

September 12, 2010

Dear Parents and friends of Carleton Tianjin:

I am pleased to report that all 24 students, or Dragon Riders, have safely arrived in China and we have had a most wonderful day in Beijing with some events which I still don't believe happened. I am writing them down so that you and I can establish evidence that miracles are possible.

We are residing at the elegant garden hotel on the campus of Tsinghua University, one of the top two universities in China. I met the last group of students at the airport around midnight. A Chinese national TV station broadcasted a part of my seven-part my talk on Laozi (founder of Taoism) on the first morning of our adventure in China. It happened to be the first lecture I would give students, and I used this opportunity to ask students to stay in their rooms to watch this TV show. It was perfect timing. I told the students I was not on Chinese TV every day, so this incredible timing was a fortunate coincidence. After watching my TV lecture, we walked across a beautiful street to an island which was a Qin Dynasty princess' garden. On our way, we saw willows touching the water full of lotus and weeds, and trees arched over our heads. You can't believe what we next saw on this serene, quiet island: Tens of older couples were dancing social dance as morning exercise. They took it so seriously and yet so playfully that a few of our own students could not help jumping to dance around from the corridors linking the pavilions. The east and the west, the young and the old merged so well, just like the classical pavilions and modern skyscrapers profiled against blue skies.

Then we walked towards the center of the island, where stood the statue of Confucius. Confucius has been a dominant philosopher of China, contrasted against Laozi, about whom I had just talked on TV. Confucius emphasized strict social structure, while Laozi desired natural and harmonious life. My lecture about Confucius lasted more than an hour, and then we had a lively discussion with both Chinese and English. I even did not try to provoke a comparison between strict Confucius and relaxed Laozi—we will save this debate for Nankai University in Tianjin.

During the noon hour, some students visited Zhongguan Cun, the Chinese Silicon Valley. I admire their energy and enthusiasm. They want to see ancient China and modern China. I know they are comparing China with the United States and will form very intelligent opinions about the two countries. History will prove the youth who have knowledge about contrasting cultures will create a peaceful and harmonious world. Some historians say there have always been wars when a new superpower has emerged from the horizon, but maybe historians will be wrong this time because they do not know the fate of human beings will be in the hands of a new generation who has mastered different cultures and languages.

In the afternoon, we visited the Summer Palace, the largest imperialist garden palace in the world. We walked through the grandeur of the imperial pagodas, temples, courtyards, and corridors (the longest one in the world, with colored paintings on the beams). And suddenly, we saw a lake lying inside the garden palace. The students study in the state of Ten Thousand Lakes but were aghast by this gigantic lake inside the empress dowager's private garden. She took money from the navy budget and built this garden for her own birthday. We joked and compared our own birthdays with this most valuable birthday gift ever.

In the evening, we had a banquet together. We tasted Peking Duck and many other dishes—I will let the students tell you more about their food adventures. We reviewed the day's events, and we did not believe we did so much. Tomorrow we will visit Tiananmen Square, the Forbidden City, Beihai Park (another imperial park), and downtown Beijing. The day after tomorrow, we will go to the Great Wall. Our study will soon begin in Tianjin's Nankai University, where the students will have four hours of intensive Chinese in the morning with carefully chosen instructors. In the afternoon, they will learn about elements of Chinese culture such as calligraphy and Chinese painting, Peking Opera, tai chi, and martial arts, all with well-known masters. I will teach a course called Chinese Civilization, which is the only course taught in English, but I will insert a lot of Chinese phrases, poems, and quotations. As a matter of fact, our visits to historical and natural sceneries are part of the class. When we talk about the Qin Dynasty's accomplishments, we will see the Great Wall in person. When we talk about the emperors and concubines, we will see their palaces. Tianjin's former colonies from different European countries unfold the architectural variety and historical humiliation. Modern history? No problem. Tiananmen Square will stand there to tell its story about a nation struggling yet proud.

I thank parents of the students, my colleagues in Off-Campus Studies Office and Department of Asian Languages and Literatures, and all our friends, for all they have done to make this program possible. You can believe, we will ride the dragon well, learn the dragon tongue diligently, and fly with the dragon to a new horizon. Thank you for your support.

Sincerely,

Qiguang Zhao