

Remarks on Yale-PKU

by Kate Aitken

May 18, 2007

Good morning President Xu, President Levin, Dean Salovey, Vice President Bruce Alexander, student and faculty delegates from Yale University, distinguished guests and friends.

Ladies and gentlemen, it is my pleasure and distinct privilege to address you this morning. By inviting me to speak before you, Peking University has given me the opportunity not only to share my views of the University, but also to profoundly thank the University on behalf of the students in the Yale-PKU program for providing us with such an invaluable educational and cultural experience.

The highlights of the Yale-PKU program are threefold. First, the program affords Yale students the chance to study at the top university in China and one of the most highly ranked universities in the world.

We have debated the intricacies of Chinese financial reform with a well-traveled Beida economist, taken a seminar with China's most famous comparative philosophy professor, and held intimate master's teas with guests ranging from a Nobel-prize winner, to the first foreign curator of the Forbidden City, to the Trumbull College alum and TIME Magazine journalist who broke the story of SARS in China.

Second, the Yale-PKU program enables students to study Chinese, regardless of prior language experience, while also taking classes with Beida faculty and working alongside Beida students in the cooperative learning environment of a seminar. Yale and Beida students have worked side by side surveying segments of the local Beijing population as part of a social science research class, and wandered through caves in Dunhuang exploring the artistic wonders of the Silk Road firsthand with a celebrated Yale art historian.

Third, the program is the only one on campus to house foreign students and their Chinese counterparts in the same dormitory, allowing students to engage in a truly immersive cultural exchange that transcends academic, social, and linguistic differences. We go out to program-funded family dinners, play bilingual Botticelli, and teach each other Chinese and English slang.

But, as with any truly vibrant memory, our experience here at Beida is more than the sum of its parts. The reality of living and working beside China's most brilliant students – some of whom scored highest on the university admissions test in their province – cannot be adequately summarized in a speech, a newspaper article, or a program advertisement. Nor can the firsthand experience of exploring China – a country home to centuries of rich history, the world's fastest growing economy, and the site of the next Olympic games – be properly expressed to those who have not had that experience themselves.

While many of my Yale colleagues on the program have fairly extensive prior experience with Chinese language and society, I am one of the students for whom the Yale-PKU program serves

as a veritable gateway into China, exposing me to a wealth of traditions and cultural perspectives I would never have experienced otherwise.

Having only four months of introductory Chinese language study under my belt, I came to Beijing uncertain of what I would find. The prospect of spending half a year in China, while daunting, was a deliberate step outside of my comfort zone – one that I took willingly, if not altogether confidently.

But Yale and Beida are right to encourage study abroad and cultural interchange like that facilitated by the Yale-PKU program. This semester has been my most enriching since I matriculated at Yale, and I truly would have considered my Yale education – world-class though it may be – to have been incomplete without this semester at Beida.

My first encounters with Chinese culture in the beginning of the semester were sometimes surprising and often amusing, but always an incomparable firsthand learning experience. It is upon these experiences that I came to build a true understanding of and appreciation for Chinese society.

In those initial weeks, I also came to truly appreciate the deep warmth and generosity of spirit that our Beida classmates share with us. Our Beida friends were eager to share their traditions, whether eating dumplings and setting off fireworks to celebrate the Lantern Festival, or attending a Peking Opera performance.

Together, we have explored the remotest regions of China, from visiting high schools at the Vietnamese border in Yunnan province, to learning Chinese songs and riding camels through the Inner Mongolian desert. Our Beida tongxue have corrected our Chinese grammar, joked around with us in the common room late at night, and engaged us in open discussions of politics and education, of personal relationships and social awareness.

Over the May break, I was able to travel with one of our Beida classmates, Xie Yu Hong, to his hometown of Shima just outside the port city of Xiamen. We met his incredibly gracious and hospitable family, visited old teachers and classmates at his high school, and toured the sites of Xiamen, arguably the most beautiful city I've visited in China.

Yu Hong's desire to share with us not only his academic life, but his broader life outside of Beida impressed me deeply. And he is not alone – all of our Beida roommates have journeyed with us outside of Beijing, taking time out of their busy academic lives to explore the beauty and historical richness of their country with us.

In their manifold capacities as scholars, roommates, cultural facilitators and national ambassadors, the Beida classmates we have come to call our friends are their University's greatest asset, and we as Yale students in turn thank Beida from the bottom of our hearts for sharing with us their most precious resource of all – their students.

Thank you.