

September 11, 2008

Dear Parents and Friends of Carleton in Tianjin,

The dragon has landed and all the riders, 26 members of Carleton College now in Tianjin, have arrived in Beijing safely. As I went through roll call the Beijing Airport, the huge lounge echoed with the blips of “dao!” (Here!). The following days have been full of cultural adventure.

We saw the Bird’s Nest and Water Cube; both became the center of global TV audiences during the Olympics. In Beijing, we stayed in Tsinghua University, one of the two most prestigious universities in China. Our hotel is located by the beautiful Lotus Lake, described in an essay found in all Chinese school textbooks. We had the first class on the island located in this lake. Standing in front of the statue of Confucius, I gave a lecture on Chinese Civilization. Surrounded by lotus, bushes, and peacocks, our students learned the basic principles of Confucius in both Chinese and English.

The students have daily homework assignments during our pre-school tour; they should write down three sentences and ten phrases in Chinese every day, collected from the street signs and cultural inscriptions on the ancient sites. Upon our arrival at Nankai University after, our tour in Beijing, Chengde, and Inner Mongolia, the students will also turn in two short papers about their first impressions, one in Chinese and another in English. This homework will link our extensive travel in Northern China to the intensive studies of Chinese language and Chinese culture in Nankai University.

After the class, we visited Summer Palace, where there was too much for our eyes to take. One of our students who walked by me could not stop giggling when we were navigating through the Long Corridor (supposedly longest one in the world) flanked by towering temples on hill and dragon boats on lake. I asked the student why she was laughing. Pointing at the Buddhist tower on left and the lake on the right, she said, “Endless surprises.” I have heard people commentating, sighing, or crying at an unordinary scene, but this was the first time I heard somebody laughing at the beauty. May we hear more such laughter from the students, mixed with their more and more fluent Chinese.

Today, the students visited the Tiananmen Square and the Forbidden City. Before we left Tsinghua University for the Forbidden City, we had a class in a pavilion on a hill overlooking the mountains on the West and the city skyline on the East. Here, we read Marco Polo’s description of the Forbidden City in the Yuan Dynasty. I assigned two extra pieces of homework for the day. First, the students were asked to compare Marco Polo’s Forbidden City of 700 years ago with the Forbidden City they observed at the present; and second, they drew a map of the Tiananmen Square with Chinese place names.

Tomorrow, we will climb the Great Wall at Jinshanling, where a piece of the Great Wall magnificently winds through high mountains, far away from Beijing’s crowded tourists. Then we will visit Chengde and Inner Mongolia, where we will meet local herdsmen, students, and cadres.

September 14 is the Chinese Moon Festival, a time of family reunion similar to America’s Thanksgiving. In the center of modern Beijing, still filled with the Olympic enthusiasm, this new family of ours has heard the ancient call of the Mongolian Steppe under the serene moon light. More excitement, inspiration, and learning opportunities are

blinking over the moonlit horizon. We will answer the ancient call with thorough preparation, strong local support, and well built imagination.

I will write you more. Happy Moon Festival!

Qiguang Zhao