

## **From Science to Society: Pacific Lutheran University's Program in Sichuan Province**

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### **Twenty Years of Change**

When Pacific Lutheran University Physics Professor K.T. Tang first established an exchange program with Chengdu University of Science and Technology in 1984, C.U.S.T. was an institution still recovering from the deep scars of the Cultural Revolution. Students and faculty from the Pacific Lutheran University Division of Natural Sciences who began spending semesters abroad at C.U.S.T. felt they were deep in the heart of remote Western China, far from the east coast development frenzy of “Special Economic Zones” and the tourism frenzy of Beijing and Xian. Life at C.U.S.T. was quiet; there was time for tea, for poetry and for Sichuan opera.

Times have changed. Members of the PLU faculty and staff recently returned from Chengdu with signed copies of the fourth extension of the productive exchange agreement between PLU and what is now Sichuan University, having hosted a 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary reception attended by dozens of exchange scholars and administrators who have spent time at PLU over the last 20 years. Sichuan University has now absorbed C.U.S.T. and the Western China Medical College to become the “Key” comprehensive university in Western China with an anticipated enrollment of 50,000-60,000 students in the next few years. With exchange programs and scholarly connections all over the world, Sichuan University is now a center for scholarly research on fields ranging from religion to forestry to distance learning and rural development. Chengdu itself is an emerging center of industrial and high-tech production with a rapidly changing urban landscape and a rapidly accelerating pace of life.

Times have changed at PLU too. Our China study abroad emphasis has shifted from natural science to Chinese language and culture, and we have developed new strategies for engaging our students in projects that plunge them into Chinese society both as researchers and as service-learning participants. We are partners with the Amity Foundation in Nanjing, working with their Social Welfare Division on medical training programs in Sichuan, and with the Sichuan University School of Distance Learning working on distance learning projects. Our students volunteer in English tutoring for teachers and students at local area middle schools, and engage in field interview research on a project of their choice.

It is an exciting time to be involved in Sichuan as it transitions from remote agricultural basin to production center for the developing international port of Chongqing on the Yangtze River. It is at times challenging to fit the “square peg” of our American “liberal arts” approach to education into the “round hole” of the research emphasis of a Chinese comprehensive university, but it is also

gratifying to be received as an “old friend” whenever we return with another semester’s group of students. This year we have received, for the first time, four students from Sichuan University to study a year at PLU. We hope that number will grow as Sichuan students learn the value and power of a student-centered liberal arts experience.

### **The Study Abroad Program in Chengdu Today**

Today the semester-long program focuses on engaging the students with modern Chinese society, through experiences both inside and outside the campus classroom. All students enroll in the Sichuan University Chinese Language Program for 10 weeks of instruction. Students may elect either the Sichuan University intensive Chinese classes, which comprise a full-time curriculum and involve other foreign students from all over the world. Or they may elect a less intensive Chinese class designed just for our program that allows time for another course—often *Modern Chinese History or Chinese Literature in Translation*. Students in either track may elect also to study *Calligraphy* and *Tai Chi*.

Beyond the classroom experience, students participate in an umbrella course called *Chinese Culture and Society* that focuses students on an individual research project emphasizing interviews with Chinese in Chengdu and other parts of China. Supporting this project are a service-learning experience, a study tour, and a lecture series.

When available, a faculty member from the home institution is in residence with the students as site-director; when unavailable, the site direction is done from the home campus, with visits at the beginning and at midterm from the site director.

The PLU Chengdu Program is part of the ANACSA consortium—selected study abroad programs of the Associated New American Colleges (ANAC) group and is open first to students from those institutions. It is open to students from other institutions on a space-available basis. There is no language prerequisite. Students must be at least at the sophomore level and have a sincere interest in exploring and learning about Chinese culture and society.