

# CHINA IN FOCUS

## U.S. First Lady Endorses Study Abroad and Cultural Exchanges During China Visit

*“Study abroad shouldn’t just be for students from certain backgrounds...it is about shaping the future of your countries and the world we all share.” — U.S. First Lady Michelle Obama*

On a goodwill tour to emphasize the value of education abroad, First Lady of the United States Michelle Obama spoke to over 100 American and Chinese students, including nine participants of the American Councils’ administered National Security Language Initiative for Youth (NSLI-Y) program, at the Stanford Center at Peking University on March 22, 2014. The recently appointed U.S. Ambassador to China, Max Baucus; the President of Peking University, Wang Enge; and American Councils Beijing’s NSLI-Y Resident Director, David Dayton, were also in attendance.

“We believe that relationships between nations aren’t just about relationships between governments or leaders,” said Ms. Obama. “They’re about relationships between people — particularly young people. So we view study abroad programs not just as an educational opportunity for students, but also as a vital part of America’s foreign policy.”

Ms. Obama spoke directly on furthering the development of educational ties and people-to-people connections between the U.S. and China, through initiatives like the American Councils’ administered NSLI-Y and Teachers of Critical Languages programs. “We’re sending high school,

college, and graduate students here to study Chinese...We’re inviting teachers from China to teach Mandarin in American schools,” Ms. Obama said.

During her speech, the First Lady also discussed how The 100,000 Strong Initiative — of which American Councils is a signature partner — has increased the number and enhanced the diversity of American students studying abroad in China.

Following her speech, NSLI-Y participants were able to shake the First Lady’s hand. Two NSLI-Y students, Claire Loudermilch (Charlotte, NC) and Cameron Cumberland (Olympia, WA), went on to participate with the First Lady in a live online forum that included undergraduate and graduate students from Stanford’s Palo Alto campus via the facility’s distance-learning classroom.

During the forum, both Claire and Cameron had the opportunity to answer questions about the importance of studying abroad and learning a second language, as well as their own experiences on the NSLI-Y program. The pair was later interviewed by Chinese television station CCTV.



NSLI-Y 2009 China alumnus Jeffrey Wood interviews U.S. First Lady Michelle Obama at Peking University in Beijing.

Several Chinese media outlets covered Ms. Obama’s speech at the Stanford Center at Peking University, in addition to other highlights from her visit. Throughout her trip, Ms. Obama underscored the importance of education in the achievement of young adults. “If they commit to their education and work as hard as they can, there is no limit to what they can achieve,” Ms. Obama said in an interview with CaixinOnline.

NSLI-Y 2009 China alumnus, Jeffrey Wood also interviewed First Lady Michelle Obama at Peking University in Beijing during her visit to China. The interview can be viewed at Discovery Education’s *Of the People: Live from the White House* online broadcast.

*Southern Weekly* noted that Ms. Obama’s visit to China marked the first time a U.S. First Lady has independently visited China in an official capacity in the 35-year history of U.S.-China diplomatic relations.

Since returning to the United States, NSLI-Y 2013-14 China alumni have continued to apply and hone the skills they

gained during the intensive language and cultural immersion program. Alumni have shared their NSLI-Y experience with peers by utilizing their language skills to offer Chinese instruction to youth in their local communities.

One alumnus created an organization dedicated to teaching Mandarin to Baltimore elementary school students. Another worked as a Chinese counselor at Concordia Language Villages shortly after returning to the U.S.

Several alumni have already decided to combine Chinese with Science and Engineering studies. In a recent update sent to NSLI-Y program staff, college-bound alumni cited plans to attend universities such as New York University Shanghai, University of North Carolina (Chapel Hill), and the University of Washington. They also shared their intent to build upon the language foundation they developed while on the NSLI-Y program by pursuing additional language education.