

Life on Campus

End of June 2012

- Ferry van Mansum and Aukje Both

It is half past seven on a hot Sunday evening, the last day of a three day holiday weekend to celebrate “*Dragon Boat Festival*”, and we just went into one of the teaching buildings to pick up some books from the English library. It is quiet in the building, but some of the classroom doors are open, and when we looked in, they were all full of students, doing some individual study. Outside the building students are pacing the gardens, or crouching in the shade bent over books. They can’t be in the classrooms, because they are reciting, trying to memorise whole passages of text and that would disturb the quiet ones inside. In Winter when it is too cold and too dark to go outside, reciting happens in the corridors. Students are spaced out at regular intervals, taking turns stamping their feet on the concrete floor to turn on the lights. In corridors and passage ways the lights are activated by sound, but to us it looks more like an act of frustration when those heels kick the ground.



Last week a couple of English major students showed us their textbook with Abraham Lincoln’s famous speech “*The Gettysburg Address*” that they had to commit to memory. Now this was only a two minute speech, but I can imagine Lincoln used notes. These students had to do it without cue cards. To make matters worse, an excerpt of a two hour speech held on the same day by

Edward Everett, where he compared the Civil War soldiers to Greek gods, was added to their homework. It is a near impossible task to memorise more than a page of long sentences full of sub-clauses and obscure vocabulary, but Chinese students just do it, even though they may not understand most of the content nor see the benefit of memorising large pieces of text. This is the Chinese way.



Earlier this month there was an important audit, a bit like ERO visits in New Zealand schools and this created a lot of activity and I imagine piles of extra paperwork. One of the most visible things was that preparations were made to make the campus look its best. All through the year classes are scheduled to have their turn to do a “labour week”, where students are allocated all sorts of jobs, from being messenger, gardener, grounds

sweeper, classroom cleaner or, most loathed of all, toilet cleaner. But in the days leading up to the audit all students were busy making everything spick and span. Even the windows of the classrooms and dorms had to be see-through. However, I don't think OSH (Occupational Safety & Health) would have approved of students hanging out of sixth floor dorm windows, or the creative way that steps, bricks, a table and chair were used to create some extra height.



When the experts came, the campus was cleaner than ever, the newly planted trees well-watered and even the fountain near the main gate was spouting water for the first time since we are here. The students were well prepared to meet the experts, having learnt by heart the text from a booklet about life on campus at Hexi University, especially created and distributed to all students for the occasion.

Now the students are busy memorising for their end of year exams. These are revision weeks, with no new material to teach. With our peer assessments and evaluations done and grades passed on to the Chinese teachers we are watching the New Zealand film “*Whale Rider*” during the last lessons this week, looking back at an enjoyable first semester here and looking forward to exploring more of China, a bit further afield, in our summer holiday.

