Jordan Keeton

We returned home from our trip to China more than six weeks ago, but I still can’t resist a smile when my attention drifts back to our journey. It was truly the trip of a lifetime. I eagerly awaited the trip for eight or nine months, and somehow it exceeded all of my expectations. There was plenty of unforgettable sight-seeing, but there was more to the impact of the experience than that. The programming that the Gaines Center and UKCI coordinated, as well as the perfect set of travelling companions, made the trip uniquely exhilarating. We were able to have fruitful discussions with our counterparts halfway around the world, take an introduction to Chinese language, climb a sacred mountain, and benefit from many other adventures that we likely would not have had during typical tourism. Even in the midst of all of the varied experience and excitement, there are a few highlights and takeaways in particular that I would like to recount. Because picking a few favorite memories is difficult enough, I will recall them in chronological order rather than trying to measure them against one another.

Early in our trip, we had the good fortune to make an excursion into downtown Shanghai, where we were able to take a dinner cruise on the Huangpu River and then explore the metropolis from the top of the iconic Pearl Tower. After the dinner on the cruise commenced, which on its face does not sound exciting when compared to many of our adventures, we re-grouped at the top deck. There, at the boat’s bow, with the wind rustling my face, the lights of one of the world’s largest cities glimmering in the dark water, and some of my closest friends laughing in the background, I was taken aback at how much opportunity there is in the world. I have never felt more intoxicated with life and excited for what my future could bring than I did in that instance. There are so many fascinating places to visit and new experiences to have, the evening affirmed. The inspiration that I felt then seldom diminished throughout the remainder of the trip, and I hope that I will carry it with me for a long time to come.

Climbing Mt. Tai was no less influential or memorable. What started off as a comfortable path on a gradual incline, eventually turned into a test of stamina and will. Nevertheless, near the end of the hike, which features over 7,000 steep stairs, I felt like we were participating in a Chinese rite that many tourists never get to see. I felt more assimilated into Chinese culture then than at perhaps any other point on the trip. The view from the top was another significant payoff. The landscape stretching before us was breathtaking, and the ceremonial structures surrounding us were captivating. We grew as a cohort during the challenge. We supported and encouraged each other and gained a lot of respect for not necessarily the physical endurance of our peers, but certainly the mental fortitude of all participants. The hike was one of many times during our travel to China that I felt incredibly fortunate to be surrounded by such a supportive Gaines family.
Mt. Tai was not the only hiking that we did. A couple of days later, we disembarked for the Great Wall. We left Beijing and battled morning traffic, but after a couple of hours in the bus, we arrived at an entry point for the Great Wall. We then took a shuttle halfway up the mountain, and were dropped off at yet another stairway. Jonathan, Stephen, and I travelled together, and our excitement propelled us to make record time on the walk. We proudly arrived at the Great Wall and were immediately astonished by the scope and antiquity of the landmark. We strategized as we caught our breath and planned to cover as much of the wall as we could in our three hours there. We took off with alacrity in one direction, bounding up and down many more stairs to my chagrin. The sheer excitement of the afternoon provided the second wind that we all needed. After covering a significant amount of ground, we noticed a section of the wall that was blocked off to tourists and was overgrown by the surrounding landscape. We cleverly climbed out of a window in a guard tower to access this path off of the beaten trail, and though I was skeptical of the adventure initially, it proved to be a great decision. Navigating our own trail gave us an added sense of independence and thrill, but also opened up views of the landscape and wall that few people get to see.

Along the way, we met a Romanian couple, ate some wild mulberries, and saw the occasional wildlife. I hope that I remember the specifics of each day of our trip for many years, but I recognize that these memories will erode with time. My personal takeaways from the trip, which are many, will likely be longer lasting. I have tangentially touched on a couple of these above, but I would like to take a moment to enumerate them specifically as to more fully explain the impact of our stay in China on me. Firstly, I feel more confident about future travel. Before this trip I would have been hesitant, if not unwilling, to travel alone somewhere where I didn’t speak the local language. By no means is the language barrier always comfortable, but it should not impede someone from going somewhere that will provide a meaningful experience. With a little miming, one can usually achieve the desired result. Secondly, meeting the Chinese students elucidated many human commonalities. There were many interests, fears, hopes, desires, that they shared with each of us, despite having grown up half a planet away. Perhaps too often we “other” people from outside the U.S. and emphasize cultural differences. Lastly, the world is full of possibility. I sometimes become narrowly focused on one microcosm and forget how many possible outcomes there are in life. I’m not bound to Lexington, or even the United States. I could work in Shanghai someday in a career that I have never envisioned doing before. To me, there isn’t anything more hopeful or uplifting than the infinite possibility that studying abroad brings to mind. I hope to remember that lesson and carry that excitement with me for a long time.

None of these lessons or memories would be possible without the hard work of several individuals. As a former event planner, I know how much thankless work goes on behind the scenes to plan a trip of this magnitude. I am overwhelmed with gratitude and admiration for the Gaines Center and UKCI staff who made the trip possible. Dr. Maske put together the perfect itinerary. I cannot imagine a better set of activities for our two weeks. Grace was the ultimate tour guide. She was enthusiastic, fun, competent, and resilient in dealing with our loudness and teasing. Lisa and Keith were great role models for us all and no doubt inspired us to keep positive attitudes, even when we were fighting the lingering effects of
jet lag and the heat. They were simultaneously fun and dignified. Dr. Harling went to great lengths to secure the funds for the trip, and further personally sacrificed when the trip forced him to miss his son’s commencement ceremony. I appreciated his willingness to do so on our behalf and found it incredibly touching. The trip to China reaffirmed what I had noticed all year—as Gaines Fellows we are all incredibly blessed to have people working relentlessly to give us all of the tools we need to succeed and have fulfilling lives. We are willing to work hard for our fellowship because the Gaines Center continually shows us that they care about each of us, and that is incredibly refreshing at a large university like UK. Even with the intimidating thesis ahead of me, I am excited to return in the fall and once again be surrounded by the Gaines community.

Jacob Mattingly

When I boarded the first plane in Lexington on our way to China, I couldn’t have predicted some of the experiences I was going to have, but reflecting on the experience long after I’ve returned to the US, I see it as an excellent opportunity to get a peek into the operations of a culture that was previously totally foreign to me. Though the trip was quite busy, I appreciated the chance to speak with other college students, to observe the country’s historical landmarks, and to climb Mount Tai from foot to summit. My two weeks in China turned out to be both an enjoyable and educational experience and one that I will not soon forget.

Speaking to other college students was an experience that I both greatly enjoyed and highly valued. The chance to gain unique insights from other students my age was a rare one that I learned from greatly, with topics of discussion including the differences and similarities between the education systems of our two countries, economic and cultural differences between the US and China, and the general day-to-day proceedings of living as a student. I most enjoyed talking to students at Shanghai University, as they seemed to be incredibly prepared for conversation, asked questions that provoked thought in us as American students, and occupied a position of parity with us in the conversation. Though it was potentially the most formal talk of the five in which we engaged, I still greatly enjoyed getting a chance to discuss the academic and cultural differences between our two countries. In any case, the opportunity to discuss these differences with students in a foreign country is an uncommon one, and it is one which I will definitely cherish.

Viewing China’s historical landmarks was frankly a bit strange at first. Coming from a country that is still not yet
250 years old, many of the “historical landmarks” which I am likely to come across in the United States are correspondingly young. This is not so in China. Some of the landmarks we saw (such as the Temple of Heaven, the Palace Museum, and the Yuan Garden) were many centuries old, and some dated back thousands of years. It was certainly odd at first to think about how some of the sites we visited were older than my home country, but I enjoyed learning about the history and unique architectural styles of the locations we visited. Learning about how the historical sites contributed to or drew from China’s cultural development was a very positive experience.

Above all, my favorite part of the trip was climbing Mount Tai. As much as I enjoyed reaching the summit myself, I also liked watching the other climbers and the great variety of people present. Men, women, and children of all ages wearing anything from T-shirts to business attire could be seen climbing alone or in groups. It really was an amazing experience to be able to climb such a culturally and historically relevant landmark while also getting a chance to observe how it has continued to be relevant to many of the Chinese through the present day. It is clear to me that the mountain holds significance beyond its size, and observing this significance in person was something that I am glad I had the opportunity to do. Though it took several hours of constantly climbing step after step, climbing Mount Tai was possibly the most rewarding part of the trip in my mind.

Looking back, my trip to China in May was a rare and quite positive opportunity to step out of my comfort zone and into a foreign culture. Though the two-week stay was somewhat short, I appreciated the chance to learn about a culture and history that are not my own, and it is because of this opportunity that I would recommend a trip such as this one to anyone with a mind open enough to learn from it.

Shannon Newberry

I can’t find the words to fully express my gratitude for the China trip that I was given the opportunity to experience due to the generosity of the Confucius Institute. As I entered my third year of undergrad, traveling abroad was starting to sound a bit like a dream to me, or an experience that was seemingly becoming less and less possible, so you can imagine my surprise when I woke up to the email on August 21st explaining that I was invited to partake of a trip to no other far distant land than China. I had to double check that I wasn’t still asleep, for this news was incredibly surreal. I even asked a fellow student if I had read the email correctly.
I’ll always remember landing in Shanghai, the immediate feeling of being out of place, but also the overwhelming sensation of excitement and anticipation. I was eager to get the trip rolling because I was ready to soak in all the new sights and experiences. As an architecture student, I certainly wasn’t disappointed. The skyline of Shanghai was absolutely breathtaking. Looking through my pictures, it still doesn’t seem real to me. My family members have described these images as a city that fell out of The Wonderful Wizard of Oz. I couldn’t agree more, as Shanghai was nothing but spectacular. Chinese architecture was absolutely beautiful. One of my favorite observations was the lack of nails and other bonding methods in ancient Chinese structures. Instead, they used a wooden interlocking system that is both structurally resilient and aesthetically pleasing. Seeing these famous Chinese works in person was worth more than all of my textbooks combined. Our travels left me with awe and respect for the Chinese and their craftsmanship.

However, my favorite aspect of our trip was speaking with the Chinese students. I was immediately humbled by their English skills, and also pleased by the fact that they were just as excited to meet us as we were to meet them. The conversations I had with these students allowed me to gain valuable insight into Chinese culture and life. I have brought back many of these conversations with me to the United States, and it has provided many more intriguing conversations about differences between our two countries. I’ll never forget speaking to a girl in Beijing about what it is like to have siblings while we tried her favorite ice cream flavor, Green Tea.

This trip has opened the door to traveling for me. I am now considering graduate school as well as other future career options abroad; before this trip, that wasn’t even an option I was considering. I am so very thankful for the hard work of the Confucius Institute for providing the Gaines Program with such a wonderful opportunity. I know our group as whole grew incredibly close over the two weeks as we experienced the rich culture of China. You can’t ask for much more than that.

Rachel Jang

China has always been close to me because of the history shared with my home country, Korea. Even though I lived close by for so many years, I never had a chance to go visit and see the architectural and cultural wonders that have been introduced to me at school. The UK Confucius Institute provided an invaluable opportunity for an entirely new
experience, and as a consequence, I was able to gain a new insight into China.

One of the most memorable parts of the trip was climbing Tai-shan mountain from the very bottom. I have heard of Tai-shan in many of the old Korean sayings; “Every little thing will eventually add up (as much as Tai-shan).” The climb itself was a character-building experience. I personally had a chance to think a lot while I climbed the stairs, and one of the many thoughts that occurred to me was the parallel between climbing such a great mountain and journeying through life. As I pushed myself to move my feet from one step to another, I thought about how applicable that is to getting through difficulties in my life. The closer to the top, the more difficult it was to make myself climb, but the views at the top were worth the sweat and fatigue. When we regrouped for lunch, I think many of us had come to a similar realization.

I also enjoyed getting to know the Chinese students. At Shanghai Institute of Technology, we got to spend time with small groups of students after the seminar. During lunch and the following campus tour, we got to share bits and pieces of our personal lives at home, and I learned that the Chinese students are not so different from us, even though we live halfway across the world.

Unfortunately, not everything I saw in China was good. On the last night in Beijing, I asked Grace to take us to Xi’dan, a shopping place Emma (a BNU student) had told me about. I thought of Goto mall in Korea, where small non-designer brand clothing boutiques are lined up, selling fashionable clothes with decent quality for a low price. I had been eyeing everyone's fashion while walking around Beijing, and I figured there must be a similar place here. Xi’dan turned out to be pricier than I had expected, and instead of clothes, I gained insight into the vastly contrasting lives of different Chinese people.

Walking by the flashy buildings and lit mannequins with expensive clothes, we all passed a family of beggars: a father with burnt or infected skin covering most of his body, and his son, laying next to him, whose ankles and thighs were the same diameter. There was a woman not too far away also begging for money. There were merchants on every street corner, selling cheap items to the tourists. What a contrasting picture, I thought, of the same Chinese people under the same sky: some are wealthy enough to shop on the streets on which the poorer others sit outside, naked and disabled. It bothered me even more that this was not solely a discrepancy observed in China but in all the developed and developing nations, not excluding the United States.

The trip to China was everything that I looked forward to and more. Delicious food, unforgettable hospitality, and the rich history integrated with the modern developments made China much more real than pictures on the Internet or in textbooks. To this day, I exchange emails and messages with students from the schools we visited, and I learn more and more that we are—beyond nationality and culture—all part of the human race.
Phillip Barnett

Travelling to China this summer is perhaps the most adventurous thing I have ever done. It was a whirlwind of firsts. The flight from Lexington to Chicago that was required before we embarked for the People’s Republic was indeed my first time in the air. My second flight, Chicago to Shanghai, was my first trip out of North America. My time in China opened my eyes to the Chinese culture in ways I never expected. Throughout my young life, the ways, customs, and daily life of the Chinese people have been shrouded in misinformation. Prior to travelling to China, I had very little perception of the Chinese milieu. Unfortunately, what perceptions I did have were very negative due to the overwhelming stigma toward the word “communism” in the United States. Instead of a nation wrought with poverty, archaic tradition, and a general lack of freewill, I found a nation not entirely unlike the United States. The citizens are chasing a “Chinese dream” not dissimilar from the “American dream.” Though I don’t agree with many social and political ideologies I found to be present in the PRC, I must say, there are just as many ideologies present in the United States that I don’t agree with. Furthermore, there are several conventions I saw in the PRC that I would like to see the United States adopt, such as extremely affordable higher education. Not only did this expedition open my eyes to the truth about China, but also to a truth about humankind.

Though I had previously travelled to Mexico and other nations in Central America, staying in the tourist areas during my previous adventures prevented me from being immersed in a culture that exhibited the lack of English fluency that certain legs of our Chinese trek, such as Taian, exhibited. Being rendered relatively mute in the predominantly Mandarin-speaking culture of such areas, much to my amazement, only barely hindered my ability to communicate. As humans, we share many similar communication traits, things present in all cultures that we must be born with. But most importantly, these nonverbal communication skills that allow us to cross language barriers would still yet be useless if not for a shared desire to communicate.

I earnestly believe that our journey to China was an eye-opening, life-changing event that will stay with me and help inform my thoughts, beliefs, and actions, causing me to be a better citizen of both the United States and of the world, for the rest of my life.
Sarah Wagner

I can say, first of all, that my trip in China was made most special by the relationships we were able to forge with students from other universities. Even within such a short time abroad, meeting students like myself from the other side of the globe was an unbeatable experience, and the times when we would share stories over food and visit favorite places on their campuses were definitely my most memorable moments on the trip. No matter how different our cultures might be, we would all be laughing and enjoying the new company within only a few minutes of meeting.

I had never been to China before this experience; it has certainly opened me up to a new way of viewing and interpreting the world. Learning about other cultures in a classroom is nothing compared to being immersed in another world—you don’t learn how difficult it can be to order in a crowded Chinese university cafeteria from a textbook. But it is also the subtleties of these cultural differences that make us so alike. Once we develop a mutual respect for these differences, we can learn to appreciate them as a part of a diversity that we all share, or a uniqueness of culture that is equally individual, and thus can bring us together.

The UK Confucius Institute, beyond just allowing our hodgepodge of American students to see the beauty of Eastern China, allowed us to turn all of these experiences and interactions into an intellectual discourse with students from across the ocean, and for that I am extremely grateful. It is a rare opportunity, and it feels like a step in the direction we all intend to pursue in our various disciplines—building a more beautiful, more diverse, and more collaborative world in everything we pursue.
Stephen Parsons

The UKCI Young Leaders Trip to China this summer is one of my most treasured memories. I am forever grateful to the UK Confucius Institute for the trip and still find it hard to believe we were given such an opportunity. The array of experiences we had was valuable to me in many ways, and I hope future students might be able to have the same.

As my pictures and those of others should show, we were able to visit many beautiful places rich in history. There are so many that I can't remember them without going back through my pictures, but my personal favorite was being able to hike along an unmaintained section of the Great Wall.

The sights were what I was most looking forward to on the trip, but during and after I've been most grateful for the people we were able to meet. It was fun trying to determine what we should expect at each seminar. Everywhere we went had different expectations for their respective seminar, and it kept us on our toes. During seminar meetings at each university, we learned the many ways we were different and also the same, but this was stronger afterward the meetings, when we had the opportunity to get to know the students informally. Sharing meals together and exploring their campuses were without a doubt the most valuable part of the trip for me.

In these few short paragraphs I've struggled to be specific—the experiences were so many that to give them each any individual attention I would be writing for quite some time. I hope my pictures are able to provide a glance into just how rich of a trip this was. Again, I am forever grateful for the opportunity.
Jonathan Sarfin

I am extremely grateful to the UK Confucius Institute for making possible what can only be described as a wonderful experience; the time I spent in China this summer, both with my fellow Gainesians, and on my own, will always be very special to me, and indeed I feel very fortunate to have been afforded the opportunity to engage in such an adventure.

One of the highlights of the trip was meeting Chinese students at their universities. This is fortunate because it was one of the primary activities of the trip. It is easier, in lieu of actual experience with a phenomenon, to substitute in its place stereotypes or assumptions, things we have heard or read somewhere. This is simply a statement of fact, but this trip was so valuable because we were given the opportunity to have an actual experience and to replace the preformed conceptions of China and especially Chinese people, that may have been implicit within us, adopted from our culture. It is no surprise, retrospectively, that we could have such an enjoyable time with the students, for they are people just as we, but admittedly there was some trepidation in the beginning of the trip, for we were unsure how different they would be from us, for we only had vague images and ideas in mind. This trepidation was, in each seminar discussion, quickly alleviated; both groups of students (for presumably they, too, felt this way) were able to discard with ease our preconceptions and engage in meaningful dialogue based on commonalities; there were many moments of laughter and camaraderie, even though we only spent a few short hours together. We talked, of course, of serious things that our countries must face together, but the time when we felt most connected with each other was when we talked of ourselves, our own lives; many times we had the same gripes about university, or we could laugh together recalling a TV program or an online video.

The gladness I feel to have met such interesting people who have, seemingly, such a different background from me (although it turns out that, in the main, people are people everywhere) is deepened when I consider a special few individuals with whom I really connected and who I still remain in contact with. I met Elina at BCLU and we, along with several other students, had a fun afternoon exploring Wudakao and BCLU. When I remained in Beijing, we met again and explored some of the hutongs. She and I got along really well together and had some very interesting conversations.

Although the group discussions were excellent, I think that the intimacy of a protracted one-on-one conversation really meant a lot to me. Elina and I still keep in touch and, since she is studying in the United States next spring, I hope to see her again.

I would like to express again my gratitude to the Gaines Center and the Confucius Institute of UK for this experience which, as I hope I have, in brief, made apparent, was very meaningful to me.
Kalin Wilson

My time in China, made possible by the Confucius Institute, was a whirlwind of new experiences. Our trip presented us with a taste of the many things China has to offer, from the excitement and modernity of Shanghai to the rich history invoked by landmarks such as Mount Tai and the Forbidden City. Every day was an opportunity to learn about, experience, and simply enjoy the country.

One of my favorite portions of the trip was our time spent in Shandong Province, where we visited Confucius’s hometown of Qufu and Mount Tai near Tai’an. Both the sites dedicated to Confucius and the sacred mountain made me realize just what a rich history and cultural heritage China has. This country possesses a memory spanning a period much longer than the United States has been in existence. It was fascinating to see China still honoring that history while also moving full-speed towards a modern future.

Although there are differences between the United States and China, there are certainly things that remain constant as well. For example, we were able to connect with students at Chinese universities—students much like ourselves, possessing similar interests and goals. Meeting these students was certainly one of the most special aspects of the trip. I am grateful to have had the opportunity to participate in the Young Leader’s Institute; it has left me with a broader understanding of and deeper appreciation for China.
As a student of Chinese Language and Culture, the email I received from Dr. Harling in August of 2014 informing me that the junior Gaines Fellows would have the opportunity to take a trip to China came as a very welcome surprise. I had been to China once before on a summer study abroad trip following my freshman year, but the opportunity to return two years later with my fellow classmates was an especially exciting prospect. The first city on our long itinerary was Shanghai—the city in which I had spent a summer and fallen in love with the hustle and bustle, the unique cuisine, and the skyscrapers that extended as far as the eye could see. It was in Shanghai that the rapid, unceasing economic growth of modern-day China was on full display. The discussions we had with students in this city were, in my opinion, the most insightful. I appreciated the opportunity to understand collegiate life for Chinese students by engaging in conversation with them about their own experiences and touring their campuses. The discussions we had featured pertinent topics such as the environment, the effects of economic growth, and political liberty. It was refreshing not only to discuss these topics but to also get to know the students, exchanging WeChat usernames, discussing pop culture, and commiserating about the stresses of classes and academic expectations.

In addition to the opportunity to witness Shanghai’s splendor and engage with its students, I also appreciated the times in which we were able to peer into traditional China and acknowledge the millennia of history that followed us everywhere we went. Perhaps my favorite aspect of the trip was our time spent in Shandong province, exploring the small but historically important city of Qufu and hiking Tai Shan. With a civilization as storied as China’s, history abounds; most anywhere one travels, he or she can see the telltale signs of a people that has farmed, fought, and thrived for longer than most civilizations have been recording history. The opportunity to visit San Kong (the mansion, cemetery, and temple dedicated to Confucius) was certainly a highlight, as was the thrilling experience of looking down below while at the top of Tai Shan, one of the sacred mountains I had first encountered not in our itinerary but in a Chinese textbook during my sophomore year. Beijing also contained more than its fair share of culture and history, and the lectures...
that we listened to in this city were particularly insightful, placing the city in an historic context unfamiliar to most Americans.

I am extremely grateful to the UK Confucius Institute. Their generosity does not go unappreciated: I found my second experience in China to be one that was both thrilling and edifying—the mark of an inspiring trip. The seminars with Chinese students were helpful in explaining the Chinese experience in a way much more insightful than that of any textbook; I hope that they could say the same regarding how we portrayed the American experience. In the 21st Century, an opportunity such as this is insightful in exploring a globalized world, and I am incredibly thankful to both the Gaines Center and the UK Confucius Institute for making such a dream a possibility.