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Journal Entry: Kunming

I believe a lot in fate, timing, and in luck. I had the good fortune to spend some time at the English Night School in Kunming. Jim, Charlotte, Joan, and I spent a few hours in a small classroom with a lively 30-something Chinese gentlemen by the name of Mr. Nixon, (!!) who was working feverishly to teach English to his Chinese students. The Chinese students ranged from elementary school to post-graduate level including a woman who was a physician. Each individual had one thing in common – their desire to learn English and to improve their communication and problem-solving skills using spoken and written English. They were greatly motivated and enthusiastic, smiling while taking notes and eagerly volunteering to go to the front of the class. It was around 8:00 at night and there were parents waiting outside for their youngsters, standing in the rain, holding umbrellas.

I was awed by everyone's enthusiasm; the diligence that the students exhibited, the sense of humor and determination on the part of the teacher; and the feeling I had of sharing a very special moment with this class. The teacher's little boy of about six kept running in and out and I kept going around the room with the video camera trying to capture the moment. There was a sense of pride and accomplishment that pervaded the room. I thought that I was tired after a long day of touring the city and meeting with professors and here we were with students on summer break and many young adults who had come to this class after working a full day. It reminded me of the time I took computer classes in the evenings after a hard day's work so that I could be better at my job.

The use of Karaoke to teach English was so fascinating to me and I especially loved when everyone sang the "Friendship Song"; known in America as "Auld Lang Syne." This lovely, wonderful class, on a dreary rainy night in Kunming was just the precursor to a charming, fascinating, educational and informative trip through Yunnan Province. Last March I had been in Beijing and the Friendship Song had been introduced on Women's Day and my friends and I had to stand up and sing in front of a ballroom filled with many teachers, mainly women. Here I was again, being asked to sing this song, this time in front of eager young students and enthusiastic adults who wanted to be better at English.

A journal entry is but one day, however I want to tell you that sitting in that classroom on one particular day set the tone for me for the entire trip. When I later met the young teacher at Lai Shi Hai who worked in that small school with the beautiful plants, the vegetable garden, and the classrooms that seemed spare and lacking he didn't seem very enthusiastic, but we arrived unannounced. I hoped that for each of the days he taught the smiling children that he found enthusiasm to help these small children learn math and reading and reflect upon their own ethnic heritage and desire to learn Mandarin and English.

The attempt to use English as a way of sharing minority heritages in Yunnan Province was often a daunting task. Everywhere we went when we tried to communicate through our guides there was often someone who could speak some English, or understand, or mimic what we said. I genuinely felt that trying to speak English and be part of the

“outside world” was very important to the people we met. On the other hand when we met minorities who were more fluent in their own language and not in Mandarin, one wondered whether their desire to learn Mandarin was more necessary than learning English.

I wanted the opportunity for everyone to learn English to be available throughout Yunnan Province, for every student, minority or not. But, at the same time, I realized that in our country we don't expect second language acquisition for our students. We encourage it, but we don't demand it. I wondered a lot about that – about the funding issues, about the politics, but here in China in Kunming on a rainy night were some individuals who knew that speaking a second language, and for some minorities, actually a third language, that this might be a way for economic success, personal growth, and world communication.

This one night early on the trip helped me see expectations and hopes as we visited each and every village and town, metropolitan city, and tiny hamlet. This one night helped me see that my language was a guidepost for Chinese minorities. Regardless of which minority we visited there was great interest in our group of teachers, in trying to speak English, and in wanting to know about our educational system, about our families, and about us as individuals.

I kept feeling that I should be learning Mandarin at the same pace that the students in the English school were learning Chinese. I think it is so important that schools in our country put greater emphasis into the teaching and learning of Mandarin and would like to work toward implementing Mandarin in our own school, and not just as an enrichment unit. So, on the rainy night the tone was set for me for Yunnan Province to embrace and enhance my learning about the many Chinese minorities that I visited and explored.