

Christie L. Gilson, Ph.D.
Member, J. William Fulbright Foreign Scholarship Board
REMARKS

2013 Pre-Departure Orientation for U.S. Fulbright Scholars and Students to China
June 22, 2013
Washington, DC

Thank you, Victoria, for that introduction. And thank you to the Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs for your dedicated stewardship of the Fulbright Program. Thank you also to the Council for International Exchange of Scholars and IIE for your ongoing and tireless work in making these events so successful.

Good afternoon, Fulbrighters! On behalf of the J. William Fulbright Foreign Scholarship Board, I congratulate each of you on your selection as a Fulbright Scholar or Student to China! As a Fulbright alumna who lived in Hong Kong for eleven months in 2006, I can remember the exhilarating sense of adventure I felt prior to my departure across the Pacific Ocean! I remember that feeling of being an imposter. I'm not worthy compared to my colleagues around me. But, guess what, you are!

In my remarks today, I will offer some advice and stories to whet your appetite for adventure and cross-cultural understanding. So, here goes: Pack sparingly but carefully. One thing I learned in Hong Kong, you cannot buy Benadryl on the black market there. Check to ensure that you can purchase all of your medications either in the U.S. or while in China.

Remember to take lots of small gifts for your new friends and colleagues in China. Bring lots of business cards. Or, even better, have cards printed in China that have Putonghua on the front and English on the back.

Get ready for the exotic to overwhelm you, to feel homesick, and then to adjust to living abroad. I vividly recall walking home one evening from my office in Hong Kong, and realizing that the aromas typical of the area no longer evoked feelings of "foreignness" to me. Rather, the fragrances of cooking oil, ginger, and Chinese spices seemed ordinary. Such cultural acclimatization is a significant achievement for anyone – even a Fulbrighter! You will attain that at some point when you are abroad. You might start to dream in Mandarin or the dialect of the community in which you live.

Make sure to travel as extensively as you can within the rules of your grant. Visit the Tibetan plains. Ride through the Gobi desert. Spend time in a rural village teaching English or, better yet, learning from the residents. Take this opportunity of a lifetime to begin to comprehend the breadth of the modern Chinese experience. Avoid glib generalizations about the Chinese. Actively work to find cases of whatever you are passionate about that defy the stereotypes. Seek to investigate the complexity inherent in your research topic.

Most of all, make time for building relationships with people. Listen more than you talk. For those of us who are not fluent in Putonghua, that will be pretty easy to do. Pace your language learning. It's normal to have a tension headache after interacting in a foreign language all day. I would recommend Chinese massage as an excellent remedy.

Take time to blog or journal about your experiences in China. When you share your impressions publically, you will be helping others to consider applying for a grant. Allow your mind the time to process all of the feedback you are taking in. Find a confidant with whom you can share your inner-most thoughts. You will encounter cultural misunderstandings. You may be shocked at times. All of those responses are normal, and they will dim with time.

Now, a little bit of background about the Board. The Fulbright Foreign Scholarship Board is comprised of 12 private citizens who are appointed by the President of the United States to oversee and set policy for the Fulbright Program, to promote the Program worldwide, and to approve all grants.

Among my colleagues on the Board are a university president, a revered civil rights activist and academic, a former U.S. Ambassador, a former chief of staff to the First Lady of the United States, a former U.S. marine who founded a school for orphans in Kenya, and a poet who teaches creative writing.

The Board members give final approval for all U.S. and foreign Fulbright grantees. With more than 155 countries participating in the Fulbright Program, and more than 8,000 U.S. and foreign Fulbright grants awarded each year, you can imagine that our Board members spend a lot of time on the joyous task of approving applications. Because I read applications for China, I know firsthand what an impressive group of emerging leaders we have in this room! Your presence here today, following a rigorous, merit-based selection process, is a tribute to your scholarship and your leadership.

You were selected not only for your academic prowess or your compelling research topic. You were also selected for your ability to be a citizen ambassador – to fully immerse yourself in the culture and life of your host country; to better understand their views and — through your presence — to enable your hosts to better understand the United States – not as it is fictionally portrayed in our media, but by coming to know you as a person.

I predict that your Fulbright award will open doors for you, not only in academia but in your personal development, and in ways that you never imagined. I hope your grant will ignite within you the passion to serve others. Your Fulbright award will change your life. The perspective that you bring to your research and studies undoubtedly will evolve -- thanks to the people you will meet and the experiences you will have while on your grant. And the friendships you will form in your host communities and institutions — and with other Fulbrighters — will last a lifetime. When your grant is completed, your Fulbright experience will continue on. You will discover a special bond between Fulbrighters – even those you have never met. They will open doors for you. You only need to reach out to them – as well as to those who follow in your footsteps.

After your Fulbright experience, be sure to give back to your community, your nation, and your world in any way that you can. Teach Mandarin or Cantonese to motivated students. Encourage others to apply for grants. Tell those who doubt themselves that you believe in them. Share the joy!

Speaking of sharing, the Fulbright Foreign Scholarship Board in particular would welcome your story at FSB@state.gov. We hope you will connect with us and remain connected. You may also follow us on Twitter at [@FulbrightBoard](https://twitter.com/FulbrightBoard). We need your stories to keep the Fulbright experience fresh for others.

Former president of South Africa Nelson Mandela wisely acknowledged being influenced by both the East and the West, and I would encourage you to cultivate within yourself such a perspective. Both perspectives inform our world.

I'll end with a quote from another Fulbrighter, a certain John F. Kennedy, who said, "Geography has made us neighbors. History has made us friends. Economics has made us partners, and necessity has made us allies."

Thank you all for your attention. I welcome the opportunity to speak with anyone who might have questions or comments.

-End-