

China: Ethnic Minorities and Contemporary Culture

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My time away from home in the country of China is something that I've found to be difficult to simply put down or record onto paper. Even after what seems like countless attempts, I feel as though my words could never accurately summarize the endless adventures, people, and memories I've encountered during my time on this program. And although I've always found Naples to be a wonderful home to return to, even now I can't help myself from occasionally succumbing to an overwhelming homesickness to the family and home I had made for myself this past month. Nonetheless, I'm happy and grateful for these experiences; and that I am able to retain the lessons and information I've learned for the future.

The program we embarked on focused heavily on the study of China's modern culture, as well as learning about the ethnic minority groups still prevalent in China today. The way in which we were able to learn about these subjects varied. From visiting museums and temples to hands on activity, the diversity in activities offered throughout the trip made every day a new and enjoyable experience. In many cases, our leaders gave us the opportunity and freedom to embark on small excursions in groups and complete simple tasks; usually for the purpose of testing our Mandarin skills through first hand experiences with the Chinese locals.

My group and I had quickly bonded over the experiences we shared and our gradual transition into daily life, as we prepared ourselves for the trips we would take throughout nine different cities in the southern regions of China. Relationships played a large role during this program. We began our journey in the San Francisco International Airport as strangers, and gradually grew to become close friends as we participated in activities such as visiting national landmarks, sharing meals as a large group, and spending nights connecting over the feelings we had developed as the trip progressed. In addition to developing relationships with my group leaders and members, the bonds we were able to form with the Chinese students we were introduced to during our time in urban homestay personally had to be one of the most memorable aspects of the trip.

The thought of living with a host family was something that I, quite frankly, found somewhat nerve racking and overwhelming prior to my trip. In the days leading up to our first homestay experience, I often found myself falling victim to the fear that I would not be able to form any connection with the family that would be taking me into their home. Thankfully, this was not the case at all. From our first family dinner, in which we ate a traditional Miao meal and I had my first introduction to my family's background, I instantly felt accepted and exceptionally grateful that my family was so welcoming. My mother, father, younger sister, and younger brother never failed to help me in any way they could and show hospitality, despite the very

limited methods of communication we had. My fourteen year old sister, Anne, and I developed the closest connection in the family; largely due to the fact that she was the only family member that spoke a small amount of English. Even though she admitted to not being able to understand most things I said, she showed interest in wanting to become better at speaking English and we were able to develop a system in which we spent most nights taking turns teaching each other our native languages. It was during these times, as well as many other moments during the trip, that I appreciated her patience with me. I loved having small family dinners and going on walks with my sister throughout the neighborhood; during which she would introduce me to any family friends and neighbors we would encounter along the way. Life in this area proved to be fast paced, yet exciting. I quickly became accustomed to the city's everyday sights and sounds, along with routines such as taking taxis as a mode of transportation and maneuvering through busy streets and crowds.

Our journey continued from the urban city of Guiyang to the Baibai Maio Village of rural China. It was here that we would learn the most about the topic of China's ethnic minorities, by living in a traditional Miao village for five days. I was lucky enough to have Anne accompany me on this portion of the trip, and to share a host family with her as well. Although both of our rural host parents spent long hours farming out in the fields daily, they were exceptionally kind and welcoming towards the both of us during the time we were able to spend together.

During this period, our morning activities typically consisted of trips to local farmer's markets and older towns, participating in activities that allowed us to create or demonstrate traditional art and music, and sit down lessons that expanded our knowledge of the Miao dialect. One challenge we encountered when entering the villages was the shift from using Mandarin Chinese to the Hmongic languages that were common of the Miao culture. Although many of our students had used Mandarin to effectively communicate up until this point, almost all found difficulty understanding the dialect used within the village. This made communication difficult, predominantly with the older generations. Luckily, some teens and young adults had a thorough understanding of Mandarin that helped us form connections with the local villagers.

After eventful mornings spent with our travel group, we were able to bond with our host families during meals and by accompanying our parents on different farming excursions. As expected, much more of our time here would be spent outdoors participating in rugged travel and activity compared to our time spent in the city. A typical afternoon consisted of hiking back up the mountain to the village, along with a meal hosted at the village chief's home, and spending time either playing games with the village children or helping our host family's farm in rice fields or fish for dinner. I especially enjoyed playing basketball and sports at the nearby elementary school with locals, as well as having the opportunity to learn how to play a traditional bamboo flute from experienced musicians who lived in the area.

The overall experience of living in rural China differed from living in any urban city entirely. One could easily take note of the several notable differences between the two regions; the first being the wider variety of educational opportunities available in the city. In Guiyang, we were introduced to our host families at a local middle school that many of our host siblings attended; and were given the opportunity to tour the school's main buildings. When traveling throughout the city, I was able to take note of the high amount of local universities and schooling available for those in elementary school, junior high, high school, and beyond. When we entered the Baibai Miao village, we were informed that one main building near the center of the village was used as a school for all of the children and young teens in the area. Topics taught were limited to a few core subjects. The facilities provided within the school were not as plentiful as the middle school we were introduced to in Guiyang, but were enough to carry out everyday teaching and education.

Moreover, the differences in sanitation between urban and rural homestay had to be one of the most indelible transitions for a majority of us. Western toilets and showers were not readily available, which required each of the members of our travel group to adjust to lifestyles different to the ones we were accustomed to at home. Each of the houses and buildings throughout the village had some form of electricity, which was mainly used for the purpose of providing lighting. Everyday tasks such as cooking were usually done using traditional methods. I vividly remember an afternoon in which my host sister and I cooked a lunch consisting of fish, eggs, rice, soup, and stir fried vegetables for our host parents. We had used firewood and matches as a source of heat, and prepared each of the dishes separately using a large wok. Earlier that afternoon, we were able to purchase ingredients at one of the local shops, and running water was always accessible. Shopping was not as common in the area as one would typically find in the city. There were only two local shops, which carried tools and everyday grocery items such as milk, eggs, vegetables, fruits, packaged snacks, etc. The process of preparing these different dishes with my host sister proved to be both a challenging and new experience that brought us closer to each other, as well as our host families.

During the time I had spent in cities that contrasted largely from one another throughout China, it had become apparent to me very quickly how life in this country differed greatly from what I was accustomed to back in the United States. It had taken some time for me to adjust to several differences. Some of which included the manner in which Chinese locals conversed with one another, haggling when purchasing items on the streets, or the overwhelming pollution that grew more apparent in bustling, urban areas. However, there were also several moments where I couldn't help but notice subtle similarities between cities such as Shanghai and Beijing, and more urbanized areas of the United States; particularly when it came to areas of business, infrastructure, and innovation. Shanghai, in particular, was an area we often referred to as "China's New York" because of the similarities between the buildings, skyline, and night life. I couldn't help but develop a deep appreciation and fascination for this country as the days progressed.

I wholeheartedly miss the cultural experience China has given me, and everything the country has to offer. If given the chance to relive the experiences I've had this summer, I'd do so without thought- as these have been, undoubtedly, the best of my life. I am grateful to the Naples Council on World Affairs for providing me such a once in a lifetime opportunity, as well as connecting me with lifelong friends and such unforgettable memories.

