

East Meets West

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DURHAM — We're all a lot more alike than we are different. That's the lesson — transcendent of language — that students, educators and parents are learning as 27 Chinese students get a taste of life in the Bull City.



The students and four educators — all from the coastal Chinese city of Qingdao — arrived Sunday for a two-week bilingual immersion program organized by Camelot Academy and RTP International Cultural Exchange.

Just like many American kids, 16-year-old Chinese student Charles Song has lofty dreams of Hollywood. "I want to be a movie star," he said Wednesday.

"But my parents don't agree with me," he continued. "It's hard to be a star, so they told me that you should study hard

and go to college."

He hopes college brings him back to America, perhaps to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where he'd like to study math, physics or chemistry.

The Chinese students — ranging in age from 12 to 18, with most between 15 and 17 — are making the most of their two weeks in North Carolina, with two field trips each day. Morning trips are educational, to places like Lenovo, Duke Homestead and UNC Chapel Hill, while afternoon trips, to spots like bowling alleys and skating rinks, offer a chance to let loose.

Camelot's founding director, Thelma De Carlo-Glynn, said she's felt an "enormous responsibility" to make the most of the students' time in North Carolina. The themes of the program are: welcome to America, North Carolina, Durham and "our homes"; and American freedoms — what they are, the struggle of earning them and what it takes to live up to them.

The private school, which educates with a "global perspective," has a significant international contingent during the year, De Carlo-Glynn said.

Scott Mitchell, Camelot's admissions director, said the immersion program fits in

perfectly with the school's ideals.

“What happens in China matters to us — it's going to affect us. And the same thing is true for [Chinese students in relation to the U.S.],” he said. “Rather just talk about the place on the other side of the world where all of these things are happening, how much better, if you can go there, then they come here?”

An ultimate goal is to take Camelot students on a similar trip to China, Mitchell said.

The cultural immersion isn't one-sided. Several Camelot students, who participate in field trips, are spending their afternoons learning to speak Mandarin and do origami and Chinese brush painting from Chinese instructors while the Chinese students take classes on English and American culture and history from Camelot teachers.

Mitchell, who recently became certified to teach English as a Second Language classes, is helping Chinese students with their English skills, which he described as “varied.”

Camelot senior Ryan Siebens said he's noticed marked improvement in the students' English just three days into their visit to the U.S.

“Some of them have started to even speak to one another in English,” he said.

Jason Wang, a vice principal at a Chinese school, said he believed the students — who are living with host families, some of whom have children who attend Camelot — were learning a lot more than slang from their Western peers.

“They're learning about manners, about culture — especially about culture,” he said. “In my impression, the difference is that the American students are more independent, and the Chinese students usually look for the teacher to take more care of them.”

Whether he makes it to the Walk of Fame or the halls of MIT, Song is looking forward to bright days ahead for U.S.-China relations.

“In America and China, the relationship is better than yesterday, maybe,” he said. “I hope [the relationship between] China and America will be better and better.”