

Blum Initiative Service Learning Fellowship – The Shimenkan Connection (Summer 2016)

Report by: Blake Pollard, Ph.D. Candidate – Department of Physics & Astronomy



A page could never be enough to convey the gamut of experiences I had during my month living and traveling amongst the Hmong people of southwestern China. I covered miles and miles of windy mountain roads, dodging landslides, participated in traditional festivals, heard beautiful choirs sing in small, isolated villages, met local leaders, government officials, teachers, students, farmers, I picked tobacco, shared meals, stories, gave speeches, taught, and made connections which will extend long into the future. I learned immensely about the Chinese people, history and culture.

I spent much of my time visiting Hua Miao or Flowery Miao Villages in Yunnan, Sichuan, and Guizhou provinces. The Flowery Miao are a subgroup of the larger Hmong minority group who are found throughout southeast Asia. My great-grandfather was a missionary among the Miao people of southwestern China in the early 1900's. He is remembered for his contribution to the development of an educational system for rural villages in the region. One goal of my trip was to retrace his footsteps while learning more about the present-day status of education in these rural communities.



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After arriving in Shanghai and meeting with Sijia Zheng, one of the founders of Shimenkan Connection, the NGO I was working with during my trip which supports community development among the Hua Miao, I headed west, boarding a plane to Kunming, the capital of Yunnan province. I was greeted by a local Hmong leader. With him was Jane Hua, an ethnomusicology PhD student at Otago University in New Zealand, who was originally from Kunming. She would be my ears and my mouth for the next 4 weeks. She was doing field work for her dissertation on the influence of Christianity on the Hua Miao's musical traditions. We headed to a small Miao village, nestled behind a giant copper mine in the mountains a few hours from Kunming. Most of the 20 or so families in the village survive off a combination of farming, raising livestock, and gathering wild mushrooms from the nearby mountains.



There have been vast rural infrastructure improvements in the past decade as part of China's plan to 'eradicate poverty' by 2020. New roads, schools, and housing appear overnight. Change is never without risk. For instance, seeking to improve the quality of rural education, the government now requires students to attend larger schools in nearby towns or cities, rather than village-level schools. This means that students have to leave home to attend school. Room and board is free for younger students, but not for high schoolers. This has decreased the number of Hmong children graduating from high school as families cannot afford the cost of room and board. The villagers have their own plans as well, seeking funding for a pilot organic gardening project which would bring about a new source of income for local people.

Next, Jane and I would spend 10 days teaching a summer school at a middle school in the town of Dagan, located on a steep hillside about an hour north of

Zhaotong, the city where my great grandfather lived before starting his work with the Miao. The summer school was a wonderful experience. The students had very rudimentary English skills. I taught the students some simple English songs, basic astronomy, and a bit about global warming.

Telling the story of my experience would require a small book. Everyday I experienced something new, whether it be the view of a 1,000 meter gorge or a ride on new type of dumptruck-motorcycle. The Miao reside at the intersection of sensitive issues for the Chinese government: poverty, minority

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