Never could I have imagined that a land on this same planet would seem so much like another world. It was comforting, however, to see that we could connect with the people even through social and cultural differences. Proof that the human connect prevails across language barriers. The path to a Chinese experience is not quite as difficult most would imagine. Just hop on a plane and go! But then questions arise: What should I bring? Where will I get money? Will I get along with the people? How can I stay in contact with my family/friends? All concerns that every human in their right mind would think at some point, but all with surprisingly simple answers.

Everyone knows to bring a camera, toiletries, and clothes on a trip; those are obvious. But China specific items are less so. Bring copies of your passport, visa, and credit/ATM card(s). These could prove helpful in situations if any of these are lost. The copies are not replacements, but at least something to show proof. Bring tissues and toilet paper. It is very common to not be given a napkin at a restaurant or have toilet paper in the bathroom. Get acclimated to bringing these whenever you go out. Bring hand sanitizer for a similar reason: no soap in the bathrooms.

Money is pretty simple: withdrawal it from an ATM when you arrive, in the airport preferably. This will ensure your get the best rate and don’t waste money on exchange fees. Most ATM’s will accept major ATM cards. If you use it at the airport there will be nothing to worry about. At first it seemed that people in China were less friendly compared to our western peers, but by the end of the trip we was a very open and social side of the population. Like any part of the world, some people will be friendlier than others. It all depends on the individual. Be excessively extroverted and you will get along with anyone; great advice for most social situations.

In my opinion, if China had the population of the United States, it would have the potential to be an extremely green country. Obviously, this is not the case. My statement is meant to convey that China is really moving in the right direction in terms of overall sustainability. However, they have one undeniable flaw: their population size and density. This will forever be the largest hurdle to jump through to advance as a country. They have the knowledge and resources (for the most part), they have the ability to implement new systems across the country, and most importantly, they seem to have an open-minded and cooperative population that is willing to change. The sheer number of individuals living in such dense areas makes it so difficult to improve.

Transportation in China is fairly similar to that the United States, with respect to large urban areas. People in China ride on bicycles much more, however, and individuals own much smaller cars. Over the entire two week trip, we saw very few large fuel consuming vehicles. The most common modes of transportation we witnessed included riding a taxi, riding the subway, using their personal vehicles, riding the bus, or riding their bicycles or scooters. There are a lot of systems in place to get people around the city; certainly no lack of transportation methods. However, one of the largest issues with transportation we saw, besides the dense population, was the overall organization. Actually, there was plenty of organization in terms of signs, signals, and markings. The issue lies with the individuals seemingly lack of order within these roads. So common was it to observe cars ignoring traffic markings, penetrations walking in the middle of the road, and cyclists swerving through traffic. In terms of sustainability, there needs to be better systems in place for public transportation and less personal cars on the roads. The cars that are need to become more developed to use less fossil fuels.

In general, China seems to have a fairly old infrastructure. From the research we have done for our group’s presentations, nearly 80% of existing buildings use “high energy levels,” i.e. more recourses than necessary for the basic functioning of the building. With the population growing exponentially, there will be an ever increasing demand for a more sustainable infrastructure. “Green” buildings will have to become the norm. The current Evaluation Standard for Green Buildings implements a three star systems based on criteria such as, land allocation, water usage, electrical usage, material saving, indoor air quality, and overall maintenance. This system gives owners guidelines to create a more sustainable structure. There are great examples of this system being put into place now; SIEEB building at Tsinghua University and Parc 66 in Jinan to name a couple. In conversations with professors and students at a few of the universities we visited, it seems that cost becomes the largest variable as to whether a building is built to these guidelines or not. Similar to the United States, owners and builders become accustomed to a certain way a building is “supposed” to be constructed and it is difficult for them to think outside of that comfort zone. However, China as country is pushing hard to make it mandatory for all new construction to be sustainable. The Architecture 2030 challenge lays out a plan for all buildings in China to be carbon-neutral by the year 2030.

Overall, this class and subsequent trip has been an experience of a lifetime in every aspect. From start to finish, this study abroad has enlighten me not only to the vast social and cultural differences between two countries, but also how much further we need to develop as humans to sustain on our planet. For me, the most exciting part in the educational aspect has been the presentations and open discussions about sustainability related issues at BJUT. This really gave me an enormous insight to the challenges China is going through. Some were very different from the United States, such as the traffic organization. However, I was surprised to find many were extremely similar. Overall, the best part of this trip was the connections we had with each other and with the people we met while abroad. As corny as it sounds, it’s true. I was so surprised to land in such a different world. I was equally surprised to see that underlying the social and cultural differences; we are all fundamentally the same. That realization truly made this trip an experience of a lifetime.