Audrey Boochever

November 1st, 2012

Reflections on International Experience in Yunnan Province, China

Last year, I spent a semester in Yunnan Province studying Chinese and conducting my own Independent Research on “The Influence of Family Structure on Women’s Role in Agriculture in Two Distinct Societies of Southwest China.” During this time, in addition to learning Chinese for four hours a day and conducting field research, I was able to live in homestays in rural villages, go to monasteries, mosques, museums to augment my learning of ethnic minorities in China.

Women’s issues across the world have intrigued me for a while. Sophomore year I was particularly interested in women in America, partly brought on by my role in the “Vagina Monologues.” Meanwhile, I was interested in China’s and women’s intense and puzzling relationship. After all, this is the country with foot binding, female infanticide, and “missing girls.”¹ On the other hand, the income gap in China between men and women is much smaller than in my very own country. I hoped that through my continual studies of women in China, I would gain a different perspective into my own culture and role of women.

When I arrived in Shaxi, and then Lugu Lake I was overcome with a sense of excitement, and an overall sense of terror. I was concerned that I would be viewed as an outsider, that I would get in trouble for research, and that I couldn’t manage going a few

weeks without a shower or toilet. When I arrived in each village I was greeted with an overwhelming sense of welcome.

While I truly believe I had a successful Independent Study experience in terms of knowledge learned and friendships formed, I did face some challenges too. Time was one of the biggest issues. It is hard as anyone, let alone a foreigner, to come into a small village and expect the local people to open up. I have realized how important it is to be a friend with a person first. I noticed that answers people told me when I first met them versus after building a weeklong friendship could be quite different. So frequently I asked about what issues women face and received the response from the women: “meiyou,” none. This was very frustrating because everyone has issues. I wish they trusted me enough to divulge a bit more than they had.

Caroline (my partner-in-learning throughout the ISP time) and I often joked about how the Chinese are superwomen. They are never cold, tired or hungry. At each of the four families I stayed with, they constantly asked me if I was cold/not cold, tired/not tired, hungry/not hungry. I usually responded “only a little bit”, figuring that was the polite response. When I asked them in turn how they were feeling it was always “not tired”, “not hungry”, “not cold”.

As a slogan by the Yongning market states, “实在男女平等推进社会进步,” realizing that men and women are equal is when society can progress. While I wholeheartedly agree with that statement, equality is a complex word. Equality does not mean the same jobs or same role as I came to understand during my time in Yunnan. I one time was so frustrated with what I experienced in Shaxi. I ran into a kind man tending to his pigs. We started talking and I asked him questions about agriculture. All of
a sudden it started to pour. We went inside his house and sat with his grandpa. Both men started smoking and drinking. Just as he responded that he thought the division of labor on his farm was fair, his wife, soaked from the rain came in. While he and his father had been smoking and drinking, his wife was out on the fields. I turned to her after a few minutes and asked if she thought the division of labor was fair, presuming that she was declare “no, of course not. My lazy husband was chatting with you and having a grand ol’ time while I was working on the fields.” Instead, she responded “yes, completely fair”. I was so outraged that later that night I wrote and email to my friend e-yelling “HOW COULD SHE POSSIBLY THINK THIS IS FAIR, WORKING ALL DAY WHILE HER HUSBAND DOESN’T CHIP IN AT ALL.”

Stubborn as I am with my ideals (I was born in the year of the horse, after all), I by chance met a writer and feminist who challenged my ideas on feminism. Through many discussions, while talking to more and more farmers have come to realize this: that providing food, whether that be cooking, planting seeds, or harvesting in the pouring down rain is power. Women are greatly respected for this, which is why they believe that their division of labor is fair.

I am constantly reflecting on my experiences in the villages, the people I met, and the lessons I have learned even a year after I have returned home from China. I hope to one day come back and hope that women are even more powerful and as respected in these parts as they were during my time here.