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Full Circle: Former Posse Scholar Jia Chen connects to her native China

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ALUMNI

Full Circle

Former Posse Scholar Jia Chen connects to her native China

By Eric Butterman



I've connected with thousands of people since coming to China. You have to remember—you never know when a connection can lead to great things.”

—Jia Chen '06

When Jia Chen '06 moved with her family to New York City, she was enrolled in a middle school where 90 percent of the students were Chinese immigrants and little English was spoken. She spent the next two decades soaking up education and experiences that have prepared her for a career in the country she left behind.

Chen is CEO of WeVenues, a Shanghai marketplace for event space. Like online travel sites that match vacationers with available homes or apartments, WeVenues matches available spaces to anyone looking for a place for a meeting or a conference.

“You have so many commercial spaces that are empty for a decent part of a 24-hour period,” she said from Shanghai. “It doesn't do anyone any good. Bars closed during the day, museums and galleries closed for hours. Imagine appreciating works of art while you're having your event?”

It's the latest stop in a journey that included Chen's stint as part of the first group of Posse New York scholars at Colby, an adventure that took her away from Chinatown as she reached out to get access to the best education possible. “Being a part of [Posse] is one of the things I'm most proud of from my time at Colby,” she said.

Chen crafted an independent major (administrative science with an emphasis on marketing, accounting, and corporate finance), minored in Japanese, studied guitar, and early in her Colby career fell in love with her English literature classes.

Another course, she noted, gave her confidence that carries over today. Since childhood she'd had a speech problem, an impediment that hampered her confidence. “A big part of overcoming it was taking a public speaking course with Professor, [David] Mills,” she said of the late English professor. “With the support I received and hearing my improvement, my confidence just grew.”

Law school at the University of Iowa and stints working as a public defender and court interpreter were followed by work as an attorney for firms in Palo Alto and New York City. Then the tech world beckoned—from China.

Chen had seen many friends leave jobs in the United States to take their experience and education back to China. Her interest piqued, she decided to visit and made the rounds of Beijing, Chengdu, and Hong Kong.

On her first day in Shanghai, Chen met a Bowdoin alumnus on the subway. He invited her to an ex-pat gathering and she met several people who were starting their own companies in China. The next day she landed her first job there, as interim CFO for a startup. A few months later, she launched WeVenues. Starting with 1 million Chinese yuan in seed money (about \$150,000), the company's revenue is growing steadily, and it now has venue hosts in Shanghai, Beijing, Hangzhou, Suzhou, Guangzhou, and Wuhan—and is eyeing non-Chinese markets.

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