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Every week was a challenge mentally, physically, and emotionally. Living within another country for a full twenty-five days took a toll on the lives of myself and my fellow students, but that did not mean that the Student Engagement Fund did not help me create lasting skills, memories, or friendships.

Week one was by far the easiest of the weeks to live within China. It gave my brain the mental capacity to understand that, yes, I am in another country and the language is different, everything is different, now adapt. One of the easiest mental hurdles to get over was by far the language barrier. Odd to say, but true. I come from a Hispanic background so hearing another language on a constant day to day basis is familiar to me. Hearing Mandarin when I first stepped off the plane was difficult to understand because they spoke so quickly, but with the passing hours it became second nature to translate and adjust in my head.

Also, within week one of living in Chongqing, China, the students were welcoming and hospitable towards us all. This gave us all a sense of commonality and made us all feel like this was also our home away from home. Not only did they teach me even more Mandarin, but they taught me the way of life in their mountain city. Our cultures merged together seamlessly, we taught them our ways of life and they taught us theirs. We learned about their government, their social viewpoints on matters such as gender and schooling systems. We did compare our two worlds, but it was within a healthy, stable environment that allowed us all to be free of judgment and come together and just speak on our own behalves as people with opinions. It was a stimulating experience staying the week with the Chongqing University students. The lasting friendships I made in that city has now moved on over to America where the students that I met

in Chongqing are now coming to Northern Illinois University and I cannot wait to catch up and show them our beautiful campus and our way of life.

The second week in China we stayed in Xi'an, a tourist city with ancient ties. Not only did we get to mingle with the students of another country, but we got to speak to the locals of all the cities we went too. This helped us with our speaking abilities in Mandarin with a flourish of people not strictly just students. One of our main hotspots in Xi'an was the Muslim Quarter. We went there every night after our schedule during the day and mingled with the locals in the market. Here we learned how to bargain for goods because that is the atmosphere and expectation in the Muslim Quarter. Our minds were well equipped by the end of this leg of the trip on how to convert USA money to Chinese RMB. We learned how to be aware of our surroundings in a new city because Xi'an and any city we went too in China was so much more populated than any cities near us. This week in China solidified not only our Mandarin abilities but our ability to adapt to our different surroundings quickly. Not only with the locals, but with each other as well. This week, the students who were also on the trip with me, we all became closer than ever before. We were not just strangers clashed together, but friends who were enjoying another culture, another country together. We became family.

The third week in China we visited our second and last university in Taigu. Taigu was such a phenomenal landscape to behold. I have been in rural areas, but this place was extremely rural, but up to date and remarkably stunning. Chongqing was a mountain city, but Taigu was a dry, flat landscape with mountains surrounding the very city. It was within a valley. The students had everything they needed right on campus; they did not need to go anywhere. This was a perfect way to become closer to our Taigu roommates, there was so much to do we did not have time to want to go out and explore, we were too busy having fun within the dorms. That week

was Dragon Boat Festival in China, a major holiday that many students go home for to visit family and friends. Some students stayed behind to spend the night with us and celebrate their holiday with us. We walked to the bridge right outside the campus, lit some lanterns that we had wrote our wishes for the year on, and sent them off into the night air with our hopes and dreams as we all looked up at the sky. The same sky we all lived under no matter where in the world we were. If one thing was for certain, Taigu made such a lasting impression on my spirit. It was the familiarity of the people around me that made me feel like I never wanted the trip to end. If anything, the Student Engagement Fund not only helped me with my language skills, but with my ability to connect to more people outside of my normal group of everyday friends. I learned to become more open, more welcoming, an all-around better person.

The last week in China was the biggest city of them all, Beijing. Here not only did we learn to navigate one of the biggest cities in China, but we had the most athletic leg of the trip because we went to The Great Wall of China. Beijing, by far, made me tear up at its excellence. The amount of history that was bestowed upon me made my eyes tear up at every site we went to go see. The Great Wall of China, I sat upon the ski lift, frightened, but once that subsided, I looked out amongst the sky and the tops of the trees we were hitting with our feet and breathed in the air. I never wanted to leave China. I was nearly nostalgic for a place I had never been to before. The moment my feet touched The Great Wall of China I grabbed my handkerchief because the amount of history at my feet made my world rock on its heels.

The world was so small to me before going on this massive adventure that I never thought I would be able to go on. Due to the Student Engagement Fund it was beyond possible to become apart of a bigger world. I learned, I laughed, I cried, I saw. I saw a part of the world that made my eyes open to a whole new batch of possibilities for myself. I met so many professors

and students that I am still in contact with today. I met incredible, inspiring people that I want to bring to Northern Illinois University, so that the other students of NIU can experience a little of China as well. China is a memory, a moment, I will never forget.