Dr. Joseph Carroll, Curators’ Professor of English, visited Tsinghua University in Beijing over the summer of 2015. Tsinghua, with a student population of approximately 30,000, is one of the country’s top research institutions and has been referred to as “the MIT of China.” Dr. Carroll’s visit was the result of an ongoing correspondence with a Chinese professor of English on the Tsinghua campus, Yu Shiyi. Because Professor Yu is interested in scientific ways of looking at literature, Dr. Carroll gave a series of public lectures and taught a class designed to introduce students to literary Darwinism, an evolutionary approach to literary criticism that has been a focus of Carroll’s scholarship since the publication of his *Evolution and Literary Theory* in 1995. In addition, a lengthy interview with Dr. Carroll by Professor Yu was translated into Chinese and published in *China Reading Weekly* (*Zhonghua du shu bao*), Beijing’s equivalent of the *New York Times Book Review*.
Literary Darwinism was not the only reason Dr. Carroll took advantage of this opportunity; an emerging interest in Chinese history and contemporary Chinese fiction, especially the contemporary Chinese novelist Yu Hua, also played a role. However, as Dr. Carroll explains his major takeaways from his visit, the two — literary Darwinism and his interest in Chinese history and literature — are closely linked. Dr. Carroll says “Literature reveals the underlying motivational and emotional structure of human life … To understand human behavior, including the behavior that consists in producing and consuming literature, we need access to the explanatory concepts in evolutionary biology and evolutionary social science.” It is no surprise then that the examination of human behavior was at the center of his visit. When Dr. Carroll says, “One main goal was to see as much of China as I could,” he means “‘seeing China’ meant talking to people, getting an imaginative impression of what their minds are like, how they see China, absorbing atmosphere, getting impressions of manners.”

This type of ethnographic interaction with the people he met was grounded in the cultural importance of China, both historically and now. While China has one of the world’s oldest civilizations, it has only recently become a major world power in industrial and technological culture. As Dr. Carroll describes it, “they have been ripped violently into the modern industrial world, completing in forty years a process that in the West took closer to two centuries.” Chinese historical experience aligns with his interests in how basic motives and emotions manifest themselves differently in various cultures. Dr. Carroll noted how the people he met “live through their smart phones, listen to pop music … and watch international movies.” However, the ways in which these cultural acts intersect with modern society is still distinctly Chinese.

In addition to teaching on the campus, Dr. Carroll spent time with Professor Yu and five of his graduate students, visiting “ancient imperial palaces and gardens, Tiananmen Square, tourist districts, artificial lakes, and the mile upon mile of dense urban landscape in a city of 22 million people.” This time interacting with the people, culture, and landscape of China gave him new insight into his scholarly work, and may lead to a return visit: he and Professor Yu have begun to discuss the possibility of an international conference on “Science and Literature in the 21st Century” in Beijing, perhaps as early as summer 2016.