From “cupping” to passing out condoms to commercial sex workers, Tulane students flew across the world to experience a different side of public health.

This past July, six undergraduate and three graduate public health students traveled over seven thousand miles to Shanghai, China with Dr. Stranova, a professor at Tulane’s Graduate School of Public Health.

Students took a class on the health system of China at Fudon University – China’s equivalent to Harvard. The mornings were spent in a classroom, but the afternoons were filled with trips to different hospitals, clinics, and institutions such as the CDC.

“It was really fascinating to get an insider tour of the Shanghai CDC,” says Autumn Coleman, an undergraduate.

During one visit to a hospital, the students were able to witness Traditional Chinese Medicine in action on one of their own. Mary Clare Patterson, an undergraduate, made a grandiose statement about wanting to experience the act of cupping.

Upon overhearing this, Jimmy Grotting, a graduate student, asked the Traditional Chinese Medicine doctor to perform a demonstration.
The students excitedly watch as a Traditional Chinese Medicine doctor performs “cupping” on Mary Clare Patterson.

Cupping is a form of traditional Chinese therapy to promote overall health, as well as treat certain diseases. It is used to cure a broad range of illnesses from pneumonia to blood disorders to joint or muscle pain. With the application of fire, the cup acts as a vacuum on the skin and thus bolsters circulation.

After visits to many health sites, the students learned cupping, though traditional, is still widely used in Chinese medicine. The students’ ability to see Chinese healthcare first hand was an added engaging approach to the class that they enjoyed.

During the second week, the undergraduates were grouped with two Fudon students and placed at a particular health center or hospital. This was the first time Dr. Stranova had incorporated a service learning component into the program. He liked to refer to the undergraduates as his “guinea pigs.”

One service learning group of four students visited seven neighborhood sites of commercial sex work alongside the instruction of the hospital’s Head of Preventative Medicine Department. She had developed trusting relationships with the sex workers and their managers, a practice that proved beneficial for their sexual health and for monitoring rates of STIs.

“The commercial sex workers were so responsive to the condoms and the pamphlets on STI prevention,” says Amy Adams. “It was an unforgettable experience to have the
opportunity to enter into their sphere and learn from them. The encounter was eye-opening and showed a different, but important aspect about health in China."