After hearing for the first time about the programme and getting in touch with people who have been to Tsinghua or similar programmes in China, what could be known about the programme turned out to be the same as what could be known about China, without having seen it, more generally – very little. At the same time, even what we know seems difficult to judge or to put into context – things just seem so different. The unexpected had motivated me before and it had never disappointed me, I thought and thus decided to apply for this 2-week-programme. In what follows I want to not only share with you my experiences throughout the summer school but also especially how the intense time has shaped my understanding of China and has put a widely spread Eurocentric mind-set into perspective. And since one sentence in the last year’s report was one of the best advices I could have possibly imagined for my time there, I would recommend you keep reading if you are interested in the programme yourself.

The two-week programme is an international, multidisciplinary introduction to China. It aims to achieve its goal by combining lectures given by Tsinghua professors, with field-trips and other cultural experiences. The programme is divided into eleven different tracks to which participants can apply after being admitted to the programme. Topics include Chinese geography, Chinese history, Education, Economics, Environment, Female issues, Urbanization and Architecture. Each track is headed by a university lecturer that acts as a senior tutor and is supported by current international and domestic Tsinghua students who are responsible for accompanying student groups on most field trips and to other activities. While the general atmosphere is supposed to be relatively relaxed and open, it quickly became clear that there is an ambition for a more academic summer school in the back of many organizers’ heads – in some tracks more, in some tracks less. Over the two weeks, every student is therefore supposed to produce a “final deliverable”. This year this took the format of a website, reports, presentations and quite often posters. By Tsinghua the programme is described as an opportunity for “students from different backgrounds to understand and know the basic knowledge of contemporary Chinese issues”. The aim is to develop students’ “ability to use interdisciplinary knowledge and means to comprehensively analyse contemporary Chinese issues”. The organizers are continuously, and it seems almost exponentially, increasing the number of participants totalling around 400 this year.
On the side of logistics, Tsinghua University is covering accommodation and most living expenses although everyone decided to spend money on food and drinks off-campus at some point. Accommodation quality is well above Chinese standards. Domestic students who live on campus typically have 8-bed-dorms with a shared bathroom and little to no privacy. Being used to Western student accommodation, rooms were still quite a shock to many. Soon, most people however realized that it is more the very different appearance that was shocking rather than the actual room as hygiene standards etc. were quite high. Daily cleaning service, a receptionist who helped people get taxis and many more advantages were soon not to be missed. Only the rather thin mattress was something I believe nobody got used to. Food on campus is heavily subsidized which also means that is obviously very Chinese. While those university canteens are an experience, after a few days most people realized how much they actually miss a different kind of food in a different atmosphere. Overall, however, the canteen food is of surprisingly high standards.

One important point to be aware of: There is a lot happening on campus at any time, other people are used to having foreigners around, the programme is not too tightly scheduled and organizers are not protective at all. Thus, there was less of a community atmosphere. One becomes part of normal campus life within a few hours and is more considered a regular student. So, while it is a separate programme, the expectation is that students manage their own life on campus rather than following a strictly organized schedule.
The first week started with general introductions and a few keynote lectures that brought all the tracks together. Especially the perspective of Chinese professors, who had often lived in the West for longer than most participants are old, provided quite reflected insights. What already became clear in the very first lecture and developed as a pattern were the clear signs that not everything could or should be said publicly. It happened more than once that a Q&A session ended a lot earlier than planned after some sensitive topics came up. Despite that, lecturers managed, even without answering those questions directly, to bring the messages across that they would like to and that participants were interested in.

Not really knowing what to expect from my track choice (INDUSTRY FRONTIERS), I quickly realized that our tutor, a former MIT researcher, was taking the programme much more seriously than most other professors. We were expected to produce one of each of the deliverables, while other groups sometimes were not even producing a single one. On the other side, he was very knowledgeable of the technology frontiers in China and related social impacts. Talking us through how a few technology firms basically provide an ecosystem with every service that the typical Chinese citizen needs, the whole group felt overwhelmed and a bit shocked by our ignorance of technological advancements beyond the West. On the second day, we formed groups within our track to work on separate topics together. Being interested in how China grows innovative start-ups, I ended up with
five other guys and the plan to look into founding options for start-ups. Later on the same day we were already able to get first-hand-insights from our visits at business parks, innovation labs and start-up-incubators.

On the third day, we were taken on a government-sponsored day trip. Chinese party cadre wearing the pins of the Communist Party almost outnumbered us. Visiting a park, an urban planning centre and innovative urban development areas we got an overview over what the Communist Party wants to achieve with regard to urbanization in the Beijing area over the next decades. After my stomach decided to not like the Chinese food anymore I had to end that day’s field trip earlier than planned and recovered for another day afterwards. After surviving the first week despite my weak stomach, the weekend’s schedule included (voluntary) trips to the Great Wall and the Forbidden City.
While the great wall was definitely impressive, my body decided that the combination of almost 40° C and almost 100% humidity was too much forcing me to spend most of the day trip indoors. Unfortunately, after being close to collapsing the same evening, I had to spend the next days in my room and could only participated in few of the scheduled events. However, since our track’s deliverables were not necessarily based on our lectures or field trips, I was able to work from my room and worked on funding case studies. Especially since station-less sharing bikes appeared in Oxford last summer, I became interested in those companies’ business model and we decided to use ofo and mobike as a case study to explore funding opportunities in recent years. With many field trips providing rather closely related insights, I think I was still able to benefit almost as much as others despite missing a few days. On the last day, I was also able to catch up with what I had missed and visit the political centre of current and historic China – the Forbidden City, Tianmen square and surroundings.

Overall, China was eye-opening for me with its dynamics, its impressive scale for almost everything and the close link of technological and social development. That leaving a Eurocentric perspective a bit more often can be beneficial, has been in my head before but my time at Tsinghua has shown me the urgency for that. While it sometimes seems so clear to us what China and Chinese people can learn from us, I think we need to reflect much more often on what we can learn from them. Going forward, I hope to explore those issues further, both from the West but definitely also during future trips to China.

I want to especially say thanks for the support I received both from Tsinghua University but also in Oxford. Without the generous funding, it would have been impossible for me to participate. As mentioned earlier, I still remember one thing from the report of last year’s Pembroke participants – something like “we decided to have dorm room porridge instead”. I hope something in my report will be as useful for future participants as that insight has been for me over the last weeks.