, Horticulture, and Plant Science, 605-688-4757, Sharon.Clay@sdstate.edu

³Department of Animal Science, 605-688-5442, Michael.Gonda@sdstate.edu

⁴Department of Animal Science, 605-688-5458, Julie.Walker@sdstate.edu

⁵Department of Animal Science, 605-688-5435, Robert.Thaler@sdstate.edu

Introduction

Cultural exchange programs lasting a few weeks to several months have been in place for a long time. Educational tourism (one to two week trips) has become common across many fields of study (Falk et al., 2012), especially since the early 2000's (Bunch et al., 2018). These international educational tourism programs are meant to increase global competence of graduates (Kenway and Fahey, 2014; Rizvi, 2014). The benefits of a short in-country experience include a lower price point for students, the inclusion of faculty mentors from the lead institution, and logistical access since they are more time effective than the traditional semester or year-long programs (Zamastil-Vondrova, 2005). Some of the outcomes, such as cultural awareness, intercultural sensitivity, and other cultural gains were found to be greater for students participating in more traditional long-term programs (Dwyer, 2004). However, others have reported that short-term programs do influence students' intellectual and personal lives (Chieffo and Griffiths, 2004), with gains in cultural understanding and communication, and awareness of global dependence (Bunch et al., 2018). Indeed, exposure to international activities expands knowledge and world-view, but immersion has been shown to spur career internationalization (Felker and Gianecchini, 2015). Out-of-classroom experiences have been reported to be the most impactful portion of study abroad (Stone and Petrick, 2013). In addition, using the experiential model of experience combined with reflection and synthesis has been shown to increase the impacts of the experience (Kolb, 1984).

South Dakota State University (SDSU) is a Land Grant university with a strong production-agriculture focus. The majority of the students are from small rural communities in South Dakota, Minnesota, Iowa, and Nebraska, and have had limited international exposure (61% of students surveyed had no international experience; see results). Specifically, South Dakota (SD) has fewer than 1 million people spread throughout its 200,000 sq km area. Most SD communities are small (86% less than <2,000 people) (Cubit, 2019). The average farm size in SD is 566.6 hectares (USDA NASS, 2018). These demographics differ substantially from China which has more than 9,000,000 sq km area, where there are 19 megacities of over 30 M people (Lower et al., 2016), and farm sizes are < 1.0 hectare. This travel experience is especially important for Midwestern students, as, until the trade embargo of 2018, approximately one out of every three soybean rows harvested in the Midwestern U.S. was exported to China. In fact, China imports just under two-thirds of the total U.S. soybeans produced (USDA, 2018) and is the second-largest consumer of U.S. exports at \$19.6 B (USDA FAS, 2017). Because of the high level of trade with China, agricultural students are likely to interact with Chinese companies. Thus, it is essential that SDSU students obtain a deeper understanding of the world beyond the Midwest, especially of our international partners, if they are going to be successful in their careers.

Methods

Course Background

Understanding Chinese culture and agricultural production and processing systems will help students prepare for their future careers, give them insight into future career opportunities, and prepare them for lifelong travel experiences. To achieve that goal, the SDSU "China Ag" class was developed to expose student participants to a new culture, make them more globally aware, boost self-confidence, and have fun in the process. The first part of the class was a semester-long course that met three hours per week to expose students to China through different delivery mechanisms including personal discovery and invited speakers with significant experience working in China. The second part of the class was a two-week-long trip to China shortly following the end of the spring semester. The faculty mentors worked with a travel agent to develop a two-week in-country curriculum that included a wide variety of cultural, tourist, and agricultural visits. Chinese in-country tour guides met the class in China and guided the group through each of four major cities. While many activities were planned, students were allowed free-time during the evening to allow for self-exploration, away from faculty and guides.

Participants of the China Ag experience enrolled in a three-credit dual listed upper division/ graduate course that convened weekly during the spring semester and culminated with two weeks of faculty-led study travel in China. Collectively, 96 students participated in this course between 2013 and 2016. The objectives of the China Ag class were to 1) enhance student familiarity with global agriculture practices, especially pertaining to relationships between China and the United States; 2) provide a comparison of culture and lifestyles in China and the United States; and 3) provide an opportunity for students to experience international travel, focused equally on culture and agriculture. The weekly classes were designed to prepare students for a heightened in-country experience.

Strategic local and global partners were engaged in the learning process. Specifically, partners from academia, industry, as well as, community members who had in-country familiarity, were leveraged to convey personal experiences related to culture, agriculture, and career opportunities. Chinese professors and graduate students from the SDSU community were invited to share their perspectives on growing up in China and studying or working state-side. A veterinarian from Pipestone Systems, an internationally known swine veterinary services and management company that has worked in China for almost a decade, led a discussion each year on how intimately involved China/ U.S. pork production has become. An executive from 3M, a multinational conglomerate corporation with a subsidiary in China, shared insights into establishing satellite branches in China, adapting personally to a long-term work assignment in China, and how choosing to work abroad can provide opportunities for accelerated career advancement.

In addition to speakers, a variety of teaching tools were utilized to engage students as active partners in their learning process. Students read current event articles, and two books [Mr. China (Clissold, 2005) and The Ugly

American (Lederer and Burdick, 1958)] with the goal to expand participant knowledge about Chinese culture as well as being a gracious guest in a host country. Students and instructors had an agreement that as long as everyone contributed to discussions on class readings they wouldn't be quizzed on the material. A key topic [e.g., Chinese history (past and current); culture; agricultural practices; finance; climate; and religion] was assigned to each student who then prepared a short paper and lecture on the topic to share with the class, essentially developing each student as our group source on one aspect of China. Students honed their skills using chopsticks while enjoying peanuts and M&M's, and eventually authentic Chinese food prepared by a Chinese professor from the campus community. Every year beginning in 2014, graduates of the China Ag experience were invited to attend one of the class sessions so that they could share their experiences and advice with the current class.

In-Country Travel

Students traveled to Hong Kong, Shenzhen, Guangzhou, Xi'an, and Beijing by plane, train, and bus. The trip to China included well known cultural sites (e.g., Great Wall, terracotta warriors of Xian, Forbidden City), as well as the U.S. embassy, manufacturing plants (e.g., John Deere, China) dairies, Pioneer DuPont, food processing plants, wet markets, a traditional medicine hospital, swine confinement operations, feedlots, ports, family homes, cropping lands, and temples. Students met with U.S. agricultural leaders working in China to promote U.S. commodities including members of the U.S. Soybean Export Council, the U.S. Meat Export Federation, and the U.S. Grains Council. The experience was designed to immerse students equally in Chinese culture and agriculture.

Once in-country, a pair of students was assigned to be the class managers for the day and another pair was assigned to be the official class bloggers. Each evening, the blog was updated with written highlights and a few pictures to keep family and friends engaged in the experience as well. Students maintained a daily personal journal to reflect on events of the trip (Kolb, 1984; Stone and Petrick, 2013). We were able to build on an existing relationship with the Dean of the College of Animal Science at China Agricultural University to plan a day where students from both universities gathered on the China Agricultural University campus to learn from one another. Small teams of 4-5 students offered prepared presentations about their hometowns, majors, and hobbies to students at China Agricultural University. Chinese students also gave short presentations on their studies. The day concluded with a banquet and dance. Upon return to the U.S., students collaborated with a local newspaper to prepare a story about what they gained from their experience. Collectively these strategic activities transformed the student experience from theory- or observer-based to an experiential participation founded on personal insights and interactions.

Student Surveys

To determine changes in awareness, confidence, and understanding of Chinese cultural and agricultural practices as well as international travel, students were surveyed

using a pre-and post-travel survey that included participant background, perception, and open-ended style questions. Surveys were administered in class prior to departure for China (pre), and in the airport just before the return flight (post). Questions related to awareness, confidence, and understanding were asked using a five-point Likert scaled response in both the pre- and post-travel surveys. Students' likelihood of returning to China or recommending the experience to friends were gauged with simple yes or no questions. Open-ended participant background questions were designed to gauge the level of prior experience that students had with international travel and with agriculture. The surveys were deemed exempt under federal regulation 45 CFR 46.101 (b) and approved by the SDSU Institutional Review Board (IRB-1304021-EXM).

Statistical Analysis

This study abroad experience was designed to increase knowledge of Chinese agricultural practices and systems, appreciation for Chinese culture, and comfort level with international travel. The China study abroad experience was nearly identical and student demographic data (major, year of study) was similar across years. Therefore, our assumption was that year the student enrolled in the class did not affect our results and data across years was pooled. A paired Wilcoxon rank-sum test was performed using R software to determine differences in perception- and comprehension-based questions (scored on a scale of 1-5) pre- and post-activity for each cohort. A Chi-squared test was performed using R to determine changes in the frequency of affirmative responses for questions related to students' likelihood to go back to China or to recommend the experience to a friend. Differences within class for the Wilcoxon and Chi-Squared tests were considered significant with a P-value of less than or equal to 0.05. Qualitative responses to open-ended questions were reviewed and grouped based on similar topics or focus. The frequency of each topic and representative sample quotes are reported for select questions.

Results and Discussion

Ninety-four undergraduate and two graduate students participated in the China Ag course at SDSU between 2013 and 2016. Forty-eight percent of the students identified as male and 52% as female. International travel was new to most of the students; 61% had never traveled abroad, 29% had traveled out of the country once or twice, and 10% had traveled out of the country three or more times. Most students had commercial (56%) or hobby/small farm experience (31%). However, several were relatively new to agriculture having only experienced the industry through class or internships (12%) or not at all (1%). The diversity of experience level with international travel and with agriculture allowed for students to support one another developing in these capacities.

Student beliefs and behaviors were modified as a result of the study abroad experience (Table 1). Prior to departure, students agreed that Chinese and U.S. markets influenced

Table 1. Student responses to statements comparing US and Chinese agricultural practices and interest in lifelong learning about international issues pre- and post-travel to China

Likert scale responses ^{a,b}								
Statements	Time	1	2	3	4	5	Mean± SD	P-Value
Chinese markets influence U.S. markets	Pre	3.1	1.0	10.4	35.4	50.0	4.28 ± 0.9	
	Post	2.1	1.0	5.2	20.8	70.8	4.57 ± 0.8	0.008
U.S. markets influence Chinese markets	Pre	2.1	4.2	13.5	40.6	39.6	4.11 ± 0.9	
	Post	2.1	1.0	7.3	36.5	53.1	4.38 ± 0.8	0.01
Chinese food safety standards are the same as the U.S.	Pre	38.5	46.9	9.4	4.2	1.0	1.82 ± 0.8	
	Post	58.3	36.5	2.1	0.0	3.1	1.53 ± 0.8	0.002
Animal welfare standards in China are the same as the U.S.	Pre	21.9	61.5	14.6	1.0	1.0	1.98 ± 0.7	
	Post	34.4	45.8	14.6	4.2	1.0	1.92 ± 0.9	0.50
I follow news related to international agriculture	Pre	8.3	34.4	31.3	19.8	6.3	2.81 ± 1.0	
	Post	6.3	20.0	30.5	34.7	8.4	3.19 ± 1.1	0.001
I am likely to read international articles/view international news	Pre	2.1	11.6	33.7	39.0	13.7	3.51 ± 0.9	
	Post	0.0	2.1	20.2	31.9	45.7	4.21 ± 0.8	0.001
Experience will impact my lifelong career	Pre	4.2	3.1	12.5	31.3	49.0	4.18 ± 1.0	
	Post	2.1	1.0	4.2	29.2	63.5	4.51 ± 0.8	0.005

^a1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Indifferent, 4=Agree, 5=Strongly Agree
^bData are reported as the % of students (n=96) responding within each category

each other, and this belief was enhanced after travel in China (P < 0.01). However, one of the biggest changes was the student's belief that Chinese and U.S. food safety standards are equivalent (P = 0.002). This view was changed after students visited wet markets in Beijing and Xi'an, where fresh meat and fish were sold and after visiting very large fresh fruit and vegetable markets. Student impressions after travel were that there was no sense of quality control. The students observed no refrigeration of fresh cuts of meat, and offal remained on the pavement, close to where the fresh cuts of meat were hanging, both of which attracted flies. Out of the 96 students, 35 directly commented on either the lack of biosecurity, "things are not thrown in the garbage, but just placed on the floor", or the lack of sanitation in the wet markets. This experience modified student thoughts about U.S. regulations for food safety was evident through their comments, "[wet markets] made me more thankful for US food safety", and "[I] appreciate the U.S., how good

we have it ... and why biosecurity is important". These observations lead to the development of a 'national self' (or collective self) (Zhu et al., 2017) which, simply stated, is a better understanding of U.S. 'home' regulations and a thankfulness of what they have in the U.S. Specifically, students reflected that "I am thankful for clean water", and "have minimal concern for most food-borne illness", as well as an appreciation for safety regulations for food and driving.

Students disagreed with the statement that animal welfare standards in China are the same as the U.S. and opinions pre- and post-travel were statistically insignificant (P = 0.5). Comments about dairies included "a lot of cows looked unhealthy", and "if most dairies look like the ones we saw, the Chinese will never be able to produce enough milk". A student noted "it was strange to see how far behind they are in dairy production" and commented on outdated milking equipment. Yet comments about other animal farms

Table 2. Students' reported understanding of China agricultural practices, markets, and culture

Likert scale responses ^{a,b}								
Statements	Time	1	2	3	4	5	Mean± SD	P-Value
Current understanding of Chinese agricultural practices	Pre	0.0	4.2	41.7	44.8	9.4	3.59 ± 0.7	
	Post	3.2	1.1	11.7	47.9	36.2	4.13 ± 0.9	0.001
Current understanding of Chinese agricultural markets	Pre	1.0	15.6	51.0	30.2	2.1	3.17 ± 0.7	
	Post	0.0	3.2	17.9	68.4	10.5	3.86 ± 0.6	0.001
I understand the differences in agricultural practices between China and the U.S.	Pre	2.1	19.0	48.4	26.3	4.2	3.12 ± 0.8	
	Post	0.0	2.1	14.7	68.4	14.7	3.96 ± 0.6	0.001
Current understanding of Chinese culture	Pre	0.0	21.9	45.8	29.2	3.1	3.14 ± 0.8	
	Post	0.0	5.3	26.3	57.9	10.5	3.74 ± 0.7	0.001

^a1=None, 2=Limited, 3=Moderate, 4=Strong, 5=Exceptional
^bData are reported as the % of students (n=96) responding within each category

revealed satisfaction with local practices; for example, students wrote that “it was interesting to see how advanced [fish farming] was”, “the vertical integration of animal systems with cropping was great to see”, and “feedlots were impressive”. When discussing animal welfare with Chinese producers, we were told that they can’t afford to have the same welfare standards as what we have in the U.S. because they are just simply trying to feed their people and provide jobs (Thaler, 2015, personal communication). Since many of our students had never been faced with the issue of food insecurity, this situation helped them understand that with the challenges of feeding 1.3 billion people, animal welfare sometimes does not receive the same attention that it does in the U.S.

Despite the fact that students tended to disagree or feel indifferent towards the statement that I follow the news related to international agriculture, their responses after travel indicated an increase in consumption of news (P = 0.001). When the concept was worded in such a way as to inquire about their plans to follow news (I am likely to read international articles/view international news) students were more likely to agree, especially after travel (P = 0.001). One student commented, “I gained an interest in foreign policy and trade relations, which I never had even thought of before”. Another student chose a career in agricultural policy in Washington, DC after completing the class.

Our students also agreed that their study abroad experience would impact their lifelong career, particularly after traveling in China (P = 0.005). Comments such as “I loved the experience and will be looking for a career where I can travel to China”, and that there is “great opportunity for the American farmer to fulfill food needs”, and that this experience “sets me apart from other applicants who

have not seen the world first-hand reflected this change in attitude. This out of country experience also helped improve self-confidence and personal growth (Table 3). At least one person in every class has told the instructors that they got a job because having an international experience on their resume set them apart from the other candidates.

Students reported a profound difference in their understanding of China before and after the travel experience (Table 2). While their reported understanding of agricultural practices and markets as well as Chinese culture was moderate to strong, they revealed an increased level of understanding in all areas (P < 0.001) after spending time in China. The small cropping areas, the high use of hand labor, and lack of mechanization on farms were surprising to the students. While some of the animal confinement centers were huge (poultry and swine) and highly mechanized, most of the grain farms were extremely small, with crops tended by hand or with very small equipment. Other observations were that every square inch of land appeared to be utilized but there was a lack of efficiency. These observations lead to multiple student discussions on how they would use the knowledge they garnered at SDSU to make each operation they visited more efficient, which developed their critical thinking skills, especially in a group setting, and provided “real world” case studies for them to examine together.

Perhaps one of the most profound findings of this study was the fact that students not only felt more knowledgeable about agriculture, but they also walked away from the experience with enhanced confidence in themselves (Table 3). Most of the SDSU students had limited travel experience, but the post-survey indicated that a large portion of the student would travel again and felt confident that they can better handle unfamiliar situations. Further,

Table 3. Students' responses to express their confidence in themselves, traveling in a foreign country, communicating with others outside the U.S. and discussing agriculture

Likert scale responses ^{a,b}								
Statements	Time	1	2	3	4	5	Mean± SD	P-Value
I am confident in my abilities as a person	Pre	1.1	3.2	19.0	39.0	37.9	4.09 ± 0.9	
	Post	1.1	2.1	5.3	42.1	49.5	4.37 ± 0.8	0.01
I am confident in my abilities traveling in a foreign country	Pre	2.1	5.2	33.3	34.4	25.0	3.75 ± 1.0	
	Post	3.2	2.1	9.5	41.1	44.2	4.21 ± 0.9	0.001
I am confident in my abilities communicating with people outside the U.S.	Pre	1.0	11.5	40.6	33.3	13.5	3.47 ± 0.9	
	Post	1.0	6.3	16.8	46.3	29.5	3.97 ± 0.9	0.001
I am confident in my abilities discussing agricultural issues, practices, and markets	Pre	1.0	12.5	28.1	43.8	14.6	3.58 ± 0.9	
	Post	2.1	2.1	10.5	59.0	26.3	4.05 ± 0.8	0.001

^a1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Indifferent, 4=Agree, 5=Strongly Agree
^bData are reported as the % of students (n=96) responding within each category

they reported a robust increase in their confidence with traveling internationally and communicating with people outside of the U.S. Students also felt better able to discuss agricultural issues, practices, and markets as a result of their experiences in China. This increase in self-confidence has been reported in other studies (Sachleben, 2016; Zhu et al., 2017).

It would be appropriate to conclude that students who participated in the China Ag course demonstrated growth as a result of their experience in China, particularly related to culture and agriculture. Ninety-three percent of students indicated that they planned to travel back to China (Table 4). It should be noted that three students returned to China by themselves for one-year teaching programs at China Agricultural University with our host professor. Students also reported a few key areas where they did not experience a change in perceptions or views as a result of their participation (Table 4). After studying abroad 16% more students (P < 0.001) indicated that they would work or intern in China. This expressed desire is consistent with the needs of the international agricultural industry. One point that was specifically driven home by the head of Pioneer DuPont China was that if students wanted to advance to the higher ranks in any international company, they would have to spend 3-5 years at a foreign post. If they chose not to do that, they could still do well within the company but may experience fewer opportunities for advancement. Finally, since most students said they would recommend this course and international experience to others even before leaving for China, there was no difference in their response to this statement before and after travel (P = 0.996).

International travel presents opportunities to expand a person's worldview and to confront things often taken for granted. Post-class reactions to the trip revealed that students gained confidence outside of their comfort zone and became more humble or appreciative of the opportunities that are afforded to them. They were surprised that "literally every square inch of space was used" in China and that people don't require as much "personal bubble" space. One student reported "I am grateful and more appreciative for what I have in the U.S.", while another said the experience "has made me more rounded in global views", and others stated this "made me more open to travel". When asked what surprised them most, the most common open-ended responses had to do with wet markets, sanitation/food safety, and the scale of farms and ports (Table 5). Several students commented that the experience "made me appreciate the U.S. much more" especially pertaining to environmental and food safety regulations.

Success in our increasingly connected world is predicated upon having a global mindset and the ability to work with people from a variety of backgrounds. Three major themes emerged when students were asked how they felt this international experience would prepare them for a life-long career (Table 6). Nearly 30% of students said their new knowledge of global markets would be a key factor in career success. Several students felt that new perspectives of broadened horizons (15%) and knowledge of differences between countries (12.6%) would provide an advantage to their career. One student shared that this course "helped me gain insight into more possible career options that I had not considered." Others indicated that they would be more

Table 4. Students' level of agreement with statements related to travel, work, and recommendations

Question	Pre ^a	Post ^a	P-Value
Would you travel back to China?	--	93%	--
Would you work or intern in China?	37%	43%	0.001
Would you recommend this international course/experience to other students?	99%	100%	0.996

^aData are reported as the % of students (n=96) responding to the affirmative

Table 5. Summary of student responses to the question "what was the one thing that surprised you the most?"

Student responses	% of related responses	Total number of related responses
Meat markets/wet markets	18.2	24
Poor sanitation/safety	13.6	18
Scale of ports and farms	13.6	18
Crowdedness of people/space	11.4	15
Inefficiency of manpower	9.1	12
Driving conditions	8.3	11
Condition of animals on farms and in markets	5.3	7
Other	11.4	15

Students were permitted to provide multiple responses. n=132 total responses.

comfortable traveling abroad for business and that they have a basis for understanding different cultural norms.

The China Ag experience at SDSU directly reflects our institution's strategic plan. We achieved transformative education through our commitment to globalizing the agricultural curriculum. We further cultivated and strengthened community partnerships and education through our collaborations with strategic local and global professionals as well as our requirement for students to publish highlights from their experience in the local papers. While the China Ag experience did not directly require students to partake in original research or creative activities, two students elected to expand upon their experiences in China to fulfill the requirements of the Honors College. One student interviewed Chinese dairy farmers and wrote a white paper assessing practices in China and the U.S. Another student approached one of the China Ag instructors to mentor her on an intensive three-credit honors independent study about agricultural practices in China. These two

instances of an agricultural focus within honors education, while rare on the national scene, are reflective of ongoing efforts within the SDSU campus to emphasize agriculture within honors courses and scholarship (Nichols et al., In Press) and outside of the classroom (Bott-Knutson et al., 2019). Combined, the alignment of the China Ag experience with our institutional strategic plan and with other campus initiatives has created a sustainable and popular enriching global experience.

Summary

The China Ag course was designed to help students see connections to others worldwide and to understand the richness that diversity provides for all. Through the development of global learning outcomes and strategic local and global partnerships, we've globalized this agricultural course. As a direct result of the China Ag course, student self-awareness, confidence, knowledge, and openness to international experiences were enhanced. As the world becomes a smaller, more internationally connected place, students are prepared for a more integrated future.

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