4. Harvard-Beijing Academy (HBA)

a. William McCormack; Final Report; HBA Summer 2019

I spent this past summer studying 四年级 (4th-year) Chinese at Harvard Beijing Academy and am extremely grateful for support from the Light Fellowship. I took CHNS 150/151 at Yale before the summer and considered both PIB and HBA. I couldn’t be happier with my decision and think HBA features a strong program spirit and sense of community. HBA offered the intense classroom experience and improvement I sought without preventing me from getting out, exploring, and actually living (not just sitting at a desk studying) in Beijing.

In my nine weeks at HBA, I learned an immense amount in the classroom, made and strengthened great friendships, and managed to visit five other Chinese cities, thanks to HBA’s 社会调查 (Social Study) week and a day trip to Tianjin one Sunday.

Most of all, once I had checked off must-see tourist destinations, developed a mini network of friends and acquaintances in Beijing, and downloaded a slew of Chinese apps and services, I felt I experienced what life is like for young people who actually live in the city too. My summer was fun, growth-filled, and often more challenging than I expected, but learning to embrace and overcome those obstacles is also what made HBA so valuable.

Academics

I was blown away by the energy, work ethic, and dedication of HBA teachers — not only to class but also to weekend activities and the 北京之夜 (“Beijing Night”) show of skits and singing they organized during Week 8. In total, 79 students at HBA this summer were supported by a team of about 50 teachers. The constant attention we got as language students was incredible — at the 4th-year level alone, we had 21 students and 12 teachers.

I think HBA delivers a summer experience that is incredibly balanced, and I liked the program’s predictable routine. We’d have class from Monday to Thursday and end each week with a written test and oral test Friday mornings. An average weekday saw my alarm sound at 7 a.m., and I’d practice a little for the 听写 at my desk, grab an on-the-go breakfast (banana, yogurt, and a 花卷 roll) from the cafeteria at 7:40, and get to class by 8. Ordering 外卖 (delivery) with classmates and some teachers to eat for lunch at noon became a much-anticipated habit, and after our one-on-one session in the afternoon, I’d either attend a cultural activity (singing Chinese songs and playing mahjong were two favorites) on Monday or Tuesday, head to the gym in a different university across the street, or head out for another neighborhood in Beijing. I was glad our 4th-year instructors deemphasized hand-writing characters after the first week — each night,
we’d need to learn about 50 new words but only learn how to hand-write a list of 15 words the teachers would provide for each lesson.

**Living**

Our living conditions at Beijing Language and Culture University, HBA’s host institution in the university-saturated Wudaokou neighborhood of Beijing, were very nice and much better than my setup at Yale. Students all lived in very spacious single rooms and shared a bathroom and mudroom with another HBA suitemate. I had a view of the bicycles, 电动车, and delivery couriers who would buzz around on the side of Chengfu Road a few stories below me too. Beijing, given its size and all the people, can get overwhelming, and knowing I had my own space in the 21 million-person capital was a nice comfort.

I had spent a summer in high school studying Chinese in Xi’an and had hoped my time there would help my seamlessly adjust to Beijing and HBA, but I still had to transition. While all HBA students live in the same dorm complex, our living setup and freedom was such that I felt I was practically living alone in my own Beijing apartment. That realization both excited and frightened me, and I found that having to completely care for yourself in a foreign place — buying meals, snacks, bottled water, and other daily necessities; setting up a bank account; running errands — was more difficult than I expected but valuable in retrospect.

Doing so also helped me significantly deepen my understanding of daily life in China. I wasn’t just a tourist or a foreigner who stuck to Sanlitun or Wangfujing (but you should definitely go check out both), but a young person actually living in Beijing. Like I might in New Haven, I would balance schoolwork with social commitments, errands, and outings with other friends who happened to be visiting Beijing.

**Apps and Tips**

Embrace China’s smartphone culture! Downloading and using certain apps enhanced my experience this summer, helped improve my fluency in everyday interactions that are difficult to learn in a classroom alone like ordering delivery, and helped me connect with local youth. I had used WeChat extensively before, but an expanded app folder entitled “中国” now lives in my phone. Here’s what’s in it:

- **WeChat**. Make sure to set up WeChat Pay (微信支付) or Alipay (支付宝). Because you have a student visa, you can (and should immediately) set up a Chinese bank account fairly easily and link that to the app as a source of payment. Cash is still accepted at most places, but restaurants, taxi drivers, panhandlers, and anyone else who transacts money have QR codes for customers to scan instead.

- **Dianping** (大众点评). Another must-have. Dianping is China’s equivalent to Yelp, and friends and I found 4-5 Wudaokou establishments we came to adore with the app. I
would constantly go and became friends with most of the wait staff and bosses. All thanks to Dianping. You can also view popular attractions, get curated recommendations, and order movie tickets.

o Baidu Maps (百度地图). Apple Maps also works well in China, especially for the subway, but not Google Maps.

o DiDi (like Uber/Lyft). Also, almost everyone at HBA loved getting around with ride-sharing bicycles that are all over Beijing and especially Wudaokou. They’re fun to ride, extremely convenient (drop them off anywhere), and I bought a monthly, unlimited pass for 10 kuai (less than $2). DiDi owns one of the most popular brands.

o Meituan (美团外卖) is China’s most popular delivery app. Delivery is fast, convenient, delicious, and affordable — our teachers would 点外卖 almost every day for lunch, and by week three, we picked up the habit as well. I would order a steamy bowl of beef noodles from a place a few kilometers away and could order in advance so my food arrived right when class ended. You can also order directly through Dianping.

o iQiyi (爱奇艺). The mobile version of Netflix/Hulu/HBO equivalent with lots of Chinese TV and most of it for free. This was the first summer where I felt my language ability allowed me to watch and understand TV dramas. I didn’t start taking Chinese as a means to some end, like some dream job or career, and I still don’t have a clear goal in continuing Chinese other than that I find it interesting and important. At lower levels, however, the rewards I gained from learning Chinese were immediate and exciting, skills like being able to order myself food or ask someone for directions. But because the 4th-year curriculum tended to focus on formal, written Chinese, improvement was harder to tangibly observe. I needed to find ways to maintain a sense of wonder when learning the formal language I wouldn’t necessarily encounter in daily life. Watching TV (specifically, 人民的名义, a show about battling corruption) with more formal language became fun and rewarding.

o Damai (大麦), an app for reserving tickets to shows and games. I wish I had used this more. One of my regrets is not having time to watch Beijing Guoan FC play a soccer Game.

o AirVisual, for tracking air pollution. Pollution in Beijing was worse than I had experienced in Xi’an, but was very rarely unbearable and was nonexistent some weeks. I always carried a mask in my backpack and would try to pop it on if the app advised me the air quality reached a poor level, but it only did a couple weeks.
Expect some homesickness. I found I could be both fully engaged with my program and experience — learning, exploring, and really enjoying my time — and simultaneously looking forward to the moment I’d reunite with my family and hang out at home.

Expect some burnout too. Since I started the language in high school, Chinese has always been one of my favorite subjects, but the amount of content HBA had us run through on a weekly basis tested that. With 20 hours of the same class a week, ~3 hours of homework each weeknight, and 24 textbook chapters to cover, the 4th-year curriculum taught me 1500 new vocabulary words and 240 grammar structures in eight weeks. I appreciated the pace, but burnout was inevitable. I would usually feel sick of learning Chinese by Wednesday afternoon, but after resting Wednesday night and taking a break from textbook work over the weekend, I’d be excited and ready to hit the books again by Sunday evening. The Social Study trip, which occurs during the fifth week of the program, splits up the first and second “semesters” and sends students out for a week of travel (and some casual interview research for a report everyone needs to write) to their choice of Inner Mongolia, Huizhou, Jiangnan (Shanghai, Hangzhou, Suzhou), or Xi’an. I love the city and chose Jiangnan. Although I was tired of visiting 景点 after 景点 by the end of the week, I loved the area. Psychologically, staring down 8 straight weeks of coursework at the beginning of the program would have been very intimidating — the Social Study week offered a nice remedy, breaking up the summer with a week away from Beijing. It’s a major reason to choose HBA if you’re deciding between multiple programs.

Strike a balance between being a student and a tourist. It’s great to follow up a really busy week with one you only spend in Wudaokou or mostly on campus. Especially in the first semester of HBA, I felt pressured to go explore every afternoon and was eager to travel everywhere I could around the city. Switching into tourist mode every afternoon — before returning to student mode a few hours later to cram the 课文 and prepare for the next day’s 听写 — might often be necessary for a student studying abroad, but it gets exhausting too. By the second half of the program, I was a little tired of exploring but found I loved spending weekdays in Wudaokou working out at a gym across from our university, biking around and eating at one of my favorite restaurants. I had to shed some of the tourist mentality in order to grow comfortable in Beijing and make Wudaokou feel like my own neighborhood.

Thank you again to the Light Fellowship for making this summer possible. Yale has many more Chinese offerings, and I’m excited to continue improving in New Haven.

b. Mitchell Harpenau; Final Report; HBA Summer 2019

Introduction
I spent this summer at the 9-week intensive Harvard Beijing Academy, run as a program intended to cover one year of Chinese coursework at Harvard (and, in terms of credits, two levels of study at Yale). This full-expenses paid opportunity to live and learn in the heart of Beijing was one that I will carry with me as I enter my Sophomore year, and absolutely will influence my future academic and career interests.

Whenever someone asks me why I chose to learn Chinese I’m always tempted to come up with some profound academic reason that touches on my interest in public health, but that wouldn’t be the most honest answer. I decided to take Chinese and study abroad mostly because I was intrigued by the idea of being able to communicate with so many people whom I previously couldn’t. Sure, career opportunities in business are plentiful in China, but my primary reason was more so a personal desire to learn more about and understand Chinese culture for the sake of broadening my perspective; I think this mindset is great to have when traveling to a city like Beijing with so many cultural opportunities.

**Academics**

I was in the 2nd-year program. The basic class structure was four days a week, with written and oral examinations every Friday. In preparation for the oral exam (口试), a 400-character paper is also due on a given topic every Thursday morning. Monday through Wednesday in the 10-person class (大班课)–taught by a current Harvard instructor–you’ll have something called a listen-and-write (听写), which is a four-character test of how well you memorized the 40+ assigned characters from the prior day. After 大班 ends, you’ll have 小班课 with one of the younger teachers whom you’ll end up getting to know very well, and you’ll spend an hour and a half reviewing the concepts taught in 大班课. After that you’ll have a lunch break, followed by a 单班课, which is a one-on-one class with one of the younger teachers.

The structure of the classes intends to cover about one week of traditional Harvard classes each day. This lends itself to a *lot* of characters to memorize, and a *lot* of class time each day. As someone doing HBA for credit rather than a letter grade, make sure to prioritize your sleep when you can! Whether that means going to bed and waking up early to study in the cafeteria, or focusing more on the pronunciation rather than the written characters, don’t sacrifice your physical health for those last few difficult characters! Aside from that, I think one of the best ways to stay engaged during the long classes (for me, 小班课 was extremely arduous at times) is to take risks and play off of your classmates’ senses of humor. Nothing made the time go by in a long 小班课 like having fun with the small role playing games that are interspersed throughout. My personal favorite was when a classmate and I were husband and wife, and we had to explain to our child why we forgot him at school (she was a workaholic and I was busy gambling). Aside from passing the time, it also helps you develop a sense of humor in a language that you’ve just begun speaking conversationally.

Before going to China, I was somewhat wary about how open I could be about my sexuality. Upon arrival, I was a little caught off guard every time one of my 单班课 teachers would ask me about having a girlfriend, but I definitely played along. As the time went by, and my confidence with Chinese eventually grew, I more often responded to a relationship question with “my boyfriend…” or “the ideal husband would…,” which frequently caught the teachers off guard as well, but was always met morso with confusion rather than scorn. I expected to continue this throughout the summer: only talking about being gay very subtly. However, as the weeks progressed, my classmates and I started to see small changes that were definitely responses to the
language we used. For example, our homework would sometimes present a question about why
people would be against same-sex marriage, or our discussions surrounding transgender people.
Each time, I definitely made a note to write a small “加油” or a smiley-face nearby to indicate
that I thought it was cool! More concrete changes began as well, owing in part to our improved
language skills. In 单班课, teachers and I would frequently talk about gay-marriage (i.e. with the
three Taiwanese teachers, there was a lot of discussion about its recent legalization). Teachers
began asking either about our 对象 (the gender-neutral word for partner) or even embracing
same-sex language. Growing relationships with a few teachers, as well, I also was super excited
that a couple felt comfortable enough with me to open up about being queer, having same-sex
partners or even just supporting such causes. This part of HBA, for me, was the most impactful. I
had intended to be open about my sexuality this summer, but I did not expect to be able to
embrace it in the ways that I did, and it gave me a really valuable glimpse of differing vantage
points surrounding queerness across the world. I was able to evaluate how my view of queer
openness has been shaped by my “Western” upbringing, and I think my viewpoint gained a
much-needed level of humility toward those who are not as open about their sexuality as many in
the USA think they should be.

Extracurriculars

As far as extracurriculars, I enjoyed the different Friday activities, which were more so
opportunities for me to meet students from the university we were staying at. We would spend a
couple hours conversing, then later they would ask to add us on WeChat so we could chat. Aside
from those, I think going to the Friday destinations with a smaller group of friends is a better
idea, because you’re given significantly more flexibility (also, everything is around 1-hour away
on the metro).

I really really loved the Beijing subway. It was clean, easily accessible from where we
stayed in the WuDaoKou district, and it had a lot of visuals to use when you weren’t sure where
you were. The cheap 5 CN¥ was totally worth it to either explore a place like the 798 Art District
on the weekend, or find a coffee shop in a different part of Beijing to study at during the
weekday. I highly recommend taking as many opportunities as you can to get out of the, at times
claustrophobic, BLCU campus. Whether it be for a little excursion to do your homework or a
place to eat dinner, the biggest recommendation I can give you to keep the city engaging is to
keep finding destinations to go to. As a point, the historic alleys of Beijing all may look the
same, but there are countless shops to explore. Besides, you’ll never know which corner the
stinky tofu is hiding behind until you’re like 30 feet away!

The pretty standard must-dos that aren’t done as a large group are:

1. Go to KTV, find your favorite songs, and spend a night singing your heart out
into the microphones with massive reverb (Hint: Blow by Beyonce is too explicit
to sing (learn from my mistakes)).
2. 798 Art District was one of my favorite places, and I spent way too many
afternoons there, but it’s a super fun and refreshing place to show your friends!
3. The WuDaoKou Dunkin Donuts is offensively nice...it’s gorgeous.
4. SanLiTun is so much better during the day than at night, and I only discovered
that two days before I left.
For the Culture Week (社会调查), I chose to go to JiangNan (which was four locations, including ShangHai and HangZhou). I had such a great time here, and I strongly recommend you consider going there as well! The small group we had of about 12 students was the perfect size to feel comfortable with your group, while still making sure to meet students from different levels. We had a great week witnessing the huge development of ShangHai, walking through water towns and improving our Chinese abilities through the week of constant Chinese conversations.

Advice and Final Thoughts

When people ask me what the most impactful part of HBA, or just being in China, was, it really was how I was able to form friendships with teachers and Chinese students in a way that was inaccessible to me just three months earlier. I am so glad that my perspective has been broadened this summer by sheer virtue of learning the Chinese language. From making an absolute fool of myself during my first time ordering bubble tea, to my last time, where I only made a fool of myself because of who I am as a person (not due to my Chinese level’s insufficiency), the progress was measurable and rewarding. I worried that I would leave HBA feeling as suffocated by the language barrier as I did my first week, but I definitely did not. I carved out spaces and interactions I felt comfortable with, and I look forward to the next time I return in order to slowly expand those even more.

C. Nathan Wu; Final Report; HBA Summer 2018

Ever since I first began the Light Fellowship program, I knew that I wanted to attend Harvard Beijing Academy, or HBA, or as it's known in Chinese 哈北班. I had heard so many great things about this program, including that HBA devoted a lot of time towards learning Chinese outside of the classroom and that HBA had great opportunities for students to explore Beijing. Outside of that, previous Light fellows also stressed to me that comparatively, the workload was manageable, and the teaching staff was outstanding. As a result, I came in to HBA extremely excited and with extremely high expectations, and while some of the fabled legends of HBA turned out to be true, some of them also turned out to be less exciting than previous Light fellows made them out to be.

Introduction

First, a little bit about me. I attended HBA as a rising sophomore expecting to major in a STEM field (applied mathematics and economics). At Yale, I took L5 Chinese in my freshman year for both semesters, specifically the 152-153 sequence with the lovely Professor Haiwen Wang. As a Chinese American, it was definitely not my first time in China, or even my fifth, and I was already relatively familiar with the culture, food, environment, etc. associated with living in China. The two month time period of living in China was rather long, but because I usually stayed for a month or so each time I went back to China, I wasn’t too worried about the Light Fellowship’s “U-curve” (or at the very least, it wasn’t going to come as a surprise to me). Coming into HBA, I was supposed to be in HBA’s level four Chinese class, but because I was hoping for a little bit of a challenge, I wanted to place into HBA’s level five Chinese, which split
each week into classroom Chinese like the rest of HBA and self-study research or internship projects, both of which held a lot of appeal to me. However, after the placement test, I was still placed into level four Chinese, but within level four Chinese, I had such a great time, and looking back, even if you offered me the chance to take level five Chinese instead, I am not sure I would have accepted.

**Living Conditions**

Students at HBA lived in either the international student dormitories (Dorm 8) or the conference center (which was basically a hotel). Each student had a single room and individual shower/bathroom to themselves, which was definitely a huge perk. There was even maid service everyday for students in the conference center, and even though the Dorm 8 rooms were slightly worse, I believe everyone at HBA lived very, very comfortably.

**Class Structure**

HBA’s program structure is designed in a way that promotes meaningful social interaction, and each individual level of Chinese feels like its own family. I had an amazing time with the fourth-year class and teachers, and each day’s class was relatively stress free. From Monday-Thursday, HBA’s first class at 8:00 am every day with 大班课 which is roughly similar to the seminar style of Chinese courses at Yale (about 8 students per section). 大班课 lasts until 9:50, with a ten minute break in the middle. In this class, you go over the material covered in the textbook, mostly focusing on vocabulary and sentence structure, although it is expected that you have read the text beforehand. Very little class time is focused on reading the content of the text; most of the questions the teacher asks will focus instead on your interpretation or understanding of the text. After that, there is 小班课, which is 3-4 students with one teacher, and this is more drill-oriented, in which each student gets chances to individually practice the vocabulary and sentence structure. 小班课 starts at 10:10 (you have a 20 minute break in-between 大班课 and 小班课) and finishes at 12:00, again with a ten minute break in the middle. Lunch lasts from 12:00 until either 1:30 or 2:25, depending on when you are scheduled to have your next, one-on-one session with a teacher, called 单班课。Monday-Wednesday have short morning dictation and textbook content quizzes, and each Friday morning has a written and oral test (with the exception of fifth-year students, who’s curriculum is more condensed and have their written and oral test on Wednesday afternoon), after which you are free. Maybe it’s because everyone spends so much time with each other in class, but you really do feel like you make many new meaningful friends and have many meaningful interactions within everyone at HBA, and especially with those in the same Chinese level as you.

**Inside the classroom**

Class itself is very well-planned; it’s very easy to see the insane amount of preparation and hard work the teachers go into planning the course curriculum. At the same time though, the class is definitely not hard. Especially as a student from Yale where this course is only pass-fail (and for most students not from Harvard), it’s very stress-free, which I thought was a huge plus of HBA. Without the stress of worrying about having to worry about your grade, you can really focus on learning the language however you see fit. Even for those who still feel the need to get an A, the class is so easy that just being in class is sufficient. That being said, one huge downside of the class structure is that after about a month (less for some people), class becomes really
monotonous. I found myself at HBA doing the exact same thing at the exact same time every day (recall that at least half of your day is under HBA’s control), and this pedantic routineness can really dampen even the most enthusiastic Chinese learner. More on this in the “Negatives” section.

Outside the classroom
HBA does a fairly decent job of planning outside of the classroom activities. Every Monday or Tuesday afternoon, there is usually some (optional) cultural activity such as Chinese chess, face painting, calligraphy writing, etc. that occur around 3:30 (after the last 单班课). These activities, although I wouldn’t call them the most exciting thing in the world, were generally interesting, but it really depended on the person. Each Friday afternoon, because there is no class, HBA organizes four (optional) Friday excursion activities that are very diverse, from street market shopping to cuisine sampling to temple visiting. If one piques your interest (and one certainly will), it is definitely worth going to and is a great way to go explore Beijing with your newfound friends! Most Saturdays usually have a bigger entire HBA excursion event such as to the Great Wall, Forbidden Palace, etc. that are a lot of fun (and highly recommended you consider)!

Finally, in the fifth week of the program, HBA has its famous week-long “social studies” trip, and this is definitely a highlight of the program. From Inner Mongolia, to 黃山 (a very famous and very beautiful mountain), to a kungfu temple, HBA presents a couple excellent choices that suit a variety of tastes. I personally went to 黃山 and the countryside scenery coupled with the mountain’s amazing beauty (there really is nothing in the world like it) was a refreshing and relaxing experience.

Positives
Overall, most of the good things I had heard about HBA were not unfounded. I would like to stress a point that many people say, and that is, the teaching staff is amazing. Not only do they work so hard to make sure class runs smoothly, they also work incredibly hard to try and get to know you. The teachers are very young and have really likeable personalities, and most are first-year graduate students, so it’s incredibly easy to connect with them. Furthermore, just as you might be eager to learn about their personal lives, they are just as eager to learn about yours. Even if you don’t go out of your way to talk to the teachers, you will still wind up connecting with them. Having said that though, I highly recommend you make an effort to get to know your teachers very well, because it makes HBA so much more interesting and meaningful. I can safely say that the best thing I brought back from HBA was the memories I made with my new friends (aka my teachers).

Outside of that, the living accommodations were spectacular! Single, hotel-room, personal bathroom/shower, maid-service—nothing more needs to be said. The workload, while not nothing, was definitely not enough for anyone to stress out over outside of perhaps the first and second week. Food at the cafeteria was okay, but not great (but again, eating anywhere every day for 2 months will make the food not great), but food in the surrounding area was amazing! Although it’s not as cheap as you might think, it’s definitely easy to get great meals at affordable prices (prices in USD).

Negatives
The huge negative I would say about HBA that I addressed earlier is this sense of routine. For me, class everyday gradually became a struggle because it became boring. Everyone comes to HBA to improve their language skills, but sitting in class 5 hours of day will take a toll on anyone’s motivation. Specifically, it was the incessant devotion to the textbook that really reduced my desire to pay attention in class. For one thing, everyone already reviews the text the night before, and the material isn’t so difficult that you need to pay attention to every word the teacher says before you can understand it. As a result, class can become somewhat boring. Furthermore, if you are like me who doesn’t believe that reading textbooks can let one truly learn a language, class almost becomes torturous. Sure, at the end of the program, when you say you learned 240 sentence structures and 1440 vocabulary phrases it sounds impressive, but how much of that can usefully be applied to speaking/reading/writing a language on demand? At a certain point, it’s less about how many words or structures you know and rather about how you many you can naturally use. This is my key criticism about HBA’s curriculum: it focuses more on breadth, rather than giving students a full mastery of the phrases/structures it teaches, and as a result, a lot of it is easily forgotten.

The routineness of HBA also has a toll outside of the classroom. For me, because I felt class becoming gradually more and more pointless and not useful, my moods started to reflect that, and I started to feel joy in going to the gym, of all things, because at least it was time not spent on class! Which brings me to my next point in that at HBA, a lot of your time was either in class, or spent preparing for class. That leaves you with not that much time to really explore Beijing’s culture, such as cuisine, comedy, or nightlife.

**Recommendations**

The reason I introduced my own background a little bit is because I’m going to make some perhaps controversial recommendations that definitely do not apply to everyone, and again are just my own opinions. The first is, for lower level students (below L5 or maybe L4 level at Yale), HBA is definitely extremely beneficial. Lower-level students’ language ability will benefit the most from this immersive experience, and will certainly see their language improve by leaps and bounds. Higher-level students’ improvement won’t be as drastic. It definitely will help, but it is worth considering whether the study-abroad program with a focus on language studies (as opposed to something like an internship in that language or studying history of that particular country(ies) using that language) is the best fit for you. Also, for people who have been to China multiple times, especially heritage students, studying abroad in China is definitely not as magical, even more so if you have been to Beijing sightseeing before. As a heritage student who has been to Beijing multiple times, to be frank, a lot of things other students experienced, such as unfamiliarity with Chinese food, the often humorous struggles of trying to communicate in a foreign language, or the amazement at Asian cities, I can’t say I experienced to the same degree as them, because I had already experienced them before. In addition, as a heritage (or even just Asian) student in China, you will be treated as a native and not as a foreigner for the most part, which may (or may not) affect your study abroad experience. Finally, for STEM majors, I highly recommend a serious consideration of whether to do an internship/research or HBA, especially if you are either a higher-level student or heritage student for reasons stated above. However, I do want to said STEM majors, I personally chose HBA over internships because I believed HBA/the Light Fellowship and study abroad in general was a once-in-a-lifetime experience and one worth having, and I still stand by that belief. That being
said, I do think that if I did the Light Fellowship at a location/with a language I was not so familiar with, say Seoul or Osaka, it would have been more rewarding.

If you do choose to come to HBA (and I would overall recommend you do), I would advise you to first, forget about your studies (you only need a passing grade anyways) and instead focus more of your time on doing what you want to do in this new location. Go explore the city, go explore the cuisine, go explore the sights. In particular, for all the hype about WuDaoKou (where the program is located), it’s really nothing in the giant city of Beijing, so definitely leave and explore other places (ZhongGuanCun, the “Silicon Valley of China” is like 15 minutes away by taxi or a 30ish minute walk and it’s a WuDaoKou on steroids and then some, and it’s absolutely fantastic—highly, HIGHLY recommended!). You also shouldn’t feel tied down to HBA; you don’t HAVE to go to EVERY Monday-Tuesday afternoon events or have to go to EVERY Friday excursion or even EVERY Saturday trip. At the end of the day, you know yourself best, so just do the things you sincerely want to do and don’t be tied down by FOMO or a sense of obligation. Indeed, for me, the best memories I have of HBA are when I made plans with friends and went out and did things that weren’t related to HBA (and sometimes skipped the HBA events to do so). Overall, I think my most important advice for those attending HBA would be just that: do what YOU want to do, and not what the program tells you to do. Your experience in Beijing depends on what YOU do. I personally was very grateful to have this chance from the Light Fellowship to go to Beijing, and while realistically HBA didn’t match up to all my expectations, overall it was still a worthwhile experience. My best wishes to any new Light Fellows/HBA-ers!

I have always known that I wanted to study abroad in college, but as a Chinese-American who has been back to China multiple times to visit family, I had always wanted to study somewhere I had never been before. However, being able to live for 9 weeks in Beijing without family and as a student was a completely novel experience, and an experience which I do not regret. Not only was I able to learn many new vocab words and grammar structures, but I also now have a slightly deeper understanding of Chinese culture and values.