Culture report

China trip: summer of 2011

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Our trip to China this summer was an unprecedented experience, a country that is very unique in nature; it is a mixture between a modern, contemporary life style and ancient traditional culture and history that is rooted back to almost 4000 years b.c.

We landed in Beijing airport the design and structure of the building is a reflection of modern and highly organized city which is one of the most populated capitals in the world, as we were driven to the hotel which was conveniently located in the heart of the city, minutes away from several tourist attraction sites, the metropolitan area anchored with architectural state of the art sky scrapers seemed overwhelmingly organized, clean and renovated.

Site seeing in China

We visited the temple of heaven, the Forbidden City, Tiananmen Square, temple of harvest in Xing Chong town, Chinwags University, the great walls, the zoo, the water park, the national observatory, the Olympic city, the 798 district, the summer palace, the royal park behind Peking university, the semiconductor institute of science, and several tourist markets.

I’ve always been attracted to the Chinese history and culture, curious to learn and explore about the mysteries of human ancient civilizations, my endeavors were met by complete satisfaction in this trip as I’d like to share some of the historical and cultural experiences with
other future visitors to China by shading the light on some of the monuments that we had the opportunity to stand before in great admiration and excitement.

**The Forbidden City**

Any tour of Beijing would be incomplete without a visit Forbidden City which is the largest ancient palatial structure in the world.

The splendid architecture of the Forbidden City represents the essence and culmination of traditional Chinese architectural accomplishment. It is a real treasure house of Chinese cultural and historical relics, As It is recognized as one of the most important five palaces in the world (the other four are the Palace of Versailles in France, Buckingham Palace in the UK, the White House in the US and the Kremlin in Russia).

The Forbidden City, situated in the very heart of Beijing, was home to 24 emperors of the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) Dynasties. The construction of the grand palace started in the fourth year of Emperor Dongle of the Ming Dynasty (1406), and ended in 1420. In ancient times, the emperor claimed to be the son of Heaven, and therefore Heaven’s supreme power was bestowed upon him. The emperors’ residence on earth was built as a replica of the Purple Palace where God was thought to live in Heaven. Such a divine place was certainly forbidden to ordinary people and that is why the Forbidden City is so named.

The Forbidden City consists of 90 palaces and courtyards; it is surrounded by a 10 meter high wall with four magnificent watchtowers, one at each corner of the city.
We enter the Forbidden City through Tiananmen gate which means the Gate of Heavenly Peace, and we exit from the gate of the divine might. The outer court is made up of three main buildings, the Hall of the supreme harmony (Tahitian) where you can find the emperors' Dragon Throne (Logy) the hall of central harmony (Zhonghedian) and the Hall of preserving harmony (Baohedian).

The inner court is composed of the three main structures at the rear of the Forbidden City, namely the Palace of heavenly peace (Qianqinggong), the palace of union and peace (Jiaotaidian) and the Palace of terrestrial tranquility (Kunninggong). Besides the three main buildings there are the six eastern palaces and six western palaces, where the emperor lived and handled everyday affairs.

**The great walls:**

Quoting the Chinese famous saying “you are not considered a man, unless you walk the great walls” it’s one of the seven wonders of the world where the ancient China built in the mountains to protect its people from the gruesome invasion of the Mongolian army in the northern China today, the initial construction of the wall is over two thousand years old, been renovated several times over the course of the years, the wall stands high and robust with numerous guard shacks and watch tower, that was once the first line of defense and the arena of gruesome battles; the wall expanded through the horizon as it occupied tens of thousands of kilometers, we walked and walked enjoying the crowds of people from all walk of life and the cool breeze from the mountains.
There were plenty of other enjoyable places and sites seeing the time will not allow to discuss all of them, but definitely a great experience and well awarding journey, as I’d like to take this opportunity to thank all the people that made this trip possible, our program director and advisor Dr Jin, our counterpart students from Peking University that took the time to show us around the city and made everything possible to make our stay enjoyable and productive.
Before heading to Beijing, China, I decided to keep an open mind and try not to get culture shocked. I enjoyed my entire stay in Beijing and will never forget it. Staying in Beijing was a very humbling and great experience. What surprised me was the process a high school student must endure to get into college. I also visited many of the famous historical sites and learned of China’s rich and vast history. In Beijing, I gained an appreciation for jade jewelry. I also enjoyed the all the new Chinese foods I ate. I experienced a difficulty communicating in Mandarin. The main reason I was in Beijing was to do a gallium nitride light emitting diode research project with the physics department at Peking University. When meeting students at Peking University, I learned about the process a high school student went through in order to get into a university.

When talking to students at Peking University, they wanted to know how I got into Cal Poly. I told them about how I applied to the universities I wanted to attend and took the SATs. I also told them that in America, our SAT score, grades, and extra curricular activities all played a part into which universities we were accepted into. From there, I was able to choose which university I enrolled in. When I asked the students how they were accepted into Peking University, they told me that all high school students must take a test, and their score determines which university they would attend. They were able to give a list of universities they would like to attend, but their test scores would ultimately determine the university they would attend. This was very shocking to me since this is a very different process than in America. I did not fully understand the magnitude of this test the high school students had to take until I met high school students staying on our floor in the dormitory. Speaking to them, I learned that they wanted to
attend Peking University and were taking a tour of the campus. They mentioned that they were preparing for the exam to determine their college and every night I would see them studying from around 7pm to 1am. I also learned that students are only allowed to take the test once during their last year of high school. This is unlike the SAT, where students are allowed to take it as many times as they like. I was also told that if some students do not get into a school they like, they go back to high school for another year in order to retake the test. Seeing how the high school students studied every night for hours, showed me how much stress is put on them to do well on the test. Both students in America can control which university they are accepted into, except in China, it is determined by one test. Learning about the process students in China made me realize how lucky I was to be able to choose which university I would attend.

I really enjoyed traveling around Beijing. I enjoy going to historical sites such as the Great Wall, Tiananmen Square, the Forbidden City, Summer Palace, and Temple of Heaven. I enjoyed eating many different foods that I have never tried before. When traveling to the historical sites, I was amazed at how beautiful the architecture of the buildings was. I learned that China has put a lot of money into restoring some of the buildings and it shows. I was impressed at how China was able to maintain their historical sites throughout many dynasties. For example the Forbidden City was finished 1420, and after 591 years it still exist. Touring the Forbidden City, I learned about its history during the Ming and Qing dynasties. To me all the architecture seems a like they were ahead of their time. I spent a lot of time taking pictures and admiring the sight of the buildings at all the sites I visited. I enjoyed all the food I ate and never dislike any dish I ate. I ate lamb and frog dishes that were very delicious. I enjoyed eating at several hot pot restaurants where we were able to cook meat and vegetables in broth. On the Peking University campus there were numerous dining halls which provided a variety of foods at very affordable
prices. A whole meal was about 7 RMB which is equivalent to a little over $1 US. The campus provided cheap and delicious food that was a fourth of the price of eating off campus. I liked how all the noodles were made fresh, and boiled in front of you. My favorite dish was the Peking Duck at the original Quanjude restaurant, at Qianmen in Beijing. Experiencing the city of Beijing was great, but the most difficult experience I had was communicating with the people of Beijing.

The toughest challenge for me during my time in Beijing was that I could not speak or read Mandarin. I had learned a few words and phrases but I still had a difficult time communicating with people in Beijing. I felt very awkward and embarrassed because of my lack of knowledge of Mandarin. This was another humbling experience I had because I’ve met foreigners in America who have a difficult time speaking English. Now I was the foreigner who could not speak the home language. I had a hard time pronouncing some words and often people would not understand what I was saying. I now know how foreigners in America feel when they cannot speak English. Luckily many of the students knew how to speak English which made it easier to communicate. I commend the students who learned English and were very nice to me even if I did not speak Mandarin. Most of the students I spoke to enjoyed speaking English to me because it gave them practice for an oral English test they must take before attending school in America. Some of the students I met planned on attending universities in America such as MIT, UCLA, and Harvard. Since these students had to learn English before attending universities in America, I made a promise to myself to learn Mandarin before I travel back to China in the future.

My time in Beijing was better than I could ever imagine. It was humbling experience learning about the process high school students went through in order to get into college. Seeing all the stress and pressure they put on themselves to do well on the test, made me realize how
lucky American students are lucky to be able to choose which university they will attend. I was able to eat new foods that I never tasted and enjoyed all of them. The language barrier I faced was a difficult challenge since I did not learn Mandarin beforehand. Being a part of this research project at Peking University opened my eyes to Chinese culture because I met many people and traveled to many places. Beijing was a wonderful experience, I will never forget.
Chinese Cultural Report

Coming to China I had a very open mind. A Chinese friend of mine spoke of the place somewhat negatively telling me of corruption, and widespread poverty. I knew the government was communist and to be honest I didn't know what that meant besides the fact that Cuba and North Korea also have the same type of government. An aunty of mine was excited that I would be in Beijing and told me that the area went through an economic boom after the Beijing Olympic games. I knew from my own knowledge that China has been stepping into the world stage as an economic leader with its technology sector. So I had two very different perspectives when arriving in China.

The first thing I noticed once landing in China was the humidity and heat. This as a small impact on the culture in the sense that it shapes the type of clothing people wear. I noticed that the clothing in China is usually made of much thinner cloth which allows the body to breathe much better. I came with a suitcase full of jeans and thick t-shirts which I basically never wore. In the US I always wear an undershirt but in China I quickly realized that would not be a good idea. Aside from clothing I noticed that people actually do use the Chinese hand fans. I thought this was an old tradition which was more of an ornament today. The use of the fan was not limited to women, I also saw that men were using them which I found slightly funny because of my own stereotype from movies in which I only saw women with fans.

Another product of the weather I found was the constant use of umbrellas. I had known of this before my arrival but I was still amazed because I had no idea how many people actually use them. I could clearly see that some were only meant for use under the sun because they had frills and holes in them for style which would not have been useful in the rain. Unlike the fans which I found men also using, women were the only sex I found using umbrellas unless a man was holding an umbrella for a woman. I was very intrigued by the umbrellas with their variety in shapes, colors and styles. I noticed
in Peking University that some girls actually matched their umbrellas to their wardrobe and used it as an accessory even when the sky was full of clouds with no sunshine.

At Cal Poly I often ride my bike and the town is somewhat known in the US as a biking town. But Cal Poly can in no way match Beijing in the number of bikers. So many people were biking that everyone had a bell on their bike and I found myself always being honked at and constantly dodging bikes. But the widespread usage of bikes didn't seem to affect the traffic congestion at all. In front of the school during commute hours, cars lined the street for what seems to be miles. My first experience watching bikes, cars, move through an intersection was somewhat frightening because I had never seen them all moving at the same time together. People don't seem to obey traffic signs much at all. Amazingly I never witnessed an accident but was constantly thinking one was about to happen with the extended honking people like to do. In the US if someone holds down on the horn for more than 3 seconds, in my experience its usually followed by tires pealing and a crash.

All of this was fascinating to me but my frustrations started with my first meal. I was excited to try all the new food but my first experience was a difficult one since I had no experience with chopsticks. Everyone in my group seemed to already have experience with them but it was a constant struggle for me. By the time everyone was done with their food, I had only reached the halfway point and become somewhat embarrassed. At that point I was thinking it was going to be a very long six weeks. My embarrassment didn't stop there. On a trip with the Peking University Physics department, I sat next to a physics professor who I had just met as I sat down next to him for lunch at a restaurant. This was about a week into our trip and although I got better at using chopsticks, my skill was still very poor. It was enough that people were looking at me in amusement struggling to grab food but my embarrassment reached a peak when a meat ball slipped from my chopsticks and bounced from the table and landed on the professors pants leaving a stain. From that point the meal became awkward but the professor was very kind and brought food to me, giving me more than I would ask for knowing that I was being shy. He helped me feel comfortable again. By the end of the second week after eating 3
meals a day with chopsticks, I felt very comfortable with chopsticks and was happy that I was forced to learn a new skill.

Communication was another frustration that I knew would not be solved during the trip. Inside Peking University many people spoke English but I only found myself on the campus during mealtimes. Outside the campus, the only English word known to people seemed to be “hello!” from merchants trying to gain my attention. Searching for specific things in supermarkets was difficult but with persistence I usually came upon what I was looking for. It was very helpful having a classmate who spoke some Chinese.

Looking at the people of Peking University I found that I could pick out the same type of groups of people I see at Cal Poly. Some people clearly were athletic, other were really into fashion. Peking University being one of the top Universities in China naturally had a strong focus on studies and that was clear. The biggest sport in china I believe is Ping Pong but I found people playing soccer tennis and basketball also. I often had conversations with people at the gym and was amazed that their knowledge of the NBA rivaled my own. They were up to date with the current NBA lockout situation and I often see NBA jerseys around Beijing which leads me to believe the NBA is a much followed sport here in China.

All in all, I found that my experience here in China was mostly how I expected it to be. Beijing being the capital city is very industrialized and was in much was similar to the US. The differences where subtle for instance the use of chopsticks. There were no huge differences that created a great obstacle or inconvenience to be besides the language barrier. I would recommend any future students to take at least an introductory Chinese language class so that at least one could get their point across when in need of some help from a local. This has been a very pleasant experience for me. I plan to take a Chinese language class in the future and possibly return on my own.
Chinese Culture Report

Wow what can I say about this trip? China is an incredibly different kind of world and a totally different type of lifestyle compared to the United States. It seems like it is currently going through a technological revolution so there may be many great things coming for this country. When we first arrived at the airport the first thing I noticed was the excellent transportation system here. Public transportation is very convenient here. For about 30 cents (US dollar) you can travel anywhere within the city on the subway, and about 5 cents for the bus. Another great thing about public transportation here is that you don’t have to wait long for the bus or train to get to the station. At most it takes about 3 minutes, so it is less time waiting and more time to have fun!

Just a little background on myself, I am Chinese and I have been to China many times before, but never have I been to Beijing or northern China. My family is from the south, more specifically, Hong Kong so it is quite different compared to Beijing. Hong Kong went through many modern changes because it used to be colonized by Great Britain. So, compared to the rest of China, it is quite different. When I got here it was quite a experience compared to going to Hong Kong. For one, my mandarin was not that great so at first it was a little difficult to communicate with a lot of people, but after a couple of weeks I was able to start very basic conversations here. For the most part, a lot of people here know a little English so it is easy to get around here. One tip I can give you all is to be sure to get out of your comfort zone. Explore this city and do not be discouraged if you cannot speak Chinese. My parents once told me that the best way to learn a new language is self-emersion. Learning the language can open new doors to explore more of the culture here. For example, you can ask a waitress to pick the food that he/she likes and you can discover many of the interesting kind of foods here. Also, if you want to bargain with someone it is much easier in Chinese because they will not rip you off as much.

The food here is very cheap. The PKU campus has many excellent cafeterias to choose from, and a full meal can go for about $1 (US dollar). Outside of campus is a little more expensive, but compared to the US, it is still much cheaper. Some food that I highly recommend ordering here is:

- Peking Duck
- Szechuan style food
- Hotpot
- Mcdonalds
- Noodle Soup
- Pancakes (bing)

You may notice that I included Mcdonalds here. This is because it is quite different compared to the US. They have spicy fried chicken which is a great snack if you are on the run. Most of the food that I put in the table can be found mostly anywhere you go. There are restaurants everywhere you walk. I also highly recommend going to Wang Fu Jing Street at night time. It is a very popular tourist attraction because it is a street bbq area. There are too many different types of food to note here, but the most interesting I found was fried cicadas. It might seem weird at first, but it tastes like fried potato chips. If you enjoy going out at nights for drinks and going clubbing there is a district for that here. The best part is that it is incredibly close to the university, and there are many international students there. This district is called Wu Dao Ko. There are about 3 clubs and a couple bars, and the drinks are very cheap.

Since Beijing is the capital of China, there are many historical and ancients areas to walk around here. Some popular sights to see include: the Great Wall, Forbidden City, Tiananmen Square, the Temple of Heaven, and Summer Palace. Most of these places were made over half-millennia ago, and I thought
it was amazing because after so many years of war and struggle the people of China still reconstructed most of these sites. After walking through most of them, I couldn’t possibly imagine what it would have been like to remodel it all. For example, a section of the great wall was remodeled during the Qing Dynasty. It was rather difficult hiking the Great wall because it is built on a very steep mountain. I can’t have imagined what it would have been like building that wall. Another thing I kept thinking about while seeing these sites was how the emperors and empresses used to live like because after so many years, they still look quite spectacular. If you were to come to China for Professor Jin’s and Professor Yu’s project I highly recommend bringing a pair of running shoes and insect repellent.

One of the more interesting things that I have experienced in Beijing is the ability to bargain. You can bargain for pretty much anything that does not have a set price tag already. On our third week, we went to the Pearl Market which was an area where they had “fake” products. For the most part, these products were made by the real company only except that they have a couple flaws to them. If they notice that you are American they will up their general set price, so be sure to always go down 75% lower than their first offer. If they do not accept the offer then walk away and they come back to you saying that they will take your offer. This will work about 75% of the time, but be sure to be firm with your price. It might also help to be a little nice to them.

All in all going to China was a very rewarding experience, and it made me appreciate life in America a lot more. It was such an eye-opener to see how someone from a different country lives, and it makes me appreciate the life that I have in the states. Most people here are very hardworking whether it be working just to find money or even going to school. There have been countless times when I have walked around during the evening and I notice that there are a lot of people dancing and having fun outside. When in America do we ever do these things? I thought that at that moment that even though their work may seem difficult at times, people seem to enjoy each others company, spending time outside, and more importantly, enjoy a simple life.
Two years ago from today I was finishing up what had been a great summer in China by spending my last week in Beijing. Prior to that summer, I had little interest in visiting China. I always thought the food was great, and my mom had even been on a two week tour, but for some reason the highest populated country in the world didn’t interest me. Most of my ideas and thoughts of the people, food, and language changed after my six week stay in a small town called Huangdao. Influenced by a wonderful summer abroad, I decided to enroll in a beginner level Mandarin class which continued to shape my view of Chinese culture. Finally, this last summer spent in Beijing has reinforced many ideas and introduced new concepts as well. I truly believe that my knowledge of China has just begun to scratch the surface of a country rich in diversity of language, food type, religion, and culture.

In the fall of 2008, a friend told me about an opportunity to study abroad in China. When he first mentioned the idea, I thought to myself “why would I want to do that?” A few weeks passed by, and the idea began to grow. What was China like? I didn’t really know much about the country or its people other than the fact that over 1 billion people populated the area. When I went home for winter break that year, I discussed it with my parents and decided to spend my summer abroad in a small town called Huangdao. That summer turned out to be one of the greatest experiences of my life. For six weeks I studied beginner level Mandarin at a University in a more rural area of China. The language was so different from anything I had ever learned, and I loved it. My most memorable experiences, however, came from meeting Chinese students. Often time we
would eat breakfast, lunch, or dinner together and discuss the differences between our cultures. Even with the language barrier, we often found creative ways to communicate. Sometimes we even drew on paper to illustrate what we meant. My second favorite thing about China was the cheap and wonderful food. To my surprise Chinese food in China turned out to be different than most Chinese food I had eaten in America. My favorite dish became 鱼香茄子 (Yú xiāng qiézi), a sweet tasting eggplant dish unlike anything I had ever eaten. I didn’t even know that I liked eggplant. Soon, the summer was over and it was time to return home, where I was able to tell friends and family about adventures and experiences. There was so much to describe. Living in Huangdao was a great experience; it allowed me to see the slower small town feel of China, as well as the big city lifestyle of Qingdao (its neighboring city).

Just before school started, a good friend of mine who had also been in China that summer, told me that Cal Poly offered a beginner level Mandarin class. I was so excited to continue learning the language. Without a doubt in my mind, I immediately enrolled in the class. For the next year and a half, I continued taking Mandarin classes where I continued to learn to speak, read, and write Chinese. Along with learning the language came lessons in culture. Each unit from our text book taught us a different cultural lesson about China. We learned about transportation in China, minority groups, ordering food, giving gifts, and even how to receive complements. Soon my experiences in China began to make more sense. For example, I had a better understanding of why Chinese students would always try to pay for my lunch or dinner. After my first year of language courses, I discovered that my professor was also teaching class on Chinese culture and history and that it fulfilled one of my requirements. Taking that class gave me a broad overview of
the country’s ancient history. In two and a half months I saw China move through its
dynastic period through its revolutionary stage and transform into the fast growing
country it is today. I knew there was still so much more to learn. That same year, a friend
told me that a professor was taking a group of students to China to do research. I
immediately spoke with this professor and discovered she had room to take me along.

I am now in Beijing, finishing my fifth week of research on Gallium Nitride
LEDs. On my previous trip to China, we spent about five days in Beijing. Since most of
us were exhausted from the rest of the summer, we didn’t spend too much time seeing the
sights of the city besides Tiananmen and the Great Wall. Over the last five weeks, I have
discovered how large Beijing is, both in area and population. When we are not working
on our research projects, our time has been spent touring other campuses, research
facilities, and historical sites: Tiananmen Square, the Summer Palace, and the Great Wall
to name a few. The size of the city truly amazes me. Often times we take a subway rides,
which by the way are cheap and convenient, step outside the station where we are again
surrounded by tall buildings. It seems that no matter how far we travel, we continue to
see tall building after tall building. At times the great city can be overwhelming. Growing
up in Fresno, and going to college in San Luis Obispo, an even smaller town, has made
me appreciate the quiet simple life.

Although Beijing often seems fast paced and crowded, it is possible to find places
of solitude and simplicity. For example, every Thursday night the women from a small
community not far from our hotel go outside and dance to tradition Chinese music. It has
become one of my favorite things to watch the old women teach each other how to dance.
While the women dance, many of the old men play badminton, cards, or just sit down and
chat. I don’t know everything that goes on within the small community, but from an outsider’s perspective it seems that they have something Americans don’t have. In American neighborhoods, most families stay within their own home. They play games at home, watch T.V. at home, and eat at home. From what I have observed, I think I would prefer the Chinese lifestyle in which communities share a common place to eat, play, and dance together. The more people interact together, the more they begin to understand each other and benefit from positive relationships. My second favorite place to escape the hustle and bustle was 圆明园(Yuánmíngyuán) also known as the old summer palace. Although not much remains of the old summer palace, hence its name, it is a large peaceful park and a good place to escape the crowded lifestyle. I personally enjoyed walking around the big lakes and finding a nice spot to sit and relax.

Overall, my trips to China and my struggle to learn the language have all been positive experiences. Unlike the other fours students that came on this trip, I will spend an extra two weeks to do some traveling. I plan to return to the school where I was introduced to the Chinese language and culture. I can’t wait to see the place that holds so many good memories. When I return to San Luis Obispo, I sadly won’t be able to continue taking Mandarin courses because our school does not offer any more than I have taken. I do hope to continue studying the language on my own; I know this will be a difficult task, but I have come too far now to turn back. Spending this much time learning about a culture and language other than my own has also encouraged me to begin learning the Armenian language, the language of my family. Although I know many words and phrases, I am far from being able to communicate with many of my own family members. Seeing how far I have come in learning Mandarin has been inspiring. I
am excited to see how I will use the experiences and skills I have gained in my future career and every day life.