Experiencing China 2017

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Tobogganing down the Great Wall of China was not what we’d expected to be a few short months after receiving a routine email from the Academic Office. An invitation from Tsinghua University in Beijing offered the chance to apply for two scholarship places on its international Experiencing China programme, but other than generous support from the college’s Santander Travel Fund there was little more detail to go on. The opportunity to visit a country of such importance, prestige and oftentimes mystique, though, was compelling enough. The Experiencing China programme brought together 260 students from over 20 countries to study contemporary social issues in China as a way to understand more of the country and its people. For us, a Linguist returning from Jordan and a Mathematician returning from unfortunately nowhere, it meant a new challenge and a rare chance to experience the country from the dual perspectives of policy and people.

The course lasted two weeks, and comprised a taught series of keynote lectures on key pieces of China’s history and governance in the first week, followed by seminar sessions and field trips focusing on one of seven social topics culminating in a report and presentation day in the second week. Punctuated by sightseeing and free time slots, it aimed to present a challenging academic syllabus alongside an internationally-focused introduction to Beijing and wider China. Attending a government-sponsored programme at a University with a history of harbouring liberal campaigners and activists, we were unsure what to expect. We were keen to see how thorny social issues and policies both domestically and internationally were addressed and experienced under President Xi, and the extent to these would be discussed freely. Equally, we each had our own interests in the trip – Millie hoped to broaden her travel experiences and build on her year abroad, whilst getting a sense of how university life in China compares to the UK, while Benjamin was interested in learning more about China’s place on the world stage, and the role played by Eastern and Confucian thought its society and government. Nonetheless, the draw of Chinese food, spectacular sights and the chance to meet and work with many nationalities from all over the world was something we both looked forward to, and it didn’t disappoint.

Arriving in Beijing and at the University already brought its surprises. The sky looked a stubborn English grey despite the sweltering heat, and though the air felt fine to breathe, what turned out to be the infamous Beijing smog was astoundingly prolific, and we counted ourselves lucky not to be visiting in the winter months, where visibility can be down to a few metres. We were welcomed to the enormous International Centre at Tsinghua: four whole accommodation blocks housing exchange students and summer programmes like ours, and dedicated canteens serving a melange of Chinese foods. Though eventually working out the canteen stamp-cards and managing a first-night
Peking Duck mountain was an enormous success, the next morning’s breakfast was a culinary whirlwind too far, and your authors sheepishly resorted to dorm room porridge for the remainder of our stay. That first morning brought a truly bizarre surprise in the form of eternally laid-back ex-Pembroke visiting student Liam Gennari, who appeared completely unannounced, having graduated from his home University of Pennsylvania that summer. After several minutes of speechless confusion at the coincidence, we were delighted to have Liam back to be our personal tour guide and political commentator for much of the rest of the trip.

The keynote lecture series invited leading professors from the University to address the whole programme on topics covering the environment, the economy, Chinese foreign policy and Chinese social and philosophical history in the 20th Century. The lecturers held half-day sessions and spoke expertly on their fields. We saw discussions of the problems of Beijing’s smog; nationwide energy production and the move to nuclear; the regional disparities in industry and development; and astounding figures on China’s ‘economic miracle’. For us without much understanding of China’s move from Dynasty to Communism and into the modern Market Socialism, a tour through the history of China’s political and social development was fascinating. Understanding the role of Confucius’ teaching in the social structure of China today and the enduring legacy of Mao Tse-Tung, whose enormous portrait still hangs above the gate to the seat of power at the Forbidden City, gave great insight into government and people. It was sometimes in answering – and sometimes not answering – questions from the other participants that the lecturers told most.

Many of the assembled who were Masters’ or higher level students of many disciplines and a few had studied China extensively, and often discussions outside class gave us the chance to talk through a number of the key conflicts in international and domestic policy. One of the standout lectures was that on China’s foreign policy, which touched on the development of China from a divided country of warring factions to a unified but repressed and isolated communist state and then into the central, outward-facing, global superpower it is today. The hugely ambitious One Belt One Road initiative, set to be one of the largest infrastructure projects ever completed and designed to open major new trade routes westwards was a very current point of discussion, as was the drive by President Xi’s government to fill the vacuum left by withdrawing western powers and cement China’s international authority. Responding to a question about the future of the Taiwan problem, the quietly-spoken and friendly lecturer left the auditorium quietly stunned by a barely veiled threat in the case of western military intervention in an open Taiwan-mainland conflict. He stated flatly that American forces would be met with ‘a far greater means of producing armaments’ that would ‘defeat the American and end their global hegemony’, after which there wasn’t much to say.
The overall structure of the programme allowed us to combine the keynote lectures and cultural programme with a specialisation of our choice, with options ranging from women’s issues to the industry frontier, education and architecture. On top of receiving broad and contextual introduction to China’s political and economic development, we participated in a series of more specialised seminars and fieldwork trips relating to our focus group. We had both selected urbanisation, and worked on a variety of issues surrounding urban development in modern day China, not limited to:

- The key differences between government- and community-led urban development initiatives
- The ecological and social sustainability of revitalisation projects
- Techniques for the preservation of historic areas in Beijing
- Opportunities for repurposing run-down or disused industrial sites

Over the course of the programme we had the opportunity to visit a number of sites, each of which exhibited a different aspect of China’s urban development. In the Qianmen area we saw the contrast between a highly commercialised and international central shopping area and the surrounding residential neighbourhoods. The restored city centre also provided a valuable introduction to the renovation techniques traditionally used in China, which in this case involved the demolition and reconstruction of the original site in order to fully replicate its prior appearance. However, the areas which showed the least economic potential as tourist or commercial sites, i.e. the neighbouring Hutongs, had received very little investment or preservation efforts.

The Shougang Group renovation was also of particular interest, as it illustrated the potential for repurposing and renovating formerly industrial areas. The group went on to use this site as an example of a government-led urban planning project, which has been driven by the external factor of a major international event. It was interesting to see how original elements of the site are due to be preserved in the renovation, for example the repurposing of a blast furnace as a steel museum, and the installation of a snowboarding ramp in a former cooling tower. This preservation of industrial relics suggests a change in patterns of restoration since the project in the Qianmen area took place. Rather than completely rebuilding the site, the designers are making an effort to incorporate existing features.

The final two areas we visited were the Tiancun suburban redevelopment and the Cultural and Creative Industry Cluster in District 798. Both of these sites were informative examples of the power of community-led development programmes. In Tiancun, the area had been selected for the construction of a new community centre, which provided educational, recreational and sporting activities for local residents. The concept was based on the idea that after initial government
investment, the community would upkeep and maintain the centre and its services. The development in District 798 arguably follows the opposite trend. The revitalisation of the area originally occurred as a result of the high number of artists migrating to the area, largely due to the low rent and living costs, and innovating new creative industry there. When the government decided to invest in cultural and creative industry, District 798 received recognition and investment as a result of the already thriving community. However, this increase in funding led to local price inflation, and in many cases the original artists were priced out of their own communities. Therefore, by comparing the Tiancun project with District 798 we arguably see two contrasting outcomes: in Tiancun the residents have taken ownership of the investment in their local area, whereas in District 798 the autonomy was taken away from the artists who originally initiated the change.

Of the several speeches that we heard regarding urban planning during the two weeks, the two that arguably captured the most interest were the talks about Wuzhen Smart City and the Rural Renaissance and Rural Planning. The Wuzhen Smart City project is renowned for successfully bridging the gap between historic area preservation and the introduction of new technologies in a way that previous projects have arguably failed to achieve. This now “symbiotic” town is still characterised by its traditional river-based and agricultural industries. However, these services are interspersed with the introduction of innovative technologies. The use of the internet for public services, shops and everyday activities facilitate a higher standard of living with minimal effort, as well as attracting global attention. The project planners have made efforts to minimise the disruption of traditional features in the process, creating a new fusion of “water town” and “smart town” with a competitive edge in the tourist sector.

The rural planning talk was also especially interesting, as it drew attention to the complex history of rural planning in China. The introduction of non-government, community-based and market-driven development projects (since 2012) arguably reflect current trends in urban planning, and the recent effort to blend urban and rural systems (since 2014) implies that the two fields are becoming more closely aligned. The complex rules surrounding land ownership and citizenisation for migrants between rural and urban areas raises an important discussion about the ethics of urban/rural development and population management, and also emphasises the importance of investing in both urban and rural areas in order to prevent mass migration between the two.

As these examples illustrate, the programme provided a remarkably in-depth coverage of recent trends in urban development and planning in and around Beijing. By engaging with so many varied case-studies and hearing from experts in the field at Tsinghua University, we were able to optimise
the incredible opportunity of being in Beijing, and travel as extensively as possible within the two-week period.

The programme was, however, not limited to academic field-work and lectures. Some of the trip’s highlights were the opportunities to travel around the city as tourists and experience some of Beijing’s most beautiful sites. From the Great Wall of China to the Forbidden City, The Temple of Heaven and the Summer Palace, the city is steeped in ancient history, and even in the short times we had off we were able to witness an astounding amount of culture and heritage. Particular highlights include a visit to the Laoshe tea house in Beijing, where we enjoyed a range of performances including traditional tea pouring and shadow puppetry. We managed to explore the region surrounding Tiananmen Square and the Meridian Gate, before climbing Jingshan hill fuelled by trolley-roasted sweet potato and looking out over the Forbidden City in its entirety. These opportunities to appreciate China’s ancient history provided a notable contrast to our studies in modern urban development, but together helped to inform a more complete picture of Beijing as a historic evolving city.

In all, the Experiencing China programme certainly delivered on its promises. The opportunity to take a tight focus on China and on the issues surrounding Urbanisation and urban growth in such a motivated and stimulating group was fantastic. We learnt much we never knew there was to be learned about urban planning and development, but were delighted to balance it out with newfound skills in Chinese calligraphy, incredible visits to temples and monuments, and about six Chinese words between us. We are immensely thankful to the Santander travel fund for its part in enabling us to live out such a rare and memorable introduction to such an important piece of the international community, and hope many other can benefit from its generosity. We are also extremely grateful for the sponsorship we received from Tsinghua University to take part, and we’d urge anyone interested in China to look out for the programme next year and make the very most of it!