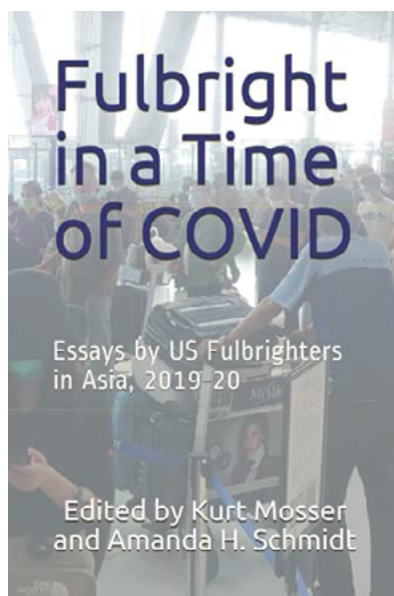


HOPE IN THE TIME OF COVID

MARK SEIELSTAD



Fulbright in a Time of COVID: Essays by U.S. Fulbrighters in Asia, 2019-20, edited by Kurt Mosser, Fulbright Scholar at Soochow University in Suzhou from 2019-2020, and Amanda H. Schmidt, Fulbright Scholar at Sichuan University in China in 2019-2020

Three years after reports of an atypical pneumonia began emerging from Wuhan, China, the ramifications continue to impact us all. *Fulbright in a Time of COVID* dramatically brings us back to the bewildering early days in the form of a well-curated and carefully edited selection of 15 essays from US Fulbrighters in Asia whose awards were cut short by the pandemic. Written in the immediate aftermath of their truncated time abroad, many of the essays offer startlingly raw, honest, and affecting accounts of the joys, challenges, triumphs, and failures that we all recognize as the hallmarks of any Fulbright experience—with the surreal intensity of a gathering global pandemic as backdrop.

Each contribution within this small volume ultimately transcends the specific circumstances of this strange moment in time and offers compelling witness to the curiosity, spirit, and resilience of those who seek out such experiences in the name of cross-cultural relations. I found the collection profoundly inspirational and vivid proof of the value of the Fulbright program, and despite their hardships, the authors agree. The dedication reads, “to the Fulbright Program and all the people who make these programs possible.”

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The book's chapters include contributions from six students and six senior scholars researching in China (which includes the two editors), one student in Singapore, and two English Teaching Assistants in Malaysia. It begins in Wuhan itself, and the subsequent chapters are loosely ordered by social or physical geography from central China, providing an eerie perspective on the flow of rumor and news in the notoriously opaque Chinese system. By the middle of March (2020), most Fulbrighters had been hustled out of their host countries, in varying states of anguish and defiance. In some cases, the awardees had to abandon all their possessions and apartments; many were away from "home" for the Chinese New Year Holiday and never made it back to their host universities.

While Covid figures into each of the chapters, the contributions serve as meditations on the larger themes of bridging cultures and deepening our understanding of what it means to be an American in a more globalized but still fractious world. A few themes emerge.

First, the numerous disciplines supported by Fulbright are a continuing strength, and the program enables significant scholarly work. Especially at the senior level, it was often essential to finish specific projects for purposes of tenure or promotion, and the resulting hardships were palpable. For students, awards can provide vital support for overseas research, but their greater value seems to be the pretext they provide for a prolonged experience living abroad. Charlotte Hacker, a PhD ecology student, expressed the profound effect of her experience: "China will always be a place of refuge and solace," she wrote (136) and "Some days ache more than others and on those days I hold onto the veracity I now know myself to possess. I'll get back to China" (137).

The student accounts reminded me of my own student research Fulbright to Algeria in 1992. On the basis of only a reasonable facility in French, I boldly proposed a year researching the origins and diversity of Berber languages. While it's obvious to me in retrospect that this comically ambitious and naive proposal would not have advanced our understanding of Berber linguistics in the slightest, I salute Fulbright for their willingness to enable me to discover this on my own. However, a vicious civil war broke out, and my award was canceled before it began—so I sympathize viscerally with the anguish of many of this volume's authors.

The second theme that emerges is dismay at the state of American monolingualism. Admittedly, Chinese presents formidable linguistic challenges, but few countries require fluency like China. Thus, a couple of the chapters belong to the genre of "The Innocents Abroad and other bumbling tales"—valid Fulbright experiences, but maybe a bit tired in the telling. While few of the authors entered China with adequate fluency, almost all found creative and effective ways of interaction, testament to the indomitable human/Fulbright spirit.

Finally, the English Teaching Assistant (ETA) program is a strength of the Fulbright program. The two chapters written by ETAs posted to Malaysia, provide some of the most aching, yet joyous accounts of the entire book. Tianna Anderson wrote about the feeling of loss which “resurged” during a meditation: “I smell the detergent on my baju, knowing that by the end of the day it will smell of sweat instead. I taste the tea in my thermos, hot and bitter. I hear the honking of horns and sputtering of engines. It is perfect. I gasped and opened my eyes, breaking the spell” (45).

Upon finishing this book, I wished nothing more than to hear from all of these authors again—now—after additional time for reflection on their experience of this unsettling point in time. Their wisdom and insights left me comforted and optimistic about our common future.

Kurt Mosser and Amanda H. Schmidt, editors, *Fulbright in a Time of COVID: Essays by U.S. Fulbrighters in Asia, 2019-20*. (no publisher) 2021. 245 pages. \$6.14 pb or .99 Kindle.

BIOGRAPHY

Mark Seielstad received his PhD in Biology from Harvard University in 1998, on the basis of fieldwork conducted in Mali, Ethiopia, Sudan, Thailand and Vietnam. From 2002-2010 he worked at the Genome Institute of Singapore before joining the University of California, San Francisco. He has served previously on the faculties of the National University of Singapore and the Harvard School of Public Health. In 2019-2020 he was a Fulbright Senior Scholar at the Academia Sinica in Taiwan, and was previously awarded a Fulbright student award to Algeria in 1993, before it was canceled abruptly by the outbreak of civil war in the host country. His email is mark.seielstad@ucsf.edu

