

To the 'Political and Economic Heart of China'

New Summer Abroad Program Takes Cadets to Shanghai

BY SHERRI TOMBARGE



VMI cadets and professors Col. Mark Wilkinson (center) and Maj. Howard Sandborn (far right) gather on the Bund in downtown Shanghai. – Photo courtesy of Col. Mark Wilkinson.

In a summer program designed by VMI history professor Col. Mark Wilkinson and international studies assistant professor Maj. Howard Sanborn IV, 10 cadets saw the People's Republic of China from the inside out and the outside in.

This study-abroad program took the cadets to many of the monuments and sites often visited by tourists and into classrooms where the two professors shared their insights in two classes that meet VMI's core requirement for civilizations and cultures. It also offered the cadets immersion in the international hub of Shanghai and that region of China through a stay at Donghua University, lectures by Chinese professors, free movement throughout the city on Shanghai's "phenomenal" subway system, and day and overnight trips to other locations.

"What I hope they would take away from it is an ongoing curiosity about China and a recognition that it's a far more complex place than what we get through the standard media outlets in this country," said Wilkinson. "I'd like them to see the connection between the historic past and the contemporary situation."

The change in perspective began, apparently, as soon as the students' feet hit the ground.

"When I got off the plane in Pudong International Airport in Shanghai, perhaps the first thing that struck me as out of place was the lack of visible signs of the totalitarian government that we always hear about in the West," said Tom Schirra '11, a history major. "Even more odd was the fact that the Chinese people were not the oppressed masses that I expected to see, who feared their government. On the contrary, they genuinely loved their country."

Introducing the cadets to Chinese culture in Shanghai was relatively easy, said Sanborn, because the city's history of interaction with foreign visitors and settlers makes it more accessible than other places in China. Street signs and announcements, for instance, are in English as well as Chinese, and the subway system took the group anywhere in the city in minutes.

Wilkinson and Sanborn designed the program themselves, rather than using an outside provider, to achieve greater quality and variety at a lower cost, said Wilkinson. Both know the city well. Wilkinson, who teaches modern East Asian history and in 2000 participated in a Fulbright scholarly exchange program in China, has made about 10 trips to China since 1988, with some stays as long as six months. Sanborn has also made several trips to China, including a three-month stay. Both speak some Chinese.

In the classroom, Wilkinson taught the history of Shanghai from 1850 to

2000 while Sanborn covered political and economic reforms since 1980. Chinese guest lecturers addressed topics including current issues in China, the history of Shanghai, and China's place in the world.

"I learned much about African-Chinese relations, which was an eye-opener in a big way," said Annie-Marie Ngotho '12, an international studies major who said she may make the issue her concentration in political science.

Among the sites the group visited were the terracotta army in Xi'an, Shaanxi Province; the capital city of Beijing, including Tiananmen Square; the Great Wall; and perhaps most memorably, a memorial concerning the Nanjing Massacre.

The memorial honors the memory of 300,000 victims, according to Chinese government estimates, of a massacre that occurred during Japanese occupation in 1937. The memorial, which Wilkinson compares to the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C., includes a viewing area where skeletal remains of victims unearthed during excavation of mass graves can be seen by visitors.

"In both," said Wilkinson, "there is an emphasis on innocent people who were victimized by a ruthless enemy. And the bones, the skeletal remains, are seen by the Chinese as one way of making this reality very stark, very concrete to the population."

Ngotho noted especially the forensic descriptions of the deaths.

"It's moving and creepy," said Sanborn, who added that the memorial attempts to convey human pain through music, lighting, and sculpture as well. "They think of it almost as art."

In fact, an understanding of the human connection between the American and Chinese cultures may be one of the most significant outcomes of the cadets' experiences in China.

"I learned that the Chinese people are a viable ally and friend if we can put aside our ideological differences and work toward a common goal, whatever that may be," concluded Schirra.

"China's going to be an important power in the 21st century," added Sanborn. "The cadets got to see the political and economic heart of China."

As for the future of the program, Wilkinson would like to see it run every other summer and, someday, include a Chinese language component. Chinese, he said, is a strategically important language.

"The hardest thing for the cadets was that they didn't have any Chinese language skills," he said. "I could help them get around, but if they could do that for themselves, that would be a quantum leap for them."