Week 3 in China

A Reflection of My First Two Weeks in Zeng Jia Yan Primary School and My Trip to Chengdu

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Monday March 27th, 2017: Day 10 in Chongqing

 After having stayed up until two in the morning to finish my weekly reflection, I decided to sleep in, knowing that I did not have to depart for Zeng Jia Yan Primary School until two in the afternoon. When I decided to leave the comfort of my bed, I ate some of the mini hot dog pastries that I purchased from the bakery yesterday for breakfast. I then spent the rest of the morning reading fanfiction and repacking my suitcases. Fortunately, I managed to finish packing in time to meet Alaura for lunch at the cafeteria near our hotel. Michael tagged along for the meal. I initially suggested inviting Altion and Victoria to join us, but given that they had yet to finish packing, I changed my mind.

 Upon arriving in downtown Chongqing, I was startled when a mother stopped and parked her car in the middle of the street, halting all traffic, until she entered a nearby primary school and picked up her child. In addition, everyone in the downtown area seems to think that honking their vehicle horns will hurry up the traffic when that will probably not happen. It is evident that the downtown area of Chongqing has a different dynamic from the Beibei district and a noisier one too.

 After checking into our hotel, we walked over to Zeng Jia Yan Primary School to meet the principal for dinner. The good news is that our hotel is within walking distance to a Walmart, a KFC, and a bakery (five minutes) and Zeng Jia Yan (ten minutes). However, in order to get to Zeng Jia Yan in ten minutes, we have to climb many steps. I can’t help but wonder if climbing the Great Wall of China and spending a week on the Southwest University campus prepared me for all of the climbing and walking that I will be doing for the next two months in downtown Chongqing. What is motivating me to climb all of those steps every day is knowing that I will be toning my behind and my legs in the process.

 Once dinner was finished (egg soup, veggies, meat, and rice), I was able to tour the school with my colleagues. I got to see what my office looked like, which I will be sharing with Alaura and Michael, and I also got to see some of the classrooms. It pleased me to see that many of them were equipped with smart boards. It was unfortunate, however, to see the limited outdoor courtyard that students could play in as I believe in the importance of maintain healthy lifestyles. I was appalled to see that the stalls in the girl’s washroom had no doors and, therefore, no privacy, and also no soap. I knew my experience in China was going to push the boundaries of my comfort zone, but I never imagined just how much it would.

 Tomorrow, I will begin my observations at Zeng Jia Yan. I’m hoping that these observations will give me a better insight into how much English my students already know and how the English teachers teach. I also hope that these observations will allow me to develop better lesson plans for my students and to develop a stronger sense of confidence for teaching them. I came to China to experience moments that would shape my career as an educator. Although I do not feel fully read for what is to come, I do know that I have to take a leap of faith and hope that I fly.

Tuesday, March 28th, 2017: Day 1 in Zeng Jia Yan Primary School

 Upon arriving at Zeng Jia Yan, we stopped by the cafeteria where we were treated to some Chongqing noodles and veggies for breakfast.

After breakfast, the principal greeted us with some tea (apparently, it is a big deal for the principal to make guests tea, so that act of kindness made me feel very special). We were also introduced to some of the English teachers within the school and they, too, were very kind. Many of them have nearly two decades of teaching experience, but that was hard to tell considering how young they appeared to be.

 An announcement was made via the school’s P.A. system, officially welcoming Alaura, Michael, and I to the school. One by one, we introduced ourselves to the student body. I introduced myself using a mix of English and Mandarin, giving my name and where I studied and expressing my excitement to be at the school and my eagerness to get to know everyone better. The goal of our individual introductions was to let all of the students know that we have arrived, who we are, yet leave an air of mystery as to what we look like and propel them to try and identify us as they go about their school day.

 After bidding farewell to Dr. Xu and Minghua, the English teachers escorted us to our office where we were able to rest for a bit. I took the opportunity to review the Grade 5 textbook material that I was given and work on some lesson plans. I learned in the morning that I would have the opportunity to observe as many classes as I could and to not only select the grade that I would like to teaching during my time at the school, but also present some informal lesson plans to Grades 1 and 2 students. As I worked, one student came across the office and peeked inside, saw us, and waved. I waved back with a smile and she greeted us by saying, “Hello, how are you? Nice to meet you!” I thought it was a really sweet gesture on her part; she did not even know us (she could have after hearing our announcements), yet she was very bubbly and friendly. It made me feel welcomed immediately.

 Soon after, we were escorted to a Grade 5 English classroom for our first observation. The minute we stepped foot in the classroom, I was taken aback by the students jumping to their feet and greeting us with hellos, his, waves, and enthusiastic smiles. I could tell that they were excited to have us in their classroom and it made me smile. I could not help but beam at them and wave back just as enthusiastically, if not more so. It reminded me of my elementary school days when I would volunteer in the kindergarten classroom during my recesses. I could tell from the minute I walked in that I would enjoy teaching these students.

 After another period of rest in our office, I joined Alaura and Michael in the cafeteria for lunch (beef, potatoes, and veggies with rice). During the choice activity period that followed, I decided to partake in the Chinese painting class to see if my skills had improved since my time at Southwest University. Although I have seen my skills improve a bit, Michael blew me away with his work. Some of the students did not even bother painting and were more entertained with watching us paint and practising their English speaking skills with us, which I was more than okay with.

 Another rest in the office followed during which Alaura, Michael, and I continued to work on our lesson plans while discussing how to convert kilojoules to calories to see how much was in one of the cookies that the English teachers brought us. They always seem to be under the impression that we do not have enough food and have been showering us with snacks throughout the day. I appreciate their kindness and generosity, but I do not feel it is necessary; however, I know that it is a part of their culture to take care of their guests.

 Once we finished dinner in the cafeteria (chicken, veggies, pea pods, and rice), Mr. Wang (the life science teacher at Zeng Jia Yan), gave us a tour of the downtown area near the school and hotel. On the way back to the hotel, we stopped by the Walmart nearby to buy some balls for our lessons (we found three soft ones for nine yuan (a little under two dollars). I also found a selection of black pens (twenty for ten yuan or two dollars) and we also bought some drinks. Mr. Wang was so kind as to pay for it all even though we insisted that we could pay for them. As we left, I could not help but shake my head at the four aisles of alcoholic drinks that I saw earlier in the store.

 As I reflect on my observations from today, it amazes me just how much English the Grade 5 students know. I may need to tweak my lessons to challenge them a bit. In addition, I was surprised to have learned that the students at Zeng Jia Yan are so eager to volunteer to participate in role-playing activities and giving answers to questions. Canadian students are meek compared to them. Furthermore, the English teachers put a lot of emphasis on repetition in order to reinforce knowledge in their students, but do not seem to give students opportunities to apply it to real-world students. During my time at Zeng Jia Yan, I hope to change that.

Wednesday, March 29th, 2017: Day 2 in Zeng Jia Yan Primary School

 Rather than eat breakfast at Zeng Jia Yan, Alaura, Michael, and I opted to join Mr. Wang for the complimentary hotel breakfast (I ate some steamed cabbage and a few mini slices of crispy dough bread that I absolutely fell in in love with!).

 Upon arriving at Zeng Jia Yan (I’m still not used to climbing all of those stairs on the way), we greeted Principal Deng and then went to our office to rest for a bit. One of the English teachers brought in Grade 5 homework workbooks for us to grade. It was mostly about the dates of holidays, how to differentiate between ‘what’ and ‘which’, and if they can read a small paragraph and indicate whether the statements that follow are true or false. What I noticed during the grading process were that many students were unable to distinguish between ‘what’ and ‘which’ and when to use them. This is something that I would like to address during one of my lessons in the upcoming weeks.

Afterwards, we had the chance to observe Miss Song’s Grade 6 English class during which the students engaged in a listening activity. Miss Song would make sure to ask the students if they were ready before she played the recording. She played it twice and students would respond to the images in their textbook and indicate whether or not the recording corresponded with the images using true or false. I noted that she often praised the students as a form of positive reinforcement whenever students answered correctly. She would also have students give the Chinese translations of the sentences that they read to ensure that they comprehend the meanings of them in both languages. Occasionally, Miss Song would ask non-volunteers to answer questions or pronounce a sentence and gently prompt them if they are struggling to pronounce a word. Throughout the lesson, she would clarify pronunciation of words and whenever a student gave a response to the question, she would ask the rest of the class whether or not they are in agreement with the response. I also took the initiative to circulate the classroom whenever students did work with a partner to observe, but also to help students if they were unsure of how to write something. Overall, I found this lesson to be very interactive. I appreciated that Miss Song praised students whenever they did something right and was always available to encourage students who struggled to give tasks a try. At the end of the class, we were swarmed by the students who were asking us to sign their textbooks. Doing so made me feel like a celebrity and I could tell that the students were thrilled to have us in their classroom. During the signing, one of the students gave me a beautiful bookmark, which I thanked her for.

 After the class ended, I returned to the office with Alaura and Michael where we continued to work on our lesson plans and type up our observations. We halted our work, however, to observe a Grade 3 English class during which students reviewed the fruits that they had learned the day before (apples, pears, and oranges) and how to answer when asked if they liked a certain fruit (“Yes, I do” or “No, I don’t). Today, they learned about more fruit (watermelons, strawberries, and grapes) and how to share fruit with others. All of the students brought fruit to share with their peers. This allowed them to practise sharing fruit with others and responding to questions about whether or not they liked or wanted a certain fruit. They even offered some to us and practised their English with us. I liked how this activity allowed students to apply knowledge to real-world scenarios with food serving as an incentive to learn.

 At lunch, I accompanied Alaura and Michael to the cafeteria for lunch: a sort of beef stew, a side of veggies, and rice.

During the choice activity period, we had the choice to observe either a chess session or a kung fu session. Given that I used to compete in chess tournaments when I was a child, I decided to observe the chess session and see how well the students played. Alaura and Michael came along as they, too, had a bit of chess experience. Students pretty much just paired up, opened a chess set, set it up, and began to play without timers. Some even asked us to play against them. I ended up playing against one boy who I could tell from the get go was very serious about the game. Not once during the game did he turn his eyes away from the board; he was incredibly focused. I, on the other hand, have not played competitively for years and felt quite intimidated by my skilled opponent. Several students even crowded around our desk to watch the game and some even tried to help me make moves. Although I ended up losing against him, it was a fun experience and I made sure to shake his hand and congratulate him for being a worthy opponent.

Once the chess session ended, Alaura, Michael, and I went to observe a Grade 1 music class during which about forty students were playing the gourd flute. For every excerpt, the teacher would play the piano and sing the notes with the students. Then, she would ask the students to finger the notes as a group and sing them with her. Finally, she would sing the notes as they actually played them. If any of the students messed up, she would ask them to play the excerpt again. As they played, I noted just how beautiful the music sounded. The melody was incredibly beautiful and sounded elegant. In contrast, the recorders that Canadian students play in elementary school sound very much like whistles and not quite as eloquent. To be honest, I do not know which was more beautiful: the students’ singing or their playing.

After a bit of rest in our office, we met up with Principal Deng and the English language teachers to discuss our move back to Southwest University, which Alaura, Michael, and I were in favour of because we would be living in the international students’ dormitory with easier access to laundry services, food on weekends, and our Southwest University teacher candidate friends who could assist us if we needed them and keep us company. On top of that, we are already familiar with the area around Southwest University and do not mind the hour-long subway commute to and from Zeng Jia Yan on weekdays. It is such a relief to know that the staff support us in our decision and are willing to assist us in any way possible to ensure that we have an enjoyable experience in Chongqing.

After dinner (beef, veggies, and rice), Mr. Wang took us out to enjoy the nightlife in downtown Chongqing where we bought mango smoothies on Snack Street, took photos and, in Michael’s case, did some shopping. I can see why the nightlife of Chongqing is one of the city’s four beauties. It felt like being in a less crowded version of Times Square in New York City; it was incredibly beautiful. The malls appeared to be connected and had many floors. I could tell Alaura to meet me in front of an H&M store and she would have to ask me which one. Overall, it was a good night out with great people. It serves as a reminder during our time here in China to make time to go out with friends or even with just each other and to not be cooped up inside all of the time doing work and making lesson plans. When it comes to managing my time here in China, balance is key.

Thursday, March 30th, 2017: Day 3 in Zeng Jia Yan Primary School

 After eating breakfast and loading our luggage into one of the Zeng Jia Yan teacher’s car (he would be taking them to Southwest University in advance), I headed to Zeng Jia Yan with Alaura and Michael. As we were resting in our office, Miss Song entered and asked if we would be interested in observing a Grade 3 calligraphy class. Looking to see if I could improve my skills, I agreed to it as did Alaura and Michael. Miss Song also asked if we would be interested in teaching a class today. Michael agreed as he has no problem improvising a lesson on the spot if he needs to. Alaura and I, being the planners that we are, politely declined and confirmed that we would teach our first classes on Wednesday as planned, which Miss Song was more than okay with. Personally, I want to give my students the best lessons that I can make and that requires planning on my part.

 During the calligraphy class, the students whipped out their ink, mats, brushes, and paper and drew the Chinese characters that the teacher drew on the board. Some were more fascinated by Alaura, Michael, and I doing calligraphy than their peers doing it and would watch us for most of the class. I think I’m getting better at it; the students said that I am, so they are either telling the truth or being too kind. I’m hoping it’s the former.

 After the calligraphy class ended, Alaura, Michael, and I went our separate ways as we went to observe or teach the classes of our associate teachers. My associate teacher reviewed the dates of holidays and how to state the months and days while saying the date. She even called me up to teach the students how to properly pronounce words without a Chinese accent. That gave me the confidence to circulate the classroom and help students properly pronounce the words that they were reading. Some even asked me for help in pronouncing the words that they were reading. Some even asked me for help in pronouncing words. At the end of the class, a bunch of them surrounded me to give me their pens and pencils. I now have about twenty of them sitting on my desk. Since the students were learning about holidays, specifically ones in April, I figured it would be a good time to teach them a lesson about Easter. I ran my Easter lesson by my associate teacher who was thrilled that I brought chocolate eggs for the students to hunt for. She said that they would love my lesson since they seem to already love me. I’m now so excited to teach starting next week. Hopefully, the student who acted out in class today and had to be dragged out by his arms does not act out during my lessons. I was a tad alarmed by the discipline method chosen by my associate and her colleague because using that method on a student in Canada can cost me my job.

 After lunch (pork, tofu, veggies, and rice), we packed up and Mr. Wang took us on a bus to a subway stop whose pink line would take us directly to a stop outside Southwest University. I was not a fan of taking the bus because it was crowded and we had to remember where to get off whereas the subway announced stops in English and Mandarin and its map, written also in English and Mandarin, was easy to read. Alaura, Michael, and I agreed that we would rather endure two transfers on the subway from and to Southwest University and Zeng Jia Yan than take a bus to avoid any subway transfers. The subway ride was long, but at least it was relaxing and gave us a chance to unwind from the day’s events.

 Once we arrived at Southwest University, and were escorted to the international students’ dormitory, we began to unpack fully. We all reside on the ninth floor on the same side with my room located between Michael’s and Alaura’s. I lay my notebooks on the desk; placed my socks, bras, and school documents in its drawers; stored my clothes inside the mini closet, put my bottled drinks into the mini fridge, and lay out my Hello Kitty blanket over my bed. I felt better knowing that I no longer had to live out of my suitcase and could make my dorm homier. It feels like living on my own in a small apartment and the view of the mountains in the distance is just gorgeous!

 After resting for a bit, Alaura, Michael, and I met up with Lisa for dinner in the cafeteria nearby (beef, potatoes, veggies, and rice). We then decided to hit up the mega supermarket to get some supplies. While Alaura and I picked up a few drinks, Michael ended up carting drinks, pens, kitchenware, and a laundry hanger to the cashier and paying no more than twenty dollars for it all. Alaura and I plan to revisit it upon our return from Chengdu to stock up on school supplies once we have a better idea of what are lessons require.

 It is reassuring to know that I will come back from Chengdu to a residence that feels like home, in an area of Chongqing that feels like home, surrounded by friends who keep me busy enough to not feel homesick. Just one look at the inside of my dorm brings me comfort in knowing that I will be okay for the next two and a half months in China.

Friday, March 31st, 2017: Day 4 in Zeng Jia Yan Primary School/Arrival in Chengdu

 It felt good to actually sleep in this morning without having an alarm or sunlight wake me up early (bless the individual who invented curtains). Eventually, I had to get up to prepare to leave for a weekend in Chengdu. After getting dressed, putting on makeup, and cramming all of the essentials into my backpack, I met up with Alaura and Michaela and we left to meet Lisa who would be accompanying us to Chengdu. Her friend also decided to come along.

 By nine thirty in the morning, we boarded the subway. Since the station closest to Southwest University is near the end of the pink line, the train was not very packed and we managed to secure ourselves seats. As the train got closer to downtown Chongqing, the less room there was in our compartment. After an hour, we switched over to the blue line, which was jam packed with people, to reach the station nearest to the high speed railway station. Once we left the subway, we took a quick bus ride over to the high speed railway station (props to Mr. Wang for getting us transit passes that we can put money on to use buses and the subway). Once we arrived, we waited for about half an hour until Altion and Victoria arrived from Depu Foreign Language School. Once we exchanged hellos, we went with Lisa and her friend to pick up our tickets, all while talking about our experiences thus far at our respective schools. Seems like we all had wonderful experiences so far; we cannot stop gushing about how sweet our students are.

 After going through security (during which Michael was, once again, groped by a security official in places that one should not be groped in), we took a long break for lunch at KFC (I had a spicy crispy chicken sandwich with two chicken wings, a custard tart, and a pop). Eventually, we left to sit by our gate because our train was scheduled to arrive six minutes later than planned. Good thing though that Lisa walked off to confirm the delay with the staff by the counter by our gate because had she not, we would not have known that the train *did* arrive on time and that everyone but us were already on board. We scrambled through the gate with our stuff, down the escalator to the platform, and hopped onto the train. We slumped into our seats. I do not even want to think about what might have happened if we were just five minutes late…

 The ride to Chengdu last for an hour and a half (we were travelling at a speed of three hundred kilometres an hour) during which I listened to music, took some photos of the rural scenery that we passed, and got some shut-eye. Once we arrived in Chengdu, we immediately boarded the subway just below the railway station. The orange line ride was long and I was not too fond of being packed in like sardines and while the light blue line journey was also long, it was not as crowded on board.

 When we got off the subway, Minghua came to greet us along with a teacher, Sam, who graduated from Southwest University. We checked into our hotel and I was in awe of how spacious and clean the room was and how comfy the beds were (the room even came with a kitchenette!). I almost regret not agreeing to stay an extra day in Chengdu. As we were resting, a few guys shoved cards of scantily-clad Chinese women offering massages under our doors. Michael, to no one’s surprise, wanted all of ours to keep like trading cards.

 The night concluded with a hot pot buffet dinner during which we helped ourselves to endless meats, veggies, and drinks (I went nuts over the dumplings). We were also introduced to other Chengdu teachers who encouraged us to drink. Despite the pressure from some of my peers to see if I outgrew my alcohol allergy, I politely and firmly declined. Besides, even without alcohol, I had a good time!

Saturday, April 1st, 2017: Day 1 in Chengdu

 Alaura managed to wake up an hour before I did, get ready, and go back to sleep without waking me up. I slept in until my alarm woke me up at half past six in the morning. After getting ready and Alaura woke up again, we headed down to the hotel restaurant on the twelfth floor (our room is on the twenty-second one) for breakfast: fried rice, veggies, sweet potatoes, and apple slices. I was not a fan of the hot orange juice. Why the Chinese must drink their beverages hot is beyond me.

 After breakfast, we all headed out to École primaire Montpellier à Chengdu, a primary school affiliated with one in France. We were introduced to some of the staff, given a tour of the school, and given the opportunity to interact with the students from Grades 1 to 3 during their sports day activities. At first, many of the students from Grades 1 to 3 during their sports day activities. At first, many of the students from Grades 1 to 3 during their sports day activities. At first, many of the students were shy and were embarrassed to speak English with us. However, once they realized that we meant no harm and wanted to get to know them better, they started asking us questions, which eventually led to them roughhousing with us. Michael, Altion, and I gave many of them piggyback rides and played tag with them. Some even tackled and wrestled us. I even picked a few up by the arms and swung them around in the air. Alaura played rock-paper-scissors with some. Although we were tired by the end of the students’ sports day, we all agreed that we had a good time. Playing with the students reminded me of playing with the kindergarten students during my elementary school years. My heart fluttered when we returned from a walk to and from a nearby lake and several of the students whom we played with bid us goodbye as they left with their parents. It is moments like these that make it worthwhile to be a teacher.

 After a delicious lunch at a nearby restaurant (noodles with beef, zucchini, green peppers, and red peppers), we returned to the hotel for a bathroom break and then took an Uber to Chengdu Shishi High School, a state secondary school where one needs top grades to enroll in. The campus is incredibly beautiful with its lush greenery, blooming flowers, and sparkling fountain. We were given a tour of the school by a man named Andy who was a former participant in the Reciprocal Learning Program. At one point, he escorted us to a nearby park where Dr. Xu introduced us to the Blind Date Forest where parents post the curriculum vitae of their single children in hopes of finding them partners. She even joked to Michael and I, the only single students of the group, that she would draft our curriculum vitae, pretend to be our mother, and negotiate on our behalf. I did not believe that such a forest existed until I saw it with my own eyes. Fortunately, Dr. Xu did not try to find us significant others there. Instead, we returned to the school, stopping on the way to pick up crepes with sesame seeds, strawberries, and other kinds of fillings for snacks. Altion and Victoria hosted a workshop for students about Canadian sports while Alaura, Michael, and I hosted one about camp. The students had a blast playing Huckle Buckle, Pass the Hoop (we used rope since it would be impractical for us to carry a hoop around Chengdu, let alone find one), and Pie Splat and I had a blast teaching them.

 Once we took the subway back to the hotel to avoid rush hour traffic on the streets, Alaura, Michael, and I joined Dr. Xu and Andy for dinner at the mall next door (I had rice with beef and tofu and some rabbit for an appetizer). Altion and Victoria opted to go to dinner and explore by themselves. After dinner, Alaura, Michael, and I explored the mall; Michael ended up finding a sale on shorts and active wear, but Alaura and I did not find much. I did, however, buy a pair of eyebrow scissors for two dollars (ten yuan) since my eyebrows seriously need a trim and I forgot my pair of scissors in Canada.

 Although our day ended with sore feet, it was an amazing day of events and I look forward to whatever tomorrow brings.

Sunday, April 2nd, 2017: Day 2 in Chengdu

 This morning’s breakfast consisted of the same rice, veggies, sweet potatoes, and apple slices from yesterday’s breakfast. This time, however, I had a glass of warm milk instead of warm juice and I added a slice of ham to my meal.

 After finishing breakfast, we scrambled onto a tour bus with Minghua, Sam, and Lisa and travelled for a good forty minutes to the Chengdu Research Base of Giant Panda Breeding during which the tour guide blabbed in Mandarin into the microphone about some interesting facts about Chengdu. Her booming voice nearly gave me a headache (I think she loves the sound of her own voice). However, I managed to note that Chengdu is known worldwide for three things (four if you count Michael’s suggestion: beautiful women): the landscape, the food, and space exploration. With regards to food, Chengdu makes food spicy to add flavour while Chongqing makes food spicy just for the heck of it.

 Once we arrived, I was astonished just how many people were arriving to see the pandas. Then again, I realized that the long weekend served as a good opportunity to travel to Chengdu to see them, seeing as we were doing just that. The panda inside the glass enclosure was very camera shy as he was eating, but the ones outside sleeping, climbing, and eating were ready for their close-ups. Both the babies and the adults were too adorable for words. Crowds of people gathered to get the best snapshots of them, but some hard-core elbowing got me to the front of the crowds to take some good pictures and videos. It was worth getting sandwiched between bunches of sweaty strangers just to see the pandas. We also got to see some red pandas and a beautiful peacock as well. As we left, I noticed that the number of visitors entering the research base tripled and I silently praised the tour guide for taking us to visit the pandas first thing in the morning.

 After a ten-course lunch (during which I indulged in more tofu), the tour guide took us to visit a temple that was connected to a street full of souvenirs and snacks. Since the street was incredibly crowded, I was not too fond of shopping along it; however, Altion and Victoria managed to pick up a few things. Fortunately, the tour guide took us to another street, an alley, also known for its reasonably priced snacks and souvenirs. We all managed to pick up some more souvenirs. Alaura and I purchased a few decks of playing cards with pandas and the Sichuan dialect on them. In addition, Alaura bought some Chinese liquor and Chengdu postcards, Michael bought some Chinese liquor as well, Altion and Victoria bought a huge bag of panda plushies for their cousins, and I bought myself a panda plushie wearing a Chinese traditional outfit.

 Upon returning to the hotel, we dropped off our belongings and purchases in our rooms. Alaura, Michael, and I went to dinner in the mall next door while Altion and Victoria, who were exhausted from the Chengdu tour, chose to retire for the night. We came across English/Mandarin menus in Pizza Hut. The waitress was very patient with us as we studied the menu and placed an order for a large pizza with tomato sauce, cheese, Chinese sausage, chicken, tomatoes, and corn. The delicious meal cost us a total of eighty-one yuan (a little over sixteen dollars) or twenty-seven yuan (a little under six dollars) each. We even took a selfie of ourselves eating the pizza to send to Altion and Victoria since they claimed to have had a bad pizza experience in China and refused to touch another one for as long as they were here. I was quite proud of ourselves for being able to order a meal with little to no struggle and no translator assistance from our Chinese friends. On top of that, the staff were very kind to us and the meal was tasty (just like Pizza Hut pizzas in Canada).

 With our hunger satisfied, Alaura, Michael, and I walked around the mall to digest our dinner and explore the place. We evens topped by the department store to buy some snacks and drinks. During our night out, we discussed how easy and affordable it is for us to go out at night and agreed to end every week of the rest of our time here in China with a visit to Jiefangbei’s snack street in downtown Chongqing for dinner and fruit drinks before catching the subway back to Southwest University for the weekends. For the duration of our time in China thus far, I have truly enjoyed the company of Alaura and Michael and I hope that our time together inside and outside of Zeng Jia Yan Primary School will bring us closer together.

 As our time in Chengdu soon comes to an end, I can’t help but smile at our adventures here in the city. From visiting the pandas to indulging in a hot pot buffet to playing with the students at schools and teaching some about camp, I have done more here than I had ever imagined I would get to do. I’m so glad that I decided to visit Chengdu. No regrets!

Monday, April 3rd, 2017: Day 3 in Chengdu/Return to Chongqing

 Alaura and I opted to skip breakfast this morning in favour of sleeping in for once. When I did finally get up, I surfed the Internet, got ready and packed my things. It was around one o’clock in the afternoon when we checked out of our spacious hotel room and went down to the lobby to meet with Altion, Victoria, Minghua, and Sam. Since our train did not leave until four forty in the afternoon, we decided to hit up the Global Center mall just a ten-minute walk away from the hotel.

 Once we arrived at the mall and agreed to meet up at three o’clock outside the Pizza Hut, we all went our separate ways for lunch. Alaura and I initially chose to eat at a Vietnamese Taiwanese restaurant and were looking forward to vermicelli bowls; however, after ten minutes of pressing the service button at our table with no results, we decided to abandon our table and menus and strolled out of the restaurant in search of another food option provided by staff who actually cared enough to serve us. Given that I was craving French friends and Alaura has yet to try French fries from New York Fries, it did not take long for us to make another decision for lunch: two hot dogs, a large fries, and two Coca Colas. While Alaura and I sat and ate (she had an original hot dog and mine was Italian), we discussed things from the foods that we put and do not put ketchup on to our opinions about the members of our Reciprocal Learning Program family. It was during this conversation when I expressed how upset I was when Altion told me during our hot pot buffet dinner that there was no such thing as an alcohol allergy and insisted that I have a drink. Alaura agreed with me when I said that whether my reason for not drinking alcohol was because of an allergy, a choice, or personal reasons, he should respect that that’s my decision. As I’ve stated before, I don’t need to consume alcohol to have fun and I certainly won’t do it until any amount of pressure.

 After lunch, Alaura and I explored the mall and were in awe of how massive it is (it has an indoor waterpark, a skating rink, and even a movie theatre and arcade). However, the cute clothes were too pricey (sixty dollars for an off-the-shoulder blouse!), so we simply walked around admiring the place and digesting the food. At three o’clock, we met up with Michael, Minghua, and Sam outside Pizza Hut and walked back to the hotel to meet up with Dr. Xu, Altion and Victoria. Once we grabbed our luggage from the lobby, we took two Ubers to the railway station. We got through security with no problems (Michael was relieved at not being groped on his behind by another female security staff member) and made it to our gate just in time for boarding. Since Dr. Xu and Minghua booked our return tickets in advance and paid five yuan (one dollar) extra per ticket, our tickets were red and they allowed us to board via the quicker red line of the gate. I spent the entire ride back to Chongqing listening to music and closing my eyes for a rest.

 Upon arriving back in Chongqing and quickly exiting the railway station (thank you red rickets!), there was some debate over how to get us back to our residences. Altion and Victoria wished to take the subway back to Depu Foreign Language School because the cost would be cheaper; however, Dr. Xu was hesitant to agree to that since they never rode on the Chongqing subway before and feared that they would get lost. Alaura, Michael, and I agreed to split the cost of a taxi if it meant we would get back to Southwest University faster, avoid rush hour traffic on the subway, and ease Dr. Xu’s nerves (even though I’m sure we could take the subway back to campus on our own by now). Eventually, Dr. Xu decided that we would all take taxis back to our residences and negotiated heavily with a cab driver to take Alaura, Michael, and I to Southwest University for one hundred yuan (twenty dollars). After packing our luggage into the trunk; bidding farewell to Dr. Xu, Minghua, Altion, and Victoria; and promising to get together on the weekend before or after Victoria’s birthday to celebrate, we were off.

 After a quick and quiet drive to Southwest University, the taxi driver was so kind to pull up in front of the international students’ dormitory. We unloaded our luggage, paid the driver, dropped off our luggage in our respective rooms, and took our reusable bags with us for a quick run to the mega supermarket to stock up on supplies. I bought some bread and bananas for breakfast, some red pens for grading, candy for my students, and a pair of eyebrow scissors (I had to leave my first pair back in Chengdu as to not cause problems going through security at the train station). I learned from this experience in China that you take the produce that you want to get weighed and tagged *before* you proceed to the checkout (bless Michael’s sense of patience and understanding!). I spent about seven dollars on my supplies (my eight bananas only cost me a dollar!). For dinner, Alaura was kind enough to give me a bag of noodles and a pair of chopsticks for me to make dinner in my dorm. It’s good to be home!

Tuesday, April 4th, 2017: A Day of Rest

 Since today is a day of rest, I took the opportunity to sleep in again, knowing that I was not scheduled to be anywhere or do anything today. I finally dragged myself out of bed around nine in the morning and helped myself to a banana, a fluffy piece of bread, and a bit of orange juice for breakfast. From having my own room to eating groceries that I bought for myself, I know what it feels like now to live on my own and take care of myself.

 I spent my morning working on my lesson plans for my students at Zeng Jia Yan. Eventually, my stomach rumbling told me that it was time for lunch. Since Alaura’s anniversary video chat date with her boyfriend was pushed back from breakfast to brunch, I would be going to lunch with just Michael. However, when I messaged Michael to ask if he wished to join me for lunch or if he would like for me to bring him anything, he said that he already made lunch plans with one of his Chinese friends. In the end, I went to lunch alone without telling Alaura and Michael that I was doing so. One, because the cafeteria is so close to our dorm and it is easy to order food and, two, because I did not want them to pity me. As I dined on a bowl of rice, marinated potatoes, and tofu (all for a dollar and twenty cents or six yuan), I thought about my lesson plans for the week. I was nearly finished with lunch when Michael walked in with his friend (what are the odds that they would choose to eat on the same cafeteria floor that I did?), helped themselves to some food, and seated themselves at the table in front of mine. I avoided eye contact with Michael because I didn’t want him to see me and pity me for eating lunch alone. I simply finished my meal and left to return to the dorm (thank goodness he was too immersed in his conversation with his friend to see me leave). I was not too bummed by eating alone as I pride myself on my independence and not looking to others for contentment.

 After returning to my dorm, I immersed myself in lesson planning while simultaneously listening to reruns of Cyberchase on YouTube. Time flew by and before I knew it, Lisa had returned to campus after an extended visit with her parents and brother in Chengdu. I invited her to join me for dinner and she accepted. Although Alaura was not hungry and was immersed in lesson planning so much that she declined my dinner invitation, Michael eagerly accepted it. On the way to meet up with Lisa, he was eager to tell me all about the exploring that he did that afternoon along the snack street outside Tiansheng station. We also discussed Dr. Xu’s recent hospitalization and hoped that she was getting better.

 Lisa managed to keep the conversation going over dinner in the cafeteria (I had chicken and zucchini with veggies and rice). After dinner, Michael and I bid her farewell and returned to our dorms; Michael retired for the night while Alaura and I managed to do our laundry after we figured out how to work the washer and finished our lesson plans for tomorrow.

 As my clothes continue to dry over the railing by my window, on the window handle, and my chair, I think about how my first day of teaching at Zeng Jia Yan will go. Will the students like me lessons? Will they understand me? Although I’m excited for tomorrow, I’m also a bit nervous.

Wednesday, April 5th, 2017: Day 5 in Zeng Jia Yan Primary School

 My alarm woke me up at six thirty this morning. As much as I wanted to just turn it off and go back to bed, I knew that I had to give myself time to make sure I had everything prepared for my first lesson at Zeng Jia Yan as a teacher.

 Fortunately, most of my stuff was packed the night before, so I was ready to go by ten to eight. Once I met up with Alaura and Michael outside our respective dorms, we caught a shuttle bus to Gate 2 of the campus where Mr. Wang was waiting to escort us to Zeng Jia Yan via the subway. The pink line was surprisingly packed considering the Tiansheng station was the second last one on the line. Alaura managed to find a seat, but Michael and I stood until we exited to transfer over to the blue line, which was also very packed and none of us had seats on it. Thankfully, we weren’t standing for long as we soon arrived at the station at which we transferred over to the green line. The station closest to Zeng Jia Yan is, coincidentally, named Zengjiayan and, conveniently, was the next station on the green line. A quick five to ten minute walk after exiting the subway took us to Zeng Jia Yan where we went to take a rest in our office and review our lesson plans for the day. Shortly after, our associate teachers entered to hand us our teaching schedules and to make sure that we were ready to teach today. According to my schedule, I teach Grade 2 English on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays; two Grade 5 classes on Tuesdays; and Thursday is a free day to work on lesson plans. As my first class fast approached, I tripled checked my lesson plan and associated materials and began pacing the office under the curious eyes of Alaura and Michael. It’s a quirk of mine; I need to pace before every lesson that I teach to get into the zone of teaching. Eventually, my associate teacher, Miss Wang, dropped by to escort me to the Grade 2 classroom. As I left with my materials, I told Alaura and Michael to pray for me because I wasn’t sure what to expect when I walked into the classroom.

 Upon walking into the classroom, the students immediately greeted me enthusiastically, which alleviated some of my nerves. Miss Wang was kind enough to help me set up my PowerPoint and then told me to begin when I was ready. I inhaled, exhaled, and began my lesson on greetings, introductions, and farewells. I tried to get students to pass a ball around to facilitate turn-taking when they practised introducing themselves, but many just chucked it across the room and the mad scramble to grab it only made the students even more active than they already were. In addition, rewarding students for properly introducing themselves using chocolate Easter eggs was a good idea in hindsight, but those also made the students more active, especially those who had yet to receive on. Despite the craziness, I managed to get through the lesson and Miss Wang said that they seemed to love me. To say that Alaura and Michael were astonished to see my dishevelled appearance as I returned to the office is an understatement. When they asked how my class was, I told them that it was fine, but warned them not to incorporate balls into their Grades 1 and 3 classes nor use candy and chocolate as incentives for participation. When they asked how many students were in my class, I told them that I honestly didn’t know because I was too busy trying to keep my students on track and focused. No amount of classroom management training prepared me for that first lesson. Although I love my students dearly, I’m now faced with the challenge of creating lessons that teach the textbook material, are fun, and keep the students in their seats for most of the lesson. Although I’m always up for challenges, I just hope and pray that whatever I do does not disappoint Miss Wang. That’s the last thing that I want to do: to disappoint her.

 After lunch (chicken, celery, veggies, and rice), Alaura, Michael, and I opted to return to our office to plan lessons than observe and participate in a choice activity. Alaura and Michael eventually left to teach their lessons and we called it a day once they were finished. With a quick goodbye to Principal Deng and a promise to stay after school to meet school board officials the next day, we took the subway back to Southwest University. Fortunately, the lines weren’t too busy and we managed to secure seats on the pink line. The ride home was relaxing and allowed us to unwind from our day.

 Once we arrived at Tiansheng station, we returned to the campus and caught a shuttle bus to the cafeteria, near our dorms where we had dinner (I ate chicken with tofu, veggies, and rice). Alaura even remarked that Michael and I really love tofu since we’ve eaten so much of it since we arrived in China. She even shared with Michael how I would not wake up to her slamming a bottle down or yelling my name, but that rolling me onto my side would silence my snoring. Although the story was a bit embarrassing, it was also funny and, apparently, Michael thought so too. Even though I wish that my first lesson today could have gone better, just being with Alaura and Michael is enough to put a smile back on my face.

Thursday, April 6th, 2017: Day 6 in Zeng Jia Yan Primary School

 I had to drag myself out of bed at six in the morning when my alarm started blaring. Mr. Wang messaged us via WeChat the night before to tell us to arrive at Zeng Jia Yan before nine o’clock to meet with representatives of the school board rather than meet them after school. I scarfed down a banana, a piece of bread, and some juice; got ready, packed my things, and was out of the dorms with Alaura and Michael by seven o’clock. During the shuttle bus ride, I shared with them that I panicked prior to leaving because I thought I had lost my dorm key only to realize as I was leaving that I had left it in the doorknob all night.

 The subway ride to Zeng Jia Yan went off without a hitch; thus, making it official that we can navigate the system on our own. Since we left earlier than yesterday, the pink line wasn’t busy, so we managed to secure seats until we transferred over to the blue line. Both the blue and green lines were jam packed, more so than yesterday. While the green line was incredibly roomy yesterday, it was the total opposite today. A woman standing in the doorway of the green line refused to move to let passengers off at Zengjiayan station. I wasn’t about to be late to what I view as my job, so I roughly elbowed her out of the way and exited the train. Michael was probably glad that I finally have grown accustomed to subway behaviours in China.

 We spent the morning in our office working on lesson plans and reflections (turns out the school board representatives will arrive when they arrive). At one point, Minghua dropped by to check up on us and to update us on Dr. Xu’s condition (she is still in the hospital, but is being well taken care of). Eventually, Michael and I got pulled away by Miss Wang to observe the fifteen minutes remaining of two Grade 2 English classes. As I walked in, the students greeted me enthusiastically and were so keen in showing off the little English that they knew. When Miss Wang asked me if I knew any good English games to play with them to kill the time remaining, I froze. I may be good at improvising when it comes to acting out a scenario or lying on the spot as to not ruin a surprise for someone, but I’m terrible at it in the teaching profession. Fortunately, I managed to kill half of the time by having students volunteer to come up to me at the front of the room and introduce themselves to meet me. Each one that came up bowed to me as they introduced themselves. I felt respected as a teacher and as a Queen. Miss Wang managed to kill the rest of the time by playing a video with a Chinese song and having the students sing along to it. During the song, I was moving from one side of the room to another, trying to encourage students out of their seats to return to them. One student appeared to love rebelling, but stern glares sent his way from me sent him scurrying back to his seat. I hope this was a sign that I’m getting better at what I love to do: teach.

 Afterwards, I was allowed another brief rest in the office before I was called away to observe a classroom while Alaura went to teach her Grade 6 English class for the first time. The students all remembered me and seemed thrilled to see me again. They learned how to count from ‘first’ to ‘thirtieth’ and how to state when their birthdays are. For the most part, they seem to understand the material well. However, some students thought ‘fifteen’ was ‘fiveteen’ and ‘twenty-fifty’ was ‘twenty-five’. A little classroom circulation took care of that issue.

 Once lunch was finished (pork, carrots, cabbage, and rice), Minghua invited Alaura, Michael, and me to visit Dr. Xu at the Chongqing Zhenggang Traditional Chinese Orthopedics Hospital. After Principal Deng and our associate teachers excused us for an hour, we took some food to Dr. Xu who was happy to see us. She looked better than she looked in Chengdu, but she lost her voice. Despite that, she was eager to hear all about our teaching endeavours in Zeng Jia Yan. Minghua also gave us a tour of the place, which smelled strongly of herbs.

 We did not do much upon returning to Zeng Jia Yan. We actually ended up missing our meeting with the school board representatives who just happened to show up after we left. Fortunately, it was no big deal and we were dismissed twenty minutes early, which allowed us to return to Southwest University via subway cards that were not jam packed with people (we even had seats on the pink line). Once we arrived, we caught a shuttle bus to the cafeteria near our dorms for dinner (I had chicken and potato fries with eggplant and rice).

 As I returned to my dorm and began to unwind from the day, my thoughts drifted to tomorrow. After school, we planned to hit up Jiefangbei in downtown Chongqing for dinner, drinks, and a night out to celebrate the end of our first week of teaching classes at Zeng Jia Yan. However, Dr. Xu arranged for us to have dinner with Dr. Shao, Ms. Jin, and a few Grade 9 and 10 students. Apparently, they heard about us being in town and wish to get to know us better, to learn more about the Canadian education system from us, and for us to learn more about the Chinese education system from them. Alaura, Michael, and I eagerly jumped at the opportunity to make more friends, but also to interview them in hopes of getting some more material for our individual research projects.

Friday, April 7th, 2017: Day 7 in Zeng Jia Yan Primary School

 I think what motivated me to crawl out of bed this morning at six was the knowledge that I was one class away from the weekend. As much as I love my teaching experience at Zeng Jia Yan, I was looking forward to going out after school with Alaura and Michael to Jiefangbei to visit Hongya Cave again before our scheduled dinner with Dr. Xu, Dr. Shao, Ms. Jin, and several high school students.

 Mr. Wang ended up messaging us to tell us to arrive before nine thirty, but we ended up showing up on time (and decided to leave Southwest University at seven thirty rather than a quarter to eight from this point forward). We spent most of our morning in our office, finalizing our lesson plans for the day and wondering if our associate teachers even knew that we had arrived. Eventually, Alaura and I were called away to teach our classes and I silently prayed that today’s lesson would be better than Wednesday’s.

 As I taught the new and improved lesson from Wednesday to a new class of Grade 2 students, I noted some similarities and differences between the two classes. While today’s students were also very active, most listened to me when I spoke. Many of them were very eager to practise greeting, introducing themselves to, and bidding farewell to their fellow classmates, so much so that it was not necessary to bribe them with candy. A lot of them, especially the boys, liked folding origami, but some were distracted by it and I have had to take away some of their creations through the lesson and return them once the lesson was over. Two boys in the back were always out of their seats and, at one point, were wrestling on the floor with one of them holding a pair of scissors in his hand. I quickly darted over to take away the scissors. Fortunately, they volunteered to practise their greetings, introductions, and farewells at the front of the class, so those moments brought some tranquility to the classroom, even if only briefly. One boy was always eager to volunteer, going as far as to kneel on his chair with a hand in the air. I learned from Miss Wang that he takes English classes outside of school, which explains his exceptional ability to grasp concepts quickly. Overall, it was a good class and I feel like I’m getting better at what I do.

 After lunch (noodles with pork, veggies, and soup), Alaura, Michael, and I participated in a choice in which we made chicken plushies out of felt, glue, thread, and cotton stuffing. Every part of my adorable chicken was constructed out of differently-coloured and sized felt hearts. Many of the students enjoyed watching us work and some remarked that my chicken was pretty. Although I did not get to finish making my chicken, we were invited to join the activity again next week to finish our chickens, which I’m very excited to do.

 Once the choice activity ended, we returned to our office where Alaura managed to finish her chicken. Michael left at one point to teach his class. When he returned, we packed up, bid farewell to our associate teachers and Principal Deng, and caught the green line subway to Jiefangbei where we explored a music store (Michael ended up spending about forty dollars for four albums) and stopped by Hongya Cave to pick up some treats from the fourth floor (and by ‘we’, I lean Alaura and Michael). By the time five o’clock rolled around, we went back up to the Starbucks on the top floor to meet Dr. Xu, Ms. Jin, and her daughter who is in Grade 10. Afterwards, we headed down to a café on the ninth floor to discuss Canadian and Chinese education systems over tea. We were soon joined by the daughter’s cousin, Dr. Shao, his wife, and their son who is in Grade 9. Examining the students’ workbooks and asking them questions about their English classes really gave me insight into the teaching strategies and resources used by English language teachers in China. I learned that the classes were mostly lecture-based and that the large student population per class and the little time allotted for each class makes incorporating other learning activities difficult. In addition, there is more of an emphasis on writing and understanding the meanings of words and phrases than on speaking and that Chinese novels are used for translation practise rather than literary analysis. I got to continue the interview over a dinner of spicy noodles, beef, fish, chicken, sweet bread, tofu, and dumplings. By the end of the dinner, we not only made some new friends, but we also gathered great material for our individual research projects.

 After thanking Dr. Shao and Ms. Lin for dinner, Alaura, Michael, and I went to catch the subway back to Southwest University. I got frustrated when my subway pass refused to grant me entrance onto the subway platform and ended up having to buy a one-trip ticket (I made a mental note to ask Lisa to assist me in solving the idea before Monday). It wasn’t until we transferred from the red line to the pink line that we realized just how late it was. The wait time for the trains was longer because it was late and traffic was low. We were told before that the campus shuttle buses stopped running at ten in the evening and that the gate nearest to Tiansheng station was far from our dorms. We feared being locked out of our dorm building for the night when curfew hit at eleven, so much so that we bolted out of the station once the train pulled in and scurried across the street rather than used the crosswalk. Noticing that the shuttle buses were still running, we made a beeline for them, but couldn’t find the bus going to Gate 5. There had to be another one heading in that direction, so Michael showed his dorm key to the bus attendant who seemed to understand that we needed to get to the international students’ dormitory. Despite our limited knowledge of Mandarin, we managed to understand that the bus going to Gate 7 made a stop outside of the teacher’s college building and we figured that if we got off at that stop and did a mad dash the rest of the way, we might just make it before they lock the doors for the night. We scrambled off of the bus as it pulled up outside the teacher’s college building, sprinted up to the cafeteria, and speed walked the rest of the way. To our great relief, the closed doors of our dorm building slid open as we approached and we praised each other and the Lord for making it home with four minutes to spare and an amused security guard watching us nearby.

Saturday, April 8th, 2017: Sleeping In, Subway Fixes, and Surprises

 I was woken up at seven this morning, not by my alarm, but because someone had the audacity to call me while I was in China. I decided before I came to China not to take phone calls while here and would only answer my phone if I had an incoming message from a friend, colleague, or Dr. Xu. I ignored the call and went back to bed, figuring that I would get a call again if there was an emergency. Fortunately, my phone stayed silent for the rest of the morning and I managed to sleep in until ten, a new record!

 Once I was awake, I began writing an introduction of myself for the first newsletter. I took a break around noon to grab some lunch with Alaura in the cafeteria near our dorm (I had rice, veggies, chicken, and lots of tofu!). I was going to invite Michael to join us; however, I did not hear any activity in his dorm and figured that he already had plans and left earlier that morning.
 After lunch, I returned to my dorm to continue writing my newsletter intro. An hour or two later, Lisa messaged me to inquire about my plans for the afternoon. When I asked if she could help me completed a few errands, she jumped at the opportunity and agreed to meet me. Once I notified Alaura about my brief departure, I went to meet up with Lisa at the intersection near the international students’ dormitory. We took a shuttle bus to Gate 2 and dropped by Tiansheng station to have a staff member look at my subway pass and figure out why it would not allow me to access the subway. Turns out when I last exited at a station, I didn’t scan my subway pass properly and the card was under the impression that I had yet to leave the subway, so trying to enter it rendered the card invalid. Fortunately, thanks to Lisa, the staff member managed to validate my subway card again and keep its original balance on it.

 On the way out of the station, I asked Lisa if we could stop by the supermarket to exchange yuan bills for coins to run the washing machine on the floor of our dorms. Lisa, bless her heart, had already made the exchange and traded me thirty one yuan coins for the equivalent in bills. I decided to keep ten of them and split the other twenty between Alaura and Michael. With them in mind, I decided to surprise them with cold fruit drinks on such a hot day. Lisa, bless her kind soul, offered to accompany me to purchase the drinks in the building next to Tiansheng station.

 Unsure of Michael’s fruit preferences and wishing to keep the whole thing a surprise, I messaged Michael using Lisa’s phone, pretending to be her asking him which fruit was his favourite since she was in the middle of drinking a fruit drink to which he responded that he liked any of them (this also told me that he had Wi-Fi and was in his dorm). After careful consideration, I purchased two mango drinks for Alaura and me and a pear drink for Michael.

 Upon returning to the international students’ dorms, I surprised Alaura and Michael with the coins and drinks, which they were both grateful for. I then gave Lisa a tour of my dorm and presented her with a Canadian dime and a Windsor postcard as a thank you gift for all of her help and to motivate her to work hard to come to Windsor in September as a participant in the Reciprocal Learning Program.

 Shortly after, Lisa took Alaura, Michael, and me to a different on-campus cafeteria within walking distance of our dorms as she claimed that the food there was better than the food at the cafeteria we frequented most often. She was right: my dinner of beef, green beans, rice, tofu, and a fried egg was so delicious!

 With a promise to have a steak and pizza dinner tomorrow made, Alaura, Michael, and I retired for the night while Lisa went to class. It was a relaxing day today, but I’m glad that I made the effort to squeeze in a good deed.

Sunday, April 9th, 2017: Newsletters, Naps, and New Restaurants

 I managed to sleep in this morning until nine, but was woken up to the sound of Michael laughing loudly next door. I find it strange that I can sleep through the sounds of Alaura slamming her water bottle down repeatedly on the night stand or yelling in my ear, yet the sun shining through windows or Michael’s laughing can jerk me out of my slumber.

 I spent the morning typing up my reflections for the week. Alaura woke up around noon and opted to skip lunch in favour of finishing our group’s first newsletter for Dr. Xu. Michael decided to grab lunch and then go grocery shopping. As much as I enjoy Michael’s company, I wanted some time to myself, so I messaged him and Alaura to say that I wanted to finish my reflections and then grab lunch and would shop for groceries with Alaura in the afternoon or evening. I then left the dorm building and walked over to the cafeteria at which we had dinner the previous evening. I helped myself to some rice, green peppers, beef, and a fried egg and was ecstatic when the kitchen staff shoved a boatload of tofu onto my tray when I asked for a serving.

 Upon returning to my dorm, I continued to work on my reflections; however, I took a break after a few hours when my head started getting heavy and took an hour-long power nap to recharge.

 Around a quarter after five, Alaura, Michael, and I left our dorms and took a shuttle bus to Gate 2 to meet up with Lisa who was thrilled to share with us that she placed third in a competition. We then proceeded to the subway to catch the green line to the station just before Tiansheng station: Zhuangyuanbei. Outside of the station, we were greeted by numerous stores, restaurants, and bakeries. It looked like a mini version of Jiefangbei. Lisa directed us to a steak restaurant situated on the second floor of a building. Not only was the menu reasonably priced, but it also had many options. It was challenging to decide what to eat. After testing our waitresses’ patience, we placed our orders and then helped ourselves to the free fruit buffet nearby. We had been seated, enjoying both the fruit and the view of outside (we were seated in a booth by a window) when kitchen staff brought our meals to our table within five minutes of ordering them. I was incredibly amazed and pleased with the taste of my medium-well steak, crab cake, spaghetti, and corn. Having eaten steak in Vietnam that was poorly marinated, I was astonished by the flavour in not only my steak, but my entire meal. Even the warm bread and corn soup was delicious. All four of us agreed that the restaurant was an ideal place to celebrate our first month in China and Lisa’s award win and the changes of us returning to this restaurant within the next two months are very high. The best fourteen bucks I have spent on a meal! Houcaller Steak House knows how to please!

 After catching the green line back to Southwest University and bidding goodnight to Lisa just inside Gate 2, Alaura, Michael, and I took a shuttle bus to the stop by Gate 5 and paid a visit to the mega supermarket for last-minute grocery shopping. I picked up a bag of ramen noodles (for nights when I return late or am too lazy to go out), some buns and bananas for breakfast, and a huge bottle of my favourite orange juice (it was on sale!). My night and weekend concluded with a sugary donut purchased from a bakery outside Zhuangyuanbei station. Two words: childhood nostalgia!