Study Abroad Reflection: Shanghai, China

By Channing Merritt

It has been two months since I lived in and walked the streets of Shanghai, China, but each and every day I still think about my experience or smile about the memories I have made. My emergence into the culture of China was unlike anything I have ever done, and it has provided me with confidence and new perspectives. The many highlights of my semester abroad include exploring the extremely dynamic city of Shanghai, learning from experienced industry workers, and traveling to Beijing, The Yellow Mountains, and Xi’an.

The first time that I stepped onto the streets of Shanghai that were surrounding Donghua University, I immediately felt excited for all the adventures that were sure to come. I was taking pictures at every corner as if I was trying to prove to myself that I actually traveled all the way across the world. It was an unbelievable feeling, and I was so happy and thankful for the experience. During this first walk around the city, we explored the many food vendors and small fashion boutiques in the area. It was this day that I ate my first Baozi. Essentially, a baozi is a steamed bun stuffed with any time of meat, mainly pork, or vegetables. I was a little weary initially because we barely understood the food menu at this time and had no way of communicating with the vendor. After a series of pointing and hand gestures, I received my baozi and took my first bite. This was the first authentic food of China that I tried, and I do believe it was one of the best. Because of this, I indulged in many baozi’s during the semester, and I find myself craving them even now. Below are images depicting this first experience within Shanghai, China.
It is interesting to look back on my first experience ordering food in Shanghai and then compare it to my experiences after being in the city for a month. I quickly learned important key words or phrases such as “Wo yao” (I want) or “Wo bu yao” (I do not want). Knowing phrases like these and quickly becoming acquainted with the new environment provided me with comfort and stability.

Along with exploration of the city came further exploration into the fashion and textile industry. The course that I believed pushed me the most was International Product Development. It was taught by an instructor who had first-hand experience working in this field and required a semester long project. The project required us to introduce an American fashion brand into China and create a Spring Summer 2016 collection. With this collection we were asked to create technical packs for each garment. As a Brand Management and Marketing major, I did not have much experience with technical packs and I looked at this project as a chance to learn. I enjoyed gaining further knowledge and experience with that part of the development process as well as applying what I was learning about the Chinese consumer into a fashion collection. Below is a depiction of my group’s final collection for our chosen brand, Pacsun.
This project, along with all of the other classes, emphasized the importance of adapting to your specific international market while also remaining true and cohesive to the original brand image. In addition, professional guess speakers from industries such as the luxury market opened my eyes to many aspects of the fashion industry that I have never thought about. These things include the impact that the Asian market is currently having on luxury segments. Overall, the academic setting enhanced my international knowledge on the fashion industry and allowed me to connect with the industry.

Outside of the classroom, every student in the program was able to travel around China. The first trip we took was a 4-day Beijing trip that was incorporated into our academic program. During the trip we had the opportunity to visit many historical sites such as The Forbidden City, Summer Palace, The Temple of Heaven and The Great Wall Of China. Walking up the Great Wall was an amazing and surreal experience. I have always read so much about this wonder of the world, but I never imagined that I would have the opportunity to be so connected to the history and the culture. There was an overwhelming feeling of serenity that the Great Wall of China possessed, and it was one of the main highlights of my entire semester in China.

Through trend forecast and research on the Chinese consumer, my group created a final collection that strongly incorporated patterns and a combination of earth tones and bright colors. We believed that the above collection would work well for our target market.
Another trip that we had the opportunity to take was a 4-day vacation to The Yellow Mountains. This trip was organized by Donghua University and tailored towards international students. Activities included hiking The Yellow Mountains, taking a boat around the mountainous area and stopping at multiple ports and visiting Hong Village. The interesting aspect about this trip was that our tour guides and leaders mainly spoke mandarin, so it gave us further opportunity to really try to learn and understand the language. I found myself understanding a lot more that I thought I knew, and it was amazing to realize how much you can gain from a full cultural immersion.

I was ecstatic to be on the Great Wall of China as well as surprised at the steepness of the climb.

When I first came to NC State, I never imagined that I would get the chance to raise up the Wolfpack sign on the Great Wall of China. It was an experience like no other, and I am glad I was able to share it with fellow students.

Although we found ourselves in the middle of a massive rainfall while hiking The Yellow Mountains, I was still able to capture the beauty and intriguing structures of the mountains.
The last excursion that I took was with just one other NCSU student. We took a 16-hr overnight train to Xi’an, China and stayed in a hostile for a few days. Xi’an is an ancient city located in the middle of the country. The travel there was an experience in itself as we both seemed to be the only foreigners aboard and we had never taken an overnight train previously. We ended up making friends with some of our bunk mates and using it as an opportunity to better our Chinese language and learn more about the culture. My favorite part about the trip to Xi’an was biking around the ancient city wall and seeing the Terracotta Warriors. The Terracotta Warriors are 2,000 year old clay sculptures of ancient Chinese warriors. These figures were buried underground surrounding the emperor’s tomb. It was believed that by doing so, the warriors would follow with the emperor into the afterlife. In the 1970’s the Terracotta Warriors were discovered, and presently, there are still more to find. Being able to visit historical areas such as this made me so grateful for the opportunity that the College of Textiles has made available. *If someone told me a year ago that I would be able to travel and navigate China myself, I would have never believed them. This trip to Xi’an really proved the confidence and new perspectives that I have gained through my time abroad.*

This picture shows only some of the thousands of sculptures and clay figures found buried underground. Understanding the Chinese culture allowed me to appreciate and respect this amazing piece of history.
Ultimately, my experience abroad was better than I could have imagined, and I hope to return to China in the future. *I believe that I am a better student and a better person because of this experience and I am truly grateful and honored to attend a school in which these opportunities are readily available.* I hope to apply the knowledge I have learned about international marketing, merchandising and product development to my future career in the fashion industry. This experience is surely to positively affect my life both personally and professionally.