

2006 Freeman China TRIP Faculty Assessment Report

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OVERVIEW

The Department of East Asian Languages and Cultures' (EALC) fourth language and cultural TRIP to China took place during the 2006 Winter Break under a Freeman grant that extended a previous funding by the foundation to Connecticut College's Travel, Research and Immersion Program (TRIP). A total of ten students currently studying the yearlong elementary or intermediate Chinese courses (i.e., CHI 101-102 and CHI 201-202) participated in this year's event, which was designed as a mid-year co-curricular link to help to enhance the students' language abilities and cultural understanding of China. Students achieved this goal by exploring China's diverse geography and rapidly modernizing socio-cultural scenes over a period of sixteen days under a Chinese-only language pledge. By the time the 11-person group returned, they had accumulated 2,300 miles of domestic travel by multiple means of transportation, set foot in seven cities located in three dialectal regions, implemented 8 of the 10 on-site language exercises that were extended from their classroom learning, and visited and interacted with an assortment of natural landscapes, historic sites, people and social constructs. Built on the groundwork that the previous three China TRIPs (2001, 2002, & 2004) have firmly established, the 2006 TRIP not only broadened the participants' scope of exploration and discovery, but also succeeded in shifting the focus of immersive language and cultural inquiries from predominantly top-down assignments to a mixture of faculty-assigned tasks and student-initiated projects. Although many of these projects will not be completed until the end of the spring semester, judging from the quality of in-progress works (student evaluation questionnaire, thank-you letters, and one slide presentation) and the promoted language proficiency attested to on both the first- and second-year groups, I am proud to report that the 2006 Freeman China TRIP has achieved many of the goals it set out to accomplish. A pedagogically well-tested framework has thus emerged for future foreign language TRIPs at Conn to refer to if not utilize. Pending the successful implementation of yet another Japan TRIP this year, we at EALC have once again placed ourselves in a strong position to contribute substantially to supporting the Dean of the Faculty's call to seek with foresight the perennial endowment for Conn's TRIP program.

A MID-YEAR MEANDEING ITINERARY

In sketching the blueprint of our itinerary, one that would facilitate the procurement of a balanced set of stereotype-defying AND stereotype-confirming impressions and findings about China won out because of its pedagogical effectiveness in meeting the academic backgrounds and cross-cultural expectations of the participating *subjects* and reflecting the vastness and diverseness of the *object* of visit. A route was therefore selected that originated in the capital city of Beijing, but ambitiously spanned the northern, central western, and southern territories of China (s. *Freeman China TRIP 2006* for complete itinerary at www.conncoll.edu/academics/departments/eastasian/Itinerary2006.pdf). In specific,

rather than delving into the more internationalized and therefore culturally less challenging Greater Yangtze Delta area centered in Shanghai, we turned westward after Beijing to Xi'an, the ancient capital of both the Qin (221-207 B.C.) and Tang (A.D. 618-907) dynasty, and onwards to Chengdu – two centers of pre-modern civilization that were also covered in TRIP 2002. Without a full third week to avail for a sojourn to Tibet as in 2002, we however squeezed in a three-day cruise along the soon-to-be-flooded Three Gorges section of the Yangtze River all the way down to the construction site of the Dam, before heading down to Cantonese-speaking Guangzhou and Hong Kong to conclude our tour. By choosing breadth over depth, we managed to expose ourselves to a few of China's many layers of civilizations that were unfamiliar to most in the group, as well as regional variations evidenced in such aspects as climates, ecology, dialects, architecture, and stages of modernization. The adoption of a mid-year timeframe over the cold January month instead of one in March or early summer – decision spearheaded by considerations of partaker availability within an academic year as well as pedagogical advantages upon returning – seemed harsh to handle at first but eventually well understood and agreed upon. As a result, most students witnessed their mind-frame open up in the course of the journey's many built-in twists and turns, despite the rush, and reported to have better contextualized their China-related knowledge against the supreme standards set under Beijing's linguistic and political lead.

ACTIVITIES, TASKS, AND PROJECTS

The educational core of the 2006 China TRIP was a conglomerate of 22 outing/sightseeing events, 8 on-site language tasks, and 10 post-TRIP academic and/or artistic projects, bolstered by the Language Pledge that was required to be observed at all times. Overwhelming as they might look, these language and cultural exercises served not so much as a list of to-do items to check off on a trip to a foreign land, but as a chain of paths leading to the discovery of exotic objects, alternative life styles, different perspectives and values, and eventually previously under-explored innate qualities of the discoverer him/herself. Thus, perhaps during moments of hiking and conducting interviews on the Great Wall, or when comparing college life with students of Northwest University before visiting the site of terra cotta warriors together, or when toiling to get one's final essay and slide show done by adding authentic textual and visual information collected firsthand in China, it would dawn on us that the slope of the section of the Great Wall that we climbed was too steep for hefty-duty bricks to be carried up there without a near slave-like class of workers to supply the labor; that to enrich the college education of a Chinese student from a medium-income family with a supplementary trip during a break like the one we were granted was a concept not only not thought about, but downright unrealizable; and that our intellectual and/or cultural curiosity could be so much more reasonably satisfied than for our language abilities to be significantly improved, so much so that to have just "been there done that" in a foreign country with no follow-up language work usually entails deflated enthusiasm rather than promoted proficiency.

Insights as such are what I expect to see lining the many works to be submitted to fulfill the students' requirement of participation. Thank-you letters and evaluations offer them the opportunity to reflect or comment in length what might prove to be a life-altering experience, whereas our on-line gallery

(www.conncoll.edu/academics/departments/eastasian/TRIPchina2006.html), put together with great expertise and dedication by freshman assistant Tianyi Xu '09), photo exhibits by Chinghar Leung (*Glimpses of China*, March 30, 2006, in Unity House) and George Fernandez (scheduled for next year in the Shain Library), and slide shows given by Hanh Pham (Feb. 13, in Cro's Nest in English) and the five second-year students (A. Gundry; H. Munro; C. Schlegel; Y. Ueki; C. Young-Fields: all to be given in Chinese on May 10th) present personal or group memories in a visually meaningful way supplemented with oral or textual narration. On the text-intensive side, the five second-year students' semester-end essays (600 Chinese characters long), and David Urbaneja Furelos' TRIP diary (www.conncoll.edu/academics/departments/eastasian/UrbanejaDIARY.pdf), will share their observations and reflections and showcase their progress in prose writing in a medium that was one of the central purposes of this very TRIP they made.

PURPOSE AND PROSPECT

Even though our comfort level had to be compromised by many built in or circumstantial challenges such as the icy coldness in Northern China, limited foreign exchange accessibility, second-hand smoking in our hard-sleeper night train, unintelligible regional speeches, the constantly on-the-go travel arrangements, and the sometimes handicapping Language Pledge, in retrospect and all things considered, we managed to attain the educational goals we set before departure and punched more than just a few notches on our personal growth belt. I attribute the success of this fourth China TRIP to the all-aroundness of its design, a central principle that was adopted due to recognition of the pre-SATA, pre-Study Away nature of EALC TRIPs and the pre-major status of their participants. Only a highly inclusive scheme as such could support a student travel group featuring two different language proficiency levels, a range of interest from language to international relations to art history, and thinking modes characteristic of data-sensitive inductionists to rule-abiding deductionists. In a liberal arts environment where the value of lifelong study and breadth of knowledge are dearly cherished, even with such a small group of students it is encouraging to see independent ways of pursuits being developed that are not necessarily regulatable through administrative policies. A position at the center of the spectrum thus holds them together well. Some of these students will definitely return to China for their study away semesters, whereas some may realize that the typological remoteness of the Chinese language and culture may not fit into their intellectual rubrics seamlessly. The purpose of holding a pre-major foreign language TRIP, unlike that affiliated with an upper-level seminar, is not to induce the production of ground-breaking research topics but to create an inductive environment for potential majors to make curricular hypotheses and test them in the target land. A mere 2-3 week period is indeed too short for in-depth exploration, but serious and accountable students like those in this China group will take advantage of this opportunity to search inside their souls. With continued hard work and on-site faculty guidance, what they experienced briefly will bear the hope to be put to meaningful perspectives afterwards and serve as the stir of their following academic life.