

A Trip into the East: A Personal Account of the 2009 China Travel Course

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The sun never set the first day we arrived in Shanghai. Thirteen hours in the air and, still, the sun shown just as brightly as it did when we left. When we landed it was approximately around the same time we had left the United States; it was an odd sensation to step off the aircraft then. The feel of the area around was much like home – the terminal layout had the same comforts of the West and all the things one would expect out of an airport. Of course, nothing was written out in English and that was probably one of the first signs that really brought reality back to my flight-numb senses. But it was only when we passed through the immigration terminal did I really fully understand the situation.

I was in China.

I have always wanted to go to the East since I was a young child. My step mother and her father had a collection of old Chinese artifacts that the family had amassed over the years and I always found myself fascinated with them. The ancient Chinese culture was always something exotic and magical to me as a young brat from the suburbs of Boston. I promised myself that I would see that place one day.

Walking out into the streets of Shanghai, it became apparent that the city was an integral part of Chinese coastal existence. The foot traffic was tremendous; never mind the naval bustle that was happening just beyond the concrete and steel. Shanghai was an essential hub for foreign and domestic wears and as Doctor Huang went on to explain, Shanghai was a main area for foreign trade and occupation in China's history. This was trumpeted ten-fold by the obvious Western structures that dotted the observation route of the river.



When we left the city to head deeper into the heart of China, the real impact of Chinese life become more and more apparent as city blocks melted away. Xi'an was our second stop. In contrast to the coast, this growing city held more of the ancient flavors that had been my focal point of interest for a long time. Once an ancient capital, Xi'an now drew in tourists from all over the world, including those

native to China. Remnants of the old towered against industry, creating a backdrop of history in the modern age. The ancient capital was thick with it – layers upon layers of these imperial structures melded into the post-modern society. Even the great imperial wall still stood as a reminder of China’s grand past.

As a native to the United States, it was hard for me to understand how the people of China felt about this magnitude of history resting just at their doorstep. For me, it was a sign of respect and a signature of a connection with the past as a means of progressing into the modern age. I will and forever state that I can never truly comprehend the personal connection to all of the treasures that Xi’an embodies, but I did feel an appreciation for much there was in this single city alone.

We left Xi’an at night; the moon at our back side, we travelled the countryside by a sleeper train. Four of us to a room, I learned to get comfortable with the people I was traveling



with and, for a little while, we let loose as the train barreled us towards Baoding.

Out of all the places we stayed, Baoding proved to be one of the most important. Hebei University, our local college partner, invited us with open arms and warm hearts the morning we stepped off the train. We were allowed a day with the students there and we exchanged stories of our experiences as college students

in the United States while they gave our group an extensive look into the world of a Chinese college student. To say the experience was incredible is not giving it enough credit.

We did not stay very long in Baoding; we had a final destination waiting for us just a few miles away and it was time for us to make it there. What waited was the country’s capital, a place of wonder and of many heartfelt memories. This place was none other than Beijing.

The city was unlike any other metropolis I had been to before; the sky line was alight with sights and sounds the world over. But beyond it all was the deep history of the past century’s turmoil and struggle. Here, the presence of the country’s vicious communist past was more present than ever.



Stepping through the ancient relics left behind during the firestorm that was the Cultural Revolution, I saw things not many people are privy to. As a history major and as someone who comes from a family that fled the communist regimes of Eastern Europe, seeing some of the great relics from this immensely tense period was more of an eye opener than any history book or text could give me. Doctor Huang told

stories of the period, of his own personal history during the Mao years and the city reflected that firsthand account. Much of what was left behind was all that was spared during the great siege of the Cultural Revolution. To the regret of many, much was lost during this rampant attack on feudalism and the old. Fortunately, the times have changed and a new tide of respect and preservation has washed in.

What is important is that people remember the history. That was probably one of the most important parts of this journey – to understand a culture, one must go to the beginning of sorts, to find out the start and move from there.

Of course, getting to know the native population and being able to socialize with people was wonderfully enriching as well. Without it, I doubt I would not have taken so many memories back with me.