Ben Childress

China is a place that has always captured my imagination. I can remember sitting in my elementary school library and staring at pictures of the Terracotta Warriors and the Great Wall. My imagination soared as I attempted to picture what living in this foreign land would be like. Over 10 years later I finally had the opportunity to travel and gain first hand insight as to what China is like.

Truth be told it’s an assault on the senses, but in the best possible way. At each stop during our trip there were people everywhere and it soon became apparent that privacy is a rare commodity for Chinese city life. Gone were the rolling hills and empty spaces that have surrounded me all my life. This familiar scenery was replaced by a juxtaposition of new high-rise building and old remnants of ancient dynasties. Everywhere we walked there was either someone yelling, someone selling something, a horn being blown, or the rattle of construction. The different odors on the streets stimulated our senses on both ends of the spectrum; at one minute you could be pacing down what smelled like a busted sewer line, the next an aromatic food vendor. The colors were magnificent, from the lights of downtown Shanghai at night, to the sensory explosions on Muslim street in Xi’an, to the subtle Beijing Blue of the capital along with royal shades of red and gold at the Forbidden City. Of course, the food is debatably the best part. Every meal was a banquet of flavors among different varieties of beef, pork, chicken, fish, duck, squid, eggplant, noodles, dumplings, and anything else you can dream up.

I found that although the sensory experience of China is magnificent, my interaction with its people was more meaningful. We had the opportunity to speak with school children, college students, English teachers, and other local people. The hospitality and kindness of every person we interacted with has left a deep impression on me. I found the people to be curious, kind, tough, subtle, and fiercely entrepreneurial. Our conversations lead me to appreciate the cultural differences between the U.S. and China while providing a new insight to the common humanity all people share.

The most foreign part of the trip was the language. Chinese mandarin is a very old and complicated language with difficult tones and thousands of characters. Forget memorization, the pronunciation of each syllable can stop you before you even start. It’s more than a little disheartening to stare at a subway map and see nothing but unintelligible symbols. Since then I have vowed to learn as much Mandarin as possible, not only for practical reasons but also because of the nuanced beauty of the language.
This trip was a reawakening of sorts for me. Many of the passions that I’ve held deeply during my life have been lying dormant since I’ve entered college. I had almost forgotten the childlike wonder that fills the soul upon entering a foreign land, an experience that until this summer I could only reach through literature and my imagination. Although we got to see a lot and visit many places (including a bonus day in Beijing) we only scratched the surface of what can be learned in China. I hope to return someday soon and continue the journey that started this summer.

Aaron Mueller

One's conception of other cultures, before exploring them, tends to be generalized and stereotyped. What is true to be Chinese seems so straightforward to a non-Chinese individual; yet, once foot has been set in China itself, all those sweeping ideas are shattered in favor of nuance and complex appreciation (as well as complex questions) of what the culture stands for. Such was my experience this past summer, where I and other students had the opportunity to explore four Chinese cities and the educational institutions therein.

Shanghai was the first of the four. A towering place that makes one feel infinitesimally small, Shanghai immediately overwhelmed me. It was vibrant, fashionable, and energetic—an atmosphere that rivaled the immediate sense of awe that great cities like New York tend to evoke. The people were loud and aggressive, the food was always phenomenal, and the city was full of beautiful lights and sounds. Being a big-city person, I was completely enveloped in the location, for it gave the impression that the world was at one's fingertips as long as one stayed in the confines of the city. West Gate—the trendy restaurant/shopping district near Shanghai University—was certainly as cool as (if not cooler than) Brooklyn; downtown was full of impressive skyscrapers and infrastructure; and the university itself was packed with extremely intelligent students. Perhaps the most shocking feature of the city, however, was that it was essentially built within the past 25 years. Were I ever to return to China, this would be my first destination; I am extremely eager to see how it progresses and continues to grow over the next few decades.

Suzhou was next and most brief leg, our entire experience of it encompassed in a midday trip. One afternoon here could completely ease anyone's mind, for its canals and flora are indescribably serene. I only wish we had had more time to explore the city itself.

Xi'an followed. I had heard nothing about this city before visiting, hence my surprise that it turned out to be my favorite of the four. Between its ancient city walls, web of rivers, and fascinating ancient history museums, this city was brimming with culture. It was the capital of many Chinese dynasties a thousand years ago, before the capital was moved to Beijing. The food here was my favorite by far, for it was the...
spiciest and most daring with its flavors. Hundreds of types of noodles supposedly exist here, and the few types I got to try were all delicious. The Muslim Street market area was more packed with people than any other place I have ever seen, and its smells and sights were pleasantly overwhelming. Culturally and culinarily, the United States could stand to learn quite a few things from this surprisingly vibrant corner of China.

Beijing was our final stop. More than elsewhere in China, a national spirit could be felt here. Many monuments stand commemorating China’s recent leaders and accomplishments, especially in Tiananmen Square and therein at the Gate of Heavenly Peace. While our previous stops had been educational, this city felt more so: the history and culture of the country could be experienced here, as opposed to simply observed or learned.

Amidst our exploration of these cities, we toured the educational institutions of the country. I was shocked to find that, despite the many differences between Chinese and American culture, students of both cultures experience school and university in uncannily similar ways. Both face similar pressures from parents and society to exceed, and over time find themselves overworked and under-rested; both participate in extracurriculars (though Americans more so, admittedly) to impress future employers and/or graduate schools; both are curious about the other, but find many misconceptions along the path to mutual cultural understanding. Talking to these students, there was a natural ease to our conversations due to our similar attitudes toward school, fun, friends, and humor. Given more time, I felt that we could have become great friends with each other.

Indeed, while most of my experience was characterized by amazement at the many spectacles and wonders China offers to the world, what I take home with me is a newfound appreciation of the cultural nuances of this seemingly distant region. While, yes, it is a very different place from the United States, it is also shockingly similar. This experience has convinced me that, at their core, people across the world are fundamentally the same, even if their individual priorities or cultural contexts are superficially unrelatable.

Seeing the real places and people within this soon-to-be-hegemonic superpower has forced me to reconsider the world and my place in it. Americans have often been criticized for being America-centric, and it was not until meeting those who constitute China that I understood what that meant. It always seems, at least to Americans, that the most important events in history and the most amazing places in the world now lie within the United States’ borders. After seeing firsthand the remarkable ambition and results thereof of Chinese students, infrastructure, entrepreneurs, and policies, the world suddenly seems so much bigger and more wonderful. While sobering and scary, it is also enormously exciting to know that, across the world, there are people leading history, largely unaware of us in the same way that many of us are largely unaware of them. One day, I hope that most Americans can learn to conceive of the world in this way and learn, just as I had the chance to, that this totally different place is truly not that different from us after all.
My first view of China was of the ships dotting the ocean, patiently anchored outside of Shanghai. The initial glimpse of land illuminated buildings that shot skyward, relics of rapid development and foreign investment. We landed and it was warm. Despite three days of extremely minimal sleep leading up to this moment, I was surprised at how alert I was. I quickly became used to not being able to read anything or understand what anyone was saying. I wondered if that was what it had felt like to be an infant, before I could read or communicate. Likewise, the Young Leaders trip to China returned me to an infant-like sense of curiosity at the world around me. The cultural immersion was a novel experience and I gained an appreciation of the modern people’s connectedness to their ancient ancestors as well as the interaction between western and eastern culture.

Although it is not possible to summarize a culture in a single word, especially the culture of a nation so large and steeped in history, the word “giving” might come close. I learned of the Chinese’s commitment to showing gratitude and repaying debts; every visit and gesture is acknowledged. This type of gracious and thankful attitude is something that has seemingly fallen out of fashion in western culture; we could desperately benefit from its renaissance. At the schools we visited, the students had gifts prepared for us, making us feel nothing short of welcome. Through these interactions we learned many of the nuances of Chinese etiquette, for example when giving a toast and clinking your cup with someone it is polite to hold your cup lower than theirs, a gesture to humble yourself. You might imagine that this results in amusing situations when each person is attempting to be the one with the lower cup.

These social graces point to a rich and long history. In museums in Xi’an and Shanghai we witnessed artifacts thousands of years old, boasting of an extensively long heritage we Americans cannot begin to claim. In the Forbidden City and Temple of Heaven we traced the footsteps of centuries of emperors and royals. In Beijing, the Great Wall spoke of power and majesty, of defense in the face of battle and of the labor of many bodies and years. The immersion in the ancient warped the experience of time in the present: our interactions in the physical space tied us to the ages of people who had walked here before us, rendering time an obsolete factor.

Through our visit to China, I also gained new knowledge on the more modern development of the country, and how it’s development in the last fifty years closely mirrors the industrial revolution and modernization of the United States but on a dramatically accelerated time and population scale. It was
interesting to see bits of western culture threaded in to the fabric of modern China. We sampled Chinese KFC, McDonald’s and Pizza Hut. I prefer the American versions of KFC and McDonald’s, but Beijing Pizza Hut put its stateside counterparts to shame. It was a sit-down experience with interesting beverages and hot and satisfying pizza. It was fun to introduce ourselves as Kentuckians and for many of the people we met to be familiar with our state; this is a quality I doubt many other states can boast.

I am grateful for this experience of place and immersion in Chinese culture. I gained a deepened appreciation for the progression of time and its effects on the present, evidenced by the Chinese people’s sense of duty their ancestors and the past. The collision of eastern and western culture is perhaps better explained in less violent terms, like the join of complementary puzzle pieces, each lending and edge and internalizing a side through an expansion of franchise or adoption of fashion and some mannerisms and ways of thinking. This trip challenged me to see myself in the context of a global community and I am thankful for the opportunity to grow in this way.

Connor Van Meter

My time in China was populated by a series of unfortunate events, but my overall experience is still painted with broad strokes of odyssey, observation, and overflowing openness.

I found myself sick three times during the trip. Once because I mistakenly ate cherries washed with non-potable water. Despite the unpleasant aftereffects, I found myself still craving the bitter-sweet delight of the red fruit. From belt noodles to dumplings, the food has challenged me to learn how to cook another type of cuisine. I have begun added tomatoes to my morning scrambled eggs since returning. I am still trying to decide what to make next from the countless number of meals we had in China.

The second bout was heat exhaustion caused by racing on the Great Wall outside Beijing during a heat advisory. Common sense failed me that day, but my luck turned when a retired French Navy doctor nursed me on the wall. I went from miserable dog to joking spirits as we enjoyed the serene view of the mountains and valley. My punishment was also a blessing: I was forced to take the time to enjoy the world around me.
My last illness was not of the body but of the heart. My grandfather passed away during the last leg of the trip. I had left my phone on the bus in Xi’an, causing concern for my family. I am thankful to the other people on the trip and the tour company for assisting me in recovering my phone and helping me communicate with my family as we planned my grandfather’s funeral.

While my stay was brief, I have taken China with me and left some of myself behind. I loved learning different customs from our Xi’an guide, Sunny, and my lackluster knowledge of Mandarin was exhaustingly tested by an aspiring translator in elementary school. These experiences would not have been possible without the UKCI Young Leaders program, and I am looking forward to creating more experiences in China in the future.

John Larson

I’ve been turning my journal entry over in my head for a few days—on Jinjinji and Ai Weiwei and China’s supercharged march of progress—and I must say that if I were to write that journal entry now, I don’t think I would be quite as cynical as I was then. I spent my bonus day in Beijing slowly. I started by getting a good breakfast (I was a real pro with the chopsticks at that point and I was proud of how far I’ve come in two weeks), then I moved to a coffee shop to work on my thesis for a few hours, and from there I took a walk around a park not far from our hotel. I sat on a bench and got back to work on my thesis, but I had trouble getting into it so I spent a lot of time daydreaming and looking around.

It was midafternoon and the sky was notably clear. The park was mostly filled with young families—typically three generations were represented—so there were babies running around kicking balls or chasing dogs or blowing bubbles (I swear, for some reason almost every child had a soapy stick for blowing bubbles and I thought I missed a memo somewhere along the line). There was a brass and wind trio behind me playing folk songs: Chinese (I assumed), English, American, and others. They started playing “Danny Boy” so I recorded that because I knew my Irish grandma would love to hear it. The tree canopy was really thick and from the bench where I sat you could only see one building, and you had to really look for it, and you could hear almost nothing—no construction, no honking cars.

So, I was meditating on that Ai Weiwei quote from the other day and though I still think Beijing, as a city, is not very concerned with the lives of ordinary people, I also think there will always be spaces (either carved out by people or mercifully spared the metastasizing tendrils of urbanization) of solace and community. Ai Weiwei’s secluded studio is one, as is the neighborhood of Caochangdi—and all other neighborhoods like it—where the residents are fighting fiercely to protect their way of life. And the park
I was in on our last day, despite its disembodied governmental origins, is one too. So, even if the city grows too large and anonymous to care about the individual struggling within it (perhaps it’s there already), it’s clear to me now that there has always been an inexhaustible human instinct to care for each other. I believe that instinct will persist, here and elsewhere, no matter what happens.

Hayla Ragland

I’d only ever left the United States by way of books, movies, and the occasional day dream. It wasn’t until we physically landed in Shanghai that I fully accepted what was happening or how far we had truly traveled. But even that felt a bit like a dream, like if I let the bus from the airport jolt me too hard I’d be thrust into my bed back home. Getting to experience China at such a young age and in the company of fellow students was truly a gift. I’m so appreciative of the Confucius Institute at UK, the relationship it has fostered between our countries, and its devotion to students—thank you may not have the semantic weight but maybe, xièxie?

The jetlag, combined with my excitement for the trip, did a number on my sleep cycle. For me, each day would begin around three or four in the morning, fidgeting, waiting for the sun to rise so I could strap on my tennis shoes and explore. The sidewalks in China, I’m convinced, are never truly empty. Even at predawn, steam would be flowing out of vendors’ carts, dumplings would be exchanging hands, and people would be walking their dogs alongside joggers and cyclists. The sun would rise to shake colors overtop the whole affair, making it look about as beautiful as it smelled. I’d pause the hip hop in my ears just to listen to the footsteps of the passerby and to the foods bubbling and crackling—they carried a tune of their own.

This was my daily introduction to life in each of the cities we visited, Shanghai, Xi’an, and Beijing. Each of these mornings was followed by visits to sites no less incredible or surprising than the last. One of my favorites was the Banpo Neolithic Village. The museum showcased a lot of utilitarian art. Most memorable to me, of all things, were the fishhooks, which were so fine and formally elegant they could have been mistaken for ivory or porcelain. Because I’m a studio art major I took a special interest in learning about Chinese art throughout the trip and kept my camera close by. Watching principles and motifs present in the ink paintings from Shanghai recur in the gardens at Suzhou and in the architecture of the Forbidden City was really interesting. Semiotics, visual culture, and philosophy seemed to blur into a single unit, and to signal the influence of China’s profound ancient tradition—something we don’t
have in the United States. On the Great Wall I’d enjoyed thinking, whenever I would trip over a stone step, that someone a thousand years older than me had done the same and similarly blamed their sandals.

Abroad, you learn very quickly that people, altogether, are not so different. Traveling to China was one of the greatest lessons in humanism I think I could’ve ever received. Getting to visit different schools throughout the trip played a big part in that. Initially it surprised me how easy it was to connect and have conversations. Even in discussing differences in education and future plans, personal similarities would always emerge, followed quickly with jokes and laughter together. At Beijing Normal University, I met a student whose American name is Vicky and she’s studying film. She wore a yellow sun dress and spoke with a punch that I immediately envied. We talked about filmmakers and photographers and about what being a student of fine arts was like in our respective countries. It stunned me to hear her speak as if pulling lines from conversations I’d had with friends at home, about different challenges and misconceptions. It was empowering for us both I think and we forged a sort of solidarity out our different experiences.