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Student Engagement Fund

Study Abroad Final Reflection

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A Time to Remember

This summer I had the opportunity to travel seven thousand miles across land and sea to explore the other half of the world. Along with seven other fellow Chinese language students, we had the opportunity to experience life as a student as well as a tourist. The entire trip lasted 25 days. In the span of 25 days, we traveled to four different cities, visited many historical sites, learned about the various cultures, and most importantly, we met so many new friends and gained so much knowledge. The four beautiful cities that we traveled to were: Chongqing, Xi'an, Taigu, and Beijing. Each of these cities taught us so much about the history and culture of China and taught us so many life lessons.

When we first arrived in China, we travelled straight to Chongqing. In Chongqing was the first Prospect College campus. We had the opportunity to stay with current students in their dorm rooms. For the six days that we had in Chongqing, we attended classes, visited museums and historical sites, lived life as college students, and had a taste of Chongqing's spicy hot cuisine. Of the many opportunities that we had in Chongqing, my favorite day was the day that



Figure 1 My Host Family

we got to spend with our host families. Our group of eight was split up into four different pairs and each pair had a host family. My partner and I started the day

with grocery shopping with our host family and going to their home. As they cooked lunch, we were entertained by their nine-year-old daughter who had been taking dance lessons. We spent the entire day with our host families having lunch, playing a Chinese board game called 'Go,' learning some Chinese calligraphy, and playing badminton. The entire experience was amazing because we were able to see what life is like for a Chinese family in China. It's one thing to learn about a culture in a classroom, but it's another to experience it in real life. It was an amazing experience to be able to spend the day with my host family. Even though I come from a Chinese family myself and my family lives similarly, but it is interesting to see how we are still different. Living as an Asian family in the United States is completely different from living as an Asian family in China. As our time in Chongqing came to an end, we were all sad to leave our new friends and the city. It was a beautiful city that had so much liveliness and gave us a great start to our trip.

The second city we visited was Xi'an. Xi'an is one of the ancient capital cities of China. In this city, we were tourists. Although we did not have the chance to meet new friends as we did in Chongqing, we did have a chance to experience the nightlife of China. During the days, we traveled around and visited historical sites and museums. We may have only spent five days in Xi'an, but we made the most of every minute. As a group, we visited a minimum of three museums or historical sites a day. While Xi'an seemed like a never-ending cycle of museums, it was very interesting to learn about the history and how this beautiful city came to be. We were very fortunate to have so many knowledgeable tour guides including the Dean of Prospect College, Gwen. With the combined knowledge of Gwen, our tour guides, and our professor, Lanhui, we were able to gather so much information about the ancient capital of Xi'an.

While the city may be old and filled with history and culture, it was very urban and densely populated. During the evenings, after the day excursions to museums, we all would explore nightlife that Xi'an provided. Our hotel was conveniently placed right across from the



Figure 2 Muslim Quarter at Night

Muslim Quarter and the Bell Tower of Xi'an. At the Muslim Quarter, there were so many street vendors that sold various types of goods from foods to little gifts to luggage. It was at the Muslim Quarter where we all learned to barter. Some learned quicker than others; I was among the slower learners. But overall, it was an

interesting experience especially since bartering is not a common part of American culture. We stayed for four nights in Xi'an and spent almost every night at the Muslim Quarter. There was always something new to find and explore. It was so fun to see so many people out and watching the beautiful lights and livelihood the city provided. It was a great experience in Xi'an because we experienced life in China as a tourist and learned many new life skills including how to barter and how to navigate through the busy roads of Xi'an.



Figure 3 Drum Tower of Xi'an

While we had a lot of fun in Xi'an, the fun never stopped when we got to our third destination. The third city that we visited was a smaller rural town called Taigu. It gave off this very homey small town feel that I really found to love. While we were what seemed like in-the-middle-of-nowhere, the campus itself was always filled with students and events. It was

intriguing to see the difference between the two campuses of Prospect college. The campus in Chongqing was more city like and provided a huge variety of experiences. Whereas the campus in Taigu gave off a small-town vibe and everyone was so close knit. In Taigu we had the



Figure 4 Group work with students during Three Kingdoms class

opportunity to take part in various types of classes including learning to play a Chinese musical instrument called the Gu Qing (古琴) to learning about the Romance of the Three Kingdoms. We were very much in a classroom setting most of the days that we spent in Taigu. The best part of being in the classroom was having Chinese students in there with us and learning

alongside us. While we were in a classroom for most of the day, we never missed out on some group time in the activity rooms in our dormitory. There was always a game of pool going between NIU students and the students of Prospect College. We made so many bonds with students not only in the classroom but also outside of class; in the pool room or lighting lanterns for the Dragon Boat Festival. Taigu taught me that you don't need to go out and party or have dinner at some fancy restaurant to get to know someone. Sometimes, you just need a room and a pool table and life-long bonds can be formed. While we were all sad to leave the quaint town of Taigu and all our wonderful friends and roommates, I will cherish all the bonds that I have built with not only the students from NIU but my roommates and classmates from Taigu.

The fourth and final stop that we made on our 25-day journey abroad was to the capital city of Beijing. Beijing was an interesting experience. The city was so large and never ending. We visited many sites during our short stay in Beijing including the Great Wall, The Forbidden City, Temple of Heaven, and the Maozidong mausoleum. Each of these places gave me more and

more insight into what everyday life is like for Chinese nationals. The Great Wall of China may



Figure 5 A section of The Great Wall

be a huge tourist attraction spot but the history behind it is what stands out. The 20 feet tall handmade wall was built in defense from the northern invaders. The amount of work and dedication that was put into the wall to defend this beautiful country is immense. The Forbidden City is where former emperors and their families would live. The city was massive and filled with so many buildings that once served business and personal purposes; now they serve as a museum and tourist attraction for millions of people to see. The Temple of Heaven serves as a place of religion and upon arriving there, I was in awe at how beautiful the building was, the amount of architecture and effort that was put into this temple, is amazing. It's

so interesting to see how the Asian culture looks at life compared to the Western American culture. And the most interesting historical site that we visited had to have been the Maozidong mausoleum. I had never seen anything like that before. There had to have been hundreds of people in line to bring him flowers and visit their late Chairman's mausoleum. The entire trip in Beijing was a beautiful experience that allowed me to gather even more insight to the culture in China and how everything came to be. China is one of the oldest countries in the world and it comes with this immense amount of history that one cannot even start to comprehend. This beautiful country is built on so much history and culture and I am grateful to have been able to spend 25 days to have a taste of China.

At first, 25 days seemed to be a long time to be away from home and my family and friends. I had never been out of the country without my family so this was a nerve-wracking

experience. But as I got to know all my classmates and my professors, I became more and more relaxed and cherished every moment I had with the group and our new experiences. Being in a foreign country taught me to be independent and proactive. It was an adjustment going from an



Figure 6 NIU group photo on Great Wall

English-speaking country to a Chinese speaking country; the amount of Chinese that we read, listened, and spoke everyday was eye opening. As I have said before, learning in a classroom is one thing, but experiencing it in real life, that's another story. I feel that my knowledge of the Chinese language has expanded over the course of the 25 days abroad. Spending time abroad has opened my eyes to a completely different way of life; this has helped me gain so many more experiences that will help me in all my life choices. It was an amazing experience that I was able to gain so much knowledge of my family' culture but also because of this time abroad, I had the opportunity to create so many life long bonds between me and the students in China as well as the students from NIU.



Figure 7 NIU and Prospect College students in Chongqing, Dumpling making