

Opinion and Commentary

Internationally Minded, Tried and Tested

As a field trip goes awry, Beijing BISS International School students put solidarity first

By *Ettie Zilber*

Imagine the heart palpitations when my mobile phone rang, waking me in the middle of the night. It was my Grade 12 Activity Week trip leader. He was calling to tell me the distressing news he had just received while on the night train between Beijing and Pingyao (700 kilometers south of Beijing), with 26 students and five chaperones.

Before I reveal the message, it would be necessary to describe the political context. For almost five days, citizens were taking to the streets in many cities in China, protesting the upcoming purchase of the Daiyu/Senkaku islands by Japan. This has been a long-standing dispute, and both Japan and China have made claim to these islands.

On the streets all around the Japanese Embassy demonstrations were increasing in intensity during the lead-up to a very sensitive date: 18 September (1931), the day Japanese forces occupied Manchuria and began their campaign to conquer the country. Clearly, this date had strong historical and emotional significance for the Chinese people; and, this was the night that our students were travelling to the lovely

historic walled city of Pingyao, featured in the famous movie, "Raise the Red Lantern."

On that late night phone call, the trip leader told me that he had received the following message from the travel agent: "Japanese nationals would not be accepted into the hotel." Indeed, we had two Japanese students in the Grade 12 cohort.

"What should we do?" he asked me, as my mind continued racing. Since they still had seven more hours to go on a 12-hour overnight train ride, I told him to try to get some sleep and I would get back to him with a plan.

I put this same question to our Grade 10 students the following morning, as they were studying intercultural conflicts and critical incidents, in their new humanities curricular unit. They had not yet heard about the incident, nor were they aware of the final decision. This was a classic teachable moment.

The scenario was described and the Grade 10 students were asked, "What would you do?" As expected they offered some solutions, some serious and some less serious. One student finally proposed to send the whole group home for security reasons.



The participants in Beijing BISS' Grade 12 activity week, well-deserving of some photo coverage (photo: Beijing BISS).

The students were certainly eager to hear the decision. I informed them that we had instructed the entire group to return to Beijing immediately. Why? Not for security, which was never a major concern. But because under no circumstances would we accept any discrimination or separation between members of our community because of their personal profile—be it religion, race, nationality, or otherwise.

We were all truly gratified by the reaction of our seniors. After they woke up and disembarked from the train, they were informed of the situation and the decision; they accepted it with grace and sensitivity. They did not complain, nor hesitate in their solidarity against discrimination towards their classmates.

If this is the outcome of students attending schools that strive for international-mindedness and car-

ing, then I am proud to be counted among their educational leaders. I know that my colleagues feel the same. Perhaps we really can have an impact on the world through our students. ●

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