9. Princeton in Beijing (PiB)

a. Matthew Walak, Summer 2019 Final Report

I originally planned to keep a blog, but I quickly discovered PiB left me with neither the time nor the energy to maintain a weekly blog. As a result, here’s my final report:

A lot happens at Princeton in Beijing in a very short amount of time. I could not fully process my experience until I returned home and had time to think about it for a few days. From the perspective of a second-year Chinese student, my entire summer was essentially a non-stop Chinese class from the moment my plane touched down in Beijing to the moment I returned to Boston.

In terms of workload, the weekdays were tough. Channeling my inner STEM major, here are some fun numbers:

- Daily class time: 4 hours 10 minutes (4 x 50 min classes + 1 x 50 min one-on-one class)
- Daily homework average: 3 hours 36 minutes (Monday through Friday)
- Total class time, homework, tests, and test preparation: 291 hours 8 minutes
- Total working days in China: 39 days
- Percentage of awake time on working days spent studying or in class: 46.7% (Assuming 8 hours of sleep, which was not always the case)

Essentially, Monday through Friday, almost half of the time I was awake was spent studying or in class.

We had a few weekend cultural excursions to see tourist attractions such as the Great Wall, the 2019 Beijing horticulture exhibition, and the Marco Polo Bridge. We also had the opportunity to see a Chinese opera (Which ended up being in French), and Chinese acrobatics. I was also able to see a few other tourist destinations on my own, including Tiananmen square, the forbidden city, Beijing zoo, and an assortment of malls, bookstores, parks, and restaurants. I was even able to take a weekend trip to Shanghai with a few other classmates over the 3-day weekend between the two month-long “semesters”.

I chose this program because I wanted to improve my Chinese, and this program did exactly that. I have improved in all aspects of the language, but my improvement in terms of pronunciation is undoubtably the greatest. With daily presentations and weekly oral tests, pronunciation is quite obviously top priority at PiB (发音好, 什么都好 as they say). Additionally, the teachers watch students’ pronunciation 24/7. Regardless of if you are in class or not, if you mispronounce a word the teachers will make you say it repeatedly until you get it right. At times, this can be a bit overwhelming because you always need to be on your toes, but this method ultimately improved my pronunciation significantly.
For the entirety of the program, we lived in dorms on the campus of Beijing Normal University. Although everyone in our dorm building was an international student, we interacted with native Chinese college students daily in the dining halls, in class buildings, and on the street. Possibly the most inspiring part of the program was seeing these students using Chinese to its full extent. Despite being unable to fully understand what these students were saying, their body language, tone of voice, and laughter all felt very familiar to exchanges I have had in English. I realized that throughout my time studying Chinese at Yale, I have been so focused on using Chinese to communicate information that I never thought about how Chinese is also used to tell stories, make jokes, and communicate emotions.

I didn’t experience much culture shock, as many of my family members are Chinese, but I did experience shock from being in an environment with little to no English. While my Chinese was good enough to survive, I was unable to fully communicate all my thoughts. A question I continually asked myself while I was studying in China was, “what language am I thinking in?” I originally assumed that my thoughts naturally rely on the English language because until this summer, it is the only language I have spoken or written for an extended period. I realized throughout my time in China that thoughts and ideas appeared in my mind, but I would often have difficulty tracing these ideas back to a source language. For example, I had a conversation with a native who knew a little English, and although I left with a full understanding of what we discussed, I could not distinguish between which ideas were put into my mind using English, and which were put there using Chinese. Upon returning to China, I began to realize that there are many concepts I understand but cannot fully describe using English or Chinese. In music, I understand what it sounds like to return from a V chord to a I chord, but no explanation in English is as concise or elegant as using chord symbols or music notes. In math, I understand how an O(n^2) function behaves but struggle to explain this concept in plain English. While these “languages” do not have the ability to communicate all thoughts and ideas necessary for everyday life as English and Chinese can, I discovered that my experience learning and using these “languages” felt very similar to my experience learning and using Chinese. I believe the biggest skill I gained in China was not how to speak Chinese, but rather how to identify concepts and communicate them, whether that is using an existing “language”, or creating a new one. I believe this skill will serve me well perusing my interests of math, computer science, and art, as there are concepts in these areas that fall outside the bounds of “traditional” language.

Overall, I not only gained important insight into the meaning of language, I found a certain sense of belonging returning to the country my relatives left many years ago. While modern China with its skyscrapers and shopping malls looks nothing like the China my grandparents say they grew up in, much of Chinese culture is still the same as they describe. Even though it was exciting to experience a new culture, it was also comforting to see many things didn’t change. I saw dancing, I heard singing, I heard laughter. I saw native Chinese people express excitement, embarrassment, curiosity, boredom, and all the emotions that do not
require spoken or written language to communicate. The words may be different, but under the surface of language, the concepts and feelings are all human, and are all fundamentally the same.

b. Jackie Zhang, Summer 2019 Final Report

Princeton in Beijing was… an interesting time. I definitely had my reservations going into the program because of the feedback I had heard from previous students and the warnings I got from those who had never even attended. I’m sure anyone reading this report is already familiar with PiB’s nickname: Prison in Beijing. To be honest, PiB was kind of like a prison (SPOILER ALERT for the sake of keeping prospective students from immediately dismissing Princeton in Beijing at this point in the report: I loved PiB!). To me, PiB wasn’t like a prison because it was terrible or excruciatingly hard; it was because it got very monotonous.

Every weekday kind of went like this: wake up at 6:45 AM, get ready for class, study right before class for our daily morning quiz, class from 8 AM to 12 PM, lunch, individual session at either 2 PM, 3 PM, or 4 PM (depending on your weekly assignment) for an hour, homework until dinner, dinner, homework again, office hours, homework again, sleep, and repeat. Of course, not every student had this schedule. Some people left campus on weekdays to explore, but because I consider myself a slow learner, that didn’t seem very possible for me. To be completely honest, this went on for the entirety of the program. I really only had time on the weekends to explore Beijing and other parts of China, but on some weekends all I wanted to do was rest in my dorm. That is not to say this was not “enough” time to explore or relax! I had the opportunity to travel to Sichuan (where I had the best 麻婆豆腐 EVER) and Shanghai and see so much of Beijing on the weekends alone. I would consider the workload to be at most comparable to a typical semester at Yale; I think the only thing that really exaggerates it is the tension of wanting to leave campus and explore Beijing while still needing to preview one to two lessons a day along with homework and a short oral report. This monotony and the struggle to find motivation were definitely the most challenging parts of the program for me. And to be completely honest, I didn’t ever really find a solution for this. The program flew by and before I knew it, I was trying to cram everything I wanted to do left in the last week of the program.
I know what you’re thinking at this point given everything I’ve said so far: why did I love PiB? To put it simply: the teachers. My teachers were some of the best I have ever learned from. Each and every one of them carried a unique pedagogy and a unique perspective of the Chinese language, as many of them came from different regions of China. All of my teachers had such a genuine care for our improvement in Chinese and gave up so much of their own time to help us. Of course, every year has different teachers, but from what I have heard from my classmates at Yale who have done PiB last year and two years ago, they have always been extraordinary. I had the opportunity to witness the hiring process for teachers at Princeton in Beijing, and I can definitely attest that it is a very strict and arduous process for the prospective teachers.

I have absolutely no regrets in my choosing to study at PiB. I came in expecting that it would be rigorous and challenging, and I was right. But the support from my teachers and the solidarity of my classmates made learning an experience full of love--love for each other, love for the process, and love for the language.

Outside of academics, PiB can definitely be a great time to those wanting to explore and truly experience Chinese culture. PiB is held at Beijing Normal University, which is near several tourist sites and attractions, such as Tiananmen Square, the Palace Museum, the Summer Palace, Houhai, Sanlitun (just you wait), Wangfujin, Wukoudao, etc. Tourist attractions aside, Beijing Normal University itself exudes culture. You can see locals at the university everyday and talk to them too! The surrounding restaurants are SO GOOD. And PiB hosts many cultural activities, such as calligraphy and wushu classes.

To me, (yes I know I’m about to be completely cliche) my time at PiB was truly, genuinely, and wholeheartedly life changing. I do believe that my Chinese improved immensely, but that’s not what was most special to me. As a Chinese American, studying at PiB, and especially the language pledge, allowed me to only begin to fathom my parents’ world. All of the “weird idiosyncrasies” my family does, which have embarrassed me my whole life, were common practice in China. I felt natural ordering at restaurants, bargaining at stores, and walking down streets. I was surrounded by people who looked like me, who thought like me, who lived like me.

Above all, the language pledge has given me a glimpse of what my father had to endure when immigrating to America, and still endures to this day. He is wholeheartedly the most dedicated and selfless person I know to leave everything behind in his beautiful China to
pursue a life in a country where he didn’t understand a word. Not being able to speak English made me feel repressed and isolated during my time in Beijing because I couldn’t adequately convey how I was feeling or say what I wanted to say. I cannot even imagine how he must have felt when first arriving in America, navigating his way through alienation and racism, unable to communicate with others. I thank him and every other parent who did and will do the same. They give up everything for us, and I think we--especially me--often forget that.

In essence, Princeton in Beijing was not the easiest or most fun time in the world for me. But it was, by far, one of the most special and valuable. The work can be hard and overwhelming, but that is because we are capable of it. Everything is a form of a sacrifice. Though I could have gone to a different program and had more free time outside of the classroom, I truly believe my understanding of and love for learning Chinese would not be where it is now.

I leave China with an immense love for my culture and native tongue. I leave feeling as if I’m finally beginning to understand my parents’ home, their sacrifices, and their realities. I leave feeling the proudest I have ever been to identify as a Chinese American.

If you have any questions, feel free to reach out to me on facebook (Jacky Zhang) or by email jackie.zhang@yale.edu! Also (shameless plug), you can check out some of my pics from my time in China on Instagram @jackyunderscorezhang ;)

c.  **Isaiah Schrader, 2018 Final Report**

Linguistically, culturally, and personally, my summer in Beijing was a revelation. The decision to choose Princeton in Beijing was not easy; I had heard about the program’s fierce reputation from students and professors alike.

“I heard they have essays due every day!”

“I heard students drop out halfway through – too much homework!”

As intimidating as my friends made the program out to be, I was drawn to the format of the program; tiny classes of four or five students, taught by a young and excited laoshi for two hours, and then by a second teacher for another two; not one, but two meetings of the “Chinese table” each week, and a one-on-one danban ke for an hour (or more) every day. As promised, each aspect of the program forced my Mandarin to swiftly progress. The tiny class size emphasized speaking skills, with correct pronunciation of every character. There is no way to hide in a class of four; instead, every misplaced tone was immediately corrected, and repeated.
Our youthful teachers were more like eager sports coaches, authority figures with whom we became friends. Competing themselves, for a position at Princeton or some other elite American university, they spent hours each night preparing a rigorous lesson plan that worked through a chapter in the textbook in just two hours (we went through two huge textbooks over the summer). Our daily danban ke, or tutorial, allowed us to focus on our personal points of difficulty, whether it was pronunciation, reading fluency, or memorization. The curriculum, too, was perfectly designed by Zhou Laoshi, the program’s director. A famed professor at Princeton, Zhou Laoshi set up the program decades ago, and has written dozens of Mandarin textbooks, including all the ones we used. I remember having a number of fascinating conversations with him in my bourgeoning Chinese; he is a prominent scholar of Chinese literature, which is my prospective major. Zhou Laoshi even brought in a number of important scholars from universities in China and the US to discuss Chinese history, economics, and poetry, hosting elaborate banquets afterwards with students interested in those topics.

Though my memory focuses on the fun parts of the summer, Princeton in Beijing is an incredibly rigorous and difficult program. Students must preview two chapters each night, which involves studying roughly one hundred fifty characters and reading six to eight pages in Chinese. We also had writing assignments almost every night, normally a page each. I spent about five hours each night completing my work, and perhaps six or seven on Thursday nights, before our weekly two hour exam on Friday mornings. To give perspective, I decided to use this opportunity spent hunched over textbooks with my laptop to increase my familiarity with the classical repertoire. In a given evening of studying, I might listen to two Mahler symphonies, four Beethoven string quartets, and a handful of concertos. Spotify was an excellent investment!

Twice a week at Princeton in Beijing, students attended a Chinese table; along with one other classmate and a teacher, we went out into the surrounding Haidian neighborhood to each out at a restaurant, on Princeton’s dime. The stipend of 200 kuai per person was more than enough to order a huge sampling of dishes. As the Chinese capital, Beijing has restaurants that serve authentic dishes from every region and province of China. The Chinese table was the perfect way for me to learn how to navigate an unfamiliar menu; we visited restaurants serving the food of the Uighurs, food from Chongqing, Hangzhou, Guangzhou, Jiangsu, and Inner Mongolia, among others. Often, we would enjoy Beijing specialties like roast duck, and meat pancakes (rou bing). With our professor at our side, we learned Chinese dining etiquette, as well as cultural and gastronomic history. A visit to the restaurant serving the food of Xinjiang, home of the Uighurs, for example, turned into a history lesson, and an interesting political debate – all in Mandarin. These small excursions into Beijing, even for just a few hours, offered valuable lessons in daily Chinese life.

As a student living full time on a college campus, I felt as though I truly experienced Chinese university life. Every day, after lunch, I visited the campus coffee shop, “Canada Coffee,” which offered good cappuccinos and taro ice in a bohemian atmosphere (Beijing Normal University is one of the most liberal universities in the country). Enjoying the fast wifi and caffeine, I would study there for hours each day. I even got to know the barista, a film
student on her summer holiday, well enough that she asked me to play a bit role in the movie she was filming. I would also strike up conversations with native students in the canteen (which, I’m afraid to say, is even better than the Franklin dining hall).

I took a few excursions of my own into the city. A friend of mine from Yale, who had participated in debate tournaments in Asia, told me about an upscale Taiwanese dim sum chain called Din Tai Fung, which has branches all over Beijing. Famed for their thin-skinned soup dumplings, Din Tai Fung has attracted a cult following. Upon consultation with my map, I saw that a visit to Din Tai Fung would require just a 20 minute bus ride along one line: the 88 bus (an extremely lucky number in China). Visits to Din Tai Fung, followed by Hong Kong style custard ice cream, soon became my Friday afternoon tradition, after finishing the weekly exam.

Most interesting about my time in China was learning how natives view my own country. While taking a taxi once in Shandong province, my cabbie asked me about what I thought about “Chuan Pu,” Donald Trump. I apologized for Trump’s anti-Chinese rhetoric, and told him these views aren’t representative of Americans. He laughed, and began to praise Xi Jinping’s political acumen. At one point, I was even able to read about Chinese views towards Yale. In my last week, I took a visit to Peking University, famed for its beautiful campus. I walked over afterwards to the All Saints Bookstore, which I had read about in the New York Times. A student bookstore and café, the shop has a wide selection of liberal and western books – all in Chinese. I even saw translations of book by Yale professors such as John Gaddis and Paul Kennedy. Finally, browsing the education section, the characters Ye Lu – Yale – stuck out. A former Greenberg world scholar from China had written a book about Yale’s liberal arts system, entitled, “Yale’s Pursuit of Progress: to become a specialized master, you must first become a universal genius.” The book is now in my room in Franklin College.

This year, the effects of my summer abroad have been obvious. I am taking upper advanced Mandarin, and my Beijing accent and careful tones give me an advantage over my classmates. I am pursuing a major in Chinese Literature, which almost certainly would not be possible without the linguistic abilities I gleaned over the summer. I know that this experience has changed the rest of my time at Yale, and beyond.

d. Manuel Schneider, Summer 2018 Final Report

After studying two years of Chinese at Yale I had the opportunity to spend two months at Princeton in Beijing in the summer, before continuing at CET-Harbin in the fall, and finally ICLP Taipei in the spring.

You’re likely deciding between PiB and Harvard Beijing Academy, so let me quickly compare the two. In short, PiB is the more academically rigorous program, while HBA is the more fun program. I would say the work-load at PiB is comparable to that of a regular Yale week, while you don’t have work during the weekend. There is not a lot of time for casually
exploring Beijing on your own, but this summer PiB organized two fantastic overnight trips to Chengde and Datong, which you should definitely take advantage of. Additionally, people at PiB seem to be a bit more serious about keeping the language pledge. Another thing you might consider, is that the living situation at HBA appears to be better than that at PiB, where you will be staying in on-campus housing and where we had constant problems with smell from the sewers coming into our bedrooms. Since putting in a lot of time really is the only way to become good at Chinese, I think PiB still is the better choice.

By far the greatest thing about PiB are its teachers. You should really think of them as friends. By the end of the program you will be much closer to them than you would expect coming in. This is largely the case for three reasons. First, the PiB teachers are roughly our age, with most of them having just recently finished their Masters. Secondly, you are required to have individual sessions with a different teacher for 50 minutes every day, which makes getting close to them very easy. Thirdly, the teacher-student ratio is insanely low, with a teacher for every 2.5 students. I don’t know how PiB did it, but they somehow found not only great educators, but also really warm people with great personalities, many of whom attended some of the most prestigious Chinese universities, including 北京大学. I heard that PiB’s selection process is very rigorous, with them cutting out many teachers during a trial period right before the program starts. I believe the most effective way to improve your Chinese is by just spending as much time as possible talking to your teachers. After about three weeks, some teachers started joining students on Friday excursions to KTV, hot pot, or the theater.

I would also like to take this opportunity to warn you about a few things, not to discourage you from going to China, but to make your transition a bit smoother. China and Chinese really are uniquely difficult to get acquainted to.

Having come to the United States as an exchange student, I had imagined my experience in China would somehow mimic that in the U.S.. Far from it. While relatively relaxed high-school classes on a Western language might be enough to be able to watch a TV show and get most of the content, this really cannot be said of Chinese. After two years of Chinese at Yale I was still unable to order dishes from a menu, or understand a simple phone conversation between two Chinese people. Even after PiB, I am unable to watch TV and fully understand every aspect of the conversation.

Additionally, Chinese society seems much more rigid when it comes to including foreigners. While someone who moves to the United States has the prospect of becoming American, and being accepted as American by his or her neighbors, this does not seem to be the case in China. As someone who doesn’t look Chinese, you will raise attention wherever you go. The moment you leave Beijing, you will notice people pointing at you, taking pictures or calling out “hello” at every corner. This is of course great if you want to improve your Chinese, as people in China really are incredibly friendly, and you should take full advantage of this to learn more about peoples' lives. However, it does indicate that no matter how hard you try to improve your Chinese and fit into society, people will tend to see you as an exotic foreigner.
China truly is an incredibly homogenous society and you can spend an entire day walking through any big city outside of Beijing and Shanghai without seeing a single non-Chinese person.

Lastly, contrary to the content of many textbooks and despite of great achievements like the high-speed train network, China is still very much a developing country. Things that you might take for granted, like food-safety, are not necessarily a given.

Being aware of these things before you go to China will help you calmly recognize some issues you might be running into as intrinsic, rather than due to your own fault or that of anyone around you.

Inevitably you will ask yourself why you haven’t just chosen an easier language, maybe one without characters, tones, or weird dialects. I think the answer should be clear. China is one of the most important countries in the 21st century, yet few people in the West know much about it. The reverse is true of most Chinese people, who rarely meet foreigners, and almost never meet foreigners who speak their language. Understanding China, and understanding Asia, are prerequisites to being a well rounded global citizen. While Chinese might be one of the most difficult languages to learn, so are most other East Asian languages. Learning Chinese opens a wealth of new opportunities in the most quickly developing country, which also boost the highest population and one of the longest histories.

Finally, I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to the Richard U. Light Fellowship. Learning any language, and especially learning Chinese, requires a wealth of resources. Spending a year in China to improve your language, which is indispensable for becoming fluent, costs about as much as new car. It really is remarkable that someone who has never met us is willing to go to great length to support us in our pursuit of language study, asking nothing in return but our efforts to improve dialogue between the East and the West. I would also like to thank Ming-Yee, who was an incredible resource during the whole process. She cares a lot about this program and seems to really enjoy talking to students.