Week 1 in China

A Reflection of the Beijing Tour and My First Impressions of Chongqing

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Wednesday, March 15th, 2017: Day 1 in Beijing

Our first day in Beijing began with breakfast in the hotel’s restaurant. The breakfast was a fusion of both Chinese and Western-style dishes, which emphasizes just how westernized the city is. During the drive to the Forbidden City, the tour guide, Jane, spoke a lot about the city of Beijing and its history and policies. I was intrigued by the license plate policy enforced in the city in an effort to reduce pollution and how there are certain days when vehicles whose license plates end in certain numbers are not allowed to be on the road that day. On this day, the vehicles whose license plates ended in one or six were not allowed to be on the road. However, I also learned that some locals own two vehicles, so they can still drive on the streets of Beijing even if one of their cars are not allowed to be driven on a certain day. On a more humourous note, I learned that people who wear green hats are implied to be foolish. If a woman, for example, cheats on her boyfriend or husband, the boyfriend or husband is said to be “wearing a green hat”. If a man cheats on his girlfriend or wife, the girlfriend or wife is said to be “wearing a green hat”.

The visit to the Forbidden City was a learning experience in the sense that I learned about the significance of its history. Essentially, everything about the Forbidden City exists because of its history and that its history gives everything associated with it meaning. I learned of the five doorways leading into the Forbidden City, but that the middle one was reserved only for the emperor and that the only time someone else was able to walk through it was the empress and only on the day of her wedding. Another door was reserved for generals and other individuals of importance while another was reserved for other members of the royal family. In addition, I learned that there are nine thousand, nine hundred, and ninety-nine rooms within the Forbidden City, many which were designated as the residences of the reigning emperor’s many wives. One room was designated as the residence of the emperor, one was constructed solely for the emperor to address his generals, and one was built for the emperor to host meals with individuals of great importance. Furthermore, I learned that the emperor could have about three thousand wives and that some wives died as virgins because the emperor had too many of them to give them all attention. Wives wanted their sons to be emperors and would try to kill the sons of other wives in order to make this happen. Overall, the visit was long, but quite an educational one.

After lunch, we visited the Temple of Heaven. It was enjoyable to have witnessed many locals spending their time there, specifically the elderly playing cards and exercising. We also stopped by a nearby tea house to experience a traditional tea ceremony. I learned that it was appropriate to throw away the first batch of tea and then actually drink the second batch. I was able to taste different kinds of tea and learned that each type of tea served a different purpose. The Ginseng Oolong, for example, aids with memory and kidney health while Pu’er helps with weight loss. In addition, I learned that the proper way to hold a tea cup is to grasp it with the thumb and index finger and to rest the middle finger underneath the cup. Ladies are allowed to stick out their last two fingers, but men are not allowed to do that unless they would like to be perceived as ladyboys. I ended up leaving the tea house with four different types of tea, a porcelain tea strainer, and a little figurine of a boy who pees whenever tea is poured over him.

Afterwards, we decided to see an acrobatic show at a local theatre. I wanted to have a full China experience, so I was in favour of taking the subway to get there. Although there are many lines that make up the subway (around sixteen I believe), the system seems to be well-organized and serves as a convenient mode of transportation in such a large and overly-populated city. The acrobatic show was amazing; it still boggles my mind how five motorcyclists managed to ride in circles inside of a large cage ball without crashing into each other. I, like the rest of my colleagues, was still full from lunch, so dinner was skipped and we rode the subway back to the hotel. Unlike our first trip on the Beijing subway, the second trip was done during rush hour. However, I was surprised at what was considered “rush hour” traffic on the Beijing subway; rush hour traffic on the Toronto and Montreal subways appear to be three times busier compared to Beijing rush hour subway traffic.

Thursday, March 16th, 2017: Day 2 in Beijing

After breakfast, Jane took us to visit the Summer Palace. What astonished me when I first arrived was how frequented the place was by locals, especially the elderly, several who seemed to have occupied themselves with writing Chinese calligraphy and drawing on the stone pathways. One kind gentleman even painted the Chinese symbols for “Canada” and “friend” for us and we took a picture with him and his work. He even remarked how beautiful Victoria was and painted a headshot of her much to the dismay of Altion. I enjoyed walking along the stone path, looking at all of the beautiful calligraphy and drawings done by the locals. It seemed to me that they were painting them for the purpose of making visitors smile and I was certainly one of them.

During the walk around the Summer Palace, I was intrigued by the singing coming from a nearby hill. Out of curiosity, I climbed the hill with Alaura and Michael and came across a large group of locals, around forty of them, huddled around a pagoda and singing songs about the Communist party of China. One of the locals immediately spotted Michael and pulled him into their circle. Soon after, Alaura and I were pulled into the same circle and we all held hands with the locals and started dancing in a circle with them while they sang. Seeing how warm and welcoming the locals are made me smile. Seeing how they spent their free time singing outdoors made me reflect on how Canadians spend their free time indoors on various social media platforms and how their idea of a problem is a lack of Wi-Fi. Seeing firsthand how the Chinese enjoy every minute of their lives outdoors and comparing their lifestyles to those of the Canadians, I realize how selfish we tend to be and how we tend to take all of life’s greatest blessings for granted. It certainly reminded me to appreciate my life and the blessings that I have been given in all aspects. The only thing that I wish was that I could have spent more time exploring the Summer Palace as I did not get to explore half of it.

We visited a jade factory on the way to the Great Wall of China. I learned that jade comes in multiple colours and not just in green. Since I wear my jade necklace every day (except for during this trip when my necklace is sitting back home in Canada), I know that the darker it is, the more valuable it is and that wearing a pale green jade on your skin will allow your body heat to darken the colour of the jade.

Upon arriving at the Great Wall of China, Jane gave us the choice of either climbing the easy part of the wall or the part that was steeper. Being the ambitious person that I am, I joined my colleagues in climbing the steeper part of the wall; either I go big or I go home. The climb was not too bad at first, but I soon began to realize how incredibly out of shape I was in. No amount of classes in Canada prepared me for the climb. On top of that, I was still recovering from laryngitis, so I coughed a lot during the climb. However, I was determined to reach my goal of climbing to the first tower and I did. I was aware of the physical toll that the climb was taking on my body and health, so I decided to stop there, rest, and take in the beautiful view. I recorded some videos for my family and friends back home with the wall in the background. I was astonished to have witnessed young children and elderly locals climb further up the wall than I could without breathing heavily, which also served as a reminder of how out of shape I was in. I waited for Alaura to descend the wall (she made it up to the ninth tower) and we returned to the ground level together. Upon meeting up with Michael, I encountered five individuals who thrusted their cell phones into my hands and asked me in Mandarin to take photos of them with Alaura and Michael. It was not the first time being mistaken for a Chinese, but I just played along and took the photos, even going as far as to count up in Mandarin.

Despite my fatigue and sore legs, I joined my colleagues in visiting the Olympic Park to see the Olympic stadium that was built for the purpose of hosting the Beijing 2008 Olympics. Like with our visit to the Forbidden City and our journey through the subway, we had to undergo a security check before we could enter the park. I did not find it necessary to undergo a security check, especially to enter a place as casual as a park, but I later learned that security was in place in an attempt to prevent any unfortunate incidents from occurring in those local attractions and painting Beijing in a negative light.

Enjoying an authentic Peking duck dinner was the ideal way to end another busy day as well as to enjoy our final night in Beijing. Unlike in Toronto when the Peking duck was carved and served next to the table, the Peking duck in Beijing was served to our table already carved, which seems a bit unusual. Personally, that was unfortunate as I actually wanted to witness the carving of the duck. On the bright side, the dinner was delicious and I was very full from eating many rolls of Peking duck that I barely touched any of the other courses on our table for the rest of the night.

Friday, March 17th, 2017: Day 3 in Beijing

On the way to the airport, I was taken aback by just how smoggy it was in the city. The air was tolerable during our first two days in Beijing and we could still see where we were walking whether it was during our climb of the Great Wall of China or our visit of the Forbidden City. However, on our third and final day in Beijing, the air was so polluted that I could smell it through the walls of the van in which we were riding to the airport. Apparently, Congress left and the factories reopened; thus, polluting the air once more. For the first time since I arrived in China, I wore my face mask because the dirty air was just too much for me to handle, especially since I was still recovering from laryngitis. I’m very grateful that the air was not as polluted during the first two days in Beijing, allowing for me to fully enjoy the attractions that we visited.

Upon arriving in Chongqing, I noticed two things after leaving the airport: in comparison to the locals in Beijing, the locals in Chongqing are more impatient (they use their vehicle horns far too often and when they are not necessary) and the air quality is fresher. In addition, I admired how the buildings constructed on the hilly landscape are emphasized by its many lights.

Saturday, March 18th, 2017: Day 1 in Chongqing

My first day in Chongqing began with breakfast in the hotel’s restaurant. I noted how the breakfast served more Chinese-style dishes rather than Western-style ones. I was not surprised by this given that the hotel is located on the Southwest University campus and caters mostly to Chinese visitors rather than foreigners. In addition, I learned that the Chinese like to drink warm water (the restaurant served warm lemon water) whereas Canadians tend to drink ice-cold water.

After breakfast, I joined my colleagues in a tour of the Southwest University campus. It was quite the workout given that the campus is built on hills and I had to climb many stairs. My sore feet and thighs from the climb up the Great Wall of China made the tour a bit challenging to enjoy. However, I did learn that the campus has two hospitals that cater to the campus community, which I found remarkable because Windsor has two hospitals that cater to the entire city. In comparison to the University of Windsor, Southwest University has more libraries, a lake, and a campus-wide transit system that costs one yuan a ride. There seems to be a lot of emphasis on physical education and maintaining a healthy and active lifestyle judging by the many soccer fields, tennis courts, and parks scattered across the campus. In addition, I learned that Chongqing is made up of four beauties: the mountains, the river, the nightlife, and the women.

Buying food from Southwest University’s cafeterias seems to be a smoother and more efficient process in comparison to buying food at the University of Windsor. At the University of Windsor, you have to collect all of the food that you want and then get in line to pay for it all, whereas at Southwest University, all of the dishes are on display and I simply had to take a dish and then scan my student card to pay for it. In addition, a meal at the University of Windsor can cost anywhere from six to ten dollars whereas a meal at Southwest University can cost anything from ten to twenty yuan (two to four dollars). With regards to the food at Southwest University, I mentally braced myself for the spiciness that would have my nose running and my mouth flaming. However, to my astonishment, I was able to tolerate the spiciness as long as I simultaneously ate a spicy dish with a neutral dish (i.e. spicy beef and tofu paired with steamed eggplant). The icing on the cake was how delicious the food was.

A trip to a small grocery store followed lunch and I was ecstatic to come across these small pebble-like cookies that I have not eaten since I was a child. I used to purchase them in a local oriental store, but then they stopped being sold, so for me to find them in Chongqing was a big deal, so much so that I bought a huge bag of them for ten yuan.

After a much-needed nap at the hotel, I got the chance to meet some of Dr. Yibing Liu’s top teacher candidates and introduce myself to them. I was surprised and taken aback when ten of them surrounded me immediately and asked me if they could add me on WeChat. They accompanied my colleagues and me to the large supermarket nearby during which they were so keen to learn more about me, the University of Windsor, and Canada. To be honest, I felt like a celebrity. At the same time, I was very interested to learn more about them, Southwest University, and the education system in China and the walk to and from the supermarket was the perfect opportunity for me to ask them questions regarding those subjects. My first impression of them was that the teacher candidates were very kind, welcoming, and willing to assist us in anything that we needed. When I said that I needed to learn how to load yuan onto my student card, a bunch of them jumped at the opportunity to help me and I appreciated their assistance. To be honest, their kindness and offers of assistance are making it easier for me to adapt to life here in Chongqing.

Sunday, March 19th, 2017: Day 2 in Chongqing

After breakfast, I got the chance to visit the Chongqing Nature Museum in the Beibei District. We started exploring exhibits as a group, but gradually began to split up into smaller groups for the rest of the visit. While exploring with Alaura, I was incredibly fascinated by the environmental exhibit, especially the butterfly and panda displays.

Upon returning to the hotel, I joined the group for lunch at one of the on-campus cafeterias. I find that my tolerance for spicy food is gradually increasing and I am hoping to build up a good tolerance for spicy food by the end of the trip.

After a quick nap, I joined Dr. Xu and the rest of my colleagues to discuss our trip thus far, what we can do to promote the Reciprocal Learning Program to incoming teacher candidates, and how to help incoming teacher candidates from Southwest University participating in the program to adapt easier to life in Canada and in Windsor. This discussion gave me a lot to think about with regards to my new role as the President of the Education Society and what we can do to support all of the incoming teacher candidates. I definitely want to host more social events throughout the school year for our Windsor teacher candidates from both years of study to get to know each other. I would also like Alaura, Michael, Altion, and Victoria to be present at these socials to serve as familiar faces to the incoming teacher candidates from Southwest University. When I return to Windsor, I fully plan to meet with the Vice President of the Education Society over the course of the summer break to discuss this matter further.

I was glad to be invited to Professor Gong’s apartment to experience an authentic Chinese family dinner. The minute we arrived, I was ushered to sit down and to help myself to some of the fruits on the table. The professor’s sister was gracious enough to travel two hours from her residence to teach us how to make wontons and I found that making wontons from scratch was a wonderful experience, especially after tasting them in the wonton soup during dinner. I was taken aback by the ten courses or so laid out before us on the table. The professor insisted that we eat first. Every time a dish would end up empty, her sister would not waste a second and refill the dish immediately. Eventually, I became full. I learned from this experience that what made Chinese families happy was knowing that their guests liked the food and that they left their residence with full bellies, both which were satisfied by the dinner experience. As we left, the professor insisted that we take fruit back to the hotel with us. It amazes me the extent to which Chinese families go to take care of their guests. The fact that all of the Chinese locals whom I have met thus far seem willing to take care of us makes me less homesick.

We ended the night with a walk along the streets to take in the Chongqing nightlife. I spotted a group of two dozen ladies dancing on the sidewalk. When Chengkai and Beibei suggested that we go play billiards, I was a little hesitant at first given that I’m not very skilled at the game; however, as the night went on, I was having a lot of fun and I ended up winning a game against Alaura. During the walk back to the hotel, I could not help but reflect on the Chongqing nightlife. From the ladies dancing on the sidewalk to the billiards games that we played, it amazes me just how much fun we can have without technology. I’m glad that we left our access to social media back in Canada, so we can really indulge in our experience here in China. Personally, the trip seems to get better with each passing day and I look forward to seeing what else will unfold over the course of next week.