

## China: The Reality of Expectations

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I could ask anyone in the U.S. that has never been to China about what comes to their mind when they hear about China, and guarantee you that most responses will mention the air pollution, communism, or overpopulation. This is what the world expects of a developing country, but if there is one thing that I have learned during my trip abroad in northern China, it is that China is so much more than what we perceive it as. Looking past the smog and televised Chinese propaganda, lies a deep and rich history of China's people and culture. I am so grateful to have had the opportunity to first-hand experience this side of China, often obscured by politics and economics.

The first stop in our cultural trek was Beijing, the country's historical capital. We walked through the Tian an men square and the Forbidden city in awe by the 500 years of dynasties that once stood there. The 8400 rooms, meaningful architecture, and extremely detailed design demonstrated the distinctness of China's history. The primarily red and gold buildings with features of blue and green were common colors used in this period of architecture to represent good fortune and strength. In Chengde, we explored the Qing Dynasty by visiting the structures built by emperor Kangxi. We saw the Buddhist Puning temple and the Summer Mountain Resort, both vast in size and showcasing different parts of Chengde's history. In Qufu, the hometown of Confucius, we learned about Confucius and his ideology. He believed in the six arts: calligraphy, mathematics, horse-riding, archery, music, and rituals. We first visited the Confucius temple, a place where his followers taught and practiced his philosophy. Then we saw the Confucius

mansion, modeled after the forbidden city, where Confucius' disciples lived. And finally, the Confucius forest is what hosted Confucius' and others' grave'.

Full immersion into Chinese culture was the highlight of the trip for me. I learned that the only way to really understand the lifestyle anywhere is to experience it yourself. There is only so much textbooks and videos can teach. Everything was different in China, and it took some getting used to. The food was not your typical P.F. Chang's and hot tea was served at most meals. Another difference, also a popular activity in Chinese culture, is Karaoke (KTV). Every city we went to in China would have multiple KTV places. Our group loved it and went three times during the trip.

I give most of the credit of my cultural understanding to my wonderful host families throughout the trip. Hospitality is highly emphasized in Chinese culture, and I felt it my whole stay. I was not too nervous for the homestays, but actually eager to meet my new family. In Chengde (urban homestay), I really bonded with my 22-year old host sister, Xu Qiu Hong. Every day, we'd talk about the similarities and differences between our homes, schools, and daily life, frequently having to use a Chinese-English dictionary to communicate some words. We did everything together during the day, and would come home in the evening and spend time with our parents. I remember after dinner one night, we walked along a street full of little stand shops, and my host mom basically knew everyone there. We'd stop at every stand as she talked to them, I was so surprised by how many people she knew in this relatively large city. Another fond memory with my family was when they took me to see the Kangxi ceremony, an expensive show about the Qing Dynasty emperor's life, relative to China's history. My family was not very wealthy, but they still wanted me to make the most of my stay. I am so grateful to have had a family who cared about me that much. I was mesmerized by the lights in the mountains, horse-

riding, and the cast of over 400, teaching me about the beloved Kangxi emperor. All these wonderful times we shared built up emotionally, and at the end of our first homestay, I was in tears as we said goodbye to our families.

My village family(rural homestay) in Bu Yang Zhuang was equally hospitable and very generous. I shared a family and home with my friend, Helena. The village stay was a dramatic change from Chengde, so we were both glad to experience it together. We had a little brother named Wang Ming Yuan, and grandparents who stayed with us every day and night. The way of life in the village contrasted every situation we've ever been in. In the village, the community was very close-knit. People would walk to each other's homes and talk, play games, and square dance for fun. The foods we had were also very different, and at night, the village people would go out and hunt cicadas with spears for the next day's meal. It was often difficult for me to communicate with our host grandparents since they spoke in the village dialect, but throughout the homestay I started to understand it better and recognize the different accents. Our host mom would come home in the evenings after work in the city, and I would also talk with her. We would talk about a variety of topics and although I didn't see her during the day, I still felt like we had a strong connection. We even watched Naked and Afraid, a show we both knew of, together on the TV they had. On one of the nights in the village, the kindergarten there put on a big show for us. They do this show every year and had already been practicing for months. It was so amazing watching the whole community come together to welcome us. Our American group also performed on the stage and the support from the whole village was really inspiring. I hope I can one day experience that type of unity again.

The best parts of a trip like this are not the activities you do, or the places you go. It is the people around you who really contribute to the experience. The people I met on this trip are

some of the best people I know, and they became my family this month. We had been through many ups and downs, but the support system we had was incredible. Since day one, everyone was included in activities and everyone's opinions were taken into consideration. We developed friendships that would last forever, bonds that can honestly only be made by dealing with uncomfortable situations together. I will always cherish the endless laughs we shared and the positivity of our group. My best friend on the trip, Meghan, just clicked with me from the start. We always had an entertaining time with each other, whether it be climbing mountains too rigorous for us, singing old-school Taylor Swift, or watching our favorite TV show together. We found the littlest things to make jokes out of that no one else would understand, and loved eating baozi (steamed dumplings) together. I am so fortunate to have met someone like her, a best friend that I know I will keep in touch with forever, no matter how far Cleveland, Ohio, is from Naples, Florida.

Not even the 115 filled pages in my journal can accurately describe my experience in China this summer. I am so lucky to have had such hospitable host families, and I hope I can see them again someday soon, maybe even in the U.S.. Leaving China was unreal for me. I had not felt homesick at all throughout the trip, so it was hard to really believe it. Getting back to America was a reverse culture shock. I cried in the airport, saying goodbye to most of our group as we all parted ways. Not wanting to let go just yet, a few of us went to Chinatown in San Francisco before our domestic flights home. Walking through the streets, we would conjure up the memories and talk about the emotional and physical roller coaster we took. We walked into stores, trying to use our Chinese yuan, our last attempt of holding onto China. After two hours in San Francisco, the rest of us finally said our goodbyes and headed back to our hometowns.

Now back in Naples, I feel so different. When I first got back, in addition to the jet lag, the reverse culture shock was intense. I had developed a strong bond towards China and its people, something I never imagined to be possible. I have only to thank the Naples Council for evoking this part of me by giving me this opportunity. One month in China changed me in so many ways for the better. After coming back, I have matured and have gained so many new perspectives on my community in Naples and the rest of the world. I have become less materialistic and more cognizant of reality. When I hear about China, I don't think about the factories, the one-child policy, or Chairman Mao. I picture the conversations I shared with the locals, the authentic and delicious food I tried, and the rich history of over 5000 years. I prefer to focus on positivity, and on what's in front of me, including the moments I share with others, since that is what truly matters in a healthy and happy life.

Here's a link to a video I made after China:

<https://youtu.be/eNYAmCLIBvc>

