As my final year of attending Cal Poly began I found the opportunity to travel abroad to China. The excitement began to overwhelm me considering it would be my first chance to live outside of the United States of America (USA). With the anticipation to experience a new culture by meeting new people, visiting famous sites, and understanding a new way of living life. Friends and family continually tried to prepare me for some of differences to expect such as language or wall sockets, but words could not explain my reaction as the plane landed.

When we first arrived at Beijing there was an impression of a metropolitan city, which was familiar for me since I grew up next to San Francisco. Both Beijing and San Francisco had signs for two languages, public transportation, skyscrapers, and dense populations. However as I left the airport a sudden feeling of alienation struck me from all the conversation in Mandarin. Lucky the signs had subscripts in English since had no time to learn their native language. We quickly settled in our rooms and engrossed ourselves with the new surrounding as we tried to notice all the subtle differences that weren’t so obvious. For example, I expected people to drive differently, yet I was surprised to see the new parking methods people developed to compensate for the non-existent parking lots. People parked their vehicles everywhere including sidewalks, pathways, or in front of houses causing quite a bit of chaos. Never the less I was surprised how creative people were with so many cars. Another difference I noticed was the number of walls and gates dispersed throughout Beijing, which made maps and ID’s really important while moving around the city. Thankfully the amazing subways system made up for the struggle because it only cost 2 Yuan (less than 50 cents) to get anywhere in Beijing with air conditioning. Beijing’s subway system continued to impress compared to the United States public transportation system since there was little to no delay in between trains and the various branches reached out to all parts of the city.
While adjusting to my new home I gradually overcame more and more of the little issues like public bathrooms not providing any toilet paper or soap. I became more comfortable and started to reach out to new groups such as the Peking University (PKU) gym. While working out at the gym I was happy to meet many PKU students, who thankfully spoke English. At first it was embarrassed because they could speak fluent English, while I failed to speak Mandarin. As time passed the embarrassment faded as our conversations drifted to their explanation of Chinese culture. I began to learn the details of their school system and how it aimed to be fair by providing everyone a chance to test into a school, but required a test into each level of schooling. The amount of testing shocked me especially since the college test was a huge standardized test that often required months of preparation. I explained the how in USA there was more than one way to get accepted into college through either the SAT or the ACT test on top of written essays describing one’s ambitions and extra curricular activities. My friends found this interesting since they did not understand why schools were concerned with a student’s ability to learn other than their applied subject. As our conversations developed I asked them about my odd encounters with random people wanting to take a picture with me, and the sudden rush of people in July. They explained it was a summer vacation in China that allowed people from the rural areas to visit Beijing. Further more, the majority of these people from rural parts were not use to seeing westerners excluding advertisements. This made sense as I reflected on my image of blond hair, blue eyes, and 6’3” stature. Another question I had to ask was their stance on the Internet and how they dealt with the Great Firewall of China. They explained there are ways around it, similar to American college students’ tricks around the drinking age. In fact most students find the Great Firewall annoying since most people have Facebook accounts and use Youtube. The questions we shot back and forth each day gave me a deeper grasp of the social and cultural environment in China.

One of my favorite parts of the trip was a weekend trip exploring the hiking trails near Beijing. The trip was planned as a tour group through the physics department, which was exciting because it provided a chance to be with other PKU students outside of the city. The trip required a few hours on a tour bus to escape the city of Beijing with three
primary attractions. The three places were divided into two days with a hike at Shidu famous scenic spot, a second hike at Yeshan Po Baili Xia, and a mini theme park called Shidu amusement park. As an experienced California hiker I enjoyed seeing the new style of sharp pointed mountain ranges that formed valleys in between them. These mountains were coated with plant life providing a thick green appearance with random brown patches due to steep cliffs. While making our way through the trails I did not expect the frequent appearance of summer rains that lasted on average twenty minutes. It was different from my usual California summer, however the rain was actually a blessing in disguise. The rain kept us cool from the intense humidity, warded off bugs, and created magnificent water falls. While hiking we passed through small passageways that collected water, which reflected spectacular images on the walls that continually changed with the movement of water. Ironically the rain we experience outdoors was insignificant compared to the 60-year storm that we survived in the city. I can safely say it was raining “cat and dogs” as we faced newly formed rivers flooding the streets and climbed up to our knees. In the search for food old memories of the Water World theme park appeared in my mind like déjà vu.

During my time in China I felt the over whelming urge to visit all the famous travel sites. Fortunately I had enough time to see the Summer Palace, Tieman Square, National Museum of China, the Pearl Market, the Forbidden City, the Tombs of the Ming Emperors, the temple of the Sun, and the Great Wall. Quiet a list showing China’s devotion to preserve their long and historically rich past. All of the sites were enormous allowing hundreds and thousands of people to swim through them. Despite the numbers we were still singled out as western tourist thus most vendors expected us to buy their goods. When we visited the Tombs of the Ming Emperors I noticed they had a different design to honor the diseased. A tombstone rested in front of a monstrous man made mountain with only a single peak, where a tree sits, while covering an underground tomb and around this mountain a wall similar to the design of the Great Wall. Out of all the places we visited the greatest impact had to be the Forbidden City due to the size and complexity of the ancient city. Every fine detail was crafted as a piece of art including the water drainage system that was etched stone dragons that exhaled the water down to
lower levels. The details were almost overwhelming, as the wood was covered intricate painting patterns from the ground to the roof, with tiles of dragons and phoenixes. The number of elegant gateways continued to impress me along with the traditional style building constructed on top of them as they opened into the fashionable buildings of the emperors. Moreover, it was hard to count the number of buildings that were used to house the number of empresses as one tried to make their way through the palace.

Towards the end of the trip we took one final voyage to Shenyuan for the International Conference of Electronics and Optoelectronics (ICEOE). Right from the start I could tell this trip would be anything but ordinary as we missed our 8:35am flight by ten minutes. The time was engraved in my mind as we could have made it in time had we not made the common mistake of assuming that all domestic flight were located only in terminal one and two. Unfortunately Air China’s domestic flights were also located in the international terminal, number three, which was a twenty minute drive from the other terminals. Vowing to never make the same mistake twice, we tried to reschedule for the next open flight at 7:10am the next day. We quickly found our selves fighting for a spot within a crowd of people in the stand by section, simply frustrating. When the flight time arisen we pushed our way through a sea of elbows screaming out our names and flagging our passports trying to claim two seats for the next flight. We caught just one ticket forcing us to scour through an endless number of flight attendants arguing our dire need to make the conference in time. Finally our luck started to change as an opening magically formed due to a technical error and we were off to Shenyuan.

My experience in Shenyuan was interesting as it provided a new perspective of China outside of Beijing’s influence. Shenyuan is known at the previous capital city of Northern China before moving to Beijing. Today it is a huge city that is still expanding with multiple construction sites for new skyscrapers. Located in the middle of the beast we were surrounded by the downtown markets that branched out to multiple streets. As we explored the new city we noticed people often walked through the streets enjoying street performers, community games like hula hoop contests, or relaxing at local restaurants. Shenyuan resembled Beijing with its ability to be alive all day and night with
huge TVs along the sides of buildings and music blaring from the stores. The only thing I strange was the music was mostly in English, yet most people did not speak English and there were no signs in English besides advertisements. While in Shenyuan we squeezed in enough time to visit three main tourist attractions including Beiling Park, Marshal Zhang’s Mansion, and the Imperial Palace. Each site was unique to see since it had a different style compared to site in Beijing. We learned this was due to the Northern Province was historically made up of the Man ethnic group instead of the Han ethnic group. The difference was most notable in the Imperial palace, which resembled the Forbidden City in the over organization of buildings yet was smaller in size with different characters on certain gateways and a different style of for animal artwork. The Marshal Zhang’s Mansion was impressive both in appearance and its historical significance. The mansion was a blend of between the west and east since it had an exterior that resembled a Roman Style, while having an interior with Chinese paintings and crest designs. The story behind the Marshal Zhang was impressive because he was responsible for secretly bring the Communist Party of China to work together with Northeast China to defend against the invading Japanese.

This trip to a foreign land was a learning experience that I will never forget. With so many different encounters it is hard to keep track of all the stories. I appreciated how the locals were friendly and open to share and explain their culture. This experience has shown me how the different values of the Chinese help create such a strong culture with so much to offer. Thanks to this positive experience I plan to continue traveling across the world to continue learning first had how different people enjoy life.