The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training
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Fulbright Stories Project

DR. MARY ELLEN HEIAN SCHMIDER

Interviewed by: Fran Leskovar
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INTERVIEW

Q: Today is October 25, 2025. This is a Fulbright interview. Can you state your name and spell it out for me, please?

HEIAN SCHMIDER: Heian Schmider with no hyphen. I am Mary Ellen Heian Schmider. Mary and Ellen are fairly typical, old-fashioned spellings, but Heian, my maiden name, which is the same as the Heian period in Japanese history, is spelled H-E-I-A-N, but mine is Norwegian, closely related. meaning a quiet or peaceful place in the mountains between two peaks. My married name is spelled S-C-H-M-I-D-E-R. My father-in-law was a Black Forest German, so S-C-H-M-I-D-E-R was the older German way to spell it, that is, no “ie” or “ei.”

Q: Can you tell me a little bit about yourself? Where did you grow up? Where did you go to school?

HEIAN SCHMIDER: In a speech I gave as I accepted the DAAD Alumni Association Lifetime Achievement Award for International Exchange, I said: "I'm a daughter of World War II. My first memory was of Roosevelt's voice on Pearl Harbor Day." I was three; we were moving into our new house. When the word came to turn on the radio, the mood instantly darkened as we heard the President’s voice in those famous words: “ The Japanese have bombed Pearl Harbor. We are at War!” My world, as one born on Easter Sunday morning, April 17, 1938, changed forever.

Q: Where did you go to school?

HEIAN SCHMIDER: I went all the way through school in Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin, starting with Chestnut School on Elm St, kindergarten through sixth grade. I then attended seventh, eighth, and ninth in the Chippewa Middle School, which is now closed, before going to Chippewa Falls senior high school for the last three years.

Q: How did you hear about Fulbright? What piqued your interest to apply and explore Fulbright?

HEIAN SCHMIDER: That's leaping a long way into the future, because I graduated from high school in 1956. However, when I went to graduate school in 1960, at the University of Southern California, my roommate was a Swedish Fulbright student in international relations. I already knew about Fulbright in 1960.

Ausa became a lifelong friend. On her return to Sweden, she worked for the Swedish International Development Agency with her work focused in Africa. We stayed in touch throughout her life. Her father was a distinguished professor at Sweden's Uppsala University.

By the time we met, I was already in a leadership position through the Lutheran church. Even in high school, I was a district Luther League president. I was offered a summer in leadership training school at St. Olaf College. I loved it; applying there for college became my only choice! During my freshman year at St. Olaf, I was asked to be a youth delegate to the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) meeting in Minneapolis. It met every five years, starting in 1947, and Bishop Hanns Lilje, Bishop of Hannover, Germany, was president in 1957. Before the main assembly began, I was at the first Lutheran World Youth Conference in Onamia, Minnesota. Four years later, one of the young men from Germany, whom I had met there, had become a founding faculty member at California Lutheran College, as had I. We were both twenty-three.

Q: Wow.

HEIAN SCHMIDER: So, the international frame of reference and abiding interest began in a deep, deep way: it was through the German Confessional Lutheran church as reinvigorated after the end of World War Two connecting with the American Lutheran tradition and international organizations for renewal. Ecumenism and revitalization were exciting initiatives in the early post-WWII era, and I was part of these.

Q: What sparked your interest in international affairs? What was unique about international affairs to a young person like yourself?

HEIAN SCHMIDER: I grew up in an educated household. My mother had a master's degree in Literature and Music (UND, 1932). My father, who had fought to complete high school, in a small farming community where the assumption was that he'd stay on the farm: by law, students needed only eight years of public school in Wisconsin. He became the partner in the Chippewa Canning Co, Inc. Both parents were first-generation Americans of Norwegian descent: all four of my grandparents emigrated separately as young adults, and I knew my grandfathers well into my adulthood. The idea that there was another world in Europe was certainly part of our lives. The traditions in the church in Wisconsin in the 1950s included a big Lutefisk dinner at Christmas, now almost "holy food" from the Norwegian tradition. Beyond our part of Europe, there was the Protestant

practice which Martin Luther undertook with the individual study of the Scriptures. Further, the Gregorian chants of the liturgy, and the King James Bible, with its wonderful, often poetic language, were part of a service grounded in history, but still contemporary. For me, it represented the scholar priest, Luther: educated, querying the meaning of things, dealing with language, posting the Ninety-five Theses on the church door to debate, to get at the truth for himself. These traditional, European religious traditions were part of my growing up, even as a young woman before the Second Wave of the Feminist Movement began. We sang both in Norwegian and German during the holidays. My mother was a church musician who utilized my piano skills to accompany the children's choir throughout my high school years. My family had a large record collection of the great Western tradition of music from Bach to opera. My father kept the Oxford English Dictionary close to the dining table for easy access during discussions.

The enlargement of my horizon through the 1957 LWF events was extraordinary. I marched and prayed down Nicollet Avenue in Minneapolis with the Madhya Pradesh Church of India at the climax of the Federation assembly. My mother thought, "Oh, my word! What next for this eldest daughter of mine?"

Well, the next summer, I joined the caravan project for Lutheran youth, one of four in a team going to the San Joaquin valley in California where the old Danish farmers were eager for their children to connect with us and where the Lutheran tradition had dimmed over time in the American West. One team member was an exchange student from Norway at Luther College in Iowa. Bodil also became a lifelong friend; she later married a man whose historic origin farm was my paternal grandmother's in Folldal, Norway.

Q: What was your first Fulbright project? What did you apply to?

HEIAN SCHMIDER: The summer of my junior year at St. Olaf, I was offered another unusual opportunity by the woman who worked as Assistant in Lutheran ministry (two decades before women could be ordained pastors). She said, "Mary Ellen, you have the background, and you would profit from this. Why don't you apply for the Lutheran World Federation study project in Europe?" I applied, and under a partial scholarship and partly my own family generosity, I spent ten weeks in Norway, Sweden, Finland, Berlin, and West Germany. In each country, we fifteen Americans from universities across the nation spent time living with students from the Lutheran campus ministry in each country. Berlin, however, was no summer outing in a countryside retreat center.

Berlin, in 1959, was war-ravaged and dangerous, with thousands of refugees coming through from East Germany to the Marienfelde refugee receiving center. The Russian Zone was depopulating, and the movement solidifying the divide between East and West was underway. The Cold War was a growing reality, and we were followed by the Stasi (Ministry for State Security) everywhere we went.

We were hosted by the one church open in East Berlin, the Marienkirche (14th-century

church). The pastor was Heinrich Grüber, who had been in the Concentration Camp with Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He survived his imprisonment to continue his church work with youth, and, as peace returned, he led the establishment of a nursing home for aging Jews who were still in Berlin after the Holocaust. Years later, Grüber was the only non-Jew to testify in the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem.We did not know at the time how closely we had touched the experience of the war, though we did know of Bonhoeffer's martyrdom shortly before the liberation of the camps..

Gruber took us to the refugee receiving center. We walked the eastern part of Berlin, saw hints of what Berlin had been, but even the Reichstag and the Opera—all of the great public monuments of the Reich—were still in limbo politically and near-total ruins. We boarded in a safe house in the Grünewald district with East German theological students who were still in the universities, but under surveillance. One pair of them was stopped at the border and questioned until they confessed where they were going—they disappeared that night, and the bishop in Berlin was sent the following message by the Stasi: ' Such meetings with Americans are not possible.' The three weeks in Berlin in the build- up to The Wall are seared in my mind. So that's how it began, my wish to be working in pursuit of peace through human connections across borders. I was twenty-one.

Q: Yeah, quite an interesting story. I think when we do a larger oral history interview, we go into it because there is a lot of historical background and understanding how the world was operating that you saw with your own eyes.

HEIAN SCHMIDER: Yes, this was the Confessional Church, of course, which was still alive. It was the leadership that had fought against Hitler. It was not the majority who had signed on calculating: "We'll, stay quiet and we'll be allowed to do our work."In fact, some of the Protestants—and all of the Roman Catholic Church—had signed a quiet agreement, including Pope Pius XII [Pope Pius the Twelfth]. A few years earlier, as Papal Nuncio, by the way, Pius XII was in Boston, and my much later to-be father-in-law was his chauffeur from the German Consulate. In fluent German, he asked: So, Ludwig, you're a good German. You must be a good Roman Catholic.' Louie replied, "Well, yes, I grew up that way. But in Boston, they're either Irish, Italian, or Portuguese, and they don't speak my language, and they want the turnstile with quarters or dollars put in before you go in to pray, so I don't go anymore." He [Papal Nuncio] said, 'You're a good man, Ludwig—stay working and living as you do.'
NOTE: I add the family anecdote to underscore the interrelatedness of experience as Americans with what was international then and always: we are not an "Island" as the poet, John Donne, memorably wrote over four hundred years ago.

Q: Quite an interesting story. So what was your Fulbright project? Later, did that experience impact your project or contribute to what you wanted to do?

HEIAN SCHMIDER: Let me focus on a central part of my career: eighteen years at Minnesota State University Moorhead. Hired as director of Continuing Education and

Community Services, I worked across the curriculum creating and administering course work for returning and part time adult students. Further, I oversaw the international programs we developed abroad, especially with Oxford University. At one point, I was sent to Sweden and Norway to oversee student teachers. When the opportunity arose, I encouraged my son to apply for a Rotary Exchange for juniors in high school. His Swedish year started him on the road he's still on—at California State University Monterey Bay where he works with world languages and cultures through technology as well as an adjunct faculty member.Visiting him late in his Swedish year, I saw again how much my own youthful international experiences had shaped me, and I longed for more.

My first sabbatical was in Iceland, teaching graduate students in American Studies through literature. My family joined me, my husband finding work through the University of Maryland University College at the NATO Base in Keflavik.

When promoted to Graduate Dean and Research Officer, I attended training sessions for both Fulbright Student and Scholar Awards. I helped students and faculty apply for grants, edited applications, and helped in shaping projects assisted by the insights of those workshops. Provided by the Institute of International Education (IIE) across the country, they obviously whetted my personal interest.

Fulbright had to wait, however, as my husband was invited to be part of the faculty exchange through the Minnesota State University System to its new and eighth campus in Akita Prefecture, Japan. Carl became a speech and language professor for a year, and I took a research sabbatical, doing cross-cultural research in Japan and working with adults who wished to grow their English language skills. Further, I was asked to do a tour as an “American Participant” for the Embassy in Tokyo. I traveled with a translator through all four main islands, giving about sixteen speeches on topics of American life, especially “The Tradition of Volunteerism.” The tour was the second USIA assignment I had enjoyed. The first was as a keynote speaker at the Austrian Association for American Studies Conference in Salzburg in 1988. (My talk came on the fiftieth anniversary of "Crystal Nacht.” Following it, I gave presentations in both Austria and Italy in universities and politically-focused women’s groups. My topic was volunteerism as "the American way” (as de Tocqueville had written), but its larger context was the life and work of Jane Addams. She, famous as the first American woman to win a Nobel Prize for Peace, represented so many facets of American life: feminism, suffrage, early childhood education, immigration and the building of a multicultural society, and political engagement in the global arena during and after WWI, as the first president of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom. Her work had been my Ph. D. dissertation study.

The ultimate journeys leading to a Fulbright grant were the two extensive visits to universities in China with other academic officers from Moorhead. So, finally, I applied for the Fulbright Senior Lecturer award. I was fifty-seven, and as Graduate Dean Emeritus in 1995, I was ready to return fully to teaching and the international

dream.

Finland, remembering my youthful visit of 1959, was my first choice. As a Ph.D. in American Studies, I applied for one of the Bicentennial grants, but another scholar's project matched the university department more fully. However, the IIE administrator
called, and said, ‘You seem like a person with an adventuresome spirit. Would you like to go to China?’ I looked at my husband but for a moment’s reaction, and then said, ‘Sure!‘

I had worked with a lot of Chinese graduate students at Moorhead, and we had developed a close friendship with one woman who had come from China in her 50s to earn the MA
in Music Education. During visits to China, I connected with her family, and her mother had spent time in our home. So even without the language, I was comfortable saying, ‘Yes!’

My project, as an American Studies PhD, turned out to be “lecturer ready to teach any course in American literature and criticism in the context of American history and culture.” The same was true in my second award, to Macedonia eight years later. Flexibility is the secret for a successful Fulbright! I had discovered many years earlier, having always wanted to go abroad professionally, that doing research at the British Museum was not the only option for English majors. I had worried when I broadened my reading to American Studies for the doctorate it would mean I’d never get to go abroad as a scholar. It turns out that nearly all universities want an American Studies scholar, because one can explore multiple parts of the curriculum within the context of American culture. People around the world want to understand what this country is about.

The Chinese committee makes the final choice of scholars and their placement in the Chinese university system. Some have compared the secret nature of the choices to the ‘white smoke’ at the Vatican signaling the choice of a new Pope. In this case, it is the decisions as to which universities will get scholars and which applicants will be sent where. Lanzhou University in Gansu Province, China, just under Inner Mongolia, as far north and remote as Fargo is in America, would be my option. So I became the first woman and the fourth Fulbrighter ever there. It was 1997, the same year that ‘Hong Kong finally returned to the motherland, marking the end of the shame after 150 years:’ a mantra which was announced with music and doves of peace each morning on our small TV set. It was a very interesting time to be there.

Q: What did you learn from that experience—about America, about how you were representing it, and how people received, I guess, American identity and American culture. But also, what did you learn about Chinese culture that surprised you?

HEIAN SCHMIDER: Well, that'll only take five seconds to answer. Of course, there's

no detail to share on that question. [Laughter]

I got there a few weeks after Deng Xiaoping died. So the country was under a great, overarching shroud. He had been the last of those who had gone on “The Long. March” with Mao Zedong, so there was great anticipation and some fear about what China’s course of action would be and how everyone’s future would be shaped by the new leadership.

Q: Oh, wow.

Schmider:Lanzhou was two hours by airplane—‘very far from Beijing.’ They used to say this to brush over or dismiss potentially illegal or politically questionable things that might happen. In short, 'not to worry too much.” It was far from the great power of the state to want or care to control. We found out in Beijing, the one day we had in the city before we needed to be in Lanzhou, that my medical form was the wrong one. I had accessed it from the embassy for the doctor to fill out, asserting **no** acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) showed on the test: I did not have AIDS. My husband’s paper work showed the same. Thus, we spent the whole day in Beijing running around so they could find a MD or clinic where we could get another blood draw on the required form. And I said, "I'm not doing that. A needle that might have been used several dozen times, and maybe one or two people might have had an infected drop of blood in it—no, I'm not doing that." But they ran us around all day, nonetheless, without finding an MD or lab to do a test. Since we needed to get on the airplane, we were told we should do the test later. We didn't get asked to do it once in the North; it just never somehow came up again. We were lucky in that regard; fully healthy the entire six months, and no HIV.

The anecdote apart, I admire doctors in China. In spite of the large population and the turmoil of the 20th Century, people are healthy and have longevity. My good friend's father founded cancer research in China after two years of advanced study in the USA
under the Rockefeller Foundation. He was a remarkable man whose state memorial service we attended some years later. NOTE: I have returned many times, professionally.

Our first and lasting impression of Gansu Province was that it was home to many minorities—especially the minority culture of Muslims—because the ‘Stans’ were all around: Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. Further, Outer Mongolia, with its more Russian state strictures of Communism along with a reemerging history of Buddhism, was on the northern border. The best beef noodle soup shops were run by the Muslims. So on the days we wanted to go out for lunch, and found the shops all closed, we realized it was another Muslim holiday: everyone was at the Mosque. Religious practice as well as a variety of traditions included, surprisingly, our Foreign Experts Guest House. It housed several couples from the USA who were unaffiliated, but clearly operating as Christian missionaries as they taught English and lived on very small

salaries.

The second thing we learned was that noodle shops did not have change for a 100-RMB yuan bill—or since not many foreigners were actually in Gansu Province at the time, the shops did not often have RMB yuan on hand at all. The soup cost one and a half yuan in local currency (worth about ten to one RMB). So again we were in luck: we got to eat
free our first day. Hospitality to outsiders and curiosity were both

real. *Q: Wow.*

HEIAN SCHMIDER: Where do I start with what happened in the classroom? I was assigned graduate students in modern American poetry and short stories, and a class in "American literary criticism." I had found a text with several versions of literary criticism with good selections of poems or brief stories from the American canon. It was, of course, the period when the new French deconstructive criticism was developing as a standard of analysis, but so was Marxist criticism. When we got to the chapter on Marxist criticism, I said, "Well, you all know all about this—you can tell me, now." They all went 'titter-titter' and then, quiet. No one wanted to say a word. Politically, it might be insulting to me as an American guest— or critical, at the least. One further key to learning how to "read"a poem was to understand that there is more than one possible interpretation. Language itself is fluid: context, historical time, cultural setting, personal experience, and other elements shape and modify meanings.

All the students were attentive and polite. Only two men were in the class; the rest were women, about thirteen in all. They all, except one man who was married and had a child, lived in the dormitory—six to a room—and they took turns going out with their water bottles to get boiled water for their personal needs. We would see them morning or night, two women students taking turns, carrying three in each hand—to the large water supply trucks which arrived daily to a line-up of waiting citizens. The water stayed hot all day. It meant, though, that there was no potable water in individual rooms or homes. In the guest house, one of the amenities was a full thermos of boiling hot water for each of us every day, delivered, if we set out our empty thermos each night. We used it for everything.

One day, I met the young man going across campus with a ticket in his hand. I said, "Where are you going?" He said, "I'm going off to the bath." He was wearing thong slippers and had a ticket which was part of the student stipend, good for once a week at the most. My students were fortunate because they were in graduate school and were assured jobs at a university although they did not have an option for where they would find their employment. I learned that the work and the home of nearly all Chinese was still determined by their status and in what unit of social services, schooling, dwelling, and work they were assigned. The personal flexibility to move away from their 'danwei' was just beginning. The 10% of Chinese who were moving, often away from the family plot of land, meant that between 10 and 15 million people were on the road—more or

less “homeless.”

The women in the dorm—two rooms as their donwei—would meet at night to talk about the assignments. I had staged the class as a genuine graduate seminar. The basis of that was that everyone needed to have read the material, understood it, and be ready to talk about it, having thought about it in their own way. Guess what? Critical thinking was not yet the hallmark of higher education in China.Nor was asserting one’s ideas aloud in front of the class.

Quickly realizing the challenge, I announced: “Okay, You need to read everything for yourself. If you find words in it that you do not know, do not just slide by thinking you'll find them later or learn them in context. Stop, look them up, find out the Chinese equivalent if there is one, write down the meaning, and create your dictionary—your English will get broader and deeper. I will collect these every once in a while to see what you're learning and which words you didn't know. The second element of the weekly writing is to write down not just an outline of the poem or story—it is to write a paragraph focused on what particularly interests you or you can talk about.”

Then, every class meeting, I went around the room and had students take turns reading a part—a stanza, half page, or a paragraph of the text to be discussed. Then we looked at words they had newly discovered. All of this as prelude to textual interpretation was to get their tongues around English pronunciation and intonation, not just their eyes and ears. All of my students were becoming university English teachers. Skill development of the four elements we require in the TOEFL were imbedded in my approach: listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

If there were questions during the focus on the literary materials, only the older woman, who had become the key one in dorm discussions and had the best English, would speak up. They all talked at home, worked out what things meant, and then she would speak for them all—until I challenged it, and kept challenging it.The class did become a graduate seminar, and I discovered more fully how to engage my students when I returned to the USA. I also realized as the years have gone on, we have many American students who either are operating as second language speakers of English or whose prior education has limited communication skill development. Engaging in the classroom setting with mutual respect as a "safe place,”one where everyone is learning and growing, can give students the permission to go beyond their comfort zones whether cultural or personal.

Both young men in the classes were more accustomed to engaging in class discussion. One was absolutely brilliant. In his early 30s, with a wife and daughter, he was given the task by the dean to be our intermediary with any issue we faced. We ate together most noons at the street market, ordering one and a half kilos of Pork Gyozas with Hwang Yu Beer (Yellow River Beer, the local, less expensive version of Tsingtau) to enjoy while my husband, Tuo, and I talked poetry.

In brief, here is his back story: he had been a sheep herder in the Inner Mongolian steppes. There, he listened nightly to Voice of America and the BBC World Service across the steppes. One day his rural school master brought in a text in English and announced they now had permission to learn English. He was allowed to take the precious book home, returning the next morning able to read and speak English. He soon began writing to American poets and orchestral players at the famed St. Martin's in the Fields in London, and ultimately was hired to offer a radio show in Western music. When we arrived, and our two big boxes of books arrived via the diplomatic pouch, his eyes fastened on them until I opened them for him to examine: he was a true lover of words, of ideas, of language! When our time in Lanzhou University was over, I left him all my personal books, ones which filled one of my two allowed suitcases.

For the women, a breakthrough came near the end of the semester. Two of the quiet young women came up to me in the courtyard, hanging onto each other's hands so tightly for mutual support that I thought they were going to pee their pants. One said, "That poem about the daughter who sends her father away, was he mean to his wife—did he hit her?" I said, "Yes." She said, "I thought so. My father is an older farmer, and when my mother got depressed, because in her midlife change, he was not kind to her. One day, after he was so angry toward her, she drowned herself in the cistern. If only I had been home instead of in graduate school, I might have kept her from dying."

It was so personal; an American poem about family violence and its effects on offspring, had called up her grief and deepest life tragedy.The poem begins: "She took it, and took it, and took it, until she couldn't take it anymore! Then she threw the guy out of her life. The rhythm and metaphor was, of course, of a boxing match: punch after punch. The student had caught the beat and the physical meaning–he hit her and hit her until…it was too much. The speaker in the poem is not the mother; it is the now grown daughter some years later. She comes upon her father, a shadowy figure near a wall watching her. She cannot cross the gulf between them, but the regret at what she could not change and the loss of both parents continues to haunt her.

The final day of class, she shyly handed me a poem she had composed–in English–about her own family tragedy.

The literature we had studied had struck home for that young woman; it dealt with her life experience, helped her deal with her guilt, loss of her mother, and to turn personal despair into poetry.

So this is the joy that comes if you are connecting with your students and you keep at it: they see you as someone who is interested, genuine, and continues to engage. Seeing that literature reflects life; it can not only be revelatory, but also a kind of catharsis; it can reveal the truth that your personal experience is universal. It is not just your own sense of failure, your own issue.

Q: Let me ask you, we can explore; that poem might be interesting to pull out if you remember that.

HEIAN SCHMIDER: Well, there was another poem about Nixon, and they all knew Nixon! Everyone knew the reference detailing the moment when the helicopter took off, and Nixon left the White House. Of course, Nixon was a hero for China because he opened it up to the West after the disastrous Cultural Revolution. So we found ourselves discussing the mixed feelings toward Nixon. From the American perspective in the poem, it was "Get the crook out of office," while the Chinese students agreed: "He opened up the world to us."

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HEIAN SCHMIDER: I was going to say one more thing about the teaching materials, especially how meanings of words and themes are culturally understood and interpreted. My spouse and I had lived in Japan for a year, and we had talked about it as a good experience. Further, our son and his bride were there at the moment as teachers. The poem in question had as its narrative the Japanese business man meeting formally with someone from China. The politeness, the sympathetic understanding between them, and the images of cultural respect were clear: Japanese and other people meeting and greeting, shaking hands while bowing politely.

To my real shock, the interpretation of every single student in their class notebooks was this: “To a person, the Japanese shake your hand and want to do business, but behind your back, they're ready to kill you or stab you in the back. NEVER trust a Japanese!”

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Now my husband and I had walked through the parts of town where people lived in the old *hútòng* (alley), and we could hear them in elementary school. We could see that they were watching disturbing video footage, some seemingly from World War Two, in every class. As it turned out, it was actual footage of the "Rape of Nanjing,” from the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937. The documentary evidence on this horrific event, “Nanjing Massacre: A Japanese Journalist Confronts Japan's National Shame" by Honda Katsuichi, had not yet been published in the West. The paperback translation was in 1999. It detailed the brutal rapes, pilaging, and massacre of over 300,000 Chinese men, women, children, aged people by the Japanese in one horrific night; what is now known as another "holocaust”in its brutal destruction of human life—the facts of it were basic in the Chinese history curriculum from elementary school on. Everyone knew about it: the idea that the Japanese may be smiling and wanting to connect, but never turn your back, was a

basic life lesson in 1997: sixty years later. It still is.

Obviously, we hadn't known the story: what had shocked me as an over-the-top response by students decades after whatever had happened, no doubt shocked them by my innocent and naive reaction to the poem: “after a war, people rebuild relationships.” That's what Fulbright is about, after all. But now I know how very, very hard it must still be to try to forgive "Nanjing in 1937,” and find negotiated peace between China and Japan. Films and further documents are actively being published as political leaders in the West are still in the process of incorporating historical reality into the overarching narrative between these nations.

(My Google search, as I edit this interview, brings up several articles and more research from this year: 2026. The truth of it continues to haunt Japanese-Chinese relations. I actually witnessed by video the start of repairing those relationships though I didn't know just why the news of this state visit was so monumental.)

I was on a flight to China from Japan in October 1992; the news video of the Japanese Emperor Hirohito and Empress Michiko going on their first state visit to China was playing in real time. The running commentary was whether he would merely bow to express his sorrow at the past, or whether he should actually say aloud: I am very sorry; please forgive me [*Sumimasen Gomennasai*]. Current research modifies the simple grace of the Japanese gesture by placing it in the context of Tiananmen Square in 1989, another horrific event which shockingly damaged China’s global reputation on human rights.

Q: Wow. Let me ask you a final question. How do you think your Fulbright experience and connection to Fulbright and your contributions made America safer, stronger, and more prosperous?

Schmider:My first reaction to your question is how much I personally learned. I read international news with a different awareness of perspective, of what's left out or what is focused upon. I know some of the places and people who are topics so I have some personal contacts of whom to inquire: "What's the real scoop here?” My understanding of China is more nuanced, and I know how much I still don't know of the deep cultural values and ways of acting on the global stage of this ancient civilization. But as a teacher, I share my enlarged understanding. And since my teaching for the last 24 years of my career was with the University of Maryland Global Campus, posted to Germany and Turkey for four years, and then online with students "down range” in the US military, IT MATTERS. As a further point, I have returned to China at least half a dozen times to give lectures as requested by our Embassy. And with each visit, I deepen my awareness and connections. I gain "soundings.”

If the goal is to build relationships with the populace in any country in the world, include Fulbright scholars in the mix of contacts back and forth. Something real about America, something beyond the stereotypes is gained by living with one another whether

as an international guest in the USA or as an American posted abroad. On the level of personal diplomacy, Fulbrighters offer a counterweight to official policies and sometimes assist in explaining contexts and reassurances on a one-to-one basis.Through our engagement, students and others begin to see the world a little differently and question a little the propaganda that we all spew out from the other when friends become enemies. So it is individual diplomacy, personal diplomacy. It's based on genuine sharing of information and knowledge–and human caring in community. Back home, in conversations with friends and colleagues, in my book club, as well as in more formal presentations on my experience, I add something to "lifelong learning."

Since my work was as a teaching scholar, I have to believe that the classroom techniques I outlined earlier in this conversation have somehow helped students become more astute in their "reading" of English whether spoken or on the page. How many battles have been averted with someone fully understanding the meaning of a text, especially a cryptic one? When we communicate well, across languages and cultures, we avert war and violence.

Finally, let me say a few words about family and how important our witness of family relations was to acceptance as genuine persons and to the perception of America as a nation with "family values."

My husband joined me as "dependent spouse," in the terminology of the Fulbright award. He found work with graduate students in the Physics and Chemistry Institute who needed to practice their oral English skills in order to understand research and interview for positions. His students were extremely eager to learn because it mattered, and he was gracious with his time and coaching. In the public perception of us, it was I who had the lead: it was my grant. It was a surprise to many, both students and community folks we met, that I was out front and my husband was fully supportive and helpful.

My daughter and son-in-law came to visit during our award period. They didn't come all the way to Gansu Province, but we did spend time with the Terracotta Warriors and other noteworthy sites in Xian, and then in Beijing. The surprise for my students was that we cared about grown children and wanted to share our experiences with them. Their notion, based on the very few films they were allowed to see, was that grown daughters were busy going to discotech dance parties, staying out late, sometimes promiscuously, and hoping to be "Forever 21!" A further assumption is that parents are glad when their children are grown and gone.

What endeared me even more to my students was my knitting. At 60, I was busy knitting a baby blanket because my son and his wife were about to birth my first grandchild. (Students had already been glad I invited them to come to our apartment where I cooked full meals for them, talked about how much I liked Tofu, and connected further over a Mexican dish that paralleled one of their favorites with similar ingredients. We were not far apart when it came to food diplomacy.)

All of the more personal life we shared was revelatory, and many said so: family mattered, at 60 I had a career that excited me more than ever, I had "womanly skills" as well as academic ones, and my husband and I were in a sustaining, long marriage. Altogether, we were something that I think made an impression or changed a few presuppositions about Americans.

I know living in Gansu Province, China, with dedicated graduate students for six months enlarged my understanding both professionally and personally in profound ways, only some of which I've tried to explore in this interview. I am grateful for the opportunity to talk about the growth the Fulbright Program offered me and has offered so many for eighty years.

Q: Wow. All right, I'll stop here.

End of interview