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Sustainable Urbanism

Before traveling to China, I had never been outside of the country. I got an email one day stating that there were open seats available in a study abroad class to travel to Beijing. I looked into it and realized this trip would fit perfectly into my academic and co-op schedule. The weekly classes and lectures really prepared us for the Chinese culture. We learned a lot about how China and Beijing cultivated into what they are today. To truly understand the Chinese way of life, we had to have first-hand experience in the country. This was not something that could be taught by our teachers.

Before leaving for the trip, I checked my notes and various websites in order to figure out what to bring to China. I also looked into what I should expect while I was over there. The blog postings on the class website really prepared me in terms of what to bring, how to stay in contact with family, and what to expect during my travel. I thought this was a good idea as a homework assignment. Originally, I had planned on bringing American dollars over to China and exchanging the cash at the airport. On the flight over, I heard some students discussing the fact that getting money out of an ATM had a better exchange rate. So I ended up doing a little bit of both. I ended up going back to the ATM three or four times. I wasn’t sure how the phone situation was going to be. So I just decided to message my family when I arrived and then didn’t use my phone again. I used the free Wi-Fi provided to communicate the rest of the trip.

Through this course and the study abroad experience, I learned a lot about sustainability and urban development. I am going into my fourth year of Urban Planning, so I had a pretty good idea of what sustainable cities required. But the first-hand experience in a city like Beijing is something you can never learn in school. I have taken numerous classes and heard many lectures about the effects of urban development and sustainable cities. The benefits and obstacles were all just words to me before traveling to China. I realize now that there are many more factors involved in designing a sustainable city. The biggest obstacle in China is the population increase. There are so many people in Beijing, using so many resources and it is difficult to implement sustainable resources when the population is growing so quickly. Beijing is experiencing rapid urbanization, and with that comes increased traffic congestion and many other problems. Some obstacles that I discovered while in Beijing had to do with the historical district. I read a report that nearly 40% of all of Beijing consists of some sort of historic site. This makes urban development difficult and traffic redevelopment even more difficult. Since so much of the land is already occupied and most of it historic, it is nearly impossible for traffic engineers to widen the roads or change traffic patterns.

One of the biggest problems in Beijing was the traffic congestion. In 2010 there was a 62 mile long traffic jam which lasted 12 days. There was no definitive cause of the traffic jam, just too many cars in one area. The ironic factor was that the large trucks which were carrying heavy mechanical loads were causing most of the congested traffic but they were carrying materials into Beijing which were designed to help alleviate the traffic problem.

When I was in China, I noticed many things about the transportation system. First off, the whole manner in which Chinese people drive is completely different than how Americans drive. In China, there are very loose restrictions on traffic lanes and merging techniques. It seems as if everyone in China is just looking out for themselves, and not paying attention to the drivers around them. Every time someone wanted to merge onto the road, they would just make their way on and all other cars were forced out of the way. I was beginning to wonder how this whole driving technique originated and then I began to notice some of the road patterns. There were a few areas where there was an outside lane on the outside of a busy throughway, separated by an island of trees and bushes. There were small lanes connecting the outside lanes to the main road, which allowed drivers to merge onto the main road. The problem with this design was that there was no easement into the main road, it just forced the other cars on the main road to get out of the way of the merging cars from the outside lane. The reason many drivers in China drive with the mentality that they do is because it is encouraged by the traffic patterns. I also noticed that there weren’t sidewalks in some areas, just fenced off regions to walk in. And often times there were mopeds, motorcycles, or even cars in this area, making it very dangerous to walk.

Overall, I learned a lot of what a sustainable city should not do. I knew Beijing was not a sustainable city but I had no idea the extent to which it was struggling. On the upside, I did see some methods which were aimed at producing a more sustainable environment, such as the landfill recycling techniques and other measures.

I think the best part of the trip was the 798 art district. This area gave each of us a taste of Chinese culture without being a main tourist location. One thing I would suggest to improve the trip next year would be to allow students more free time. Maybe just one full day of freedom would be enough for most students to do the things they would like to do. The trip was organized very well and we kept busy the entire time. This experience is one that I will never forget and always cherish.