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Comparing the cities in China

Shanghai is beautiful. Coming into the airport, I see a sprawling metropolis. When we were first coming to Shanghai. I was under the impression that Shanghai was a relatively young city and that there wasn’t much history involved and that most of the history that did exist was super recent. It wasn’t a special economic zone (SEZ) until 1991. Looking at the skyscrapers in Pudong made it seem like it was an SEZ for far longer. So many skyscrapers and high tech buildings in one concentrated area. It was hard to fathom the fact that all the buildings were semi-new. But what really caught me is that looking right across the bund there were buildings that were 100 years old. It seemed that old and new transitioned seamlessly and formed a healthy relationship to form the city. Going throughout Shanghai. I keep on realizing the fact that it being a super recent city with very little history was super misguided. The event that we did the oldest historical context was the Yu Garden, which was built in 1559 during the Ming Dynasty. 1559 is still old, older than the entire existence of the United States. It wasn’t just the Yu Garden that captivated the age of Shanghai, it was that whole area. The Bazaar around it, the narrow streets, and the ancient architecture also showed the fact that this city had more history then people give credit for. If a garden and a surrounding area was warranted being built in that area in the middle of the Ming Dynasty. Then it must have been at least somewhat important city at that time. What really captured me was the fact that how diverse the city was. It wasn’t just during the Ming dynasty that the city had significant locations for. The fact that Shanghai had former residences of Sun Yat-Sen and Song Ching-ling during the Republic of China. It also had the meeting spot for the first assembly of the Chinese Communist Party in the French Concession also show its importance during the Republic of China as well. Again debunking the myth that Shanghai is a new city with little History

The common theme that I have noticed all throughout China and what every city we visited had in common was the relationship between the past and the future was always strong. Although China had the reputation, especially during the reign of Mao Zedong, of looking forward instead of backward. It always appeared that the past always had a role in determining the future. All these historical sites were thoughtfully preserved and built around, not on top. The fact that giant cities with towering skyscrapers and wall to wall buildings would always have the giant breaks for acres upon acres of preserved land always marveled me. The size of the Forbidden City, Temple of Heaven, the Buddhist temples we visited in Beijing, Shanghai, and Xi’an. One area that really struck me as a interesting way of integrating old and new was the examination sight in Nanjing. The plaza around it with old style buildings, but in these buildings had KFCs, Ice Cream parlors, Grocery Stores, Dine in Restaurants, and thrift stores. Another thing that helped me understand China’s relationship with the past and the future was Olympic Park in Beijing. The stadium was designed in the shape of a circle as representation of ancient interpretation of the heavens. And a stadium is basically a display for the heavens. The natatorium being called “The Water Cube” because a square is ancient representation of Earth. They made the Olympic village and a man-made river on both sides of the park were designed to look like dragons, a sign of protection, to watch and guard the games. These areas I thought was the most captivating in terms of understanding China. Most countries that deal with rapid modernization have an identity crisis of sorts. But it appears that China embraces the change while at the same time not forgetting their past or where they came from. It’s sort of a magical feeling the fact that they in modern day they can look forward and backward at the same time.

One aspect of every city in China that we visited that isn’t common in the United States is that Chinese Cities always have a relationship with Nature. I learned during the trip that this was because of the Daoist concept of Yin and Yang. It seemed like every Chinese city always had plenty of greenspaces, landscaping, trees, and pseudo parks. I was surprised by this for two reason. One, the stereotype of China for people in the United States is that they are incredibly environmentally unfriendly. Although they do sometimes have an issue with issue with air quality, it seems like nature and environment play a pivotal role. Another reason I was surprised is that although this stereotype exists, it appears it does better than the United States in terms of Integrating nature. Nature in Chinese cities appeared to be spread out and gradual, whereas in the United States it’s all concentrated into a few areas (Central Park in New York, Golden Gate Park in San Francisco, Boston Common) leaving a lot of spaces to just pure concrete and building with the occasional small tree on the sidewalk. The amount of symbolism in Chinese culture I think led to Nature being integrated into cities more because various aspects of Nature always have some sort of historical meaning.

One city that really took me by surprise was Xi’an. I was under the impression that Xi’an was nothing more than an ancient capital and was only known for its historical sights. I learned throughout the trip that Xi’an is an advanced city that only slightly lags Shanghai and Beijing. I thought it would a city with mostly Chinese People, few tourists, and not many knowing English. The city had a bunch of Westerners from both the United States and Europe which really caught me by surprise because Xi’an doesn’t seem as hot button as Shanghai and Beijing. But Xi’an’s rich history, I think, brought many people to the city. Xi’an was the capital of 13 dynasties and its historical significant always showed. The Terra Cotta Warriors, the Big Goose Pagoda, The Grand Mosque, and Emperor Huangdi’s memorial all showed the historical significance of Xi’an

I always knew about China’s Lui people and Muslims in China. But I knew little about the vast influence they have on Chinese culture. Xi’an and Yan’an both had a very apparent Muslim culture. One thing that really surprised me is that the University visit we did had a special halal dining area for Muslims to eat at to help with their dietary restrictions. Another thing that struck me in awe is that when we were walking the streets of Yan’an, there was like a food wagon gathering, some of which were serving either halal meat or Muslim food. The Lui grand Mosque and the Muslim quarter in general really gave me the opportunity to see Muslim influence in China. Something I hadn’t known much about before the class.

Overall, my china trip was one of the most enriching experiences I’ll ever have in my life. All the sights we saw and the experiences I had were enriching. Visited 6 different cities helped me see the whole picture of China. Had we just visited just Shanghai, or just Beijing, my perception of China would be completely different. But going to all these cities helped me see China as a whole.