

THE SHIP OF CURIOUS WORKMANSHIP SAILS TO CHINA:  
TERM IN BEIJING FOR BYU-IDAHO

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Study of Chinese language and culture is relatively new at BYU-Idaho. Though now well developed, today's Chinese program is probably a modest beginning of greater things. We reached a milestone in 2006 with the establishment of the Term in Beijing. Study in the Chinese capitol is helping our students mature into more complete *leaders* and *disciples*, the two terms President Clark used to summarize the mission of BYU-Idaho in his inaugural address, and which reflect Elder Eyring's prophetic description in "A Steady, Upward Course:"

They will be natural leaders who know how to teach and how to learn. They will have the power to innovate and improve without requiring more of what money can buy. Those graduates of BYU-Idaho will become—and this is a prophecy that I am prepared to make and make solemnly—those graduates of BYU-Idaho will become legendary for their capacity to build the people around them and to add value wherever they serve.<sup>1</sup>

In Beijing, I observed the maturation underway. Each Sunday as the branch president gave a special welcome to the students from BYU-Idaho, I felt at peace knowing they were in Beijing—of all Chinese cities—because one of the Lord's servants asked BYU-Idaho to go there, the capitol of the People's Republic of China, where no other LDS educational institution yet has an organized student presence. Of the six hundred foreign students at Capitol Normal University (CNU), the dean invited ours to represent CNU at a Beijing municipal activity to motivate the citizens to practice English in preparation for the 2008 Olympics.

And I spoke briefly with Miss Shang, a young dormitory maid from an impoverished rural area in Gansu Province. As she mopped the floor in my room one morning while the students were in class, Miss Shang asked me if "all these students" (referring to rooms down the hall) were mine. I said they were and asked if they had done anything wrong. On the contrary, she indicated. She then told me how exceptionally kind and warm they were, and how impressed she was with their diligence as students.

To explain where we are and how we got here, I will review the history of our Chinese program, the efforts to inaugurate *in situ* experience for BYU-Idaho students, and how this study-abroad experience relates to other travel-study programs and the University's development.

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## CHINESE AT BYU-IDAHO

Chinese language offerings began at Ricks College/BYU-Idaho in 1993, when Cheng Ya-lan, retired Mandarin instructor for foreign diplomats and military personnel in Hong Kong, relocated to Rexburg, where her son-in-law, Tom Liau was the director of the McKay Library. Sister Cheng taught part-time, passionately and enthusiastically, for several years before once again retiring when she was already well into her seventies. Never wanting to turn anyone away, she often accommodated students of dramatically differing skill levels in her classes, despite the extra burden this created for her. Sister Cheng recently relocated to Provo, Utah. I sincerely miss her beautifully spoken Mandarin and her contagious sense of optimism and humor.

When hired at Ricks College in 1998, I was assigned to establish an associate degree program in Chinese, which of course constituted fewer classes than our current Chinese minor. Although adjunct Chinese language faculty are difficult to find in this area, during my tenure at Ricks/BYU-Idaho we have been fortunate to employ a few such individuals. Su Li, a native of Shaanxi, People's Republic of China and now of Idaho Falls, taught part time during the 1998-99 academic year.

Teresa Chao-chi Yang, after working for three years as a teaching assistant, was entrusted with a Chinese 102 course during her senior year at BYU-Idaho (2003-04). Teresa recently completed an MA in Language Acquisition at BYU and accepted a faculty position at the Defense Language Institute in Monterey, California.

Michael Paul, the first Ricks College student to earn an associate degree in Chinese, went on to complete bachelor's and master's degrees in Chinese and Chinese Language Acquisition, and is currently a doctoral student in Chinese Linguistics at the University of Arizona. BYU-Idaho was fortunate to have Michael teach beginning and intermediate Chinese during the summer of 2006.

Another Ricks College alumnus, Tyson Yost, has recently completed a master's degree in Comparative Literature, with an emphasis in Buddhist studies, at the University of Chicago and will begin work on his PhD this fall at Cornell. Tyson also taught a Chinese literature course in Rexburg in the summer of 2006.

While enrollment in Chinese language and culture courses grew steadily over the years, at least two obstacles prevented further growth and maturation: limited introductory course offerings and lack of a university-sponsored study abroad opportunity. The first obstacle was at least partially overcome in 2004 when we were fortunate to employ Shen Lei as a full-time faculty member. Dr. Shen has taken over coordination of intermediate and advanced language instruction, which has allowed the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures to offer multiple

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sections of beginning Chinese, hence increasing the number of students entering Chinese language study. Dr. Shen has also been instrumental in our overcoming the second obstacle: a university-sponsored language program abroad.

#### STUDENTS IN CHINA: A FOUNDATION

The need for BYU–Idaho students to go abroad and increase their language competency and cultural awareness was acknowledged as early as the implementation of the Chinese associate degree program at Ricks College.<sup>2</sup> Serious planning began in 2000, when a generous grant from the Freeman Foundation allowed Max Checketts and me to participate in a program sponsored by ASIANetwork to assist faculty and administrators in establishing study abroad experiences in Asia.<sup>3</sup>

Back at BYU–Idaho, our early effort was based on the local travel model, which is successful with the Mesoamerica, British Literary, and European Humanities tours. This was not successful because the target group of students was too small to support the requisite number of faculty members needed. Subsequently we investigated the workability of a new model that was not dependent on the number of students wishing to study in China at a particular time. Based on recommendations that Max and I received from Elder Chia Chu-jen of the Seventy while in Beijing in 2000, we decided to send students to Beijing to study.

The dean, Lee Warnick, and I traveled to Beijing in 2001 to visit two universities, People’s University and Beijing Normal University, which might serve as bases for a residential study abroad program. After these visits, I laid tentative plans to take students on a trial basis to Beijing Normal University. The plan for a group with one faculty sponsor for summer 2002 was cancelled due to the events of September 11, 2001. Similar efforts for the summer of 2003 were stymied by the outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in China. After this series of defeats, plans were put on hold. We did send two students to study at Beijing Normal University independently in the summer of 2004, but no formal BYU–Idaho program was carried out.

It was ultimately the enthusiasm, encouragement, and professional ties of Shen Lei that incited the planning for a recent successful BYU–Idaho Term in Beijing. With two full-time teachers, we were attracting more students to study Chinese. Informal surveys throughout the 2004–05 academic year indicated strong interest in a residential study program in China. While many students were finding their way to China through English-teaching positions, there was a corps of serious students who indicated their preference for a more academic, university-sponsored, language-intensive experience.

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Upon Shen Lei's recommendation, we explored a relationship with another university in Beijing, Capitol Normal University (CNU). A former colleague of Shen Lei had been director of Chinese as a Foreign Language at CNU, and Shen Lei was aware of the excellent quality of instruction at this institution. Furthermore, CNU was somewhat smaller, and would perhaps be a better fit for our students, than the larger and somewhat less personal Beijing Normal. Early correspondence with CNU proved comfortable and promising. They seemed interested in accommodating our students and willing to discuss our wishes and concerns.

We were given permission by the BYU–Idaho administration to move forward with a program at CNU. By December 2005, twelve students had committed to participate in the program during May 2006. Roy Huff and I visited CNU in March 2006 to establish an articulation agreement, meet with faculty and administrators, inspect living arrangements, and meet informally with leaders at the Beijing LDS branch to notify them of our plans. We were delighted with the professionalism of the faculty, staff, and administration and equally pleased with the quality of the facilities. The leaders of the Beijing branch, as well as China District President Stephen Toronto were genuinely excited that BYU–Idaho would have a student presence in Beijing.

Financial support from the Thomas E. Ricks Foundation and the College of Language and Letters allowed me to be present during the first two weeks of this inaugural “Term in Beijing” program, as well as to slip away for a few days to conduct some service work for a non-profit organization in a poverty-stricken region of northern Shaanxi Province. The Term in Beijing does not require or preclude BYU–Idaho faculty to travel with students to China or to accompany them during their residence in Beijing. Differing dramatically from the current BYU–Idaho travel-study model, the Term in Beijing meets the needs of the University and its Chinese language students who seek specific knowledge in a specific locale.

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#### FRUITS OF THE LABOR; GIFTS OF THE SPIRIT

In hindsight, it is apparent to me how the development of the Term in Beijing exemplifies that the hand of the Lord is in the affairs of this institution. Although during the exploratory years we did not yet know of President Clark's three imperatives, the Term in Beijing appears to have been planned with the imperatives as guiding principles.

First, the Term in Beijing *raises substantially the quality of* (at least one) *aspect of the experience our students have*. BYU–Idaho Chinese language students are now able to plan into their academic futures an intensive language and culture immersion in China. With the sponsorship of BYU–Idaho, they can be confident that it will be a positive, high quality

experience, and more predictable than programs arranged individually or through some other institution.

In the future, Term in Beijing will be carried out during the common summer break (July-August), allowing students from all tracks to participate together. The predictable time allows students to plan in the long-term. Another benefit of the summer schedule is that it will allow Chinese language faculty, if they wish, to accompany the students during part or all of the program. For little more than the cost of airfare, they will be able to share this time with the students, reacquaint with contemporary Chinese culture, practice language, and engage in other scholarly and service activities. Thus faculty will be better prepared and more enthusiastic back home in the classroom, raising the quality of education for all of their students.

The BYU-Idaho Term in Beijing also makes this aspect of a *BYU-Idaho education available to many more young people of the Church*. Formerly, no study abroad was available to our students of Chinese. Furthermore, in Term in Beijing, teachers are not required to escort students abroad during an academic term, allowing them to maintain their regular teaching load of larger classes on campus, thus reaching more students than if they were leading a small group abroad.

Finally, Term in Beijing *lowers the relative cost of education*. Similar programs at other institutions cost thousands of dollars more than the Term in Beijing. Since this program does not rely on funds from students to pay faculty salary and travel expenses, costs to students are kept low and group size is flexible. ☺

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## NOTES

1. Elder Henry B. Eyring, "A Steady, Upward Course," Brigham Young University-Idaho Devotional, September 18, 2001.
2. Research suggests that *in situ* study is indispensable for Chinese language students. See Cornelius C. Kubler, "Study Abroad as an Integral Part of the Chinese Language Curriculum," *Journal of the Chinese Language Teachers Association* 32:3 (1997): 15-30.
3. Incidentally, I was at the YWCA in Hong Kong when my wife phoned in the middle of the night to tell me of the announcement that Ricks College would become a four-year university called Brigham Young University-Idaho. This was particularly important to me, as the next day I was traveling to China, where BYU was, during the 80s and 90s, a university with nearly as much name recognition as Harvard or Yale, due to performing groups from BYU that toured China and were featured on the few channels of state-run television. With its new name, Ricks College was instantly recognizable to a whole generation of Chinese.