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ARTICLE

## Sustainable China and the Global Traveling Classroom

Jason Brozek

Lawrence University, US  
[jason.brozek@lawrence.edu](mailto:jason.brozek@lawrence.edu)

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Since its inception in 2009, the Sustainable China Program at Lawrence University in Wisconsin has given students and faculty the chance to engage with important environmental, economic, political and cultural questions by combining interdisciplinary academic work in the classroom with an extended field experience in China. The program is built on the PERC best practices for short-term international study abroad, which includes: **P**reparing students directly for the experience, **E**ngaging with partners on the ground, **R**eflecting on personal development, and **C**ontinuing that development by using the program as a springboard for further opportunities. Lawrence University has adopted this model, which we've named the "traveling classroom," to similar programs in Sierra Leone, Jamaica, Nepal and other countries. This article briefly outlines the history and objectives of the Sustainable China traveling classroom program, including how it represents an avenue for global engagement and a launching pad for further international education.

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**Keywords:** China; LIASE; study abroad; education; pedagogy; student travel

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In December 2015, I was with a group of eighteen students and faculty from Lawrence University who were detained by Chinese security forces at Ludi Elementary School outside Guiyang in rural Guizhou Province. Our passports were taken away without explanation, and were only returned a few hours later – still without explanation. In 2011, fifteen students and faculty experienced such heavy small-particulate air pollution in Shanghai that buildings above the tenth floor disappeared and a number of group members experienced difficulty breathing and other respiratory problems. Detention and coughing were not on the syllabus in either year, but these were precisely the kinds of spontaneous, high-impact educational experiences that the Sustainable China Program was designed to facilitate.

Sustainable China is an interdisciplinary program at Lawrence University (LU) that directly and deliberately integrates on-campus coursework with an international travel component. The model, which we have termed a “traveling classroom,” has been adapted for similar high-impact programs in Sierra Leone, Ghana, Nepal, Jamaica, and more. This article lays out the history and evolution of the Sustainable China Program, the structure and expectations for students who participate, and the PERC principles (preparing, engaging, reflecting, continuing) that constitute best practices for short-term international education experiences.

## **I. Program History**

The Sustainable China Program has roots in a mid-1990s grant from the Andrew Mellon Foundation which sent approximately one-third of our faculty on study trips to East Asia to explore new ways of integrating the region into the curriculum. One of those participants was a faculty member from the Department of Economics. Impressed with the opportunities to study economic development and innovation in Hong Kong, he returned the following year with a small group of undergraduate students. That trip led to more alumni connections and deeper networking in Hong Kong, and by the mid-2000s he began returning to the city regularly with small groups of economics majors. In 2007, the group studied connections between water and economic development in the Pearl River watershed (which includes Hong Kong). Subsequently, as a direct outgrowth from that experience, the university

hosted a summer 2008 workshop with Chinese officials and representatives from the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources to discuss common challenges of water management.

In 2008, Lawrence University's Board of Trustees moved the academic calendar for the ten-week fall term ahead by nearly a month. This was intended to be an energy- and cost-saving measure, but it also created a new six-week December break. A small steering committee decided to use the extended break between the end of the fall term and the beginning of winter term as an opportunity to expand on and institutionalize the groundwork that had been laid in Hong Kong.

In 2009, with support from alumni and the Henry Luce Foundation (in the form of a Presidential Discretion Grant), a group of three faculty and twelve students traveled from Hong Kong to Shanghai via Chongqing and Wuhan as part of a new program called EAST Meets ENST. This was an interdisciplinary collaboration between interdisciplinary programs – *East Asian Studies* (EAST) and *Environmental Studies* (ENST). Faculty leading the trip represented a diverse range of departments, including Government, Economics, Environmental Studies and Theater Arts. In preparation, the students in the program met once per week in a half-credit tutorial to talk briefly about Chinese language, environment, politics, history and economics. While the trip was successful enough for the program to continue, there was a general feeling that the prerequisite coursework had failed to adequately prepare students for the experience.

When the next group of students departed for China in December 2011, they began the experience with much more extensive pre-trip preparation and a new name; EAST Meets ENST was replaced by the more inclusive title, Sustainable China. The affiliated faculty created a new course, *Sustainable China: Environment and Economy*, which was cross-listed in the Economics, Government and Environmental Studies Departments. Additionally, students took a half-credit tutorial in the East Asian Studies department on the history, literature, and culture of China, as well as an introductory course in the Chinese language course sequence. Students typically take three six-unit courses per term, and preparation for Sustainable China constituted a very substantial two-and-a-half of those courses. With minor tweaks,

this preparation was continued for the December 2013 trip. Due to retirements and other faculty departures, the course and tutorial were combined beginning in 2015. For the last two iterations of the program, students enrolled in one six-unit course in Mandarin language and one six-unit course on Chinese politics, economics, history, culture and environmental challenges.

After the initial Presidential Discretion Grant in 2009, the Henry Luce Foundation continued to support LU's Sustainable China Program. In November 2010, the foundation invited LU to submit a proposal for their new Luce Initiative on Asian Studies and the Environment (LIASE). Sustainable China has received two grants through LIASE – a planning grant in 2011–2012 and a multi-year, \$400,000 implementation grant that began in 2013. In addition to the biennial traveling classroom component, the implementation grant provides opportunities for independent summer research by students and faculty, and curricular development and interdisciplinary faculty collaboration between LU and a Chinese partner university (Guizhou Normal University in Guiyang).

Under the administration of a program director, Sustainable China is run by a faculty steering committee made up of representatives from three divisions: Social Sciences (government and economics), Humanities (Chinese and history), and Natural Sciences (biology and public health). Since the program's inception nearly ten years ago, almost 150 students have participated in at least one element (December travel, independent summer research, or post-graduation internship), and many have participated in more than one element.

## **II. Structure and Expectations for Student Participation**

The focus of the preparatory coursework and the trips themselves has consistently been the “Three Cs” of sustainability – commerce, conservation, and culture. In other words, the “sustainable” in Sustainable China is interdisciplinary and broad. Conservation of natural resources and preservation of ecological systems is one element of sustainability, but cannot be separated from questions of long-term economic development and cultural heritage.

In particular, the Sustainable China Program stresses that the most critical questions fall at the intersection of these three elements of sustainability, and that

contemporary China is an engaging case study through which to explore them. For example, how does Chinese political and social culture either enhance or undermine efforts at natural resource conservation? How can the country lift millions out of poverty and achieve widespread economic development without massive environmental degradation? What are economically viable ways for communities to preserve their cultural history, and how do those models intersect with the natural environment (for good or ill)?

To participate in the program, students must apply the spring before, by submitting a personal essay that addresses how they would benefit from the program and a letter of support from a faculty member. Because the program is intended as a springboard instead of a capstone, preference is given to students who are in their first and second years (for a traveling classroom program during their sophomore or junior years). The faculty selection committee's goal is to assemble a group of student participants with diverse backgrounds and a wide range of interests and majors (including students who have not yet declared a major). Part of the application is also a commitment to register for two courses the subsequent fall term: a Chinese language course at whatever level is most appropriate (for most students this is the introductory course in the first-year sequence) and a place-based course that builds the academic background for the trip.

In the most recent iteration of the prerequisite course, student participants engaged in discussions about Chinese political trends, economic systems, institutions, and environmental history. As the syllabus noted:

This course challenges the assumption that sustainability is exclusively environmental, or that it can be understood as a simple calculation of inputs versus outflows. Instead, we will take a broad view of sustainability that integrates the natural world with politics, economics, culture, institutions, entrepreneurship and other social and historical forces.

Over the next ten weeks, we will use China as a lens through which to explore a variety of topics critical for understanding sustainability, including economic development, natural resource management, grassroots political protests, institutional effectiveness, and the evolution (or not!) of cultural

and social values. It will not be a top-down course in which we talk at you about China from a position of authority; rather, we will jointly investigate challenging questions that go well beyond China. How are environmental values reflected in (or perhaps suppressed by) a community's culture? What ought to be the relationship between humans and nature? Does that question itself mistakenly presuppose a split between the two? How can communities balance preservation (of values, of natural resources, of the past) with growth, progress, and modernity? We will explore them together – first on campus, then in China.

In the course, students complete a multi-stage research project about one of the cities on the itinerary. The goal is to develop background expertise and to better engage with the city by proposing a slate of questions. The assignment details are laid out the guidelines and expectations:

The primary assignment for this course is an extended case study to be titled “\_\_\_\_\_ : Sustainable City?” This is a collaborative group project with individual elements. Your group's project will integrate multiple perspectives from our discussions and readings, and set up questions to be answered during the December trip to China. You'll choose one of the five cities we will visit on the trip, assemble a group, and complete the project in the following three steps. Upload each to the course website on or before the dates listed below. Each step (except the first) should also include a revision of the previous step(s), so you can think of this as a project being written and extended in stages.

**Step 1: Identifying Sustainability.** In your judgment, what does it mean to identify a city as sustainable, and how does your definition incorporate environmental elements with political, economic, social, and/or cultural ones?

**Step 2: City Overview.** Choose one of four cities in which were spending a significant amount of time (Shanghai, Wuxi, Guiyang, Shenzhen, or Hong

Kong) and construct a broad historical, political, environmental, cultural and economic overview.

Step 3: Sustainable City? In the analytic section of your case study, you'll bring together the first two sections and answer the question of whether the city your group worked on meets your collective standard of a sustainable city. Why? How? Further, what questions would you like to try to answer while we're there in December? What should we all look for in order to answer the question of sustainability better or gain a deeper perspective on whether this is or is not a sustainable city? In small groups, you'll present these questions to the rest of us on the final day of class.

During our travels, each student is expected to take a leadership role in the city they researched based on their work in the prerequisite course and their case study.

When the term ends and the program moves to China for three weeks, the goal is to engage with places and people directly and constructively, rather than participating in passive academic tourism. The critical element for success is faculty with experience in the cities and local partners who help facilitate the kinds of experiences we are trying to create. The challenge, of course, is to find ways to productively engage with places that are new and often overwhelming to students who may be traveling abroad for the first time. Two daily entries from the trip leader's 2017 post-trip report outline a typical day on the ground in China (shared with permission):

*November 30*

For our first full day in Shanghai, the goal was to look for intersections of the city's past and future. We began with the historic Bund and talked about an article that suggested architecture as a lens into how a city uses its history (like a Starbucks in the lobby of a 1920s art deco building). The group took a ferry across the Huangpu River to Lujiazui, where we had the chance to contrast Shanghai's new financial district with the old. In the afternoon, we dove into Shanghai's future by visiting the Urban Planning Exhibition Center, where there were exhibits on livability and the concept of home, the



intersection of geology and urbanization, and the environmental restoration of Suzhou Creek (a tributary of the Huangpu River). After the Urban Planning Exhibition Center, we gave the students a mapping and exploration activity that we developed at the LIASE conference last fall. In small groups, we handed out historic maps from the 1930s, then sent them to explore the area around People's Square Park and Nanjing Road with a specific task: find what still exists. They brought their discoveries to dinner, and we discussed what sorts of city features manage to stick around over decades (very few, as they discovered). As a group, we talked about what that tells us about a city's long-term sustainability, as well as what it implies about top-down versus bottom-up planning.

Another entry from a different city in the second week of the trip (with permission):

*December 4*

We continued our exploration of Wuxi with a day focused on water pollution and remediation. In the morning, we visited Turtle Head Park on the northern shore of Lake Tai. Before venturing near the water, we handed out a 2014 New York Times article about algae blooms on the lake so serious that the Wuxi government began jailing those who called for solutions. On the walk around the park, we talked about how the article casts a shadow over the natural beauty. How much did it cost to develop and preserve this space? Was that a good investment when the lake that surrounds it is too toxic to touch human skin? In the afternoon, we met with colleagues at Jingnan University's program in Environmental and Civil Engineering. Professors Hongfeng Miao and Xiaoying Chin introduced us to pollution remediation work they are doing through the Taihu Ecological Research Center; then they took us to a site visit where they are working to remove nitrogen and phosphorous from Lake Tai. On the way from campus to the Gonghu Bay Field Station, the small farms tucked in between high-rise developments gave us another opportunity to talk about forcible relocation and development. As

Professor Chin explained, the Wuxi government no longer has the budget to induce relocation, but the small farms are an environmental hazard. Families, she explained, create a lot of chemical runoff into the water, dump waste into the river, and burn garbage.

After completion of the trip, students participate in a post-trip poster session during the first half of the university's ten-week winter term. They design a large 3' × 4' poster that uses their direct experience on the ground in China to illustrate some intersection-of-natural-resource conservation, economic development, and Chinese culture. The posters are presented to the campus community and displayed in the atrium of a high-traffic building for students, faculty and staff to read.

### **III. Objectives and the PERC Model of Best Practices**

The objectives of the traveling classroom component of the Sustainable China Program are threefold: (1) to prepare students for a deeply engaging experience in China, (2) to serve as a catalyst for continued language training, independent research projects, and/or future study abroad, and (3) to help students acquire and deepen a broad global perspective.

We have brought these three goals in line with best practices in short-term study abroad with a model called PERC. In short, the objectives of the program are for students to be preparing, engaging, reflecting and continuing. To break each objective down:

#### **1. Preparing**

First, an engaging and successful travel component cannot stand alone, and student participants should prepare by reading, discussing and completing projects that are consistent with the academic goals of the program and, more narrowly, based on the places they will be traveling to in China. Additionally, when feasible, students should also engage in language training (preferably more than a brief "emergency Chinese" phrasebook). The prerequisite coursework helps ensure that students begin the traveling classroom experience with context and background knowledge specifically tailored to the places and people on our itinerary (Sobel 2005). The

language training gives them some confidence to read and engage with locals and native speakers (Allen 2010, Kinginger 2011). The concept of high-impact place-based learning, putting concepts in a specific geo-physical space (Gosselin et al. 2016), is central to this objective. For Sustainable China, the syllabus for the prerequisite course includes authors the students will meet in China and case studies of the places they will visit. For example, preparation for the 2017 trip included reading and discussing articles about agricultural runoff near Wuxi and resultant blue-green algae blooms on nearby Lake Tai. During the trip, students visited the shore of Lake Tai with a representative from the Wuxi city government. This not only gave them the chance to see the pollution directly and in person, but the opportunity to apply their preparation by asking questions about remediation policies.

## ***2. Engaging***

Second, students should apply their academic and linguistic preparation by engaging actively in the travel portion. The objective here is to avoid passive travel or academic sightseeing, where students simply consume tourist sites without engaging (Breen 2012). Evidence from other programs demonstrates that engagement is a reliable and effective high-impact practice (Schroeder et al. 2009, Paige et al. 2009). Connections and relationships with local organizations are critical for fostering authentic engagement, but contacts may still need to be nudged to do things like replacing a slideshow presentation in a conference room with a walking tour or a site visit. Depending on the context and the topic, the traveling classroom portion of the program may also include service learning opportunities. In 2015 and 2017, for example, students participated in an ongoing service learning project with faculty and students at Ludi Elementary School in rural Guizhou Province. Ludi Elementary serves a community with a large proportion of rural-to-urban migrants, so this is an opportunity for students to work directly with a group that our students had discussed in class.

## ***3. Reflecting***

Third, students and other program participants should reflect on their experiences, formally and informally, individually and as a group, and during and after the travel component. Students who participate in the program are encouraged to use travel

journals, and because structured, purposeful reflection is necessary for study abroad to be a transformative experience, the daily itinerary explicitly carves out time for faculty-led group discussions (Dolby 2004, Perry, Stoner and Tarrant 2012). Beyond simply encouraging travel journaling, part of the pre-trip preparation involves giving students paper journals and a handout on how and why travel journaling can be powerful. As their handout explains, “Reflection is an important part of traveling, so we’re building in ways to make it happen. Off-campus study can have deep impacts, and can be even more enriching and transformative when time and space are built in for self-reflective activities and processing.” Because post-experience reflection also has positive effects on student learning (Edwards 2008, Wielkiewicz and Turkowski 2010), participants in the Sustainable China Program design and present a poster in the month immediately following their return to campus. Most recently, for example, students designed posters about the interdisciplinary nature of sustainability. The posters were illustrated by their own photos and experiences in China, and displayed in the atrium of a high-traffic campus building for a week.

#### **4. Continuing**

Finally, participants in the Sustainable China Program are strongly encouraged to see it as a first step rather than a standalone experience; one of the key objectives is to facilitate their continued exploration of the questions, concepts, and challenges raised in the prerequisite coursework and the travel component. Continued engagement can take multiple forms. For some, continuing means enrolling in courses or declaring a major in economics, government, East Asia studies, environmental studies, or another affiliated department. It can also mean continuing the Chinese language sequence, which the program facilitates by requiring a standard first-term course in Mandarin rather than a special trip-specific class. Students who choose to continue their language training can immediately begin second-term Mandarin after they return to campus, rather than waiting a full academic year for the course sequence to restart. Other students extend their experience by proposing independent research projects, either on campus or in China. In the last few years, student projects have included an investigation of how public and private school curricula incorporate sustainability (if at all), the role of environmental values in Guiyang’s Buddhist

temples, and the intersection of gender and ethno-tourism in Guizhou's Miao ethnic minority villages. Students are also encouraged to use the short-term international travel experience as groundwork for a longer-term study-abroad program that covers a traditional semester-length fifteen-week academic term.

Most broadly, the primary goal of the Sustainable China traveling classroom program is to help participants foster a deeper, fuller global perspective. A global perspective is increasingly reported as valuable by students, faculty, parents and potential employers (Stearns 2009), and short-term study-abroad experiences can be an effective, meaningful, high-impact pathway to a global perspective (Tarrant 2010, Hall et al. 2016). At Lawrence University, a recent presidential task force on study abroad concluded that a global perspective is central to the institution's mission. As the task force's final internal report noted:

“...as we look to the future, it is absolutely clear that study abroad must assume a more central place in Lawrence's liberal arts mission: student interest is more international than ever; Lawrence's new Global Studies program is taking shape as a broad curricular initiative; and most imperatively of all, the planet of the 21st century is making greater demands on its best and brightest to have a global perspective shaped by global knowledge and understanding and to act in globally wise ways.”

Likewise, in an internal document articulating the goals of a liberal education, Lawrence University's provost highlighted the importance of international education. As he noted:

“...a liberally educated person is prepared for effective action in the contemporary world, including knowledge of great issues that we must confront as inhabitants of the world; a sense of concern about these great issues; an understanding of the historical context that has shaped the contemporary world; and the ability to understand different cultural systems, their interrelationships in shaping human identities, values and aspirations, and their significance for contemporary action.”

Overall, the Sustainable China traveling classroom program is an interdisciplinary springboard that encourages high-impact global travel, language development, and independent research. The model brings together the PERC best-practices of short-term international study, whose objectives include: preparing thoroughly for the experience, engaging deeply in place-based education, reflecting on the experience in formal and informal ways, and continuing to explore the questions introduced.

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### Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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