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A VOICE FOR UNDERSTANDING

By Kelley Bruss

China scholar helps bridge knowledge gap in the U.S.

Whether you're with her in a classroom or on a street in Shanghai,
KATHERINE PALMER KAUP
is going to make sure you don't miss the details.

As a China scholar, she understands both the depth of the problems and the extent of the promise held within the borders of the world's second largest economy.

"Pointing a finger and trying to overly simplify the solutions is just disengaging us from having a voice," she says. "The more you understand, the more strategic you can be in promoting your own values."

Kaup is Furman's James B. Duke Professor of Asian Studies and Politics and International Affairs. Those who've traveled with her call her "a force of nature" and "absolutely brilliant."

In May, Kaup was elected to the board of directors of the National Committee on United States-China Relations, a role that will enhance both her own scholarly work and her voice in helping others understand the country she studies.

The committee's work fosters constructive relationships between the U.S. and China, in part by connecting China scholars across disciplines and equipping them to be voices in their communities and on a national stage. It's work Kaup was already doing.

"That's just native to her," says Jan Berris, vice president of the committee. "It's part of her DNA."

China scholars sometimes feel pressed to defend their interest in a system ripe for criticism. No one understands the gravity of the abuses better than those scholars,

says Kaup, who has testified before Congress about human rights issues in China.

"The people who understand it really well actually are the most angry," she says. "We have many friends who are suffering consequences of how the regime behaves."

But she says it's critical to study how far a government can go in shaping a culture. Her research focuses on the country's responses to poverty and ethnic minority groups.

"You need to understand what the challenges are that they're



(Top) An excursion to the Great Wall – Kate Kaup with Furman faculty members who attended the Luce Initiative on Asian Studies and the Environment Faculty Development trip she led in the summer of 2016.



(Left) Yuqi Wei '15 served as The Furman Advantage Research Assistant for Kaup's study on minority customary law. She is now in her third year at Wake Forest Law School.

Mayor Knox White greets delegates from Yunnan Minzu University who visited Greenville July 8–25 for the LIASE Summer Science Exposure Program.



confronting and how and why they're making the choices," she says.

Building a passion

Kaup's first trip to China was booked for the summer after she finished her undergraduate degree at Princeton University. Two days before her graduation, Chinese soldiers fired on protestors in Tiananmen Square. There would be no traveling that summer.

Undeterred, Kaup went to graduate school, then took a year to teach English in China. She's traveled there frequently ever since.

Kaup began teaching at Furman in 1997. Her work has included helping create the First Year China Experience, which funds trips for students who commit to studying Mandarin for at least a year. She's helped build connections with partner institutions in China, including Minzu University and Soochow University. And she's pursued and won major grants to enhance the China program.

The Asian Studies department has five China specialists in multidisciplinary roles: philosophy, film, literature, history and political science (Kaup's position). Each of the department's three majors – Asian studies, Chinese studies and Japanese studies – has about 20 students, some of whom are Chinese nationals.

"We provide a very different understanding of China than



they are presented with at home," Kaup says.

The department is currently creating a China alumni association with two distinct groups: graduates who are Chinese nationals and live anywhere in the world, and graduates of any nationality who are living in China.

Kennedi Alsop '18 came to Furman with her heart set on studying Japan, where she had lived as a girl as part of her father's military service. When she was

selected for the China experience instead, she admits being disappointed. A few weeks with Kaup changed that.

"Her passion for China really allowed me to be passionate about it as well," says Alsop, who majored in political science and Asian studies.

For each issue that Kaup covered in class or on a street in China, she had a personal story to go with it.

"You could really learn more about the country through her experiences," Alsop says.



Kate Kaup with participants in the LIASE Summer Science Exposure Program, which explores how higher education institutions, government and non-governmental organizations, businesses, and private citizens work to address environmental challenges in the U.S.

Also spent a semester of her junior year in China and then returned to the country after graduation for a two-month internship before beginning her master's degree in international commerce and policy at George Mason University.

Opening eyes

Besides leading student groups, Kaup brings alumni, business and civic leaders, and even Congressional delegations to China.

Nick Hoffman of Atlanta, a member of Furman's Parents Council, traveled to China with Kaup and about 15 others. She's "absolutely brilliant in her scholarship and experience," he says.

"Kate's a force of nature," says **Dave Ellison '72**, a Furman trustee and wealth management advisor who's also traveled with Kaup.

"Their economy is going to be the biggest economy in the world in short order," Ellison says. "They're critically important."

As they traveled through both major cities and rural areas, Kaup pointed out details the group might otherwise miss and provided context to what they would see and hear.

"Kate was just wanting to open our eyes and educate us," says Hoffman, who works for an investment management firm.

Berris, the committee's vice president, says issues of great consequence – climate, global trading, cyber security, to name a few – require the world's major powers to work together.

"China has just gotten too big and too powerful – too many people, too much of everything – to not be part of the solution," she says. Those who care about the future "need to care about China and what makes it tick and why it's acting the way it's acting."

Looking to the future

China scholars walk a narrowing line between access and academic freedom.

"It is tightening, without a doubt," Kaup says.

While the risk is greatest for partner and sponsor institutions within China, visiting scholars regularly evaluate their own work in terms of safety. Kaup has chosen to stop visiting one area, in part to protect the people there.

But the work is too important to abandon altogether.

"It's dangerous for the country (the U.S.) to have such limited understanding of such a key partner," Kaup says.

Her new role with the national committee will expand her ability to foster that understanding.

The committee was formed in 1966 to assist with reestablishing diplomatic relations. Its current work focuses on bringing sides together for conversations and partnerships that will be mutually beneficial.

In 2008, Kaup was a fellow with the committee's Public Intellectuals Program. Now, as a board member, she will sit alongside former U.S. ambassadors, business leaders and military leaders, offering a scholarly, and distinctly southern, perspective.

"I'm really delighted that she's on the board," Berris says.

Also, the recent graduate, says the existence of an authoritarian regime that has created massive economic growth is an enigma. Kaup can help students and the broader community grapple with that.

"China is not one of those countries that isn't going to make a difference," Also says. "It's probably the country to really watch these days." ●