

Spring Learning in Beijing

Sonya Van Schaijik

In April of 2017 I visited Beijing with a group of twelve New Zealand Chinese Language teachers. We applied for and won a place on the 2017 China Scholarship Programme to Beijing developed by ILEP, Confucius, Hanban and the New Zealand Ministry of Education.

We were hosted by Beijing Language and Cultural University that is located close to the centre of Beijing and stayed in the conference centre.

During the twenty one days in Beijing I was immersed in the Chinese language, from catching a train, shopping at the supermarket, daily routines such as passing pleasantries with staff at the front desk to asking for my clothes to be washed at the laundry. I was surrounded by language from the fabulous forms of vehicle mashups and their advertising to the signs directing us to uniformed checkpoints and of course wherever we saw food.

I spoke with local people at the historical sites we were taken to, on the trains, at the university canteen, with my home stay and with our tutors and support students. We visited a school where the language lesson was centred around whole group teaching with a focus on traditional poetry. As a group we attended a Kung Fu performance

and a Beijing Opera performance, so again we were exposed to language but in a different way.

What I have learnt about Chinese culture is how old and steeped in history it is. We visited historical sites to learn about history and visited places of interest where we could observe traditional arts and crafts happening. My favourite site was Mutianyu at the Great Wall. I spent time on my own, walking parts of the wall and reflected on my Chinese learning, which like the Great Wall has been massive. Parts of my language learning are crumbling from lack of use and parts are stronger from teaching.

I believe that language and the environment go together and I believe that the current challenges that Beijing is having with natural resources will continue to improve. I saw signs of this with the return of local birds in the area.

As I sat listening to my new friends share their highlights during our final days I felt connections as we reflected on an incredible three weeks' learning. We returned to New Zealand tired but at the same time rejuvenated in our efforts to teach and share about Chinese language and culture with our students and our peers.

For me the greatest taonga I bring back are the memories of my time with my colleagues as together we navigated our way around Beijing and learned more about a different culture and language. We have returned home with a greater appreciation of our own country and the importance we must give to its environment, culture and Te Reo. Highlighted for us is the importance of people, whether we are learning in a city of twenty two million people or teaching in a country with four million people.

Overall the purpose of the scholarship was to grow our understanding of Chinese Language and Culture and also to rediscover interesting aspects of our own cultural identity. Probably my greatest learning was from the other Chinese Language teachers in the group. Through them I learnt more about vocabulary and phrases I would need, I learnt about some cultural aspects such as an explanation about the appropriateness of using chopsticks.

I believe that in order to be a second language teacher of English it is vitally important to know what it is like to be a language learner myself. An experience like this places me as a learner and therefore I am able to better empathise with the students I teach.



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