Studying family dynamics in rural China has been a preoccupation for Professor Weiguo Zhang for the past twenty years, but working last year in this area with undergraduate students through the Research Opportunity Program (ROP) has served to further flame the passion he has for the topic.

Through a previous project completed in 2005, Zhang had collected data from some 600 families in 10 villages from three separate counties in China. He advised his ROP students to review the background material and look at the questions that were asked of these families, and to select a topic of interest. Matthew Annibale and Adrian Fong opted to focus on marital status influencing a person’s occupation and children financially supporting their parents (respectively). Hailey Ng, the third student who made up Zhang’s ROP team, relied on internet-based research and concentrated on the subject of international adoption. Zhang was very pleased with their work and says it helped to validate the previous research he and his collaborators had done.

The students hailed from various backgrounds and were either somewhat versed in Asian culture or had no frame of reference from which to draw. The data they covered reflected changes in China, such as market reforms and the one-child policy, which both started around the same time in the late 1970s. “Both of these policies actually transform Chinese society and families,” says Zhang. “So the total institutional environment has been shifted, and also the family itself — in terms of giving birth to children being virtually controlled by the state — so we wanted to see how that impacts on families.”

Zhang is clearly enthusiastic about the ROP experience, and feels that it benefits the professor, in terms of reinvigorating their teaching, as well as the student for the research training it provides. “The ROP helps to demystify the research for undergraduate students,” says Zhang. “And some of the questions they ask may lead me to think this might be an interesting perspective that I should look into in the future.”

— Carla DeMarco