

# 2009 Travel Grant Recipient

Jessica Lah



For Jessica, travel encourages artistic growth. In the summer of 2008, Jessica embarked on an adventure abroad, first in Italy for 2 months and then for a year of exchange study at the Academy of Fine Arts in Guangzhou, China. She dedicated this time away to focus on her craft: painting. Jessica believes travel and art share similar qualities: a personal encounter with a new culture or visual representation has a greater impact than simply reading it on page.

Studying art at the Academy was unique, and she had the opportunity to experience a new culture and paint during her physical and internal journey. She was one of only two foreign students at the school and was fully-immersed in the society of University Island. The Island has ten other universities, all constructed over the last eight years. At first glance, the Island's fresh soil, sprouting trees, and plotted landscape evoked the question "what was there before?" Investigation and exploration revealed hints and remnants of history—the discovery of old ancestral halls hidden in villages and sculptures surfacing on shorelines. Records show that the government paid residents to leave before construction, but the underlying strife showed through in one park where red protest banners hang and a poster displays photographs of forceful military removal of the villagers years ago. Despite this, a handful of the original inhabitants still remain, living in makeshift housing built from old advertising signs. As the island continues to commercialize, young generations of students populate the new universities. However, they are diverted from information about the Island's history.

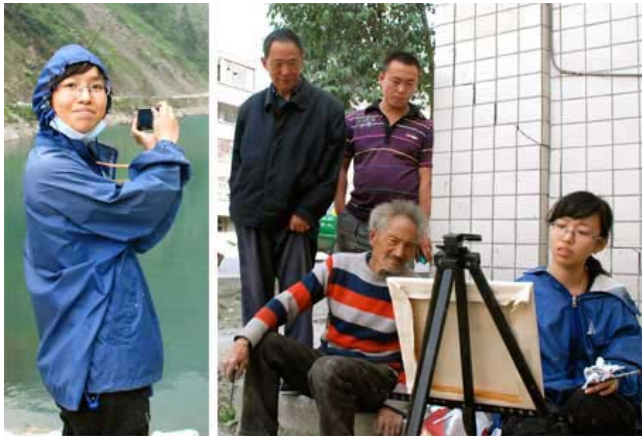
Jessica set out to capture the villagers in their current state, weathered by change, in hopes to remember and celebrate the villagers for their sacrifice.

Jessica's fascination with the ephemeral nature of the Chinese landscape inspired her to apply for the HI youth travel grant to continue her inspirational pursuit at the Wenchuan earthquake site in Sichuan province. While there, she intended to investigate

the process of clean up, demolition, and reconstruction of the roads, cities, and community along with the positive and adverse effects during the "healing" stages of reconstruction.



*End Angered Species*



*Winnie leong*



*Lee Yu*

Jessica set out on her journey, extending her grant benefits to Winnie leong, a Macau artist, and Lee Yu, a fellow artist classmate who had never stepped outside his hometown or school. The three received mixed answers from the locals regarding their travel destination. They were told they could face elemental blockades, road closures, or governmental intervention from military and police. Fortunately no such hindrances materialized, however the bus ride to Wenchuan confirmed the concerns. While clean up and construction efforts have cleared 20 kilometers of roads and tunnels, landslides and falling rock are still an hourly occurrence. Tall mountains plunge down into the violent Ming Jiang River, narrowing passageways. Trucks haul equipment, brick and concrete, and buses transport thousands of construction workers through congested roads as they detour around fallen bridges

and buried roads. Several villages are completely buried by the mountain or submerged in the river, while others are inaccessible by roads. Fortunate towns that braved the earthquake are a shell of what they formerly were. Buildings are abandoned from earthquake damage or remain in various stages of demolition and reconstruction. Massive construction cranes swing overhead, jackhammers deafen the ears, and bulldozers roam the streets.

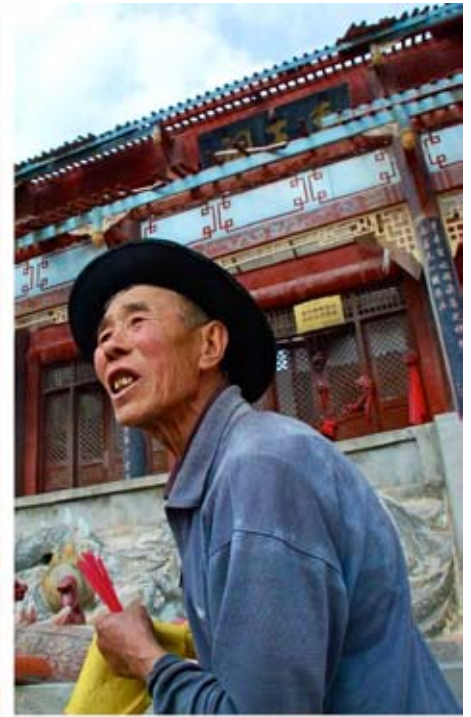
After demolition crews move on to the next project and the dust settles, local women, elderly men, and children pick up, brick by brick, the rubble of someone's home. Because thousands of families remain homeless or in temporary housing, time is short for reconstruction and the preservation of history, culture, and environment becomes an expendable luxury. Here, the line between natural and man-made disaster appear blurred.

The aesthetics of the scenery, surprisingly, does not reflect the energy of the people. Production in factories and exports has stopped, but the government has a redirected focus: clear away to rebuild. Outside construction workers generously commute into Wenchuan for weeks at a time to work. Restaurants and street vendors are busy feeding workers throughout the day. Farmers descend from the mountains



with baskets of cherries to sell in markets on the street. At a Buddhist temple, Jessica received a blessing by the priest outside of his temple with a collapsed roof. He proudly shared stories of the gods and history, yet made no mention of the condition of his temple. An introduction to a professor making rice paper imprints at an ancient tomb led to an invitation to his humble home. Full of pride, he shared history, stories, his personal artwork and found relics of Wenchuan, but made no complaint about the lack of electricity or running water in his apartment building.

Because of Wenchuan's isolated location, social problems can be seen without the government fearing its exposure to the outside world.





Government officials drive overpriced, black SUV's while millions are homeless and walk barefoot. Prostitute salons are a block down from the police station. And beautiful, new schools are built to overshadow the shoddy construction of the "tofu-dregs schoolhouses" that were partly responsible for the deaths of over 5,000 schoolchildren. Corruption remains a disturbing occurrence.

The government is applying a large portion of their funds in promoting Beichuan, the center of the Wenchuan earthquake, severely hit with 80% of buildings collapsed. The city has received the most media and government attention and has become the poster city for the May 12 Wenchuan earthquake. The collapsed Xuankou Middle School was dedicated as the central monument for the one year anniversary of the earthquake. The economy of Wenchuan is entirely reliant

on government support, demolition, reconstruction, food, alcohol, and prostitution. The government plans to generate more revenue by promoting "disaster tourism" through tours, hotels, monuments, and museums.

The government spends massive amounts of money on propaganda to promote civil obedience and nationalism. Police quickly silence protests: the families that lost children from collapsed schoolhouses were paid off to stop demonstrations. Media filtering and geographic isolation easily shield information from leaking in or going outside the mountain walls. Likewise, foreigners are often restricted from several locations in China. Jessica's first attempt to travel through Sichuan months earlier was



*Aftershock*

passive nature is common among many Chinese because their upbringing in such an environment has desensitized their reactive responses. As a foreigner who was newly exposed, Jessica was able to recognizing contradictions and details that Chinese people might not notice or consider relevant.

Jessica collected hundreds of notes, drawings, watercolors, and photographs in the days she spent in Wenchuan. Upon her return, she composed paintings, using her investigative material. The painting process became a way to organize her thoughts and make connections between her visual accounts, personal interactions with people, and outside research. As

a failure—she was kicked off of the bus to Gansu. Foreigners are often denied access to areas of China at the discretion of the police, which the government typically claims are for “safety” reasons. Few foreigners travel to Wenchuan. All the Chinese interviewed had not seen a female foreigner since the earthquake.

Over the last century, China has seen rapid growth, dramatic fluctuations, and uprooting. Generations of Chinese are born in a nation under constant reconstruction, both physically and socially. At times, Jessica would point out shocking ironic details during the trip, to which the Winnie and Lee would always reply, “Yes, but this is China.” A



*Night Fall*

the painting came into clarity so had her understanding of her experience in Wenchuan.

Jessica believes that traveling leads to discovery of new cultures, but discoveries depend on how we engage with the environment and the people, what we take with us, and how we apply it in our daily lives. When Jessica painted watercolors on site in China, she engaged in the community and environment by talking to the individuals who surrounded her. The public got a glimpse of the artistic passions of an outsider, and often were interested enough to stop and observe. Likewise, when Jessica returned to the US and displayed her paintings for others, her paintings transformed into a language for retelling her story and were more than just color and drawings on paper and canvas.



*Snapshot (Observations During a Year Abroad)*



*Detail of Snapshot,  
6 watercolors painting in Wenchuan*