As I’m writing this, I’m listening to the sounds of fireworks exploding over Tianjin. No one is quite sure the reason behind this spontaneous, mid-week celebration, but regardless, it was exciting to watch the fireworks break up the night sky as we walked back the dormitory this evening. Random firework evenings and street fire-crackers are proving to be a Tianjin special- and they are still a novelty for us Australians, who are really only accustomed to watching fireworks on television at New Year’s Eve.

It is already our third week in China, and in some ways we have to remind ourselves that we really have only just arrived. Our little corner of Tianjin is quickly becoming home. We all exploring more and more everyday, and every new thing we discover is exciting; a new market, a hidden street of local food vendors, a new group of friends. Considering that Tianjin is the third largest city in China, I am sure we will never discover all of its secrets in the three short months that we are living here, however, it is still exciting to feel as though we are starting to know and feel at home in this country.

Our schedules are quickly becoming filled, and I find myself wondering where all the days are going. Our week mornings are occupied with classes- Grammar, Speaking, and Listening classes- then lunch is usually followed by extra study. Afternoons are quickly spent in exploring, meeting up with our Chinese buddies, or English/Chinese language exchange sessions. Yesterday a few of us attended an English Corner study group for Chinese students at the Tianjin University New Campus. I was blown away by the willingness and determination of the students there to learn and practice their English. I think all the Australian students were tired after the two hour class, but we are all excited about returning next week, hopefully bringing with us some new ideas to make the English classes more effective and fun for everyone involved.

I am also very impressed with the motivation of the 2010 UMAP group. Regardless of the level of Chinese each member possesses, everyone is determined to make the most of the incredible opportunities we have here to concentrate solely on our language skills. As one the few students that has never studied Mandarin before, I find it hard to comprehend just how much I have learned in the two short weeks of classes. Recognising characters, or being able to venture to the markets of my own with a few rehearsed lines and a head full of new vocabulary is extremely exciting, and I can only imagine how we will all progress during our three months of intensive classes. One of the benefits of studying in Tianjin is the absence of spoken English in the city. Our language skills are forced to adapt to real life situations, and we have to mould and stretch our classroom vocabularies to be useful outside of the university walls.

This is such an exciting time for all of us. I am full of anticipation for the months ahead, and looking forward to growing in my language skills, increasing my cultural understanding, and building strong relationships with those around me.

By Alexandra Claire Henry
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