

Feedback Report of 2011 Mandarin Students' Trip to China

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Overview

The purpose of the trip is to afford the opportunity to our students of Mandarin to have direct exposure to the Chinese language and culture. The trip is jointly sponsored by Naspers, the Confucius Institute at Stellenbosch University (CISU) and the Postgraduate & International Office at Stellenbosch University. This year fourteen second-year and two third-year Mandarin students attended a four-week-long Summer School programme at Xiamen University in China. Together Xiamen University and Stellenbosch University currently administer a Confucius Institute.

The programme

The programme, offered by Overseas Education College, started on 13 June and ended on 8 July. Chinese language lessons are major component of the programme and every morning the students attended a Chinese language lesson lasting two and a half hours. In total the class hours added up to fifty hours, which is almost equal to the hours for one term at the university.

In the afternoon, the students were offered lessons in Chinese culture which included Chinese Kung Fu, Paper-cutting, Chinese Knot, Chinese Song and Calligraphy. The students showed great interest in these lessons but, because of limited time, only basic skills could be covered.

The programme included an opening ceremony on the first day of our arrival and a closing ceremony on the last day of class in which certificates were issued to each of the students. A meeting was also arranged with Chinese students who are training to become teachers of Chinese to foreigners.

Weekend tours

Tours were an important part of this trip and were arranged independent from the university. Some were organized by travel agents, and some we organized ourselves. Weekends were spent touring some local places of interest in Fujian Province where Xiamen is located. We spent two days touring in and around Xiamen and a day in the provincial capital, Fuzhou City, which is located in the east. We took a trip of two days to the Wuyi Mountains which are in the north of the province.

We also attended an amazing evening outdoor performance directed by Zhang Yimou who was the director of the Opening Ceremony of the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games. Another day was spent visiting a variety of village castles in the west.

The students experienced almost all the local means of transport: taxis, normal buses, buses running along special routes called BRT, normal trains and superfast trains. and covered the four corners of the province which the students enjoyed very much.

Food, Accommodation and Communication

Food cards were bought for the students who could have a discount when eating in the campus dining halls. Everyone stayed in a university hostel which was clean and safe and had air-conditioning in each room. While there was no internet access available in the rooms, two accounts were opened for the students to use to receive and send emails. A local cell phone SIM card was bought for each of the students on the first day of our arrival.

Problems & incidents

The change of climate and exposure to foreign food became quite a challenge. Xiamen is very hot and humid from June to September. A few students fell sick in the first week but this could also be because the students started the long flight to China almost immediately after finishing their university exams without a rest of a few days. After the second week in China, they became used to the local climate and food.

Teachers and students on campus can speak Mandarin well, but the local people do not speak Mandarin or they speak Mandarin with a strong local accent which caused some confusion amongst our students. Some students did not contact their parents regularly, which caused some concerns. One student lost her cell phone. Two students' camera memory cards were confiscated by the local army because they took pictures of the gate of a military base which is illegal according to Chinese law.

Gains

During the four weeks the students studied together, travelled together, ate together, and relaxed together which forged a strong bond between them. Some of them also made Chinese friends and established contacts, which might be helpful in the future. Regarding language learning, the students' listening and speaking abilities were greatly improved. Also, the students' interest in China has been greatly enhanced which has led to most of them expressing the wish to spend one or two years in China after they finish their studies at Stellenbosch.