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## Landmark China Conference on East-West Existential Psychology Commemorated

*Kirk J. Schneider, Ph.D., & Ilene Serlin, Ph.D.*

On Friday November 12th, SFPA past president, Ilene Serlin and member, Kirk Schneider described their landmark trip to Nanjing China in April, 2010 for the First International (East-West) Existential Psychology conference. This conference, which was cosponsored by both U.S. and Chinese organizers, marked the first time that some 50 psychologists, therapists, and teachers—and several hundred of their students—gathered formally to discuss the powerful potential of existential psychology to build cultural bridges and transform lives. Dr. Serlin began the evening talk with a slide show and remembrances of the many wondrous sites that she, Dr. Schneider, and others from the U.S. delegation experienced both prior to and during the conference. Among these sites were the Temple of Heaven and surrounding people's park, in which teeming groups of elders danced and sang and played recreational games among themselves and with visitors, such as ourselves, who delighted in their spirit. Other sites noted were Tianamen Square, the Forbidden City, a museum of ancient culture, a couple traditional Chinese operas, the Massacre Museum—a very solemn memorial to the Japanese siege of Nanjing during WWII, and of course, the animated faces and eager spirits of students, faculty, and presenters at Nanjing's Xiaozhuang University where the conference was held.

Following the slide presentation, Kirk Schneider spoke at some length about his sense of bridgebuilding that developed between U.S. and Chinese existential scholars. In particular, he cited the fruitful tension between the Western existential emphasis on

mystery and struggle and the Eastern (particularly, Taoist and Buddhist) stress on harmony and acceptance in the quest for human liberation. He gave examples of this dialectic from stories in Chinese literature, such as that of the ancient Chinese farmer who endures a series of tragedies (losses) with equanimity and grace, and the more recent story by the great early 20th century Chinese philosopher Lu Xun called "The Iron House"—about a slowly suffocating group of people in an iron house with no windows or outlets and the toilsome quandary of the protagonist about whether to pound on the walls of the house to wake the people up (in the hope that they might save themselves) or to do nothing and accept their fate.

Dr. Schneider went on to show the parallels of these stories in the presentations at the conference and the deepening of the existential perspective that resulted. He referred to his opening keynote address of the conference, "Awakening to an Awe-Based Psychology," which is posted at the Society for Humanistic Psychology website (<http://www.societyforhumanisticpsychology.com/spring-summer-2010-1/china-2010>) for more information.

Dr. Serlin then began her talk about the various observations she made of the personal relationships at the conference. Her keynote was on Whole Person Healthcare, and showed how a humanistic approach to the whole person, mind/body and spirit, had similarities to Chinese medicine. She talked

about the importance of art to the Chinese psychologists and philosophers, and especially noted a presentation she moderated called "Demented Art," of Outsider Art by a Chinese former psychiatric patient. Finally, she described her experience doing two 2-day workshops in Beijing and Nanjing, and her surprise at how eager the participants were to step outside traditional roles to find their "authentic selves." She was impressed at how her hosts were trying to find and maintain a balance between their traditions and the fast-changing global landscape, and her notes on the conference are on a blog for Psychology Today at: <http://www.psychologytoday.com/em/41512>.

Others in the audience who had traveled or worked in China shared their experiences, and all noted the timeliness of the global exchange, and fruitful possibilities for the future.

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