Everyone seemed to wake up this morning around 3:30. Jet lag and nervous excitement probably contributed to this early rise, barring explanations like earthquakes or a group telepathic disturbance. It was nice to wake up so early, and a quick search on the internet showed that the expected time of sunrise would be around 4:47, just about an hour after the initial awakening.

When you go out at sunrise, you get to see the slow increase of people walking, jogging, and biking around. Before five o'clock, the only souls outside are security guards and furious birds. The guards are friendly--I was surprised by the quickness with which they turn to mime a jog and give a thumbs-up while you go by. As time passed, more and more people did, too, some waving and smiling, others offering a nod. These people are friendly, and they seem to appreciate personal development.

The value of personal development was echoed in many places, wrought with some tension between itself and filial piety and order. In the talk with Dr. Zhao Jinlong of Shanghai University, we found this tension within the history and current atmosphere of higher education in China. I went away from that talk with more than a bit of despair: schools put extreme pressure on students for examinations, teaching little-to-no critical thinking or research skills. Students were to perfectly fit a mold in order to get into a good university, but upon graduating, had no guarantee of a job. These same students spoke about how they have their own ideas and wish to be respected and given more choice over their lives. Their goal was still development of self, though it has become more difficult given the atmosphere that education can create.

I was given hope, however, upon visiting the international elementary school in Shanghai. Students (grades 1-5) were allowed to choose some classes, participate in non-academic activities, and even collaborate and play between their separate grades. I was blown away by the community and faculty there, who seem to have devoted their lives to the cause of making students better people, more rounded, and happier. These people were delightful and caring. Their care showed on the confident faces of the children studying there, who I’m sure will look back and realize what a phenomenal school this is not only in China, but around the world.

Besides, how can you dislike a school whose motto is "Smile"?

That program moved me and several others on the trip, and has had a great impact on how I see that the ideals discussed so often for education can actually be attainable. I could have sat there and asked questions about its development all day.
Would you believe that we flew around the world and right now I am sitting in front of Starbucks? This is our meeting point. Everyone is supposed to be back here at noon, but I went ahead and came back because I needed to sit and write.

Oh, now people are showing up.

Full disclosure, today is my day to submit the journal entry, and that is making this harder. I feel much better today, I slept 12 hours last night. Hayla thinks I may have gone into shock yesterday and I think she may well have been right.

2:31 PM Art Museum

Ok the time change is starting to catch up with me. Sitting down for a break.

It’s hard to know where to begin. We are something of a novelty, several Chinese men just came up to take pictures with us. I knew that coming over the culture would be different, but it is one thing to know that and then to experience it.

For one thing, the juxtaposition of ages of buildings. We don’t have that sort of depth in Kentucky. We toured the 400-year-old garden and are now in a modern museum. I would imagine that breeds a different perspective on history, when you are not only mentally but physically aware of the past.

Going to take a walk about.
7:36 PM River Cruise

This is really something else. I am in awe of the size of the city. It is difficult for me to imagine the sheer number of people in this place. I think so often we become very involved with our own stories and we don’t realize that perhaps everyone is feeling and thinking and breathing like we are. And that I am often just an extra in someone else’s story. I have been thinking about this today among the crowds, among the millions.

We sailed past a district of the city that was almost completely European style architecture, but from different countries and time periods. Once again, it is an interesting juxtaposition of past and present- like all of history is happening at once here.

Our normal experience of time is seemingly linear, mostly you don’t think about it and so it sails by. I don’t begin to understand the nature of time, but to step back and look at it not as a progression of days but as all ages simultaneously occurring in conversation with one another provides a window to view our human experience as a collective, dynamic force. I think Shanghai can serve as a brilliant microcosm of this.
For today we ventured out of Shanghai to visit Suzhou, an older city with a legacy for canals, silk factories, and beautiful gardens. Suzhou is located a few hours west of Shanghai and eventually could be a major spill over point to hold some of the city's commuters. The first stop on our visit was to the Lingering gardens. The gardens in Suzhou are like the equivalent of our older estates or manors. Lingering is a beautiful fusion of nature and manmade craftsmanship. It's filled with symbolism of wealth, promotion, longevity, and integrity. The entrance hall and various living chambers are set the same way one might imagine they were upon creation. Beautiful pavilions, flowers, and grotesque rock formations fill the courtyards. It's an awe-inspiring sight that mystifies and transports the mind to a more traditional time. The harmony between man and nature is present everywhere in Lingering, even in the signs put up by modern day tourist companies (take care of nature, and nature will take care of your mood).

Our next stop was to the Suzhou No. 1 Silk Factory Co., Ltd. Built in 1926 it's of the oldest factories in the area. I was surprised by the simplicity and calmness of the process. Other than the mechanization, it's as if very little has changed since the process begin. Silk worms feed on the leaves of mulberry trees, they grown and then form into two types of cocoons - single and double. Singles make up 95% of cocoons and they are used to make most of the items we associate with silk. The doubles are mainly used for stuffing in the silk quilts. The silk thread is extracted from the cocoons and reeled together before going through a mechanized weaving process inside, "the world’s first computer." Afterwards we ran the gauntlet of silk products being sold to tourist. Pro tip - if you're a guy it's debatably ok to try on female silk robes on accident, you're just not allowed to take pictures.

Finally, we took to the canals of Suzhou in Dragon Boats and enjoyed the various bridges, engravings, and buildings that the city has to offer. Suzhou is a perfect picture of how two worlds collide in modern day China. There's a mix of traditional and modern, of nature and pollution, and of the simple and high tech. It's a beautiful city with rich tradition, of which we only scratched the surface.
Today we had an early bus ride, and all the way I mourned Shanghai. I’d loved the city, especially the University, the west gate, morning runs, and the primary school we’d visited. I could see my memories replaying themselves in the blue gauze curtains of the bus window. And then I was asleep.

I remember the first thought I had when we finally came to the airport. I’d wished for one more 5 am jog around the campus circle. I’d never once felt strange or even stared at. Any attention I received was curious and kind, and reflexive of my own intrigue with the people I was seeing, experiencing in blurs or moments of intense clarity as I weaved around sidewalks and bike racks—not dissimilar from the ones at UK, but altogether grander. I photographed them. And I photographed the people, the majority of whom smiled, threw peace signs, or shyly looked away (as I would have done). And when I wandered alone, through empty halls of the University buildings, I felt eerily at home. One morning I stumbled through shrubs to follow some piano music and found myself in what I guessed to be the courtyard of the fine arts building. There were leaves of rusted metal, furniture torn to bits, and a red umbrella perched just off-center atop an old desk. Perfectly, haphazardly, achromatically aesthetic, and in tune to the classical music which had led me there. The strangeness I’d reserved in my expectations for China dissipated so quickly then. Even on the other side of the world, art students are still untidy, early-bird eccentrics; and people are just people.

But Xi’an had promise. Even framed by the humble bus window, the streets reverberated with style and gusto. I supposed it came from being rooted, culturally and infrastructurally in an ancient past. A richness reasserted in the way our tour guide, Sunny, spoke to us about the city; it had been her home. But then we were in it ourselves. On the ancient wall and in the city streets. A group of us ventured off the wall and we fell into a sweet-smelling market place, and there was a woman singing opera with a band. One of the members had a fedora; not dissimilarly from cities in the U.S., they seemed an inescapable trend in China as well—several floated about in Shanghai. In the evening, we went to a place called Muslim Street. We were encouraged to “barter.” Confrontation horrified me and I avoided it with the vendors, hypocritically perhaps, as I was physically colliding with passerby, cart, scooter, and the occasional child or cat without an anxious thought in the world. Bustling isn’t big enough of a word to describe it. You just become a part of the flow so to speak. I’d begun to understand why there isn’t common use of an ‘excuse me’ or ‘pardon’ in language or at least not in the social habit of these cities. The convention interrupts the pace of things, it was nice to just respectfully intertwine. Both cities have been on the cusp of overwhelming. Not unpleasantly so, but at some pinnacle where you can see how beautiful people really are, charged with candid energy. I’m doing my very best to keep at bay the thought that I will never return to these places. I’m trying to see outside the lens of calendar days and to soak in as much as I can; the less sleep the better.
Aaron Mueller  
Monday, May 22 and Tuesday, May 23

Today's theme—for lack of a more concise word—was the juxtaposition of past and future. From the Neolithic village of Banpo to the future leaders studying at Gaoxin #1 High School, China has come far and is certainly destined to go much further.

It was through serendipity that Banpo was discovered: originally the site of a planned power factory, the artifacts that were found when the foundation was being dug eventually lead to the founding of a museum. The Banpo museum was fascinating: the tools, while rudimentary, were far more advanced than what I would have expected from a six-thousand-year-old tribe.

That ingenious spirit of the pre-Chinese peoples is still apparent in contemporary China, and nowhere is this more apparent than in the school system. The students of Gaoxin have accomplished remarkable things -- especially for their age! -- between winning international academic competitions, speaking near-fluent English, and somehow managing their packed school schedules.

However, in talking with these students, it was clear from their body language (and often through direct statements) that they were exhausted. In many ways, it reminded me of American students' perpetual fatigue, for we are required to fill our days with school, work, extracurricular activities, volunteering, upon other things. China's focus seems to be much more on pure academics above all else, but the sense of intense competition and overworking of students is a shared theme between our two societies. These students will be well-prepared for the hard work ahead of them at the elite universities they plan to attend, but I do wonder if these future leaders will have room to learn independence and creative, spontaneous thinking before getting there.

Nonetheless, I have no doubt that China will continue to improve exponentially in the coming years—in no small part thanks to its appreciation for history and its focus on educating future generations. Today, the spirit of China—its past and future, good, bad, and simply different—were made clear. And, if I am being perfectly honest, it is far more similar to us than dissimilar.
Today we arrived by train in Beijing. We woke up in Xi’an, hustled our way to the station (fashionably late, as is our style), and sat on the train for however many hours. It was very much a “hurry up and wait” situation, arriving on the platform just as the train slid to a stop on the rails, and then we had a lot of time to look out the window. If I’ve learned anything it’s that China is inexhaustibly massive—its population, its history, its geography, its economic growth. Our bullet train travelled 300 kilometers an hour, straight as an arrow, for six hours and only crossed two provincial lines (China has 23 such provinces). As if it wasn’t huge enough already, I have read that in the coming decades Beijing plans to merge with Tianjin on the coast and Hebei province to the west to make a mega city with a population around 130 million and an area larger than the island of Britain. From what little I’ve seen on my train ride, and from what we now know about Shanghai’s explosive growth and the economic dominance of the Yangtze River Delta, an economically and administratively viable mega city (they call it Jingjinji) certainly seems achievable for China—maybe even fated.

As we pull into the Beijing train station (already I see more unscalable buildings, most of them built in my lifetime) I am thinking about two quotes commenting on the city (from two very different sources). This first is from an interview which I watched before leaving the states with the famous, iconoclast artist and Beijing native Ai Weiwei: “Beijing is not old Beijing anymore. It’s a city that doesn’t really belong to its residents. The city is very grand, very big, but it’s not really designed to consider ordinary people’s lives.” Ai Weiwei’s neighborhood of Caochangdi is one of many that was formerly on the fringes of the capital but in the past decade has been completely absorbed into the city. The line about the city not belonging to its residents seemed to me especially poignant. In Shanghai especially I wondered what such rapid economic growth meant for the human people inside.

I’ve been using this Wi-Fi oasis to browse a Beijing tourism website (visitbeijing.com.cn) and I was struck by this quote from an article styled “An Introduction to China’s LARGEST Cities,” that urges you to “Feel the buzz of the urbanization rush in the fastest developing country in the history of the planet.” The office of Chinese tourism citing sheer numerical growth as its opening hook is as disconcerting as it is seductive. I mean to say that despite my reservations about the ideology that makes a 130-million-person city a reality, I do in fact Feel the Buzz and I can say that all this Urbanization does give me a Rush. But it also feels like China might be roaring down the highway with nobody at the wheel. I don’t know what the alternatives are to such unprecedented economic growth, or if they would be any better for the people. This has certainly been an improvement from the Mao years for them—millions out of poverty, higher standards of living, a more democratic society. The cynic in me says the government is trying to buy a more agreeable, placid citizenry. Or maybe this really will better the lives of those living in the most populous country on earth. I can’t say for sure, but there is no denying that this is an exciting, if scary, era for this country and I’m glad to have been here to see this amazing place for myself.

Signing off for today,
John Larson
On the bus ride to Tiananmen Square I was well awake, eager but afraid, like I was about to experience something I wouldn’t understand. I think I was afraid of not being able to separate myself from the history and art history chapters, the slideshow images, the documentaries, I’d been fed about the place. I’d never known nor heard Tiananmen translated into Gate of Heavenly Peace and wondered why when Candy, our new guide, told us so.

I remember feeling uneasy. There were so many people, so much unpatterned and unpredictable movement and picture taking, and the history of the place was the most destabilizing of it all. The heat helped me relax, and the children, and the strangers in their bright outfits and umbrellas. The crowd stacked as we were wedged toward the gate, but even as a sum we couldn’t overcome the vastness of the square, nor the feeling of its inhabitability. The light bounced off the concrete so ferociously, it stung to look into the distance or into the sky for too long. It stung to look through my camera.

Chairman Mao was an orange mist breathing into a blue sky, softer than even oil paint should be. My immediate response was a wanting to run to it, to be alone with the portrait in an empty square. To climb a ladder and experience it as a painting, instead of the iconography I felt I was processing too quickly. It seemed like that would be the only way to digest the impact it was having. But we kept moving and then it passed. Also, they replace the painting. When weather fades, a new one takes its place. I’d known that from a class I’d taken but I’d never considered this fact in juxtaposition with the architecture we were experiencing. Its replication, for me, served then to privilege the lacquered bamboo of the Palace Museum and the Temple of Heaven, which exuded a much more honest and assertive permanence. One of my favorite parts about the trip has been learning about China’s different symbols and motifs, which are deceptively simple and intensely compelling. It makes the United States’ lack of an ancient history seem like a much bigger loss than I’d ever felt or cared to recognize. Truthfully, I felt lucky as we climbed the stairs in sets of nine, and again as we descended, and I wondered how it could be that simple to awaken a spirit with numbers and patterns and colors the way the Temple of Heaven was doing. And it did so for all of us, you could see it in our faces and in the photos I snuck of them. I’d stared into the blue bamboo roof until I could turn away and see it echoed in my field vision, imprinting itself on the actual sky. I felt intensely at peace.

There was also a moment with a young boy, maybe two or three. His name was ‘Ocean’ and his pronunciation of it shook my heart out of its chest. His mom held him and got him to sing his ABC’s for us. It was nearly too much, you know with heat and all. What was I to do but collapse? I kept my feet, and bounced on my toes as he spoke and then we all waved goodbye and I chirped with xie xie’s. It had become the go-to phrase, fittingly so, we’ve all been so thankful for this. The sights and sounds alone are a gift, don’t get me started on the food.
Friday and Saturday, May 26-27
Hiking The Great Wall at Mutianyu and Visiting Headquarters of The Confucius Institute