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Summer 2013 Cultural Report

My first experience in China was a great experience for me on all fronts; educational, cultural, experiential, and even spiritual. My second visit to China a year later has been same, same but different. I’ve experienced a lot of the same as the previous year but I’ve also had many new and different experiences.

One difference from last year is that this year I can speak a little bit of Chinese…a miniscule amount of Chinese in the grand scheme of the Chinese language. Charades were still very useful as were picture menus at restaurants. Just pointing at an item still worked too. Nonetheless it is more than I knew last year and it has been extremely helpful. It was fun putting my new language skills to the test, and reinforcing what I learned. I took every opportunity to converse in Chinese and try to learn more. At least my effort was appreciated. Sometimes I just knowing a few words, allows me to deduce the rest of the sentence from the context of the situation. This has also helped me to learn more Chinese. I would like to one day be a fluent Chinese speaker. I think it would increase professional opportunities for me.

Chinese people are still very curious about foreigners, Westerners in particular. (This hasn’t changed from last year.) They like to muse at you or take your picture sneakily from a distance. This didn’t bother me so much this time around. I hardly even noticed it. I did find it difficult to ignore the proximity of everyone around me. Beijing has a lot of people living in it! It can get extremely crowded on a bus or subway, and you just have to try to deal with it. It’s the way of life in Beijing, there’s always a crowd.

Life in China remains simple. China continues to develop and evolve with their growing economy. Chinese are extremely hard working people. At any hour of the day, some Chinese person somewhere is working. Chinese men work under the moonlight to repair existing infrastructure and to bring up new infrastructure.

The nightlife in Beijing is awesome. I did visit various nightclubs and bars in Beijing. They are filled with locals and foreigners alike and everyone comingling and interacting with each other can be seen. It is interesting that Chinese peoples curiosity about foreigners is most evident in this type of setting. They often invite foreigners whether male or female over to their VIP table or buy them drinks so that they can have a conversation with them. Additionally, I think that nightclubs and bars cater and promote to foreigners to give their venues an heir of exclusivity and elite-ness which probably attracts more people…both foreign and Chinese.

A new and interesting experience this year was my acquaintance the Chinese medical system. I had a stubborn cough for two weeks and was not getting any better. Professor Jin accompanied me to the hospital on the campus of Tsinghua University as my translator. The whole process was very quick and painless. Except for the finger prick required for a blood specimen. It is quite different than going to urgent care in the United States. I didn’t have to fill out any long questionnaires or wait in line for over an hour.
before being seen by the doctor. Comparing the price of that doctor’s visit with what it would have cost me in the U.S. it was practically free. Which is great because I don’t even have medical insurance back in the U.S.

Aside from being diagnosed with bronchitis, I was also baptized that day at the hospital. The receptionist was unable to enter my English name into the computer so Professor Jin told her to make one up. With a quickness the receptionist gave me a proper Chinese name and entered it into the computer. For the rest of the day my name was Liu Hong and for the rest of my life I have a chest X-ray with my Chinese name on it.

Professor Jin was telling us about the National Exams and how the system has been set up to appear fair. She provided her opinion that the system is still unfair but appears to be fair such that when those at a disadvantage fail they blame themselves and not the system. Otherwise there would be upheaval or uprising from the disadvantaged communities.

I think this situation is not unique to China the same concept I think is found in many countries throughout the world, including the United States. One only has to pay attention and delve deep enough to find that people are being treated unfairly and that there are many systems set in place to prevent people from revolting against the unfairness.

I made a lot of acquaintances last summer, and I was very pleased to see them again. It pleased me to learn that our previous Chinese host from Peking University Fu Xin Xin had graduated and moved on. I am happy for him but a bit disappointed that we didn’t get to see him again. Luckily the two Jiang’s were still there whom we also met the previous year and just as before they were extremely cordial and helpful. I am grateful that they took the time to give us a tour of their research facilities and the Great Wall.

I was so happy to see one of the street vendors from whose cart we ate from almost on a daily basis. She had a small child, a toddler, and she has grown a lot since. The woman remembered us from the previous year and we smile and wave at each other as if we’ve been life long friends. Some of the international students and ex-pats that I met last year were still in China and it was so much fun to be able to converse with them in person, as opposed to chatting on Facebook. I’ve become a regular customer at Laker’sPizza and I’m going to miss seeing everyone that works there. I’m especially going to miss Jiu-jiu the restaurant’s mascot who I’d often run into on the street.

I also met a lot of people this year, which I hope to keep in touch with. Many of them are Chinese. I have a collection of business cards I’ve collected while here. Everyone seems to have a business card, even people who don’t have a business. I guess it makes it easier to exchange information when phone numbers are 10 digits long.

By far, the people I met and the people that are on this trip with me are what have made my time in China such a wonderful experience. This strengthens my belief that relationships and one’s ability to relate to others in whatever context will take you a long way in life and are what is most important.
Before departing to China for the second time, I felt a mix of emotions. For one, the excitement took longer to hit me compared to the first time. In other words, I already knew what to expect. However at the same time, I knew that it was going to be a different experience. I was also traveling with a different group of people, including two more girls, which made me more excited. Adding to that, I had a new task this year: to present at the 13th IEEE International Conference on Nanotechnology. I have never presented in such an important and professional conference. To this point, my nervousness and excitement continues to grow, but above all, I feel prepared (conference takes place August 6th – August 8th).

During the past two school years, I took two quarters of beginning Chinese Mandarin, where I got to learn the beginning language and more of the Chinese culture. This added to my appreciation to the Chinese language and culture, and even more knowing that I had already been there, and that I was retuning there as well.

Overall, I enjoyed this trip a lot, not to mention that it was a different experience than last year. When I arrived to China, I saw many changes, particularly in the buildings and all the new different stores and restaurant that were built. It was pretty astonishing to see how many changes could take place within a year. At the same time, some things did not change one bit, including traditional food carts and famous touristic places.

Having taken some Mandarin courses allowed me to both understand more of what someone was saying and be able to communicate more of what I wanted to say. Through this, I got to learn more of the way they speak and the more common the phrases that they use. When someone could understand what I was saying or asking, their face would light up in a good way, as to show appreciation of trying to learn the language.

The food was delicious; however there were times when we did not know what it was that we were eating, which indeed ruined our appetite. In general, the food is different: a different culture brings in different dishes. For the most part, I enjoyed them all, in particular the
dumplings and all the different dishes that include cucumber. I also learned that the Chinese are more willing to eat both untraditional parts of an animal, and animals that we are not accustomed to eating. Not to forget scorpion and snake, which I myself tried this year! In general, food was cheap. It would range, as some would cost less than a $1 per meal, and others would go up to $5. Even so, it was relatively cheaper than back home in the United States.

Knowing my way around through places allowed me to take advantage of my surroundings. This caused a more home-like feeling, returning to a place I already knew. I never expected this to have happened, since like I mentioned in my 2012 Cultural Report, I never saw myself ever visiting China, in my life!

Even though I visited places I had already been to, like the Great Wall of China, it was still an unforgettable experience. These are moments that only occur a few times, and I cherish every one of them. I also visited places that I didn’t visit last year, like the Beijing Zoo and the National Olympic Stadium. To me, visiting the National Olympic Stadium was breath taking and inspiring. It was definitely on my top 5 must sees here in China, since I am a big fan of sports and the Olympics.

Inviting someone from back home was also something special this year. It made me see the point of view and the reactions of someone other than me, and it made me appreciate all the knowledge and experiences that I have gained while in China, as I was able to share that with them.

The culture here in China is a unique and astonishing culture. I can say that the Chinese are very superstitious. Through my stay, I have been able to learn about certain traditional customs, like wearing a red belt around your waist on your year, or what certain jade pendants mean. Even I have adapted some, as I also consider myself superstitious: next year is the year of the horse, my year, and I am bringing back a red belt with me to wear as much as I can next year. This, according to the Chinese, will bring me more luck. Not only that, but the Chinese are very humble. When you tell them a compliment, instead of agreeing to it, they disagree to it. Also, when you offer them something, they consistently say no, until you have asked enough times, they accept it.
To conclude, compared to last year, I am even surer that I want to return to China. I want to travel here with loved ones from back home and show them the knowledge that I have gained through my stay here in China during both years. Not only that, but have them feel what I felt. As our professor mentioned, when you are at important landmarks or places, they bring in a set of feelings you will not feel anywhere else in the world. I can definitely second that. I also still have a high determination to continue taking Mandarin courses, hoping that one day I will be able to have a full conversation with a native, and not be shy to speak.
A mix of the past and present, Beijing sprawls across the landscape farther than the eye can see on most days. Driving from the airport to the dorms, the city was nearly invisible, just random blocks of apartment buildings rising 8 to 14 stories out of the smog. Upon arriving at our ‘hotel’ and reaching our rooms, I found that we were actually staying in the nice dorms for foreign students at PKU…and there was no towel, TP, or soap waiting for us. The dorms themselves seemed to be an odd mixture of the US and Mexico. The building, elevators, and rooms were all nice and up to US standards, but the tap water was undrinkable until boiled. The bathroom used extensive tiling but was not grouted and sealed properly. Because the drains did not have p-traps, we experienced wafting sewer gas and invading mosquitoes for our first few days here. After my roommate Travis and I covered the drains, the sewer gas and mosquito problem faded out and allowed us to enjoy our apartment much better.

On the good side, Beijing has many beautiful palaces, temples, museums, and parks to visit and the cuisine ranges from Chinese (regular, weird, and traditional) to American. I enjoyed spending most of my vacation hours exploring the city and its history and the subway makes this very easy. The subway lines are easy to navigate (clearly labeled with English subtitles), clean, cheap (~35 cents), and arrive every few minutes at the station.

My favorite location in China was the Biyun imperial temple on the side of a mountain west of Beijing. The temple architecture was beautiful and the old trees provided nice shade. The breeze coming through the grounds was remarkably un-smoggy that day and the general atmosphere of the place was quiet, peaceful and un-crowded. I believe that much of its appeal to me was its complete refuge from the city, but whatever the underlying reasons were I thoroughly enjoyed our visit there.

The thousand odors of Beijing I will not miss. While there are good smells there, the ones that I notice most often when walking down the street are: potent, rotting sewer gas wafting from the street drains and sewer holes, a nose stinging chemical that aerosolizes in many parts of town, and the overall smell of the Beijing smog.
Purchasing things here is an odd experience. There are normal stores that have price tags of course, but many places have no set prices. The game is bartering; the clerks goal is scraping as much money from you as possible. The electronics mall might qualify as a third kind of beast, there the items have price tags and the electronics stores repeat themselves after ever 100 feet. But this place is also frustrating because every little store has three to five people waiting to pounce on you and pull you into their shop (perhaps being tall and distinctly non-Chinese didn’t help). The idea that helped me survive shopping in these places was: do I really want or need it for myself or as a gift and is it significantly cheaper than buying it back in the US. Probably by this standard I paid more than a Chinese person would have, however, this allowed me to go out shopping and actually get stuff there.

Crossing the street here is a different experience. When the walk signal is lit at an intersection the odds are better that usual that you will make it across safely, but no matter the signal given by the crosswalk indicator crossing the street inevitably becomes a game of chicken between you and turning cars. The more people that cross with you, the better your odds are. However, most cars just honk and continue their turn through the crosswalk and the people. Sometimes the oncoming car or bus won’t even slow down. The driver will just lay on the horn to tell the pedestrian to move (or else!).

The sheer mass of people, buildings, and cars in this city are astounding. The sidewalks are not just for people to walk on here in Beijing. They are also commandeered to serve as car parking for the over abundance of cars, shop fronts for street vendors operating out of suitcases or bicycle carts, moped routes during grid lock, and begging venues. Visiting the Great Wall was a great experience, but the Badaling section of the wall that we visited was jam packed with people the entire time. Looking around was like seeing an ocean of umbrellas. Our group took the slide (single person sleds on a track) up and down the first section of the wall. While going down this was fun, waiting in line for an hour under the hot sun made me wish that we would just walk up the hill using our own feet. The snaking path of the line through the steel rails was very narrow and its position on a slope made caused me to constantly be hit by people’s umbrellas as we walked back and forth past the same people. Once we got up onto the wall itself we had a great and un-smoggy view of the mountains and the wall itself snaking up and down the mountain ridges. Gabby joined me in hiking to the highest point of the wall in our section of mountains. The view from the top was great, but getting up there took
a while and a lot of dodging through crowds (we had limited time before we needed to go back and meet up with the group). On the way back I scaled the Great Wall to dodge a long line of people waiting to use a narrow stair well. It was remarkably easy since in some places, the builders just continued the wall right over boulders. These boulders then made it much easier to climb the wall.

I have enjoyed my time here in China and enjoyed learning about the culture and history of this large and ancient country and capitol. While I have accomplished quite a bit of research during my stay here in China, the exploring and adventure of living in another country means far more to my trip that the work alone could possibly mean. I valued our visits with the professors and Ph.D. students and enjoyed asking them questions about their work during our meetings together. I will always have so much more to learn, but I appreciate the chance to learn about LEDs, people, culture, and China that I have had here in Beijing in the summer of the snake.
China Cultural Report

During the months approaching the departure date to China, I had specific images in my mind of what Beijing would be like. I thought that every building would look like those depicted in the movies, it would be green everywhere, I would watch the fog roll up over the mountains and everyone would be dressed in silk robes and wooden shoes. Okay, maybe I’m exaggerating a little bit but I thought I would still witness some of it. Arriving into Beijing I was a little shocked on how the city actually looked. First off, I know I was told that the city air was polluted but I didn’t realize the severity of it until I saw it with my own eyes. It had just been raining the day before and continued a little into our arrival day but I still didn’t see blue sky for at least almost a week. The air looked brown compared to what I was used to back in San Diego and San Luis Obispo.

On the drive to where we would be living for the next 5 weeks, I realized I was in for something different from what I imagined. The multiple-lane freeway was full of cars and vans that took the meaning of the lane dividers with a grain of salt and there was no hesitation in the use of a horn. I was happy to see that one of my first depictions of this foreign land had been true. It was green everywhere. As we went further and further into the city all I saw were tall buildings with air conditioners below every window and clothes hanging out to dry. But not only were these buildings tall, there were so many of them. I was informed before I got on the plane that Chinese living quarters were small and close together, and I was witnessing it with my own eyes. It made me wonder how many people actually lived in this city, which will be answered later.

Our first stop, after stepping off the 747, was what we were going to call home for the next 5 weeks. Walking down the hallway to my dorm room I could smell so many different scents, some I knew and some I didn’t. I have travelled to a few other countries and I distinctly recognized the moth ball smell of which I had grown accustomed to from my father’s home town Lima, Peru. The other smells I could not decipher and I didn’t find them very pleasant. They were even more potent when I opened the door to my room. Other than getting used to the smell, the room seemed rather comfortable until I flopped down on what I thought was going to be a soft bed. I thought to myself how it was going to be interesting getting used to the new city, and I hadn’t even entered into the majority of it.

As the weeks came and went I was able to explore more and more of the foreign city. Some of the first things I noticed were there were a lot of people, women holding umbrellas, bicycles, mopeds and cars. It was difficult to get used to sharing the sidewalk with so many
other pedestrians that wouldn’t necessarily move out of the way for you. They weren’t afraid to run into you either if you didn’t move. Crossing the street was an obstacle in itself. Just because the sign showed a green walking man did not mean the pedestrian had the right of way. Cars would push their way through a crowd of people and unless you challenged them they took the right of way. There were plenty of times where I was almost run over by a car, moped and even bus. With crossing the street you would understand that being hit is a possibility but they weren’t afraid to drive on the sidewalk either. One thing that I was never able to get used to was the constant honking, which drivers would use as a method to let people know that they are simply approaching and if you don’t cross the street faster that they would hit you.

The city was more run down than what I was used too. Everything had dirt on it and there was trash everywhere. You couldn’t really pinpoint what the smell was that entered your nose. It could have been from the baby you saw using the side of the street as its own personal bathroom but you couldn’t always be sure. Despite the city’s rough exterior, it had this old world charm that still made it appealing. You could sense that if the buildings could talk they had plenty of great stories to tell. You could sit somewhere and watch the locals go about their daily business in this city that they call home, and that hit a soft spot in my heart. I enjoyed watching the elderly do their daily exercises the various community outdoor gyms. You could even catch an elderly person riding a bike down the street that looks like they could have owned it their entire life.

During my stay in Beijing I was able to explore some of the popular landmarks that the city is known for. These consisted of the Great Wall, Beijing Zoo, Tiananmen Square, the National Museum, the Forbidden City, the Silk Market and various other less popular spots. The trip isn’t over and I still plan on visiting a couple other sites including the Summer Palace and the Temple of Heaven. It was cool to go to the older sites and see what has been in place for thousands of years. In America, things are only a couple hundred years old so it was awesome to see that a culture that had gone on so many years ago. One of my favorites was the Great Wall. Not only did it look out over so much green, but it represented so much man labor to protect their homeland from so many years ago. It puts your life into perspective if you really think about it.

One place that I would like to add in is the Biyun Temple which was by far my favorite place that we visited. It was a nice escape from the city because it was further out in the suburbs, last stop on the 331 bus. The air was clean, there was so much green everywhere and I got to see the architecture that I was expecting when I initially got here. It was so peaceful out there I could have sat in one of its side gardens for hours. We were able to climb to the top of the temple and look out over all of Beijing. It was such a rewarding experience.

One last major thing that I noticed during my outings was the pushiness of all the local people. Whether it was them just walking around, trying to sell you something or asking for money. I’ve been pushed on numerous accounts by people just trying to get through a crowd or
on the subway. They don’t even think to apologize because they consider that their everyday life. Never in my life had I ever been yelled at so much or had my arm grabbed to go into a store to buy whatever the salesperson was selling. I’ve also never been hit by a beggar and then asked by them to give them money. If I had to describe the local people here in one world it would be “fierce”. They know what they need to do to get by and they will do what they will do what it takes to get it done. They are a very strong willed people.

But just today, Professor Jin took us to see the guy whom she buys all of her jade through on Tsingshua University’s campus. I will never forget this experience because the man was so nice. He was very patient in showing us all the different pieces even though there was an extreme language barrier. With the pieces that we ended up buying he ended up adding in accent beads to the necklaces free of charge, giving them that extra beauty and uniqueness. He also ended up giving one of us medicine to take home because she was sick and bought us refreshments before we left to take with us. His kind gestures proved to me that there are still those generous soles out there.

It took some getting used to and there are still things that will take some time but this city had become home. I found my regular hangout spots where the employees began to know us. No matter where we went, the people were always kind and wanted to help out the best they could. It had been a struggle with not knowing a lick of Mandarin before I came here but I got by and by the end of the conversation I got what I needed. I was laughed at a few times because I was the “foreigner” but I know it was at the situation. They were always patient with me and I will always be grateful for their gratitude. This trip has been a very memorable and self-learning experience. I will never forget and will always cherish it.
Before heading to China I was filled with so many different emotions. I was really nervous about how different the culture would be but yet so excited to see how I would adapt to the lifestyle. I had never really traveled anywhere further south than Mexico and east of Kansas, so I knew this was definitely going to be an experience. All my family and friends were really exciting for the opportunity I was given and just told me to seize the next 5 weeks and keep an open mind…to everything.

Landing in Beijing was the start of it all. Sitting on the plane, looking out the window as we just landed I was already so confused. Are those clouds or smog? And indeed it was smog. Yes, I was warned about the air quality here but had no idea of how bad it actually was. But taking that first step off the plane was the definite, “You are NOT in California anymore”. As soon as you walk out you can feel the hot, humid air. It reminded me of when I went to Cancun, Mexico. The same heat, the same humidity, only this time with an extra layer of smog with no magnificent view of an ocean. After going through customs, this is where the real confusion began. My first interaction with someone who only spoke Mandarin. Before coming to China, I knew I should have tried to learn some of the language, at least the basics. Now I was definitely regretting it. I was trying to buy a water bottle and the lady behind the register just gave me a blank stare. Luckily there was a display on the other side of the counter of the drinks they had. So, I just pointed to the water and gave her an amount of money I thought would be enough. I had no idea what she was saying.

Throughout my time here I picked up on some words and learned a little from the students who came on this trip last year and took a couple Mandarin classes. Even with these students who had taken two quarters of Mandarin there was still when trying to communicate with one of the locals. This became extra frustrating when ordering food at a restaurant. Fortunately, there are many pictures and English subtitles on most of the menus so when ordering we just pointed at the pictures. Knowing Mandarin before I came would have helped me greatly. I probably could have tried more food and actually know what everyone was saying to me.

In China, the city is modernized with big and tall buildings you see in the states. Some of the buildings are actually much nicer in their design schemes than the states’. However, most of the city area we were constantly around was kind of dirty. It reminds me of Mexico. You have these big tall buildings, but everything around it seems run down, the streets, apartments and little shops. It was rare walking into a shop or restaurant that felt as clean as in the states. And about the streets, beware of your surroundings when walking in China. You are more likely to walk into baby poop than dog poop. Yes, baby poop. Little babies and sometimes toddlers use the sidewalk freely as their toilet. It’s normal here but definitely something I did not get used to. Luckily I only experienced the horror three times.
The most fun I had in China was site seeing. There are so many attractions to see beautiful gardens and palaces. My favorite attractions were Tiananmen Square, The National Museum, The Great Wall, The Olympic Stadium and Biyun Temple. I still have not made it to the Forbidden City, Summer Palace or Temple of Heaven but they are definitely on my list of must see places. Biyun Temple was by far one of my favorite places I’ve been to so far. It’s just filled with these beautiful gardens, waterfalls and pond and you definitely get awestruck by the old Chinese architecture. They keep up these places that are hundreds of years old and it just shows you how much the people of China appreciate their history and culture. Old Chinese architecture is by far the most beautiful I’ve ever seen.

The food here was surprisingly good. I’ve really enjoyed the dumplings and noodles here. But, I’ve also been able to try some things that are just not typical in the states. We went to this snack market that was just a whole street filled with booths of different foods. I tried scorpion, squid tentacles, snake, and sheep penis for the first time. It was quite an experience. I’d have to say the best thing was the tentacles and the worst was the sheep penis. The scorpion was surprisingly bad as I thought it was going to be. At first it’s a struggle to get the thing in your mouth. They are fried with a little bit of salt on them, but I was just thinking about it crawling in my mouth and it freaked me out. Once you chew it, it’s kind of like eating burnt popcorn. I think the one with the worst texture was the snake. It was a lot more gooey than I had expected, but it wasn’t bad tasting.

I also really enjoyed the nightlife here in Beijing. There is a district called Wudaokou which is walking distance from our dorms. They do not card at bars here which I thought would be chaos. However, I did not see under-age drinking while I was here. The drinks at the bars are also relatively inexpensive, as is everything in China compared to America.

After speaking with a couple local students, I realized how difficult the education system is here and how tough it is to acquire a job once you graduate. The system here is lot harder. As a student in China you are constantly competing with other class mates. At the end of their high school career, each and every student takes one test. This one test is the one and only determination factor on whether or not they will be getting in a college in China. And really it is their only opportunity to have a better lifestyle. There aren’t very many middle class Chinese citizens. There is a huge gap between the wealthy and the poor. Being under such stress must definitely take a toll on students.

Spending these 5 weeks in China and trying to adapt to their lifestyle has really made me appreciate the country I live in. After learning about the education system and how bad the economy is here, you really do see what other foreigner say about America. In the United States there are many opportunities to make a better living for yourself and your family. I defiantly won’t take that for granted.

China was definitely an eye opening experience. I didn’t just get out of this a research project on GaN LEDs. I got the chance to be able to experience the humble lifestyle of China and enjoy the culture it offers to this world. These 5 weeks I can say have changed my perspective on life. You see how these less fortunate people live day by day and experience a little bit of it yourself and it just make you appreciate all that you have. I am truly grateful.
blessed that I was given this opportunity. I believe it has definitely changed my life and my perspective on life for the better.
Cultural Report

Before coming to China I had only travelled to Mexico twice for about a week each visit, so my experience with different cultures was slim thus far. I knew China was going to be a completely different lifestyle to what I was used to in the States, but I was excited to experience this new culture. I knew for me to enjoy this experience, I would have to keep an open mind and be ready to try new things. This included eating food I’m not used to or even seen before, learning languages that I rarely heard or knew about, and meeting people that I might not introduce myself to back in the States. Now, after about four weeks of being here, I’ve realized that what I thought I was going to experience before this trip only scratched the surface of what I really did experience here in Beijing.

While I was flying here from San Francisco, all kinds of thoughts were running through my mind. From what I heard from other people about the corruption and widespread poverty in China, I knew I should be aware of my surroundings and be careful who I trust. I knew tourists, especially Americans, were thought to be easy targets to ripe off and take advantage of by the Chinese people, so I wanted to be very careful of what I bought while in China. Knowing I only brought a certain amount of money, I wanted to try and get the best deals on things.

Landing in Beijing, the first thing I noticed was how bad the air quality was and the intense humidity. It was a damp heat and I was happy I only had shorts and shirt on. Riding in the van from the airport, I noticed the terrain was very green and lush and it seemed like the trees were planted in a perfect pattern, each supported the same way with four poles on each side. I knew Beijing was one of the biggest cities in the world so I wondered where all the big buildings and city life was. Then after about almost an hour drive, it was clear to me we were in Beijing, a place that was completely foreign to me. I saw in the distance, or at least as far as the smog would allow me to see, tall high-rises being used for either apartments or offices, big cranes building new buildings, and lots of people walking and riding bikes.

Transportation around Beijing consisted of bike, bus, subway or taxi. I was able to experience only the subway and taxi, but I really appreciated the subway because of the air conditioning and overall cleanliness. I’ve never ridden on any other subway before but what I’ve heard is that Beijing has one of, if not the best, subway systems in the world. It definitely was crowded with tons of people but it helped relieve some of the traffic from the streets. It was also cheap to ride with it only costing 20RMB for the card and 4RMB for each ride: 2RMB to enter and 2RMB to exit. Riding in a taxi was a little pricier compared to the subway, but I enjoyed it not only because I was able to see the city and its cool architectural designs but also I was able to experience what it is like to drive in Beijing! It seemed like there were no rules enforced and drivers are able to do whatever they wanted. Pedestrians definitely do not have the right away like they do in the States. However, even with all the crazy driving and lack of direction for traffic, I never saw a car accident or a pedestrian get hit while I was here.

I’ve never seen so many bikes in my life before I visited Beijing. They all seemed to have bells that they rang to let people know they were coming up behind. It seemed like I was always being
honked at and constantly dodging bikes. One time I saw up to four people riding on one bike they were riding like it was totally normal. Girls would ride on the back of the boy’s bike and cruise. It looked fun but dangerous with all the cars buzzing around and people walking all over the place. I saw bikes being used to haul loads that trucks would haul in America. The Chinese have perfected their use of the bicycle.

I really enjoyed the nightlife in Beijing, especially the Wudaokou district which was walking distance from where I was staying near Peking University. The music was good, dancing was fun, and I met all kinds of people around the world. One friend I met stood out from all the rest. His name was Mike and he was born in China but received his education in the States. He was fluent in Mandarin and new good English. He had a degree in materials engineering but was working on education in China. In particular, he was helping Chinese students who wanted to study in the States or Canada with their English. He offered me if I wanted to teach some English to a few of his students and my first thought was should I trust this guy? After getting to know him and one of his friends better, I used my own judgment and took the risk.

I travelled to his office near Tiananmen Square to meet one of his students named Li Lu who applied to UC Berkeley for finance management. She was a very sweet and smart girl who tested at the top one percent of her class. Some professors from UC Berkeley wanted to interview Lu to see if her English was good enough to make it in Berkeley, so Mike wanted me to do a mock interview with her. After asking a few questions, I saw Lu relax more and her English was improving. I enjoyed the experience of her learning English and me learning a little Mandarin. We practiced using Skype a couple days before the actual interview and Lu we thought was ready. A couple days past and I found out Lu was accepted and she will be going to UC Berkeley starting August 20. I was proud of her.

I also was able to eat Peking duck with Lu and Mike at a place called Da Dong near Tiananmen Square. We chose the duck, they roasted it, and then they cut it in thin slices in front of us. It was an awesome experience I won’t forget. Mike is friend that I will continue to stay in touch with and I was lucky to meet a trustworthy person like him because I know their hard to find especially here in China.

I had a great time in Beijing and the entire experience made me appreciate where I live and all the opportunities that are available to me in the States. I will definitely want to learn more Mandarin next time I come. Being a part of this research project at Peking University opened my eyes to Chinese culture and I will remember this trip, the professors, and my fellow students for the rest of my life. I hope this research project will continue in the future because multicultural learning is important for students to get a well-rounded education.