

Aidan Ward

To Enjoy the Moon's Lovely Graces:
Summary of Princeton in Beijing Program Attended With Funding From the Gold Smith Adams
Award

My experience with the Princeton in Beijing Online Program began with a rocky start. From the very first day it seems I couldn't utter a single sentence without being corrected. Chinese is a tonal language with four different pitches that change the meaning of words and my teachers quickly informed me that both my second and third tones weren't clear enough, meaning I was struggling to pronounce about half of the words in mandarin, a language I had studied for four years already. For the first week I spent hours agonizing over my pronunciation mistakes and my motivation plummeted. At one point my frustration was so great I decided I must have been born tone deaf, despite the obvious fact that at Bowdoin I sing in both an acapella group and a chorus group.

My teachers told me to just keep going and trust the process and to no one's surprise but my own, they were right. This was, after all, exactly the difference Princeton in Beijing was designed to make: while at Bowdoin, class sizes and time constraints mean we often don't have enough time to work on pronunciation, at Princeton in Beijing, I attended a one hour individual class each day, half of which was devoted to pronunciation drills. There I was able to practice pronunciation with instantaneous feedback and learned many important exceptions to normal tone rules and how to modify my speech to make it sound more fluent. Eventually, I could pronounce most individual words accurately, and only ran into difficulty in longer more complex sentences.

Outside of individual sessions I also spent two hours in group class discussing various topics related to China, while going over new vocabulary and grammar structures. The greatest strength of these lessons was that I walked away from them with a much better understanding of Chinese culture and history, not just the grammar and vocabulary we were focusing on. One particularly memorable topic was “顺口溜”, (*shùn kǒu liū*) a word that is best translated as “jingle” but really equates to an often humorous saying with rhyming elements that speak to problems in society. Perhaps the most famous of these is well known in the West and refers to Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms that mixed capitalism and socialism: “Black cat or a white cat, as long as it catches mice then it's a good cat!”. There was also a special focus on cotemporary challenges in China and the increasing openness of the younger generation. In class it seemed no topic, from condoms in vending machines to hookups and marriage pressure, was left undiscussed.

Despite the online nature of the program, there was also a great deal of learning outside the (virtual) classroom. The PiB program was rounded out by a rotating suite of guest speakers and extracurricular activities. Each speaker specialized in some area of Chinese studies and often their speeches emphasized a practicality that was harder to find in class, like an award winning human rights journalist who presented on the challenges of reporting in mainland China. Extracurriculars allowed us a space to enjoy little slivers of Chinese culture with our Chinese teachers and friends. My favorite extracurricular activity was poem recitation. Poems form an important part of Chinese culture and if you meet someone who went through any Chinese education system, they undoubtedly have at least one of their favorite poems memorized. As someone who grew up overseas and often moved around, I choose an ancient classical Chinese poem to recite whose topics of parting and longing deeply resonated with me. At the graduation

ceremony, my teachers asked me to recite the poem again for the everyone one in the program, and I ended singing one of the many popular song versions of the poem instead. Despite my nerves, it turned out great and I was excited to be able to apply my musical skills that I had been building at Bowdoin in a totally new environment.

I write this summary on the plane on the way to Taipei, Taiwan, where I will spend the next year of college studying Chinese and Taiwanese history. Princeton in Beijing was meant to build my confidence and prepare me for this next step, and I look forward to applying all that I have learned in my new home for the next nine months. As I fly towards a new journey in my academic career and commit myself to a year thousands of miles away from my newly made friends, my many fellow polar bears, and even my family, the lines of my chosen poem sneak back into my mind.

人有悲欢离合, *For mortals there is grief and joy, coming together and going
apart,*
月有阴晴圆缺, *The moon has bright and shadowed phases, wholeness and then
something gone,*
此事古难全。 *Things never stay at perfection.*
但愿人长久, *So I wish that we continue long,*
千里共婵娟。 *To share across a thousand miles its lovely graces.*