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Thursday, January 27, 2011

Mids Study Chinese in Beijing

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From the International Programs Office

Six Naval Academy midshipmen spent the fall semester in an intensive Chinese language program while living in Beijing, China.

Midshipmen 1st Class Alena Ahern, Lara Bzik, James Cheung, Susannah Stokes, and Robert Wynne, and Midshipman 2nd Class Ros Lary took a pledge to speak only Chinese during their four-month stay in the country's capital city.

“Although very challenging at times, this environment prepared us to leave the classroom and explore China using our language skills,” said Bzik.

Destinations outside the classroom included the cities of Qingdao, Guilin, Shanghai, Luoyang, Xinjiang, and a trip outside the country to Japan. While living and traveling abroad, the midshipmen faced challenges such as being a minority in a foreign culture and struggling to communicate, but still enjoyed the opportunity and developed a deeper appreciation for their U.S. citizenship.

Aside from our language training and travels, the midshipmen had other unique opportunities for professional and military development. They met with U.S. Ambassador to China Jon Huntsman Jr. to hear his analysis of China's current domestic situation. They also attended the Marine Corps birthday ball hosted by the Marine Embassy Security Detachment, where they met diplomats, military officers and State Department officials.

“These unusual opportunities contributed to our overall experience living in a foreign country and made us more capable and aware individuals,” said Bzik.

For Ahern, one of the most interesting parts of the semester abroad experience was being an ethnic minority

“I had never before considered what it would be like to stand out because of my race, but in China's ethnically homogenous society, I found that I drew



Caption: From left, Midshipmen 1st Class Susannah Stokes, Robert Wynne, Alana Ahern and Lara Bzik stand on the Great Wall of China. The midshipmen, along with Midshipman 1st Class James Cheung and Midshipman 2nd Class Ros Lary, spent the fall semester studying in Beijing. Photo courtesy of the International Programs Office.



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attention wherever I went, from strangers yelling at me in Russian to families asking to take pictures with me," she said.

In China, 92 percent of the population is Han Chinese, and the other eight percent is comprised of fifty six different ethnic minority groups. Many of these groups are practically indistinguishable from Han Chinese, said Ahern.

"Being noticeably different had benefits, such as being a very easy conversation starter with people I met," she said. "They frequently wanted to know where I was from and what I was doing in China. As soon as they found out that I was American, they had lots of questions for me and things they wanted to say."

The midshipmen found that the Chinese people were very interested in finding out about them and how Americans perceive China.

However, sticking out so obviously also had its drawbacks, as occasionally they ran into people who attempted to take advantage of the fact that they were in new surroundings.

"Store owners or street vendors frequently tried to raise prices on me," said Ahern. "Being so obviously different was an experience at once unnerving and exciting."

Wynne was most surprised by the economic and cultural diversity throughout the country. While he/she found that Beijing was not much different from a large city like Washington, D.C., just an hour outside the city was a completely different environment.

"The Chinese countryside and smaller cities are a world apart from the modernized conveniences of the large coastal cities," said Wynne. "In my trips to the countryside, where people had never before seen a foreigner, let alone a Chinese-speaking American, I was truly immersed in a culture nothing like America."

Despite vast differences in living standards and ethnic compositions, the people the mids encountered during their travels shared many of the same values, including a hope for a better life for their children, a desire to make money and live comfortably, and respect for guests and friends.

"I think that the extreme diversity of China's locales challenges me to seek more opportunities to travel to China and explore new regions," said Wynne.

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