

Jeff Bissell Looks Back on Eleven Years at the Helm of SYA China



by Stephen Morison Jr.
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When I call Jeff Bissell to interview him for this article, he is 1,500 miles south of our Beijing campus, on the road with SYA China's 52 students and five of its Chinese faculty. Jeff is in the midst of the program's annual four-week "Winterim" trip, overseeing a four-day immersion at a Chinese high school in Jǐnghóng City. This regional capital is situated along a stretch of the Mekong River in southern Yunnan (literally, "South of the Clouds") Province, close to the Burmese and Laotian borders, where SYA China's students are enjoying a tropical climate, palm-lined streets and a spectacular cuisine while attending classes, sharing meals and spending evenings with kids from an area that rarely sees Western travelers.

The opportunity to forge relationships like these with people in disparate places, relationships that offer SYA students intensive-language and unique cultural experiences, is just one of the reasons Jeff was so excited to join SYA 11 years ago. He confesses that it's also one of the things he'll miss when he departs at the end of the school year, to head the Chinese American International School in San Francisco.

“I had this total life-changing experience when I was in my twenties,” Jeff says, recalling his first visit to China in 1987. “Coming to SYA was an opportunity to, every year, be part of a similar process for kids. China was on the rise, and still is. Kids who spend a year here when they are seventeen have a chance to be a front-row spectator to a lot of stuff, and I just wanted to be a part of that.”

Twelve years ago, Jeff was teaching Chinese language at Marquette University, in Milwaukee, when he stumbled on an online advertisement for the SYA opening. Having taught at the high school level before earning his PhD in Chinese languages and literature at the University of Wisconsin, he knew something was missing. His job at Marquette left him feeling unfulfilled. “My interest in China was more of a visceral, on-the-ground interest,” he remembers. “Teaching at Marquette wasn’t pushing any buttons. I was interested in working with high school kids instead of college kids. One night, while folding laundry in my room, I went online and found an ad for the [SYA] Resident Director position. I just looked at it and thought, ‘This is the coolest job there is, the answer to my dreams.’ So I applied. I couldn’t have written a cooler job description.”

The program then was still in its infancy. Having been established five years earlier, it had just expanded to a full-year program in 1998. Jeff credits his predecessor, Resident Director John McLoughlin, with laying the foundation but also remembers the difficulties of operating in China in the late 90s. “Being there that first year was a lot like running and pulling your pants up at the same time,” he recalls with a laugh. “We ran into a bunch of roadblocks because we were foreigners and people were nervous. There weren’t a lot of foreigners then. We were living with Chinese families and traveling around. I would receive regular visits from the police. I had to spend a lot of time reassuring people that things were cool, that nobody was going to lose his job. So that was a challenge, convincing officialdom that we weren’t a risk.”

When Jeff arrived, SYA’s agreement with Er Fu Zhong, the Chinese public high school where SYA leases office and classroom space, stipulated that SYA students would be taught Chinese by Er Fu Zhong faculty. Although the agreement helped SYA get a foothold in China, it presented Jeff with several challenges. “It wasn’t a good fit for a variety of reasons,” he says. “There were differences of pedagogy and standards. I had very little direct control over the teachers. I didn’t train them, and they had commitments to their Er Fu Zhong classes.”

So Jeff set about changing the agreement. When Er Fu Zhong was tasked by the Chinese Ministry of Education with implementing a plan for ambitious growth that would expand the size of the campus and turn the school into a Chinese “model” school, Jeff saw an opportunity. He volunteered to relieve the high school’s teachers of their responsibilities at SYA, and they agreed. Then he contacted a handful of former SYA students who had returned to China and were experiencing or had experienced a college study-abroad program. With input from his former students, Jeff began to identify and recruit standout teachers from Beijing college Chinese language programs like the Inter-University Program for Chinese Language Studies at Tsinghua (IUP) and Princeton in Beijing (PiB). In short order, he had recruited a faculty of well-

trained and hardworking teachers who were forward-thinking and ambitious enough to make the leap from the more entrenched university programs to the up-and-coming SYA.

“We hired good people, but Zhong Tong was and is our unlikely, unassuming rock star,” Jeff says, referring to SYA’s longstanding Chinese language chair. A Peking University graduate, Zhong Tong had taught at Yale, IUP and Beloit College (in Wisconsin), and was in charge of training new teachers at IUP before Jeff persuaded her to make the leap to SYA. “Once she took over the responsibilities of running the Chinese program,” Jeff says, “It went from a collection of smart, dedicated teachers to a well-oiled machine with evaluations, assessments and meetings to make goals and integrate Chinese into the curriculum.” Jeff also credits Zhong Tong with identifying other talented teachers and recruiting them. Over the course of her tenure, she has been responsible for luring more than a half-dozen Chinese language teachers to the school.

With the language faculty and curriculum in place, Jeff began to put together the other pieces of a puzzle that would eventually turn SYA China, as he puts it, “from a program into a school.” Not happy with a faculty of temporary teachers who rotated through every year or two, he set about locating teachers willing to make a long-term commitment to China and to the school. He eventually secured master teachers Hilda Becker, a PhD candidate now in her eighth year at SYA, and Tim Pettus, a mathematics teacher and AP Calculus wizard with previous experience at Phillips Exeter and St. Marks, who is also in his eighth year at SYA.

Perhaps his final challenge was the remaking of the English curriculum. Jeff sought to require books and assignments of SYA China’s English class that are “more relevant to the experience the kids are having in Beijing,” he says. Three years ago he found and hired me, an English teacher who was enthusiastic about working with Jeff to develop a syllabus that integrates classical and contemporary Chinese authors in translation with selected authors and works from the canon of American literature. Jeff credits the changes with reinvigorating interest in English among students who already commit more than five hours a day to Chinese language study.

But as anybody who has spent more than a day on any one of SYA’s campuses must surely realize, Jeff’s job as a Resident Director demands more than just a commitment to curriculum design. For the last 11 years, Jeff has been SYA China’s day-to-day leader, a job that requires he stay as flexible as a Wuqiaoan acrobat as he shape-shifts from motivational speaker one moment to firm taskmaster the next. As Resident Director, Jeff is accustomed to fielding telephone calls from the United States at two in the morning or being awakened in the middle of a chilly night in Fujian Province while sleeping in a *tulo* to hear that one of his charges is throwing up and needs attention.

Jeff and wife, Leanne, raised their own two kids in Beijing even as Jeff served in loco parentis to countless SYA kids. Christopher “Kro” Bauer CN’01 is one former student who credits Jeff with having a powerful impact both during Kro’s time in the program and in his life subsequent to SYA. “I was probably the most homesick kid in the history of SYA China, but Jeff would talk with me,” Kro remembers. “It was because of him that I stuck it out.” Kro has long since recovered from his homesickness and is now a successful entrepreneur based in Beijing,

where he oversees, in addition to other projects, the popular Tube Station Bistros and Kro's Nest pizza restaurants.

At the most fundamental level, Jeff simply loves working with kids. "Watching the kids gain increased self-confidence, increased independence, increased sensitivity and humility." When I ask him to describe the favorite part of his job, he answers quickly: "watching them have eureka experiences. From: I can do this? To: I can do this!"

He says he's lost track of how many students have returned to China but swears it's in the hundreds. "They're doing incredible things," he says, "everything from working with businesses, to working with NGOs, to using Fulbright grants to implement research projects, to working in schools."

I ask him what he'll miss most. "There's nothing I won't miss," he says. The line goes quiet for a moment, and then he begins to list things: the food, his Chinese friends and colleagues, his relationships with the "good singers" in the SYA home office, his relationships with various SYA parents, the self-selecting students who make the commitment to come to China for a year, the blossoming SYA library. "China is really the eye of the hurricane in the world," he says. "Life here is lived at a frenetic pace. The country changes so quickly that life from one year to the next is like being in a different place. I like being here with all this movement, speed and optimism."

He knows San Francisco will present new challenges, new adventures and new opportunities, but he hopes to maintain the relationships he's forged at SYA. "I look forward to supporting the organization any way I can in the future," he says. "Whether it's sending students to China, interviewing kids, helping out with projects . . . I plan on keeping a finger in the pie."

The winter wind is blustery in Beijing. It rattles my apartment windows and groans like an arthritic ghost. Down in Yunnan, a car horn toots in the background behind Jeff. He asks if I have any more questions. I check on how things are going with the kids, and he reels off the highlights. Some are familiar to me—I was with him on this same trip a year ago—and some are new. What never changes, however, is the enthusiasm in Jeff's voice. It rings with all the bounce and excitement of a kid describing his first day with a new toy. Over the last 11 years, Jeff has transformed a nascent program into one of the most respected Chinese language schools in the country, he's traveled to remote regions with 50 plus kids more than 30 times and he's watched them thrill to new experiences and new acquaintances thousands of times. But listening to him tell me about his most recent week traveling through Jǐnghóng City with the students, you'd think it was still his first week on the job.