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Student Engagement Fund: Final Reflection

Study Abroad Summer 2019: China

The skills and perspectives I gained from this study abroad are boundless. This experience was truly one of the most life changing, eye opening, and wholesome experiences I have ever had the opportunity to participate in. There were ups and there were downs, and not all of this journey was easy. However, if I were given the chance to go back and do it again there is not a single thing that I would wish to change. I experienced an entirely new culture and gained so much priceless insight of the world outside of my bubble [United States] to the extent that I could not imagine my life without having gone on this study abroad. There were three major areas in which I have benefitted in both a professional and personal manner. Through this journey my perspectives on China, the world, and other people changed significantly; I also gained valuable skills which are necessary to living in another country and even back in the United States; additionally many personal connections were formed between my group members, Chinese students, and faculty- a valuable gift.

This study abroad to China was brief but extensive in terms of the itinerary and content in which we endeavored upon. For the first week we stayed in the most beautiful of the cities that we travelled to, Chongqing, and lived in the dorms with Chinese students. Here the trees were lush and the entire environment itself was full of life. We travelled to historical and cultural sites with the students and faculty to immerse ourselves deep into Chinese culture. We also spent time with wonderful host families to learn about modern Chinese culture, food, and hospitality.

Moreover each night we returned to the dorms and conversed with the most interesting and genuinely kind roommates at Chongqing's Prospect College. Here we spent time with the Chinese students to exchange knowledge on our native languages and cultures. Through the first week our [the group's] days were packed with history and culture in a quantity I had never experienced before. As a history major and one who had never travelled so far away from home, this experience was a truly irreplaceable one. It opened my eyes to a completely different lifestyle and expanded my knowledge about China exponentially.

The second week we travelled to a populated, urban city known as Xi'an. Here we learned about Chinese culture during the nights where we [the group] had free time. Xi'an was a beautiful city with dazzling lights, beautiful buildings, and busy intersections. Walking down these streets was a stark contrast to the vacant roads in my highly-rural hometown. We travelled to the shops around the Muslim Quarter and tried foods that are foreign to Americans, some of which, particularly the Chinese hamburgers, were truly amazing. It was here where we learned how to haggle with street vendors which is a concept most of us had never experienced in the west, where shopping is based on predetermined prices and sales. However, our stay was not all leisure, as it also included a massive amount of historical trips during the day.

Historical trips throughout the day provided us with an intimate knowledge of ancient China, including the magnificent achievements of the past namely: Terracotta warriors, Qin dynasty palaces, Temples, an exciting sightseeing bike ride around Xi'an's wall, and much more. Through this short stay in Xi'an my respect for China grew and my connection with my group members transformed from peers into very close friendships. This part of the study abroad

increased my social skills, communication abilities, historical knowledge, and expanded my comfort zone with trying new things.

Taigu was the third stop on our journey and possibly my favorite destination. This might be a result of it being closest to how I was raised in America. Taigu is a semi-rural city with a heavy influence of familiar lifestyle- namely agriculture and quaint town living. This town was very dry and so as a result the plant life was much more sparse than Chongqing, however it was beautiful nonetheless. Most of our time in Taigu was spent in a more classroom styled education and around campus with a few highly enjoyable excursions to areas around Taigu. We again learned how Chinese students lived day to day and spent a great deal of time mingling with them and exploring the campus. We saw western influences in recreational activities such as 8-ball pool in the activity hall; however we also saw a plethora of entirely foreign activities as well. One in particular was painting traditional Chinese masks during English Corner, a period where Chinese students and our group participated using only English.

Throughout our stay in Taigu our group became very close with one another and long term friendships have been formed, even as this reflection is written [two months later] we are still in close contact with each other. Not only does our group still keep in contact, but several of us still keep in touch with our Chinese friends, which allows us to refine our Chinese language skills. Through this week in Taigu we formed important connections with other people and continued to learn how to live in another country.

The fourth destination was one of China's most urban cities, Beijing. Beijing is utterly massive and highly advanced, the streets are always full of cars and there are hundreds of expensive shops on the streets. Food is shockingly easy to locate as well in Beijing as restaurants

are everywhere, the only challenge is reading a menu in Chinese (however by this point we were comfortable doing this). We explored this expansive city during the nights when we had some free time and during the day we went to amazing locations such as: The Great Wall and the Pearl Market. These two locations were a couple of the most shocking historical part of this trip. The Great Wall is truly the most awe inspiring wonder that exists. It is difficult to walk on and extends farther than one could travel in a week or a month. This achievement is truly something special, not to mention how beautiful the countryside is with miles of rolling mountains filled with lush trees. The Pearl Market is also wondrous as it employs our newfound ability to haggle on a larger scale. A huge shopping building full of goods and services, some of which can be haggled down from several hundred yuan to just 30 yuan (or as our group said in china, “太贵了 , 三十块”). The physical life skills such as haggling, navigation, using squat toilets, communicating with people from another country in their native language, reading Chinese menus, and simply living in China were extremely valuable, but not the only thing we acquired on this journey. Our group also benefited from the sheer amount of socializing we participated in while in China.

I have always struggled with shyness and have always been a generally quiet individual. However after spending a month so far outside of my comfort zone, with so many other people who were all genuinely kind and interested in American culture, I quickly began to break my shell. Moreover, the living conditions were so vastly different than what I have grown accustomed to in America, my comfort zone itself has expanded robustly. I have made more genuine connections with people whom I look up to during this trip than most of my life in America. I truly believe that my ability to confidently communicate and participate in activities I

would have been terrified to before this, is infinitely more capable. Socializing and communication is possibly one of the most valuable skills in today's society and always was my weakest area. However after spending so long being pushed into extremely social situations I no longer fear it, but seek it out on a daily basis.

Through this study abroad my physical skills such as haggling, navigation, using squat toilets, communication with people from another country in their native language, reading Chinese menus, and simply living in China were either reinforced or established for the first time. Moreover social life skills such as communication, forming connections, and engaging in activities in highly public settings are no longer a cause of panic, but instead a source of joy. I feel confident in my ability to research topics further in depth, navigate a foreign land with a semblance of competence, and form connections with other people. I believe strongly that this study abroad has changed my character significantly and prepared me further for not only the academic world, but the adult world. It was genuinely a life changing journey and I am so elated that I had the opportunity to participate in it.