Grateful for Friendships and Opportunities

Elaine Lingying Zong, ’98

Elaine Lingying Zong’s Time At Booth Opens Global Doors

“Why is business school only two years? Why not make it longer?” quipped Elaine Lingying Zong, ’98.

In all sincerity, Zong credits her two years at Booth as being among the best of her life—not only because they helped transform her career, but also because they allowed her to meet and bond with classmates who still remain among her closest friends.

These relationships are one of the driving forces for Zong’s extensive involvement with Booth today. In addition to serving on the school’s Global Advisory Board, Zong is co-chairing her 20-year reunion this year. She is also co-sponsoring Booth’s historic “Meet Us at a Million” Challenge this spring. She and other alumni have united to give $1 million to challenge the alumni community to give back—with all contributions before June 1, 2018 being matched one-to-one.

“I give back because I feel proud of the school, and I want to help future students have the same life-changing experience I had,” Zong said. “My participation in the ‘Meet Us at a Million Challenge’ will help the school to offer the world’s best education and foster future business leaders around the world. I can say the way I think about life and investments has a lot to do with my education at Booth.”

Prior to studying at Booth, Zong worked in a public service role in China’s new capital markets at the President’s Office of the Shenzhen Stock Exchange. Interested in becoming an investment banker, Zong began her studies at Booth in 1996.

Her time at Booth and in Chicago wasn’t without its challenges at first. She didn’t speak English well and initially struggled to understand her professors. She didn’t know anyone when she arrived in Chicago and quickly learned about the city’s long, bitter winters. Yet Zong credits the friendships she made and the experiences she had at Booth as making her time at the school one of the best times of her life.

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Zong has professional relationships with some of her friends from Booth and is in discussion with them about a few business partnerships. She invested in US-listed Concord Medical, which was cofounded by Steve Sun, ’97, and referred Adam Sun, ’98, to become the CFO of the company. The three of them also were on the same board.

“We help each other, even today,” she said. “We do business together, have fun together, and even have mini reunions from time to time.”
Zong’s time at Booth also changed her career path, for which she is enormously grateful.

“What I have today has a lot to do with my education,” she said. “The school changed the way I think about things—methodology, critical thinking, logic, and so on. I benefit a lot from that and owe much of what I have to Booth.”

Zong gives to other university causes. She recently made a gift to the University of Chicago Center in Hong Kong, which will help fund capital costs, activities, and programming at the center. In addition, she is a valued member of Booth’s Global Advisory Board (GAB), where she provides strategic direction for the school and helps enhance its reputation in key markets around the globe. Zong is proud to be a part of the GAB, particularly as Booth’s presence and reputation in Hong Kong and Asia burgeon.

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“You feel that you are closer to the school. You get more updates; you see things from ideas to reality; you see the physical building [Center in Hong Kong] going up,” she said. “No other experience can bring you a similar kind of sense of achievement. It will be there forever. What else can you achieve? It’s great.”

Zong also noted the value added by alumni from different parts of the world. “There’s a great difference between the United States and the rest of the world, especially Asia. Now we have more students from Asia going to Booth, and we have more alums coming back to Asia after getting their MBA. I feel that global alums can do a lot more to the benefit of the school and make a bigger impact on the school,” Zong said. “Here in China, I believe our alums are much more active, and I hear a lot of success stories from Booth. The branding here is very good, and I feel that message should be brought back to the school. We also have a stage for a prominent global branding in Hong Kong.”

Zong began giving to Booth in 2005, when she gave her first Annual Fund gift of $500. Along with making contributions to other areas of the school, she has increased her giving to the Booth Annual Fund over the years and hopes her fellow alumni will join her in making a gift to the Annual Fund in honor of the “Meet Us at a Million” Challenge.

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Zong is thrilled to be a part of the challenge and hopes it will inspire alumni to be philanthropic in other ways. “I think our alumni could do more, and this is a great initiative to encourage them to do that,” she said. “If we could not only raise a high-dollar amount but also increase our percentage of participation, then that would be very exciting.”

As Zong continues to reach out to alumni from her class about attending their 20-year reunion and/or participating in giving back, she noted that it has been particularly enjoyable reconnecting with old classmates. “Even if they’re unable to make it to the reunion, it feels good to be reconnected. Being part of the reunion committee has been a good excuse to reach out to everyone, and everyone has been excited to hear from each other.”

In addition, Zong has contacted alumni who previously have not been contacted by the school. Through her outreach, Zong has informed alumni—particularly those who have not thought to give before being contacted—that every gift counts.

“Sometimes alumni may feel that their small contribution isn’t meaningful, but I think they need to know that a small contribution is valuable and that it will grow with them,” she said. “It’s good for alumni to realize that all contributions matter and broader participation means a lot.”