**Reflection Essay**

**Packing**

There are a lot of things that one must take into account when travelling half-way around the world. For instance, factors such as length of trip, the climate of your destination, the necessities you need to have with you, what you plan to bring back, and airport size/weight regulations all contribute to the overall packing process. And believe me, it is a process. Luckily this was the second time that I had travelled overseas with a school group for two weeks and had a basis for my packing. Some of the things that I chose to bring, rather than buying it there, were:

* Toiletries: Shampoo, toothpaste, toothbrush, deodorant, hair gel.
* Eyewear: Spare contacts, contact fluid and cases, a pair of eyeglasses.
* Electronics: Power adapters, cell phone, phone charger, tablet computer, tablet charger, headphones, digital camera, extra batteries.
* Medication: Prescription medication, allergy medicine.

I had to make sure that I packed a couple items on this list above others. First of all, as a person who struggles from bad seasonal allergies here at home, I didn’t know what to expect when I flew to a completely different region with all kinds of different plants. Would my allergies get worse? Would my medicine even be able to keep me functioning in China? What made the decision even worse was that in the days leading up to our departure, Cincinnati experienced one of the worst allergy weeks in recorded history. As it turns out, when we arrived in China, my allergies completely disappeared. However, because this will not be the case for everyone, it is important to think about how your body will respond to a sudden location change. Also, I had to make sure to pack my power adapter, because if I didn’t pack this, my chargers and electronics would be useless.

Picking a suitcase size was also difficult. I didn’t want to be one of those people who packs their entire closet for a two week trip, but I also knew that laundry services may be few and far between. I ended up going with the medium sized suitcase from a set, which I packed to the brim. I did, however, pack in a way that banked on their being laundry facilities at the hotel, and my bet backfired. There were no nearby Laundromats and no laundry facility in the hotels or dorms. Hand-washing was an option, but as we were changing hotels often, it was hard to allow enough drying time.

The other major issue we ran into with packing is the return trip. As a general rule, nobody ever gets everything to fit the same way as it did when you were leaving. Somehow, the same amount of clothes will never occupy the same space. This problem only gets compounded when you buy souvenirs and hope to bring them back with you. Luckily most of us were either able to cram our suitcases a bit tighter or ask a favor of others on the trip who had some spare room. The return of souvenirs, however, should be something that is thought about when you making your initial decision about suitcase size.

**Contact**

In terms of contacting my family and friends, I chose to have my phone service turned off because it was far too expensive. Instead, I decided to bring my tablet computer in hopes of sending off an e-mail every night. This, however, was not always possible as internet was not always available. I also tried to use Skype to chat with my parents, but as there was a 12 hour time difference and the internet was spotty at best, it made it hard to line up and maintain a video chat. It wasn’t until half way through the trip that I realized that Skype could make phone calls directly to home or cell phones. These types of calls only needed a small amount of internet bandwidth and were much easier to manage and coordinate. As an added bonus, the calls were only charged at $0.02 per minute, and I paid for $10.00, so I was able to let other people on the trip use my tablet to make phone calls, as I would have never used all 200 minutes.

**Money**

In terms of money, I decided to simply withdraw a lot of cash from ATM’s once I arrived in Beijing, however, I did bring $50 American to get converted in the airport, just in case for some reason my card didn’t work. A few people in the group did run into this problem, but thankfully I didn’t have to go through the trouble. I made sure to tell my bank well in advance that I would be making the trip and told them that if my card got turned off while I was there, I would switch banks. I think they got the message. To avoid as many fees as possible, I withdrew large chunks of money in single transactions from ATM’s, making the ATM fee and conversion fee as little as possible.

**What I Learned About Sustainable Urbanism in China**

I have a mixed opinion about the sustainable urbanism practices in place today in China. While none of the experts, professors, or students were able to deny that a clear, underlying issue existed with the rate at which China was being developed, the effect this development had on the environment, and in turn the effect it had on Chinese citizens, changing their current ways did not seem to be a major priority to some. I do not mean to belittle the efforts put forth by the planner, politicians, and designers of China’s great cities, but I got the feeling that though they wanted to make the changes, they simply couldn’t. Rather, what I saw was the age old battle of cost of implementing changes to the way the Chinese people plan their cities to incorporate renewable resources, green roofs, e-waste management, etc, vs. the cheaper option of keeping the status quo, and building bigger taller buildings as fast and as cost effective as possible.

In Beijing, I noticed that there was almost a battle of sorts to develop new, modern buildings and public spaces while still trying to maintain the culture and heritage of a specific area. This tie to tradition seemed to trump the goal of long lasting sustainability. While talking with architecture students from BJUT, I was told that there wasn’t all that much of an emphasis put on designing things to be renewable, and environmentally friendly. Rather the emphasis was on aesthetics. A lot of students admitted that when preparing their designs, the thought did not even cross their minds to make the building renewable, or to think about accommodating practices that would eliminate the site’s carbon footprint.

China’s issues with sustainable urbanism are not solely represented by the building of in-efficient buildings, but range between multiple sources, one such being transportation. From my personal point of view, there were three major issues with the transportation system of China. The first issue was that China lacked a proper traffic system, including properly spaced and timed traffic lights, traffic laws to help regulate congestion, proper infrastructure and planning, such as designated bike lanes (that are actually only used by bikes) and designated sidewalks and crosswalks for civilians, and any sort of penalty system for violating any laws. The second issue is the overwhelming amount of vehicles on the road. These two issues lead to a large amount of idle time by vehicles, that 1) emits a large amount of greenhouse gases, 2) increases the amount of time it takes a person to get around the city, and 3) leads to a greater need for a dwindling fuel supply. I got to experience these issues first hand, whether in a taxi that flew between other cars with no signal, in a bus that tried to go down a small alleyway not meant for a vehicle of its size, or as a pedestrian trying desperately to cross the street and not die.

I don’t see the environmental issues in China as an unanswerable riddle. I see it as a mindset that needs to be changed. I believe that there will soon be a movement by the people of China, a “Sustainable Revolution” if you will. I do not believe that the pace at which major cities in China are expanding is maintainable. Eventually the people will see exactly what happening to their cities, their health, and their economy, and on that day people will organize and call for change. My hope for the Chinese people is that this day does not come too late.

In conclusion, China has a daunting challenge ahead of them as they continue to plan and grow its cities. With a population as large as theirs moving into cities all at once, there is obviously a need to rapidly to build addition housing and office, but there was no “laying of the groundwork” in terms of planning. Convict with overloading electric grids and sewage lines are in the near future, as this infrastructure was never planned for such a large city. Roads and highways were not built to endure the amount of cars that now occupy them. Supplying clean, drinkable water to the interior of the city will soon become difficult and inefficient. Chinese cities have made a small effort to counteract some of the negative effects, such as an emphasis on recycling and a large amount of green space, but from my experiences over the two weeks that I was there, China needs to make sustainability the top priority and launch a massive campaign to get everybody’s mindset on a green future.

**Review of the Class:**

I want to say fist and foremost that I believe, especially with this being the first year of this program, that the professors did a fantastic job of planning out this trip. It was one of the most memorable experiences of my life and I able so thankful that I was able to take part in its maiden voyage.

That being said, here are some suggestions for the years to come. First, if it is possible, making a trip a bit longer would allow for a much deeper grasp of Chinese culture and a much longer exposure to sustainability practices throughout China. Second, a basic understanding of Mandarin Chinese would help students interact with Chinese students, professors, and locals. Whether is was a suggestion for next year’s students to take a course, or if it was investing in a Rosetta Stone software kit that gets practiced by the whole class, the knowledge of how to communicate while abroad would be invaluable. Third, have a pizza social within the first couple weeks to break the ice with the students. For our group, we really didn’t meet each other until we were already in China. Had we known each other all semester long, the trip would have been even more enjoyable. Fourth, I know that plans changed, sometimes at the last minute, but a clear communication of those changes would be a good thing. Sometimes things did not match the itinerary and some people were late to things or didn’t know what was going on. Fifth, perhaps a TA would be a good investment with these courses. They could create resource material for the class, manage homework assignments, direct certain lectures, etc., basically anything that you would want them to do.

Overall this course was very valuable. I learned a lot about the issues China is facing with sustainability, learned a lot about Chinese culture as a whole, and made irreplaceable memories with a lot of great people I am proud to now call my friends.