

## **To what extent should anthropologists be activists?**

**By Melyn Heckelman '08, Anthropology major**

-This difficult, perhaps unanswerable question accompanied me as I taught in 4 Chinese schools over the course of 7 weeks in the summer of 2007. Along with Victoria Yuan, a recent graduate, I was awarded a 10,000 dollar grant from the Davis Foundation to pursue an independently designed project that would strengthen the prospect of “peace” in the world. As an undergraduate, I have been unbelievably lucky to have been given the opportunity to implement a project of this magnitude (and, quite frankly, audacity) over which I had total creative, financial, and administrative control. Being charged with spending 10,000 dollars in the name of world-peace can be, at times, as terrifying as it is thrilling but after many revisions, Victoria and I designed a project that would bring peer based sexuality education to the interior cities of Wuhan and Chengdu. The logistics were relatively straightforward; we would work with family planning Beijing, Beijing University faculty and local Waterville sex educators to design a curriculum that we would then spend several days in 4 schools teaching.

Having recently finished a course taught by Professor Mary Beth Mills on gender and sexuality, our curriculum went beyond basic anatomy and safe sex lessons to include sections regarding gender identity, the status (and existence) of intersexed individuals, and sexual orientation. A recent methodology class led by Professor Jeff Anderson had instructed me in the proper methods of data collection and research design, which I had previously applied to my own study of linguistic deviation between genders in regards to the language of sexual bodies at Colby College. The results of this earlier research had passed through a theoretical framework I had learned in yet another course, Contemporary Anthropological Theory, taught by Professor Catherine Besteman. The combined effects of these classes enabled me to design a curriculum that was functional, ethically conscious, and aware of the power in language. All of my study in anthropology had enabled me to anticipate many of the cultural issues we would face, and the faculty were some of our best resources. Whether it was notes on what to expect in the classroom, or reminders about the importance of flexibility, the depth of experience available to us through the faculty was key to our success.

Though the experience was, above all else, intensely rewarding and educational at each step of the process, as a budding anthropologist I was constantly navigating through my own issues related to the appropriateness of being an “activist-anthropologist”. We had an agenda; we felt that under the current conditions, Chinese youth were not receiving the comprehensive sexuality education they needed to live healthy lives. We believed their lives would be improved if we could encourage them to feel ownership over their own bodies, comfort within their sexual preferences and confidence in their abilities to make informed, healthy decisions about safe-sex practices. As an advocate, I felt as though my project would indeed help to improve the quality of their lives. As an anthropologist, I couldn't help but wonder if I had turned my back on the age-old anthropological tradition of observation and objectivity. From what position of cultural superiority did I come that I was endowed with the advanced intelligence to dictate to these students, many of whom were my age or older, how to understand their sexuality? This issue continued to nag me as we introduced ourselves to a classroom full of 20 to 26 year olds at the Wuhan University School of Public Health. Given my lack of language

ability, I was able to stand back and observe as Victoria delivered our carefully crafted lesson plan. As I watched busy hands take notes and listened to students ask questions they had never before been comfortable or capable of asking, it became clear to me that I could reconcile the anthropologist in me, with the activist.

Though anthropologists may have, historically, chosen to stay at a distance, today, many are choosing to use their ability to observe, to obtain the necessary perspectives to make real change. Anthropologists are uniquely situated in their dedication for respecting the traditions of others, and this cultural empathy allows them to be fantastic advocates and activists. To be able to listen, understand and truly empathise with the wants and needs of the group you study, is a skill that is repeatedly honed through the study of anthropology.

In returning to the US I have realized that my training allowed me to experience and appreciate, on an intellectual level, the interactions I had and the observations I made. In turn, my project rewarded me by teaching me the un-teachable in anthropology. I have learned, through experience, how to combine the traditions of the past, the brilliance of my professors, and my own goals to produce the form of anthropology that makes me the kind of researcher I want to be. For me, anthropologist-activist-and peace-maker, are titles that sound best together.

