“One older man told me that he had been studying English on the radio (Voice of America) for at least 10 years, but he had never spoken to a native speaker. I felt so honored to be the first person he ever spoke with in English.”

Foreign is not a word much used in the university these days. Foreign students are international students. Foreign travel and study are overseas travel and study abroad. Foreign at one time had the glow of adventure—the unknown, the undiscovered, the unfamiliar. But the word was also clouded by the fear of these very things. While many saw the attraction of the foreign, others feared it, were suspicious of what they saw as alien—them, the other, rather than us—and worried about what the presence of different cultures would do to their own.

International did not have this negative charge, and that is one reason for its popularity over foreign, but there is likely another reason: As economies and cultures become globalized, the countries of the world are no less different than they were in the past, but they are more familiar, better known, less foreign.

Thirty years ago, China was just emerging from the Cultural Revolution. The rest of the world was getting its first glimpses of a vast nation that had been hidden.
from view for decades. At that time, for the West, China was foreign. And for 10 IU students in 1983, the thought of living and studying for a four months in China brought all the buzz and all the fears that today we can only imagine, say, for interplanetary travel.

The program was an early outgrowth of an “Agreement of Friendship and Cooperation” worked out the year before by senior administrators of Hangzhou University and IU’s School of Education. It represented an international breakthrough for both institutions, who agreed to make exchange easier by hosting and supporting the other’s students and faculty.

The 10 IU student “pioneers” were treated as VIPs, with attention not just to their work in the classroom but also to their experience of the region and their comfort while there. They lived in the Foreign Experts Dorm, “a lovely building with every amenity,” as Nita Levison, faculty mentor for the trip, described. The experience brought them closer to Chinese language and culture, as it was expected to do, but it also brought them closer to each other. Last spring, three decades after they left Hangzhou, they met for a weekend in Bloomington. Their own words are the best testimony to the lifelong connections and consequences of that early experience.

Students completed a course in Chinese culture and history and had been introduced to Mandarin as part of the course. Professor of Education Robert Arnove led the group; he summarizes their experience in China:

The four months in Hangzhou—daily classes of comparative education, multicultural education, Chinese language, and occasional lectures on the history of China—were complemented by excursions to local cultural sites, Tai Chi classes, and longer excursions—including an overnight canal trip to Suzhou, and a weekend hike up the Golden Mountain (Huang Shang). At the end of the four months in Hangzhou, nine of the 10 students accompanied by a faculty member from Hangzhou University, took a 3,000 mile train excursion around China visiting historic cities and cultural sites, finally flying from Guilin to Guangzhou (former Canton), and then on to Hong Kong and home.

When the group gathered in Bloomington last spring, memories, three decades old, were still vivid:

I remember mornings in the park with thousands of Tai Chi practitioners and people taking their birds out for a morning chirp. I remember multitudes of people stopping and staring at the “Yang Guidze” (foreign devil). I remember the markets and the jaodze stands. I remember the former palace that was converted to a tea house and the awesome Dragon Well tea they served. I remember the singing we did together. I remember the awesome feast that a teacher cooked up for us in her tiny dorm room. I remember the beautiful painting that was given to me with incredible generosity. I remember the workers cutting the lawn at the dorm with their hands. And I vividly remember our awesome graduation ceremony on the roof of the dorm. Robert Politzer

We had all been given bicycles and we loved riding around Hangzhou, exploring the paths around Xi Hu (West Lake).
At those times, if we stopped, we would quickly gather a crowd. Sometimes people would approach us and ask to speak with us. One older man told me that he had been studying English on the radio (Voice of America) for at least 10 years, but he had never spoken to a native speaker. I felt so honored to be the first person he ever spoke with in English. We had many such encounters over our four months there.

Mark Emmett

It may be a cliché to say that study abroad is life-changing, but this group shows the truth of that statement:

Before that trip, I had never even imagined that I would have had the opportunity to experience an overseas trip, much less one to a country that so few of my fellow Americans had seen. Once I knew it was possible, I just continued to take (and make) opportunities for more overseas trips. Since then, I have traveled to six of the seven continents and I have lived in Ireland, Japan, Australia, and the United Arab Emirates. At last count, I have been to 42 countries. Mark Emmett

It gave me the taste to explore China even further. I went on to study East Asian Languages and Cultures and history at IU and later received an M.A. in China Studies and International Economics at Johns Hopkins. I went on to live for more than five years in Hong Kong, Nanjing, Taipei, and Beijing in my 20s and 30s. The program was the spark for lifelong interest in the area. Cross-cultural negotiation is at the core of my work. My China experience has given me credibility when bridging the cultural divide between East and West. Karim Davezac

For many, the experience had a significant impact on their career:

All I knew was that I did not want to be a teacher, but something got triggered in my psyche. It started when Nita Levison was asked to teach English to a group of Chinese students. Most of us ended up in her class as guest speakers. My mini-lesson consisted of reading a plane ticket and pretending to navigate a U.S. airport, and I couldn’t shake the feeling I had afterwards: those students had listened to me as intently as if I was the Oracle of Delphi. I realized that not only could I do it, but I liked it. Victoria Tomko

The whole trajectory of my life was re-routed, I think I can fairly say! I had imagined graduating from IU, heading to Europe, and “Eurail-ing” around for a while. After spending the time in Hangzhou, I wanted to explore more of Asia. Sandy Lucas

The cascade of opportunities and experiences that resulted from our 1983 exchange with Hangzhou University began two years later, when I returned the summer of 1985 to Hangzhou as a teacher of English as a Second language for the Zhejiang Province Electrical Power Bureau. [Later] I studied Classical Chinese and taught ESL in Kaohsiung, Taiwan, R.O.C. The field work for my IU master’s thesis, “A Phonological History of the Hangzhou Dialect,” included interviewing and recording language reflexes of native Hangzhou, Suzhou, and Wuzhou dialect speakers. I became an elementary teacher, and I have incorporated Chinese language and culture as well as Japanese and Tibetan studies, into my curriculum. Kathy Boone
Reunions are high risk events. People change; what was once familiar can become foreign.

Some of us had to identify ourselves because we don’t all look the same as we did. Many of us hadn’t spoken to one another in three decades and yet, when we got together, we were that same group of adventurous explorers from the early 80s. Mark Emmet

What was most special about the weekend was how easy it was to fall right back together as the “China Kids” we once were. Of course, while in the PRC, we had our struggles, but they were the kinds of struggles you might have with siblings, little things that you got over with no hard feelings or anger. What was so evident to me this weekend is how respectful everyone was, and is, to each other. Victoria Tomko

After 31 years, we came right back to where we had left off. I felt such a profound sense of comfort and joy hanging out again with this group of wonderful people. Naturally and with ease, we were able to pick up where we left off over three decades ago. Cohesive, loving, and aware of the importance the trip had on each of our lives. I will treasure these friendships forever. Robert Politzer

Finding the familiar in the foreign now as they did 30 years ago, the group, rumor has it, is already planning another reunion for next year.
Dear IU-HU Exchange Group Members,

It is hard to believe that a group of students from a one-semester class can hold a reunion after 30 years! The IU-HU exchange program began right after China opened its door to the world. At that time there were very few foreigners in China, so you were a group of academic pioneers to China. When you arrived, because of the lack of contact in the past, Americans and Chinese had difficulty in understanding one another. These difficulties existed not only in language and culture, but also in physical appearance. It was very difficult for Chinese to tell the age of a non-Asian person. When your group would visit an institution, I had to register the visit at the gate. This would show that there was a professor among you. Without exception, the guard would gaze at you looking puzzled and ask, “Who is the professor?” because it was impossible for him to tell your age.

This happened to me when I arrived in Bloomington in 1984, there were very few Asians in Indiana at that time. Hoosiers could not tell how old we were by looking at us. One day, I went to the Art Museum in Indianapolis. When I paid the admission, I was told that I could have a senior discount (I was 36 years old). On the very same day, I went to Bear’s Place to meet a friend in the evening but was not allowed in. The doorkeeper insisted I show him ID indicating that I was at least 21 years old.

Thirty years have passed, Americans and Chinese keep learning from each other in those thirty years, and the two peoples understand each other better now. The IU-HU exchange program contributed to this development. IU students learned Chinese language, Chinese history and Chinese art in Hangzhou. They experienced Chinese education first hand. On the other hand, they encouraged Chinese students to think more critically. An IU student interviewed a group of female Hangzhou students. The IU student asked, “Did you feel discriminated against when you had to get a higher score than the boys to get into a college?” At that time, Chinese colleges had different standards for boys and girls in the college entrance exam. Girls had to score much higher to get admitted into a college. The whole country accepted those standards without any objections, and I had never heard any complaints from female students on campus. Obviously, the interviewees did not expect such a question, so a long discussion followed.

I have been living in Bloomington for over thirty years now and I like this town. It is beautiful and convenient. Sometimes I still have problems talking to local people over the phone because of my listening comprehension and their southern Hoosier accent, But I can tell a bearded young guy from senior citizens now.

Today, sadly, China’s pollution problem is so severe and the scenic spots are highly commercialized. Meanwhile, let’s remember the old days, the beautiful lakes, rivers, hills, and mountains.

Mu
High School in Hangzhou

Just over three decades after the first IU undergraduate students studied in Hangzhou, the IU Honors Program in Foreign Languages (IUHPFL) sent its first group of high school students to that city to live with host families, learn Mandarin, and become acquainted with Chinese culture. IUHPFL began in 1962 with sites in France, Germany, and Mexico. Since then it has provided generations of talented high school students with intensive language training and cultural immersion in nine sites around the world. The new program in Hangzhou is the tenth and the first site in Asia.

For five weeks last summer, nine students from Indiana high schools studied Chinese in a Hangzhou high school with IU instructors. From instructors at the Hangzhou high school, the students learned Tai Chi, practiced Chinese calligraphy, and became acquainted with playing the hulusi, a reed flute native to southwestern China. With their host families, they shopped, visited their hosts’ friends and neighbors, and participated in the daily routines of Chinese life. Excursions took them to Beijing, Shanghai, and neighboring Suzhou.

Rachel Krieger, participant from Carmel, Indiana, said she “learned a lot about Chinese culture” and feels that this pioneering group “demonstrated admirably that the program can be successful in China.”