

SARAH LAWRENCE winter 06

[FEATURED](#)
[DEPARTMENTS](#)
[ON-LINE EXTRAS](#)
[TABLE OF CONTENTS](#)
[ARCHIVED ISSUES](#)
[previous story](#)
[next story](#)

In August 2005, Joshua Muldavin (holder of the Henry R. Luce Junior Professorship in East Asian Cultural/Human Geography) brought three Sarah Lawrence students to China's mountainous border region with Tibet. It was a journey of firsts—the first time Sam Stein '05 and Will Rhodes '07, both Meredith Fonda Russell fellows, had been to China; the first time Muldavin had relied on undergraduates for so long a research trip; and the first time many of the villagers they met had encountered visitors from so far away.

The month-long project documented the impact on remote Himalayan settlements of environmental decisions made in Beijing or even further afield by international organizations. It was also a chance for undergraduates to handle field research.

After Stein's initial research pinpointed where they'd visit, the group, which also included Julie Klinger '06, spent time in eastern China to gain permission to travel and work in the interior. Finally on site, they faced realities: how to meet the most knowledgeable people, which questions prompt the most insightful answers. At the end of a day of interviewing villagers, the Sarah Lawrence group would climb to a high point overlooking the town and map it, documenting the effects of erosion, areas devoted to forestry and where roads might be built.

"They were wonderful ambassadors," said Muldavin of the SLC students, who received support funding from the Henry Luce Foundation. "The Chinese were moved that young people from across the world cared about what happened in their community, and thrilled that we cared enough to draw a map of their village. One old man told us he could count on one hand the number of visitors they'd had to their village—and we ourselves were four of them!"

Klinger, who had lived in China for a year and speaks Mandarin, joined Muldavin as the group's translator—in reality, as translator of a translation, because many villagers spoke a Tibetan dialect, necessitating a first

At right: Bucun, a village where the Sarah Lawrence team conducted research, and its mountainous surroundings

Below: Julie Klinger '06, Will Rhodes '07, Joshua Muldavin and Sam Stein '05 (from left) and Tibetan prayer flags



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translation into Chinese. She hopes to pursue development studies or international relations, and was drawn to the trip by increasing evidence that Tibetan culture is dying out. "Somebody's got to be in touch with these issues," Klinger said.

For Rhodes, a vegetarian, eating meat was a way not to miss anything during his time in China. "Our Tibetan driver took us to a friend's restaurant that specialized in yak," he said. "I remember chewing one piece of yak for five minutes and thinking how the just the experience of eating yak in the Himalayas cancelled out any issues I had with the taste and texture; it was very tough."

Not all enlightenment was derived from research. At a Buddhist monastery, a senior monk led them through a labyrinth of rooms and passageways to a central chamber and sat on the dais, asking "What would you like to ask me?"

"He told us that the most important and most challenging aspect of a good life is that you love everything unconditionally, including, or perhaps especially, your enemies," remembers Stein. "For all the ornateness of the monastery, and the generalization of monastic life as separate from the world, I was incredibly impressed at how every lesson he brought up was connected to making the world a better and kinder place."

Each of his visitors left with the answer to a particularly personal question, something to ponder as they climbed toward the reason they had come.

The trip was so successful, Muldavin says, that he is organizing a return visit.

—J.B.