

YingHua in Beijing Summer Program Final Reflections 2014

[The following reflection essays were written by students attending the nonprofit “YingHua in Beijing” 2014 Summer Language & Leadership Institute. Almost every day, the students would sit in a circle to reflect on the day’s experience through writing and sharing. On the last Saturday before they went home, they were asked to reflect on their 4-week experience and what they would tell other kids about it. They had 20 minutes. All of the students shared their experiences here. More information, such as the institute’s daily announcements and schedule, can be found at www.YingHuasummer.org . Contact: Dr. Bonnie Liao bonnie.liao@YingHua.org (609.530.0399). Please feel free to share this document with your friends.]

Ava D, 10

This camp was really fun; I got to make a lot of friends. There were a lot of fun experiences, and I enjoyed the time I spent here.

You would be surprised how quickly you make friends and how much fun you’ll have. We went to a lot of cool factories, like the silk factory, the jade factory, and the pearl factory... You also get to learn how to determine if certain jade or pearl is real. We got to go to the Great Wall, Tian An Men, and the Summer Palace. We went to a couple of bargain markets, and I enjoyed that. On the trip, you get to go to the senior and community centers too.

When I was here the first day, I was nervous; everyone was. But after a while, when you know each other better, you aren’t nervous anymore. In the end, you actually want to stay longer.

My favorite part was meeting the Guang Ai kids. Guang Ai is a school for poor or homeless children. The school name, in English, is Shining Love; and that is true. Cherish the four days you have here with them, and make friends with them. You will discover that you can’t help them a lot, but don’t waste your precious time.

Overall, I think the YingHua Summer Camp is really fun, and you get to learn a lot of cool stuff. I am telling the truth, so come on this trip. It is definitely worth it, and then you will know for yourself.

Here are some tips: I know you’ll buy stuff on this trip, so leave some room in your luggage(s) so you don’t have to carry a separate plastic bag like me... Bring around 700 RMB... There will be Chinese class and leadership lessons. Bring long pants, sneakers, sandals, and slippers. The more clothes you bring, the better. Don’t overpack, and prepare to write one of these essay things yourself. Also, prepare to cry; happily, and in sorrow.

Conrad Z, 15

Over these past four weeks, a lot has happened in this summer camp. I've made friends, visited famous Chinese landmarks, such as Tiananmen, the Forbidden City, and the Great Wall, just to name a few. I've also done various activities with my campmates, such as hiking, learning Chinese, even bargaining for trinkets to bring back to the States. I feel that through experiencing all of this, I've matured as a person and achieved a greater understanding of China. Just over the course of a month, YingHua in Beijing has changed my perspective of the world, and has taught me that everyday things we consider necessities are actually luxuries, and that the world is so much more than just the Internet. The daily jogs and reflections, the Chinese and leadership lessons, the struggle to wake up at 6:30 in the morning every day may all seem pointless and exhausting, but it is through this routine that helped me realize just how much that life has to offer. The only downside is that the camp doesn't last long enough, and that I have to leave my friends only after a month. I wholeheartedly recommend YingHua in Beijing as a summer camp escape, perhaps not for the lessons you'll learn, but the memories and experiences you'll share with the friends you'll make at YingHua in Beijing.

David L, 13

Over the summer, one of the most difficult decisions is to choose a summer camp. But what makes a summer camp so memorable? And what makes a summer camp an experience that will never be forgotten? There are so many different types of camps I have been to over the years, but there is only one camp that I will always treasure within the depths of my heart: 英华在北京. A four-week experience that visits much of Beijing doesn't seem like much, but there is something so special about it that I cannot explain.

When I return back to the States and talk about this camp, many will probably ignore and reject this camp. I was also like them in the beginning, for I thought that everything spoken about the camp were all lies. But it's not. This camp is like a portal, one that will change you forever. As soon as you come through the portal, everything you feel about the world will change, and that's a promise.

In the beginning of anything, people will always be uncomfortable and confused, but in a flash all the uncomfortable and confused thoughts will disappear. This is the same case with 英华. The first few days were blurry and uncomfortable, but we were all happy together by half of the first week. The first week starts it all off, with the incredibly long flight and unknown buildings. However, once all the fog clears, the camp becomes tons of fun. Of course, the camp has a major focus on Chinese, so Chinese classes have to happen. Other than that, we visited many places, such as a porcelain factory, a private school, and even a silk factory. Yong An (the hotel) is really well-managed and the breakfast buffet is awesome. Everything starts out slow, but progressively gets faster and faster.

The camp focuses on many different traits, but Chinese is one of the most important. The camp is divided into three groups: A, B, and C, based on skill level. Every class learns different words, and there is a final test. C learned 水浒传 (*The Outlaws of the Marsh*) and B learned 西游记 (*Journey to the West*), which are extremely famous Chinese stories. Chinese class may not seem like much, but it's a lot of fun.

The 2nd and 3rd week of camp went past in a blur, and I feel like I didn't treasure every single second of it. During this time, many trips were made to different places in Beijing, like the Water Cube (we got to swim), the Great Wall, and even the Science and Technology Museum. We even went to a mosque to break our fast, because one of our counselors fasted during the camp. Many life lessons are learned throughout the camp, and words cannot express how thankful I am for this camp.

Imagine this: the alarm clock screams in your ears at 6:30. You have to slump out of your bed and get down to the lobby by 6:55. You then have to run to a park, and there you have to run a mile around a huge lake. By the end of it all, you are exhausted, gasping for air. This is a day in the life of a student at the camp. Although seeming rather cruel, morning exercises are a great way to boost the physical ability of everyone. Before, I couldn't even run half a mile, but now I feel like I could run two miles. Exercise is also built into the everyday life, because a very common punishment is also to do pushups. So be prepared!

The fourth week completely differs from the other three weeks - and it is packed with lessons and goodbyes. On the fourth week, students go to a school called Guang Ai, a free home for children with no parents and who wander the streets. Guang Ai starts out very uncomfortable and confusing - with flies buzzing about, rooms as clean as a junkyard, and showers packed with people. Can people here truly be happy? Many debated over this, like me, but after staying for four days, I understood. People there can truly be happy - even more so than us. To students there, Guang Ai is their home - where they lived all their life, and where they have felt the most comfortable. Sometimes it just doesn't seem possible that people can truly be happy somewhere you would never expect to be called "home". After my Guang Ai experience, I finally understood why Guang Ai can be a home, and why many outsiders consider Guang Ai another family. The last few days of camp are sad in some ways, but they are still filled with the constant joy of the students that shines throughout the camp. Parting is such sweet sorrow, and it fills my eyes with tears, seeing that we have all gotten so close with each other. Although we come from all different places and are so different in so many ways, I feel so many mixed emotions that we have gotten along so well together but yet we already have to part ways. I guess this is something that has to happen in life. People meet, they become friends, and in the blink of an eye, they must separate.

There is so much that I cannot hold in, and I feel like I need to tell the world about this camp. So what is it like at 英华? Words cannot explain what I want to say, but I will do my best to tell its story. 英华 teaches you much of what you need to know about life. The camp is an excellent way to improve leadership, socializing, physical ability, responsibility, and the Chinese culture. In

the camp, everyone will find new friends, a new hobby, and even a whole new understanding of the world. Sure, there might be some tough times and some moments when you want to say “I can’t take it anymore,” but those moments will pass and you will get to see a new, bright morning filled with laughter and joy. An experience in the camp will brighten up your day and teach you how to be a new and better person. Many people even come back every year to visit, while others even come for multiple years in the camp. Even though I am describing 英华 the way I can, you won’t truly understand what I am writing about unless you experience the camp yourself.

Life is a journey packed with excitement and adventure, but eventually it all has to come to an end. I cannot believe that the trip to Beijing is almost over and that soon we will all have to leave this place. Some I will see again in the future and talk with, while I may never see some others again. Sometimes I tell myself that the camp will not end, but nobody can hide from reality. As I am writing this, my eyes are filling with tears as I slowly etch every word onto this piece of paper, because I cannot believe that it is almost over. Every single person in this camp has brightened up my day and has revealed to me what the world is really about. I hope that all of us – me, Mollee, Eric, Ava, Ethan, Kevin, Emily, Katherine C, Katherine Y, Conrad, Michelle, Shannon, Fawzi, and Liao Lao Shi can all meet each other in the future – and still treat everyone the same as before. 英华 means so much to me and I promise that I will remember everything that makes this camp what it is. My new family here has to part ways soon, but I still want to treasure every second we have together. 英华在北京 is something that is unique in so many ways, and I know that there will never be anything like it. No matter what other camps I will go to and where I go in this world in the future, there will never be anything as great and as extraordinary as 英华在北京.

Emily J, 14

The past four weeks at YingHua have helped me grow as a person, and also gave me what is possibly the best summer of my life (no exaggeration). We’ve done so many things during this short month and I’ve made so many great friends, so it’s sad that this camp is so short. Choosing to come to YingHua is definitely not something that I regret, and I know for sure that I will do what I can to come back again. At this camp, I’ve also created so many wonderful memories with all the people here. It’s hard to wrap my head around the fact that soon we’ll all be separated again to continue our lives in the States.

Unlike some of the other kids at this camp, I actually chose to come to YingHua for a new experience. However, I got so much more from here than just a “new experience”. There are people here that I hope to stay in contact with for the rest of my life. There are places I wish I could go back to over and over again. I can’t even begin to describe with words how great this camp has been. Anything I say about YingHua and the friends I’ve made will sound cheesy, but I’m going to miss everything about this camp more than you can imagine.

If I continue to write, this reflection will just be repeating the exact same thing, so I'll end this by saying that I love the new family I made at YingHua, and thank you, everyone, for making this great.

Eric X, 9

Today is our last reflection day.

This camp has been such a memorable event in my life. We've been on a lot of field trips and I've made so many friends.

In the first week, we just started to get used to each other and found out so many different facts about the underground tunnels. It was actually a very cool place. Looking at the trap doors gave me the creeps just a little. Not just the creeps, but I also asked myself a couple of questions: How could the Chinese improve so much? What materials did they use?

I started to get more used to Beijing in the second week. I always had a passion for swimming. One day I went with the rest of the camp to the 2008 Olympics Water Cube. I knew that I should do great. I risked trying out the 200-meter swimming test because I thought that since I hadn't swam 200 meters in such a long time, I wouldn't be able to make it with such short stamina. I had to believe in myself in order to make it. We also went to the Beijing Phoenix Orchestra. Those people were super nice. We played a lot of games and finally got third place. The story a lady there said was fascinating. I want to be just like them now, like a phoenix. A phoenix's ashes will let the phoenix grow back alive after it is burnt. I take that from my point of view as grit.

We climbed the Great Wall in the third week. I was sweating to death. My rubber legs wouldn't let me stand up. Jello Me wouldn't think straight. That was my second time ever climbing the Great Wall. I was so tired. I thought so positively and made it finally.

The week we went to Guang Ai, I was touched in just four days. Guang Ai became a part of my family. Little ones were cute, older ones were fun to have fun with. I was so grateful. They gave me the gift of love and gratitude. My heart ached so much when we read during yesterday's reflections, and I cried.

One last paragraph: the counselors and director are all so welcoming and nice. The classes aren't like any plain old boring classes, but they are instead more fun.

Ethan C, 11

When you look back in life and the things you have done, every step of the way, everything happened in a blink of an eye. Take this camp, for example. Reflections on all the things we enjoyed this month have come to an end. For me, coming my third time to camp was fun, but having come three years I've lost three families and that means a lot to me. So this is my final reflection of this month. To start things off was first meeting everyone. It is a strange feeling for me every year because you don't know who is who. Getting on the plane, the worries start to disappear. As us eleven students arrived we settled in a hotel called Yong An. Going there again just reminded me of old days. As the first and second weeks were done I could then get to know everyone. Then, I enjoyed the third and fourth weeks the most because for the fourth week we got to go to Guang Ai.

Overall, if I were you, I could come to this camp because you get to learn Chinese, learn how to be a leader, and have fun with the Guang Ai kids.

Katherine C, 14

In the blink of an eye, the YingHua Summer Program is over. These four weeks have taught me many things from Chinese culture to language to leadership skills. Out of the four weeks, the first week challenged me the most. It was challenging not because of making new friends, but because of conquering jetlag. During the first three weeks, we learned about the Chinese culture and language. We had the opportunity to visit the Ethnic Park Museum and learn about the different ethnic minorities in China. On most days, we would have morning classes and then some activity where we would learn about the Chinese culture or leadership skills. On some days, we would have full day trips to some of Beijing's tourist attractions, for example: the mosque, the Buddhist temple, Water Cube, Great Wall, etc. These trips were very tiring, but were also exciting and fun. On the last week of camp, we were taken to another part of Beijing to be with the students from the Guang Ai School. While we were with the students, not only did we teach them, we also learned many things from the students. We tried to teach them how to sing English songs, play hand games, and more. The students there were always energetic, especially the day we went hiking the Great Wall with them. They treated us like they've known us forever. Leaving them was one of the hardest things because it felt like I was leaving my family behind. The students taught me discipline and how I should be grateful for the things I own. Overall, this camp has taught me so many things that I can use later in my life. All the friends and all the memories will stay with me forever. Hopefully I will have the opportunity to come back in the future years as a counselor.

Katherine Y, 14

It feels as if I am writing an epilogue today, ending a story about a shining world from grime and ash. Written in the words are strangers, a long and uncomfortable plane ride and thinly carpeted hotels. This story is about slow friends and hard hotel beds, about mosquito bites and morning exercise and Frisbees through fountains, about hot days in dark navy cotton and studying and yellow books and corridor stories. Woven into this story is a family of mismatched people; poured into these words are simple joy and bright love, brilliant and raging against the dying of the

light. It has been a month, it has been four weeks, it has been twenty-eight days – it has been an eternity. And now it draws to a close.

I am one of many words and little talk. I have not so much been changed by 英华 (YingHua) as I have been either sharpened or smoothed – I cannot tell which. It is the Beijing air, its streets and people that have made me different. Immersed into a foreign yet familiar language that flows down the streets and pools in bargain markets, speaking and writing and seeing Chinese in the bones and flesh of Beijing, an old gate has creaked open in my mind and my “mother tongue” begins to sluice past my lips. And much more than a language, I have begun to reflect the mannerisms and heart of the Chinese people – a heart that has scarcely beat since I left China years ago. Here, I am not the American daughter of my mother, and yet I am not quite a Chinese student visiting from America. I am something more, less than the people I pass on the streets but close enough to feel their skin brush against mine. It is strange and intoxicating.

The word “fate” and what it is: it is fickle and delicate. It favors none and yet when it shines golden on you, you are lucky and must cherish it dearly. The Niuji Mosque may be visited next year, it may be visited for decades to come, but it cannot beat what we experienced the day we broke fast with Fawzi and the hundreds of praying Muslims. The night was hazy but beautiful – the way deep orange played with steep charcoal shadows on open faces, the dark violet sky and silver-tipped dusk, the sweet baritones of men in a beautiful tongue, thick with strange wonder... The night was brimming with gratitude and awe, knowing that once it was over it could only breathe through memory’s exhale.

Love is bright. 光爱. I have no words – they hover over my tongue and in the ink at the tip of my pen, but I cannot spill my heart on this page because I am afraid I will be unable to take it back. I can let it bleed through fragments. 刘瑞’s (Liu Rui) china-doll bangs, 杨洛 (Yang Luo) and 西洛 (Xi Luo) giggling, “姐姐对我们特别好!” (“Big sister is so nice to us!”) 叶依诺’s (Ye Yinuo) cheeky poses and 王永生’s (Wang Yongsheng) “姐姐， 姐姐!” (“Big sister, big sister!”) and my return: “弟弟， 弟弟!” (“Little brother, little brother!”) 阿妹’s (A Mei) beautiful gift and thumbs up, 天恩’s (Tianen) wide eyes and chess moves, 瑶瑶’s (Yao Yao) fake pout and laugh. They are bright and lovely in my heart and I am terrified that they will be fleeting. What I have learned from them is not something I can explain in words. They have taught me open, generous love – pure love, unafraid and quick to embrace. It is silly – clichéd, even – to say that they have taught me kindness and gratitude, love in the unexpected, fragility and strength and beauty singing through the air. My words are meaningless and empty as they do not capture the shallowest tip of the depth of these emotions. How does one explain a love – a family – in less than four days? How does one pen the intensity of raw love, of grief over loss? How do I tell the chapter that plays on the heart’s strings, the words that do not exist in the English language? I cannot. I do not know how.

I am writing my epilogue and if I had tears left to cry, I would. Perhaps it is the taste of Beijing in the air, the distance from America that has brought me here. Or perhaps it is the people,

myself included, who have brought us this far. We are but eleven students and two counselors, tightly knit together on a fast-fraying cloth; we are but a family not by blood but by love. And though I fervently wish I could rewind time and live it again, the curtains are falling on the last act. So I will tell you instead – the first week will pass slowly, but blink twice and suddenly it is the end. 英华 is what I have never thought to call it – it is beautiful and it is home. I am stuck between two world and this epilogue is not at all like an ending.

And as you read this, not in my handwriting but typed on a screen, I will tell you that even as I write my epilogue to 英华, my goodbye, it is the prologue to another story. Life is a dream fabrication that exists infinitely, and so does much inside it. 英华 will take you from the beginning and take you through a lifetime, through love and laughter and frustration and loss. And as it sets you gently at the end, you will see that it is only the beginning. In Chinese, “goodbye” is “再见”, which is literally “meet again”. Perhaps it is never the end.

“Goodbye is never forever because it leaves itself open to interpretation.” – Fawzi.

Kevin T, 13

It seems so long ago when we eleven students first met, all together, in an unfamiliar room, full of unfamiliar faces. Yet now, reflecting back upon these early days, only a month ago, our nervousness seems foolish, almost comical, for we now know each other well, as roommates, as colleagues, as (mostly) friends. What goes in comes out improved, and we emerged enriched in Chinese culture and language, as well as in leadership skills and emotional bonds. YingHua in Beijing is definitely an amazing experience.

Our month in China’s most recent “京城” (capital city) has been full of surprising experiences. For the first three weeks, a routine of exercise, class, and field trips emerged. Our visits to various areas of interest in and around Beijing every two to three days allowed us to truly appreciate many aspects of Chinese culture. The Forbidden City, the Science and Technology Museum, the Great Wall, the Temple of Heaven, each and every one a new place of wonder and excitement, showcasing both the China of elder days, of yellow-glazed roof tiles and mighty fortifications, as well as the China of today, the China of high-speed trains and tall skyscrapers and billions of people. In order to understand China, we look at it both academically and practically, through the eyes of the researcher, the tourist, and the helper.

In addition to the trips and the understanding, probably the most energetic and unforgettable part of this camp, apart from the bonds we, the students, had formed, was the week at the 光爱学校 (Guang Ai School). The students there were probably the most energetic and friendly people I have or will ever meet. While our parting after four days was sad, tearful, and full of regret, as the old saying goes, better to have experienced light and be turned back into the dark rather than to never have experienced the light in the first place.

Finally, yet another extremely emotional and, perhaps, the greatest part of this camp are the friendships, the bonds created between one person and another over the course of one month in Beijing. And, while it is tearful and heartbreaking to let them go, it is the bonds forged over the course of a summer that truly are the greatest and most amazing part of YingHua in Beijing.

The world still revolves on its axis, no matter what we do in our tiny, insignificant lives. As some students do completely horrible pushups and others hurriedly write our final goodbyes, there are still some things I wish to say, though, perhaps, I will not, and have you experience it... for yourself.

Michelle G, 15

How has it been a month already? It feels as though it was just yesterday that I was nervous for this trip. How would I be alone? Will I like the people there? Now the worries seem like nonsense. YingHua in Beijing has been the best summer camp. Not just because I met so many new, amazing friends and memories. I have also grown as a person. I became more independent and built endurance from our morning runs. I have grown to analyze who I am from leadership training. In four weeks, we visited many Chinese landmarks. Each time we got out we always made a scene from our noise, from struggling to climb the Great Wall or laughing on a boat at Beihai Park.

This camp does a great job of immersing us in Chinese culture. You don't see just the tourist places - we went to hutongs and ate at a local family house. When tourists go to the Summer Palace, do they know what all the stories mean? We have been to bargain markets and different types of factories. When we aren't travelling we learn Chinese. It's a lot of fun and I learned things I would never have learned. All of us have grown to be family. They are no longer strangers but friends who make me laugh every day.

For someone who is debating to go on this trip or is nervous about it, don't be and just go. How do I put into words what this trip did to me? It brought a huge smile to my face every day. You create a bond with the people here and learn a lot about yourself. We travelled Beijing, met amazing friends, and forgot about home. You still aren't convinced? You get to go to McDonald's in China and go shopping. YingHua in Beijing taught me a lot and will be an experience I won't forget.