LETTERS TO PARENTS

of the

Students of the

2014 “Chinese Bridge” Summer Camp

for American High School Students in China

sponsored by the

Confucius Institute at San Francisco State University

and

Hanban/Confucius Institute Headquarters

Written by

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INTRODUCTION

The following pages contain letters written to the parents of a group of twenty-eight high school students who participated in 2014 “Chinese Bridge” Summer Camp in China for American High School Students, a sixteen-day short-term study abroad summer camp experience in Beijing and Changsha, Hunan Province, China from July 16 through August 1, 2014. The letters were sent via email every three days or so to inform parents of their children’s activities. The program was sponsored by the Hanban/Confucius Institute Headquarters of the Chinese Government and was conducted by the Confucius Institute of San Francisco State University.

The students who participated in the program ranged in age from fourteen to seventeen, and in grade level from entering freshmen/women to rising seniors. They came from twelve different schools throughout northern California, from as far south as Monterey and as far north as Redding. They were united in their interest in improving their knowledge of Chinese language and culture. Throughout their sixteen days in China they forged unique bonds of camaraderie and shared learning as they confronted on a daily basis interesting challenges in the classroom, on field trips, at the dining table, on home visits, in museums, on playing fields, in marketplaces, and in a variety of other settings—all as a part of the unique cultural experience of operating in a different linguistic and cultural framework provided by their short-term study abroad experience.

To a person, these admirable young people responded to challenges as inquiring, mature young adults. There were no high school cliques formed, no in-group/out-group behaviors; only mature and sensible reflections on new and interesting experiences. I was in awe of them daily. They taught me and the other chaperones; it was not the other way around. These young people comprised a rare and wonderful group, and it was a privilege to work with them as their group leader. Perhaps we all caught “lightning in a bottle” during the trip. It was a sad moment when we said goodbye on our return to SFO, for we had formed strong relationships in our short time together.

We had a strong team of chaperones that included Peggy Kao from Confucius Classroom at Western Sierra Collegiate Academy in Rocklin, CA; Xin Chen from Berkeley High School in Berkeley, CA; and Lois Gao from the Confucius Institute at San Francisco State University. Overall leadership and coordination was provided by the team of the Confucius Institute at San Francisco State University.

It is my hope that the letters that follow offer a small glimpse of this rich learning enterprise.

David Hemphill
Group Leader
2014 Chinese Bridge Summer Camp
Professor and Chair
Department of Equity, Leadership Studies, and Instructional Technologies
Graduate College of Education
**Late Saturday Night, July 19, 2014**

Dear Parents of 2014 "Chinese Bridge" Summer Campers,

I am writing to report that we safely arrived late this morning (Saturday, July 19) in Changsha, Hunan after a smooth and pleasant flight from Beijing.

It has been an eventful few days so far, and I wanted to take a moment to write and give you some flavor of the experiences your kids are having. First I want to say thank you for sharing such wonderful young people with us. We could not have asked for a better group. They are sharp, witty, responsible, patient, and anxious to take in all that China has to offer. All four of us as chaperones—Lois, Peggy, Xin, and I—are extraordinarily proud of them, and you should be as well.

We arrived the evening of Thursday July 17 in smog-shrouded Beijing. We were taken by bus after baggage claim to a quite decent medium high-end restaurant for a late dinner. There the kids all had their first chance to practice serving each other food and tea and other requisite Chinese table manners. We then went to Beijing Royal school, where all were assigned to dorm-style rooms for a brief two-night stay. The girls were fortunate to be in a building with two-person rooms that had their own private Western-style bathrooms. The boys (plus your humble correspondent) were assigned to a dorm with a set of common facilities at the end of the hall, including a shared shower room, sink room, and toilet room (with Asian toilets on the floor in stalls, where one must squat). Rooms were clean though spartan.

The next day (Friday, July 18) many of us woke up early from jet lag. Some of found the school's track and did some running or struck up impromptu soccer games. After breakfast there was an opening ceremony for the summer camp (the first of many such opening and closing events in China, one soon learns). The kids were extremely patient and well-behaved—remarkably so, even during an interminable lecture about the development of the Chinese foreign language testing system that would have tried the patience of many of my own educational colleagues with PhDs. I was super proud of the kids. Then in the afternoon we went over to the headquarters of Hanban, the overall agency sponsor of the Summer Camp program, and the kids enjoyed experiencing a series of quite innovative hands-on museum displays of Chinese cultural and linguistic history and heritage. Following that we visited the Imperial College and the Confucius Temple, both quite lovely temple-like settings that memorialize respect for learning in ancient, imperial Chinese culture. The area is also located in a traditional "hutong" section of Beijing, so the kids got a chance to see a fast-disappearing old-Beijing life style.

Quite early this morning (Saturday, July 19) at 5:15 AM (guess who had to wake up your children at 4:30?), we boarded buses for the Beijing airport and flew down to Changsha, the capital of Hunan, our major base of operations for the next week. Our hosts here are Hunan University, and are quite well organized. The university campus is quite beautiful, park-like on a mountainside, with beautiful traditional Chinese buildings, trees, and ponds surrounding where we are staying. The weather is super humid (it is, after all south central China in July, but
bearable). The food is an improvement over Beijing--buffet style in the hotel, and quite good. We had (you guessed it), another opening ceremony in the early afternoon. Two of our group, William Bogdan (representing the students) and I (representing the chaperones) were asked to give some opening remarks. We both decided to do so in Chinese, which seemed to please our hosts. We are one of three groups in Changsha--the other two groups are from San Diego and the Seattle area. This evening we walked down to the Xiang River and witnessed a spectacular fireworks display. Apparently Hunan is known throughout China as the best producer of fireworks, and that was certainly evident from what we witnessed--truly the most impressive such event that I have ever seen in my life. Many of your kids no doubt will have images to share with you.

That's it for now. Again, thanks for sharing these wonderful young people with us. They are a well-motivated, impressive, high-energy, caring, thoughtful bunch. I am very proud to be associated with each and every one of them.

On the communications front, I now have a local SIM card in my iPhone. If you need to reach me in an emergency, my number is:

+86-187-0132-1692

Also, since each of your kids now has a hotel room here in Hunan, Lois Gao is sending you their room numbers and instructions for how to call them in a separate message.

Best wishes,

David Hemphill
Group Leader
2014 "Chinese Bridge" Summer Camp
Tuesday Evening, July 22, 2014

Dear Parents,

Here is another report on your kids’ activities in China. I hope you continue to find this sort of information interesting. These fine young people continue to be a source of joy and wonder to all four of us chaperones, as well as to our host colleagues and volunteers from Hunan University. The kids have formed an easy cohort bond and truly display warm positive regard, affection, and concern for one another. You would be so proud of them, as are we. They are giving a superb account of contemporary American youth.

Sunday, July 20

The day’s agenda involved a large dose of culture and history, followed by some traditional Chinese stress release therapy. In the morning we had a lecture by a Hunan University faculty member on the ten most significant folk arts of Hunan Province. As one who is deeply enamored of folk art, I found the lecture fascinating. The folk arts discussed ranged from folk opera to music, dance, silk embroidery, carving, and other indigenous forms. The presenter engaged the kids by asking lots of questions and awarding candy bars for correct answers. As always, the SF kids were the most vocal and garnered the most honors.

In the afternoon we were taken to two important historical museums. At the first museum we saw important relics recovered from an ancient Changsha burial site from the Han Dynasty (around 206 BC-220 AD), including some of the silk tapestries that we learned about in the morning. At the second museum, called the “Bamboo Museum,” we learned about the importance of bamboo as a medium for recording vital textual information prior to the invention of paper in China. Again, around the time of the Han Dynasty, important data for running local government (military records, taxation data, household information, etc.) were all recorded on small bamboo staves around a foot in length that were bound together with strings into “books.” These were discovered in 1996 during excavation of a local building site. The museum also had some impressive Shang dynasty (1600 BC-1046 BC) bronze pieces on display that had been unearthed locally. It reminds one that Chinese cultural history in this region goes back very, very far.

In the evening two of our local Hunan University student volunteers offered to lead the kids and chaperones on an expedition to get foot massages, for which Hunan is famous. Since the foot has more nerves than any other part of the body, there is a long tradition in China of therapeutic, acupressure-based foot massage practice to relieve stress. 25 of the 28 students decided to go along, so we went off on a bus ride to a nearby shopping street. The kids thoroughly enjoyed it, and afterwards we stopped for shopping (snacks and knickknacks) and then headed back to campus to turn in.
Monday, July 21

This was a class day. In the morning there were 3 hours of Chinese language instruction. The kids were divided into 4 levels of proficiency based upon a placement test that had been given on the day of our arrival. I reviewed the test and took it myself, and found it to be a reasonably well-constructed assessment tool for placement purposes. The other chaperones and I circulated among the different classes to observe instruction. The kids appeared to be responding well. We were offered the opportunity to make comments at noontime, so we suggested that there be expanded opportunities for our kids to practice their Chinese more in the 2 hours of afternoon class. There remains in China the tendency for teachers to lecture more than might be desirable from a US language learning perspective. Fortunately, the teachers and their coordinator welcomed our collegial input, and adjustments were made.

In the evening the kids returned to class for a presentation on Chinese folk songs. The purpose was to offer them options for songs that they could prepare for the final performance at the closing session of the camp. They were encouraged to select a traditional Hunanese courting song, which several of them will perform in special authentic folk art costumes that will be personally tailored for them by local artisans.

Food note. There has been ample and high quality food available for the kids in Hunan. Each of the three daily meals is taken at the hotel dining room buffet. It consists of easily 15 to 20 dishes at each sitting, with separate additional small tables of salads and meats (e.g. duck, steamed chicken). There are always numerous vegetable preparations (turnips, Chinese broccoli, Napa cabbage, tofu) and fish, in addition to pork, other meat dishes, rice, and noodles. There is mild spiciness to some of the dishes, though not as much as I expected. In the morning in addition to the buffet there is a “noodle bar” where one can order the local rice noodle specialty as a soup from a chef in two widths (wide or narrow), and then season it with a range of local condiments. There are also multiple forms of steamed breads (man tou) to take from a steamer in the morning. It turns out that Hunanese cuisine is quite excellent. Many of the kids have also discovered local ice cream shops and many other tasty Chinese junk foods along the way. C’est la vie.

Laundry note. At first we thought laundry here would be free. Then we learned otherwise, but assumed the cost would still be reasonable. However, upon arrival it turned out that the hotel’s prices were on the order of a 5-star hotel in a major city. That was untenable, so with Lois Gao’s clever initiation, our local program coordinator Dr. Zhou negotiated a uniquely Chinese solution to our conundrum. He arranged with the lady who is the caretaker of one of the women’s dorms a few blocks away to take in our students’ laundry at a reasonable price, wash it in the dorm washing machines, hang it out to dry, fold it (sort of), and have it ready for pickup the same day. All for the price of 10 yuan (just under 2 bucks) for a full bag of dirty clothes. I tried the system out today and it works. So, laundry problem solved: dorm caretaker lady makes extra money; students get clothes washed dirt cheap (pun intended); students get to practice Chinese when dropping off and picking up clothes.
Tuesday, July 22

A field trip day. In the morning we went to Orange Island. It is a large built-up sandbar in the middle of the Xiang River, the major river of Hunan province eventually feeding into the Yangtze. The key attraction at one end of Orange Island is a massive 105-foot tall sculpture of the head of a young Mao Zedong (at 32) constructed in 1996. Mao in this iteration has a flowing mane of hair reminiscent of Mozart. Mao is originally from Hunan and apparently used to swim in the river this area and wrote a famous poem about Orange Island. The stature is rather impressive in person—kind of like a Chinese Mt. Rushmore.

Following this we went to a traditional teahouse for a presentation on Chinese tea culture. It was delivered in a lovely setting by a Chinese tea master, who lectured the kids (via translator) on the 5 kinds of Chinese tea, the growing regions, history, and functions of tea in Chinese culture. Then we witnessed a tea ceremony, after which we had a chance to sample a local black tea (hei cha) and a red tea (hong cha). Both were excellent. This was followed by a bit of time for shopping on a nearby market street.

For lunch we were taken to our first meal outside the university, to a nice hotel in downtown Changsha. There were easily 20+ dishes on a buffet, including: duck, spicy fried rabbit on skewers, braised fish with chilies, jiaozi, cucumbers and lettuce, watermelon (ever-present) and bananas, shrimp balls, turnips, Chinese broccoli, rice, noodles, sweet and sour pork, pork and bell peppers, mung bean soup, another soup, several other stir fried vegetable dishes, fried chicken pieces, etc. You get the idea. It was our best meal to date, quite well prepared.

In the afternoon we went for a tour of the Yue Lu Academy, which is close by our hotel on the Hunan University campus. It was founded in 976 AD, periodically destroyed, and rebuilt throughout multiple Chinese dynasties, educating multiple succeeding generations of scholars in Confucian and Neo-Confucian thought. Today’s Hunan University was formed out of the Academy. It has beautiful grounds and numerous lovely historic pavilions and gardens. The Academy’s continuing presence for over a millennium attests to the historic Chinese respect for learning and cultivation of the mind. The day was extremely hot and humid, and we began to learn why this region is sometimes referred to as the “furnace of China.” Not having brought water, a hat, or comfortable shoes with me for this outing, I learned an uncomfortable lesson about the power of the sun and high temperature; take them seriously. Fortunately, cold water and ice cream were available for rapid revival.

In the evening our kids had the opportunity to try out to perform as dancers and singers in closing ceremonies here and in Beijing. It was reminiscent of the Broadway show “Chorus Line” as they learned their steps to a Chinese traditional folk dance and were then selected for the final performance. Our group from SF will have the largest number of participants.

That’s it for now. Best wishes from Changsha,

David Hemphill
Group Leader
2014 "Chinese Bridge" Summer Camp
Friday Evening, July 25, 2014

Dear Parents,

Here is a third report on your kids’ activities in China. They continue to be a wonderful bunch, and we are very lucky to have them with us.

Wednesday, July 23

A class day. This was the second full day of Chinese instruction (3 sessions in the AM; 2 in the PM). The classes are now balanced, the teachers are now used to working with American kids, and we have made a switch or two upon request so that individual kids are placed the right levels. (Note: whenever this is done, we are careful to make sure that the teachers understand that it has nothing to do with the quality of their instruction, but rather with the nature of the students’ prior language background or the initial placement decision.) One key topic of the day was food, so there were many amusing dialogues where the kids modeled ordering food in restaurants. Particular standouts were Surya Sundararajan and Keith Sibal (in Level 2), who delivered an energetic and clever restaurant dialogue, as did Alex Renn and Ryan Fang (in Level 4). Students learned a range of food terms, including words for fast foods (hamburgers, French fries, drumsticks, etc.). Cultural/business note: we learned that there is a local fast food chain in Hunan called “Shuai Ge Shao Bing” (handsome dude sesame seed cakes) that sells made to order yummy sesame seed cakes filled with meat, eggs, sauce, lettuce, etc. The entrepreneur who developed it is a Hunan University graduate and a local hero. Look for it soon in the Bay Area (or not).

In the evening there were two classes: one on Chinese folk paper cutting, the other on calligraphy. Both were relatively well presented and the kids were engaged in developing their skills in both of them. The classes will be flipped the next evening so that the kids will have the opportunity to learn the skill they didn’t study the first night. A particular standout was Sophie Kelley in the calligraphy class, who did a wonderful dragon drawing, with the simplified character for dragon (long 龙) in the middle. Sophie has allowed me to share her calligraphy piece as an attachment to this message.

Thursday, July 24

Visit to a Chinese school, and “funny sports” day (as written on the schedule). In the morning we walked across the Hunan University campus to the middle school (zhong xue 中学) (same as a US high school) that is affiliated with Hunan University. There we were greeted in an assembly by the school principal and head teacher. I responded in kind with some simple remarks of gratitude in Chinese and gave the school a pennant from SF State (always a crowd pleaser). After opening ceremonies, our kids were asked to mix, mingle, and chat with groups of Chinese students from the school for the next hour or so. It was slow going at first, but our kids were quite willing to reach out, and there were numerous groupings that eventually formed. Later an impromptu basketball game broke out down on the basketball court before we left for lunch. It
soon became soberingly evident to our kids that the young Chinese ball players were rather good.

After a lunch break we were led to the campus gymnasium for the “funny sports.” Organized events included several sorts of cleverly designed, enjoyable relays in the gym, followed by a basketball game between our kids and a rather good team from the local Chinese middle (high) school. It turned out to be a real game with a referee, a whistle, a scorer, and all. Our team consisted of Maiya Shoemaker (yay for Maiya!), Apollo Mettler, Laith Labban, Alex Renn, Ryan Fang, Stuart Harvey, William Bogdan, Princeton Liu, and a couple of volunteer Chinese chaperones. None of the other two cohorts from San Diego or Seattle volunteered to play, so the US team solely consisted of the SF group. Our team faced a well-practiced Chinese team who played together regularly. Despite this, our students gave a strong account of themselves. They led at multiple points throughout the game, keeping the score close, though they ultimately lost by a few points. I was really, really proud of these young people as they powered enthusiastically up and down the court. You would have been proud, too. The soccer players of the group, led by Hannele Jane, went outside to play a brief pickup game of soccer on the field next to the gym. Ardent soccer enthusiasts included Scott Ng, Carson Armstrong, Jarod Heng, Rebecca Gillespy, Rafaela Altman-Allen, Carmen Zhang, and several others. Ever creative, our students decided to move the soccer goals closer together, briefly inciting the ire of a Chinese soccer coach who did not appear to appreciate American youth ingenuity in soccer field redesign.

In the evening we had a second set of classes in Chinese paper cutting and calligraphy, where everyone had a chance to work on the artistic skill they had not learned the night before.

Friday, July 25

Family visit day. All the kids assembled in the lobby at 8:15 AM to be picked up by local Chinese families who had volunteered to host from one to three kids apiece for the day. Most family hosts showed up on time, and by around 8:45 all of our group had found a host family and been sent off for a day of sightseeing, eating, shopping, cooking, talking, and experiencing Chinese culture and language from an entirely different perspective. The chaperones and I checked with the kids in the evening on their return from their host family experience, and reports were uniformly positive and filled with excitement about their experience. Experiences ranged from home jiaozi making to eating out (one kid happily reported eating steak and macaroni). Another family took kids to an amusement park. Several were taken shopping. Others said they ate hot pot for the first time, and still others had the chance to sample delicacies such as snake for the first time (hats off for their willingness to rise to the challenge—it is a local specialty but not my favorite). All whom I talked to were bubbling with enthusiasm about their home visit experience, and past trips have shown that this facet of the agenda is the highlight of the itinerary.

As for the chaperones, we were taken to Shaoshan, the birthplace of Mao Zedong, who led the revolution that resulted in the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949. Shaoshan is
in a lovely area, with nice wooded hills and valleys. It's about an hour drive SW from Changsha, so we got to see some countryside. We went to the Mao museum, which was quite nice. It had lots of his personal memorabilia, poetry, and political writings, reverently displayed. This was followed by a visit to Mao's home birthplace. It was a pretty and spacious farmhouse surrounded by lush green fields, so clearly his dad was a wealthy landowner. But what crowds. They actually had lines like in Disneyland, with people wrapping around several times before you could get in the house. It was about a 30-minute wait. After that we saw the Mao family temple. As we drove through the town, it was interesting to juxtapose revolutionary themes used to advertise business names (“Mao Family Restaurant”, “East Is Red Auto Repair”, etc.). These kinds of contradictions are what make contemporary China so interesting.

Best wishes from Changsha,

David Hemphill
Group Leader
2014 "Chinese Bridge" Summer Camp
Monday Evening, July 28, 2014

Dear Parents,

Here is a fourth report on your kids’ activities in China. As before, observing and participating in their learning about Chinese language and culture continues to be a fascinating pleasure.

Saturday, July 26

A class day. This was our final full day of Chinese language instruction. Classes met in the morning and afternoon. We started to note that a couple of the kids became ill with mild colds and slight temperature elevations, so we have been careful to monitor everyone’s health quite carefully.

We went to lunch off campus as a group to a Hunanese fine dining restaurant to thank the Chinese language teachers for teaching the kids over the past week. Lois did a great job of arranging the menu, and the teachers were flattered that our group thought to plan such an outing for their benefit. Lois also arranged gift bags for each of the four teachers that all the kids signed with personal messages for them.

In the evening there was a tai chi class in the gym for everyone. While it was slow going at first, after a few minutes it was remarkable how many of the kids ended up learning about the first five sets of tai chi movements quite well, performing them smoothly as a group. I had the pleasure of watching the whole group of young people flowing as one from the upper reaches of the university gym. It was a lovely sight. Standouts as future young tai chi masters included Carson Armstrong, Sophie Kelley, and Mayda Dhanuka (in my untutored opinion).

Sunday, July 27

Field trip day. We set off early at 7:30 to visit Jinggang Ancient Town, which is located about an hour northwest of Changsha. It was a famous harbor and business center in ancient times and was once one of China’s four largest rice markets. Now it has charming market streets featuring fried and smoked fish, local candies (peanuts and sesame seeds), and other local products. Despite the use of GPS, our bus driver lost his way a few times, but we had a chance to see a lot of local countryside (rice paddies, taro plantings, local farmhouses with charming dragons on the rooflines, water buffalos).

Our second stop, again after a major directional miscue caused by a blocked road not noted on the GPS, was Tongguan Ancient Kiln. Our bus driver eventually had to persuade a local resident to lead us on his motorbike over potholed back roads to our destination. This “dragon-shaped” kiln dates back to the Tang Dynasty (618-907 AD) and was a major producer of beautiful porcelain and pottery for the region, using tan- and green-hued glazes of great sophistication. The large kiln, now an archaeological site, resembles a dragon stretching up the hillside. There was a small museum shop selling good contemporary pottery works in traditional styles.
Starved for lunch, we ended up in a good local restaurant somewhere back on the outskirts of Changsha (maybe). On a related food note, it is evident that many of the kids have reached their fill of eating the hotel’s Chinese food and have regularly begun to slip a few blocks off campus to the local McDonalds. In fact, as one student observed, they have apparently so decimated the stocks of that branch that it scarcely has anything left to sell other than a few desserts and drinks. The kids are craving familiar tastes, which is understandable.

In the late PM we returned to Changsha for a bit more shopping on Taiping Street, a tourist-oriented walking avenue. There the kids had a chance to buy souvenirs, ice cream, and (yes) Starbucks. (We noted that our colleagues from Seattle all made a rapid beeline in that direction.)

In the evening we had a joint performance/welcome party with a group of college students from all over the world who just arrived for a global “Chinese Bridge” performance competition. Held in the international center auditorium, it gave our kids a chance to showcase some of their linguistic and performing talents, including singing in Chinese, against university-level Chinese language performers from all over the world. Needless to say, in my unbiased view, the California kids more than held their own. Surya Sundararajan, Mayda Dhanuka, Elizabeth Long, and Scott Ng sang a Hunanese folk song that captivated the audience. Hannele Jane and William Bogdan served as MCs, announcing all of the high school acts bilingually in Chinese and English, and did a superb job. The entire group of SF State kids sang a popular Chinese ballad that they had learned in class, to the delight of the audience of international college students.

Monday, July 28

Final full day in Changsha. The kids had a test review and then formal achievement testing via the YCT (Youth Chinese Test). It is a four-level test. Our most advanced kids took level 4, which was a bit challenging, and quite a few took level 3, which was not that tough. The rest took levels 1 or 2, which they mostly blasted through. As usual, I was quite proud of their serious attitude and professionalism throughout the test.

After lunch we had a closing ceremony for the Hunan portion of our trip. Two students were given the outstanding student awards for our SF State group. They were Alex Renn and Sophie Kelley. The award recognized all around achievement, engagement, motivation, and performance throughout the entire time in Hunan. Awards were also given for achievement in Chinese cultural arts (calligraphy and paper cutting), and there were multiple recipients from our group. The SF group received an overall group award as “most enthusiastic” group.

For dinner a large group went with two of the chaperones and me for some final shopping and local eating, capped by karaoke singing. Another group that had been rehearsing a dance number for the final performance at the closing ceremony in Beijing also later went out for some karaoke as well. Both groups thoroughly enjoyed the chance to cut loose with a little
singing each in their own private KTV (karaoke) room in downtown Changsha. It was a fitting and fun ending to a great stay in Changsha. Tomorrow, the return flight to Beijing.

Best wishes from Changsha,

David Hemphill
Group Leader
2014 "Chinese Bridge" Summer Camp
Professor and Chair
Dear Parents,

This is the fifth and final report on your kids’ activities in China. It has been an enriching experience for the three other chaperones and me to share the past two-plus weeks with your wonderful children in Hunan and Beijing. We thank you for lending them to us for what we believe has been a significant experience in all of our lives.

Tuesday, July 29

A travel day. We packed and left the hotel a little after 8AM for our flight to Beijing. It should be noted that our airline, Hainan Airlines, flies the newest Boeing 787 Dreamliners, with in-seat selections of movies, comfortable seats, etc. It appears that the Chinese government recently went on a buying spree in Seattle at Boeing for its regional airlines.

We returned to the same place where we had stayed upon arriving in Beijing, the Beijing Royal School, a private school on the far north end of Beijing, north of the 6th ring road. I understand the reason they are putting us here is that it has the size to accommodate the 700+ kids from the US Chinese Summer Bridge summer camps from all over China. The conditions are clean but spartan, like a simple college dorm.

Dinner was taken outside the school at a restaurant, and then the kids were treated to a well-presented kungfu show.

Wednesday, July 30

Field trip day. First on the agenda was a visit to Tiananmen Square, the largest public square in the world. This is where you may have seen the large portrait of Chairman Mao and heard of other large public events taking place. Mao’s tomb is located here, as well as the Great Hall of the People (the equivalent of the US Congress). Following this the kids went to the Forbidden City, the former residence of the Chinese Imperial Family, and then they were off to the National Museum, which houses centuries of Chinese treasures. Fortunately, the weather was relatively cool by Beijing summer standards, since it had been raining in the prior evening. So the sightseeing conditions were pleasant.

A traffic note. Beijing traffic is horrendous. Car ownership in China has expanded exponentially in the past decade, and nowhere is it more evident than in Beijing during rush hour. I tried to make my way downtown for dinner with some colleagues on Tuesday evening, and it took well over two hours to get there from our lodgings at the Royal School. Gridlock was in effect.

In the evening the kids and I rehearsed for the closing ceremony. Our kids are performing a dance number. William Bogdan, one of our students, is serving as MC of the event due to his excellent Chinese, and I am delivering some remarks in Chinese and English on behalf of the chaperones and our Confucius Institute.
Thursday, July 31

Field trip day. This was our last day in Beijing. We went to the Great Wall about 45 minutes north of Beijing in a mountainous area. There a couple of key places that tourists usually go to access the Great Wall – the most common one is Ba Da Ling, which is where I had gone before, but this time we went to Ju Yong Guan. I have been to the Great will twice before—once on a very hot day and once in the rain—but it never ceases to amaze and impress with its size and grey brick grandeur. The Ju Yong Guan Great Wall access point has two sides: a very steep side to the left, and a less steep side to the right. Of course most of your children chose the (steep) left side, so the chaperones felt compelled to join them, climbing some really steep, uneven steps for quite a long ways until the energy gave out, watching the younger legs of many of the teenagers (some of them cross country runners) continue much further. The Great Wall remains an incredible engineering feat that is actually visible from space. The kids had a great time, needless to say, and many declared it the best sightseeing event on the entire trip.

In the evening we had the closing ceremony. Our group’s dance performance was one of the strongest performances of all the presentations, in my view. Performers from our group included Ardith Chavez, Apollo Mettler, Madeline Yang, Jarod Heng, Elizabeth Long, Hannele Jane, William Bogdan, and Maiya Shoemaker. William Bogdan did a super job as MC in Chinese and English, and I gave a speech in Chinese and English describing the SF State Institute and congratulating Hanban on the 10th anniversary of the Confucius Institute.

On a final note, let me say how much all of the chaperones (Peggy Kao, Xin Chen, Lois Gao) and I have enjoyed spending the last two-plus weeks with your children. They are an incredibly wonderful, gifted, bright, funny, generous, warm, giving, thoughtful, mature, engaged, caring, and positive group of young people. I truly had no idea of what I would encounter with these young people when I took on the leadership of the Chinese Bridge Summer Camp, but I have been favorably impressed with them in every instance we have encountered. They have been through high heat, long classes, interminable bus rides, challenging cuisine, and different linguistic and cultural settings. Yet in all instances they have responded with patience, curiosity, maturity, and forbearance. I cannot say enough admiring things about their performance. I deeply respect them and have developed genuine affection for each and every one of them over the past two weeks. I know that the kids have been talking about how hard it will be for them to leave one another when we touch down in San Francisco. It will be equally hard for us as chaperones to say goodbye to them.

I have no doubt that they will bring home many good memories about this summer camp to share with you and their friends. Their valuable experiences in learning Chinese language and culture, and their unforgettable stories about China and Chinese people, will motivate them to continue learning the language and culture in the future. Please join me in congratulating your children on their considerable achievements through this study abroad program.

Best wishes from Beijing,
David Hemphill, Group Leader
2014 "Chinese Bridge" Summer Camp