



The Beijing Center’s secular retreat to bring students closer to themselves, their fellows, and TBC’s mission of teaching in the Jesuit tradition

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Abstract:

“If you cannot be a friend to yourself, how can you be a friend to another?” Matteo Ricci, S.J., wrote in his 1595 book *On Friendship*. *On Friendship* was inspired by a conversation about friendship with a Chinese prince, and his first work written entirely in Chinese. The Beijing Center for Chinese Studies has its roots in Matteo Ricci’s journey from Italy to China, and the high value he placed on friendship. In Beijing, Matteo Ricci met with the poor and the rich, the powerful and the weak, and extensively studied Chinese language and culture, meeting Ming Dynasty knowledge and teaching European knowledge in turn.

The Beijing Center, taking inspiration from this experience, has always maintained that cultural exchange is the root of our mission. With a student population shift from international to domestic students due to the COVID-19 pandemic, a three-day retreat was devised to teach students about Jesuit education and bring them into a deeper understanding of themselves and their peers via secularized methods originating from Ignatian Spirituality. This article explains the cause, effect, methodology, and greater implications of the retreat.

The Initiative:

Following The Beijing Center’s ethos of building bridges, staff drew on their experiences and developed a localized, secular retreat to bring students closer to themselves, their fellows, and TBC’s mission of teaching in the Jesuit tradition.

Description:

At the heart of reconciliation and of peace is mutual understanding. The Beijing Center (TBC) has, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, faced a shift in student populations, changing from international students largely from Jesuit universities to domestic students who come from a wide variety of educational backgrounds. While general academic practices introduce the Jesuit education framework, TBC wanted to engage these students with secular spiritual practices for their own benefit.

The TBC Retreat was brought to The Beijing Center in just the same way as Jesuit learning came to China: through the actions and experiences of the Jesuit community. Moritz Kuhlmann, S.J. was a Research Associate with The Beijing Center from 2021-2022, whose secondary school was Jesuit affiliated. Fr. Marco Mohr, S.J., in conjunction with his Ignatian Student Group at that secondary school, first devised the particular structure and pedagogy of the retreat. While working with a majority Muslim population in the late 2010s, Moritz edited and adjusted the TBC Retreat to be more aimed towards non-Christian populations in ways that still served them and accommodated different worldviews, which is a similar version to what The Beijing Center put into place. TBC Retreat's Chinese name, 利趣特, sounds like 'Retreat' and is comprised of words that imply both doing good and having new, interesting experiences.

The current job market in China is inundated with high-performing fresh graduates, courtesy of a long cultural tradition of academic competition and increasing access to education. However, that does increase competition and social pressure to excel, both academically and professionally (Bodycott, 2012). "Socially prescribed perfectionism" anxieties are high in Chinese students, especially when compared to students from Western cultures, demonstrating the pressure this competition and social value of the competition places on students (Xie, Long, and Feng, 2008, p. 163). Beyond school, studies of Chinese work intensification due to marketization like Xiao and Cooke (2012) indicate that not only does Chinese work cultures largely overlook work-life

balance, individual coping mechanisms are insufficient for the structural issue at hand. Belonging and acceptance is a key theme of the TBC Retreat – specifically, belonging and acceptance that does not revolve around achievements, but rather who the individual is as a person. It also focuses on giving them a space away from this intensification, and teaching centering skills to manage a sense of self and community in the face of high performing work structures that they may encounter in the future (Xian, Atkinson, & Meng-Lewis, 2019). Leadership skills are also emphasized at the TBC Retreat. In some spaces such as academia, leadership skills are often linked to achievement - the top-achieving student may be seen as a model of relevant life skills, but the TBC Retreat offered participants the ability to develop leadership skills outside of achievement-based situations (GonzálezNavarro, Talavera-Escribano, Zurriaga-Lloréns & Llinares-Insa, 2019).

Objectives:

1. Integrate The Beijing Center's mission of Jesuit education to students from non-Catholic cultural backgrounds.
2. Introduce secular spiritual processes to students for self-peace, peace with others, both internal and external conflict resolution, and an emphasis on building and maintaining healthy relationships.
3. Acknowledge current societal pressures on university students and offer them a place of belonging and to self-develop without those pressures placed upon them.
4. Build connections between The Beijing Center students and students from the wider University of International Business and Economics, especially considering the effects of the pandemic on campus culture.

Methodology:

The structure of the TBC Retreat was altered by The Beijing Center to encourage student leadership and engagement and remove religious connotations. Designed to take place once per

semester, the TBC Retreat brings together TBC students and University of International Business and Economics students, on which campus TBC is located. In its Fall 2021 iteration, which this article will draw from, there were seventeen participants total – four leaders and thirteen students. Each leader facilitated a group of 4 or 5 students. The small group division allowed for maximum use of sharing time and allowed each member to grow closer to one another. The retreat was conducted in Chinese, as it was designed for Chinese students.

The TBC Retreat is scheduled over three days of the weekend, going from the afternoon on the first day to the afternoon of the third day. Each day reflects the goal of the focus of the retreat – the first is I/Me, the second is You, the third is Us. The retreat centered around exploring themes of friendship and leadership.

The essential idea of this retreat is to deal with different topics related to a deeper sense of life, using the same way of proceeding for each topic.

Step 1: Leaders give input and/or begin discussion on the topic.

Step 2: Participant connects the topic to a personal experience of theirs.

Step 3: Participants explore their experience in greater depth through peer sharing and group discussion.

Step 4: Participants gather to harvest the fruits and conclude the exercise.

Going through these four steps while focusing on a specific topic is called one “exercise.” Each retreat day features several exercises, tied to the day’s theme and featuring several topics.

The retreat is typically not held in the regular educational environment – in 2021, that meant welcoming UIBE students to TBC dorms, having TBC students move to a different dorm for the duration of the retreat, and encouraging community between these two student groups outside of the Retreat. The Beijing Center believes that getting out of one’s everyday environment is important for participants to go deeper than their everyday experience. Another way to bring about this mental shift is to change communication habits – that is, at times, remove access to

cell phones, and ask students to refrain from engaging with their TBC peers not participating in the retreat.

Leadership:

The leaders' main responsibility is to give the exercises to the participants. This includes:

1. delivering the input for each exercise
2. accompanying the individual participants during their time of personal experience by offering support
3. facilitating peer-to-peer sharing
4. guiding the plenum discussion at the very end of each exercise

The leaders are responsible for the daily routine of morning and evening meditative activity, starting and ending the day as a group. Leaders make sure that all the core elements are put into practice. All leaders are provided with Jesuit-led guidance training and facilitation skills necessary to be involved in the TBC Retreat.

Each day of the retreat features activities such as silent meditation, group reflection, and structured exercises designed to get participants thinking in new ways and exploring new communication methods. Meditation, peer to peer sharing, diary entry, and one on one talks with leaders are all methods used to ease the participants out of their normal comfort zone and into the retreat's atmosphere and expectations. Ignatius of Loyola presupposed that "every good person is to be more ready to save the other's proposition than to condemn it," and the TBC retreat aimed to explore and encourage that attitude.

Consecutive retreats are led by previous retreat participants who want to do the same good unto others that they received and put into practice what they learned about leadership and responsibility. While they will have systemic support and guidance training, the TBC Retreat was fashioned to help participants become leaders comfortable with holding these kinds of spaces.

Activities:

Activities range from Exercises to Meditation, Group Gift Sharing (both as individuals and as written letters of friendship towards one another) and Program Free Time.

Each exercise is structured in four parts: leader input, personal experience reflection, peer sharing, and closing reflection. Personal experience and peer sharing take up the majority of the time.

An example Exercise scheduled to take 100 minutes would allocate ten minutes to leader input, ten minutes to the closing review and emotional check-in, and forty minutes to the personal experience and peer sharing time each.

Exercises linked each day's theme to each other, bringing students into reflection about what has changed their lives, their perception of injustice and reconciliation, and the unique gifts that they have.

Results:

1. Students gained a greater sense of community to each other, conquering COVID-19-effected feelings of loneliness and distance.
2. Students gained a greater sense of self and connection to the society around them with nurtured leadership skills.
3. Students gained a greater interest in the application of practices they learned at the retreat beyond the retreat hours, bringing reflection and secular spirituality into their daily lives.

Implementation of the TBC Retreat into TBC's regularly scheduled events has received positive feedback and anticipates greater engagement. Here are some examples of student feedback:

On reflection of self:

- This retreat really impacted me because it reminded me that I have the ability to love and be loved. A lot of things in college have been bringing me down and making me forget that.
- I realized a whole new side of myself. That's really important to me.
- It was a completely unique weekend experience that deepened my understanding of myself and helped me better cherish my relatives and friends.
- This weekend is unforgettable. It's like my psychological line of defense was broken, little by little, until it finally collapsed, but I was rebuilt again. I will remember these new feelings.

On leadership:

- I really believe it's meaningful to help others in this process, because it was meaningful to me to be helped.
- This retreat was really helpful to me to find a more deep meaning and sense of life!!! Hearing from other people's perspectives really inspired me, and helped me gain a multi-faceted understanding of life. I learned a lot about love, too, how to find, receive, and give it.
- I really came to understand leadership is hard work, but the preparation and act of it is so meaningful.

On cultural communication:

- It felt totally different to my normal life, but enriching.
- It only took two and a half days but I was doubtful at first and moved by emotion at the end. I don't know what happened, but I made unforgettable memories.

On community:

- I felt blessed to be part of the group and grateful that I could open up and share my past with people who were strangers to me before.
- I really experienced what I'd described as a "love that never ends," it was very encompassing and moving.

On future engagement:

- I'd really like to get together with everyone again, and more often.
- I would be willing to be a leader. I really felt the influence of the retreat, and want to pass on this warmth that I feel, as well as see how others change and listen to their stories.

On future application of learned skills:

- I want to try and meditate every week by myself now.
- Meditation really helped with my peace of mind, and I want to try it again in the future.

At the end of the TBC Retreat, eleven out of the thirteen student participants expressed enthusiasm and willingness to participate in another TBC Retreat as a leader. One of the two who replied in the negative expressed schedule constraint concerns, while the other acknowledged the positive effect the retreat had on them but still remained dubious about their leadership ability. All of the students felt that the TBC Retreat was positive, enriching, and increased their understanding of their relationship with themselves and others, as well as their value on friendship and community. One student drew parallels to the Alcoholics Anonymous and single mother support groups they had seen on American television shows, finding emphasis in the sharing of experiences.

Lessons Learned:

The Beijing Center holds this retreat every semester possible, and intends to update the Exercises as it grows and progresses. Materials get increasingly localized to add in more cultural touchpoints to the Chinese students. Student recommendations range from increased outdoor activities to more time to hear from others. Some students noted that they'd like to dive deeper into the cultural exchange taking place, to examine the preconceived notions they hold and learn more about what they do not know. In addition, future iterations will be held in collaboration with an organized club of students from the University of International Business and Economics,

to have a greater reach and impact beyond the normal The Beijing Center network. A Fall 2021 UIBE participant, who was very positively impacted by her Retreat experience, led the club and wanted to do something to promote and sustain the TBC Retreat with the UIBE community.

Overall, students were able to break out of their preconceived thought patterns and notions and fully dive into the world and format of the TBC Retreat. They participated in the cultural exchange of trying this method of recognition and reconciliation that originated in Ignatian spirituality in the West, while themselves being rooted in none of those identities (Mast 2016).

1. Despite some initial hesitations, the retreat format allowed students to introduce new worldviews and to be introduced to new worldviews from their fellows and the structure.
2. The structure and positive relationships of the TBC Retreat created solid connections between TBC and UIBE (University of International Business and Economics) students and the institutions they participate in.
3. Leadership, both internal and external, contributes to the feelings of inclusion and progress in the group.

Conclusion:

The Beijing Center's semi-annual TBC Retreat brought The Beijing Center students, The Beijing Center staff, and students from the University of International Business and Economics together for a weekend, making a positive change in their lives and encouraging friendship and leadership.

The TBC Retreat brings The Beijing Center's mission of cultural exchange to our Chinese community in a visible, tangible way, as well as the goals of self-reconciliation and inner peace. The method itself is meaningful and educational, not only from the post-retreat feedback but the evidence in action to promote and continue involvement with the retreat. For participants, in today's fast-paced society, everyone may need a chance to step back from their daily life and spend some time reflecting, to hear their true voice and find inner peace. Self-esteem, forgiveness, empathy, and a decrease in anxiety have all been shown to blossom when students

have a space for community and for nurturing interiority (Ji et al., 2016). Li & Qin's 2021 study on the efficacy of mindfulness-based stress-reduction strategies for Chinese university students demonstrated a direct reduction in fear of anger, depression, and anxiety. The TBC Retreat's repeating nature means that the TBC in the name not only stands for The Beijing Center, but To Be Continued: just like the growth of each student.

Ignatian spirituality holds *cura personalis* in high regard, dedicated to the care of mind, body, and spirit of the whole person. Equipping today's young people, no matter their culture, home country, situation or beliefs, with the skills to value themselves and others, is a step towards bringing their inner selves closer to peace. Ignatian-originating retreats work to give participants clarity of mind and positive feelings towards themselves and society, and can be valuable to people of all backgrounds.

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