After thirteen hours, three movies, and a nerve-racking experience with a Chinese ATM, I have finally realized my life’s dream of traveling to China. The following is a glimpse into my travels. While not a complete account, I have tried to capture my experiences, emotions and impressions to the best of my ability. Let the adventure begin!

First Pictures in China:

Journal Day 1:

As our first real day of sight-seeing draws to a close, I can’t help but think how different my expectations of China were from reality. I came to China expecting either Mulan or abject poverty, and instead, I found a thriving modern society with most of the amenities I have grown accustomed to. While not the Third World country I had been expecting, there are still some features like squatty potties that remind me that I am still a long way from home. Therefore, the theme of the day was revelations and the sharp contrast between my expectations and reality.
For example, we started the day off realizing one of my life's goals: climbing the Great Wall of China. In my mind, I had painted a very specific picture of what I imagined this experience would be like. I saw myself leisurely walking along the Wall, camera in hand, snapping pictures of all the beautiful scenery and possibly pandas; however, what initially struck me about the Great Wall was the amount of pollution clouding the scenery. As I tried to snap pictures from the bus and on the Wall, I noticed that they were all hazy and distorted. My preconceived notions that beautiful artifacts such as the Wall would remain untainted by modern issues such as pollution were completely false. My beliefs in this area stemmed mainly from my experiences with the state parks and protected artifacts in our own country which for the most part remain removed from and untouched by society. The pollution surrounding the Wall definitely represented a stark contrast from my expectations.

Another revelation I had about the Great Wall was how much I had relied on the depictions of Disney's Mulan when creating my mental image. The Great Wall which I initially believed was a straight, flat line from the movie proved to be a steep and winding masterpiece. Mostly steps, the Wall proved to be a hiker's dream with uneven ware and several areas where you were climbing rather than walking. Unfortunately, I made the mistake of leaving my asthma medication at the hotel, and while climbing the wall, I had to stop several times and even drink a Coke in order to make it all the way to the top. Fortunately, if I had died, the Great Wall is still one of the most beautiful places I have ever been; therefore, I would have died happy. In the end, the American depiction of the Wall through media such as Mulan and the actual Great Wall were drastically different; however, this was a welcome surprise because it made climbing the Wall that much more exciting and that much more of an accomplishment.

An additional revelation and probably the most disconcerting so far is the difference in bathroom practices between here and the United States. Today, I had my first run in with a “squatty potty”, and I don’t think I have ever had such a bizarre experience. Excreting into a hole in the ground while standing as a female is just not done in the United States, and it is completely common place here.
In addition, the use of toilet paper and soap seems to be a completely foreign concept, and we must carry our own wherever we go. Maybe it was just because I was raised by a hyper vigilant and germaphobic mother, but I am deeply disturbed by this society’s lack of the use of soap. I think this disturbance also stems from the deeply engrained American obsession with cleanliness and washing hands. It is interesting to think that if I had grown up in China not only my perspective but also my health might be completely different. Still, I did not, and during our travels, this will probably take the most getting used to.

Apart from all these discoveries, I think my greatest revelation is still how similar China is to the United States. When I see a line at McDonald’s or even a Western (American) toilet, it feels like we never actually left home, and we are perhaps just in a part of the country I haven’t seen before. I’m sure as the trip goes on the fact that I am in a foreign country will sink in, but for now, I am just enjoying a welcome change in scenery. So far, this trip has been a dream come true, and I look forward to what tomorrow brings.

Picture of the Day:
Journal Day 2:

I want to raise my kids in China. It’s as simple as that. After spending the day touring kindergartens and talking to university students, I am struck by how amazing it would be to be a child growing up and learning in these environments. There’s time to exercise, time to be creative, and time to just be a kid which are all things I believe our school system is lacking or starting to do away with. This feeling of wanting my kids to attend school here was only reinforced by my conversations with the university students who seemed to be genuinely passionate about teaching and who represent the next generation of teachers for these sorts of schools in China. Overall, I was super impressed by both the Sihuan Playgroup and Beijing Normal University Kindergarten, and my experiences at both have given me a whole new perspective on how to educate young children and teach them skills for the future like collaboration.

Our group started the day at Beijing Normal University Kindergarten, and from the first moment we walked through the gates, I was in absolute awe. I literally turned to Laura who was standing next to me at the time and said to her, “Oh my goodness. This place is amazing.” In a culture where space is a commodity, the sheer size of the play yard was impressive. Full of green space and areas where the kids could just run around, the play yard combined the structures of a playground with the free space of a sports field. Fortunately, our group arrived in time to witness the morning exercises and play time, and I was supremely impressed by the level of collaboration of these young children. One of the play structures was a team building obstacle course where the children had to work together to not only build the structure by rearranging boards, but also, they had to communicate to get all the members of the group across the structure. Now, I have seen this activity done in the States, but it is usually with people at least three times the age of these children. Furthermore, the people I have seen doing these courses are not particularly successful; however, the children were accomplishing the task easily and
treatment it as play. The advanced communication skills as well as collaboration abilities of these children definitely have me convinced that this school has some things figured out.

In addition, I can’t help but think about the implications for these children’s futures. We know that a key to success is effective communication and the ability to work in groups. Moreover, if children in China are mastering them at such young ages, there’s no telling what they will be able to accomplish in the future which brings me to our discussions with the Beijing Normal University students. I was thoroughly impressed by what an accomplished and intelligent group of individuals the Beijing Normal early education students were. Their complete willingness to embrace our group and answer our barrage of questions really gave me the impression that they wanted to cooperate and learn from us, and I felt like we made some really meaningful connections through this (now I believe engrained) spirit of collaboration. One student, we’ll call her Jane, spent most of the time talking to me, and I was able to ask a lot of questions about her upbringing and interactions with young students at the Beijing Normal Kindergarten. Jane explained to me that growing up she played with some boys, but the older she got the less she spent time with them for fear that her teachers would think they were dating. Jane also spent a significant amount of time detailing how differently boys and girls are treated in China. Jane talked about how little girls are expected to be gentle and considerate, and little boys are expected to be outgoing and adventurous. Jane also explained that little girls and boys partake in different activities such as sports for boys and jump rope for girls. I will be interested to see if Jane’s perspective on gender roles in China is shared by other students that we talk to, but for now, I will have to take her word for it.

After our communications with the students of Beijing Normal, our group had the immense pleasure of visiting a migrant worker school called the Sihuan Playgroup which again illustrated the theme of the day of collaboration. When we first entered the play yard, I was not sure what to make of the migrant school. It consisted of a cramped play yard with three small classrooms which starkly contrasted with the beautiful kindergarten we had visited in the morning. My first thought was, “What
horrible conditions. How can children learn in such a cramped and dirty environment?" I must say I was extremely wrong. It took me about five seconds of watching the children play to realize this environment was just as good if not better than the kindergarten we had seen earlier. One aspect of the playgroup that really impressed me was the collaboration between parents and teachers in instructing the children. Throughout the day, the parents of the children at the school stop by from their work in the market to partake in the playgroup’s daily activities. In addition, some of the parents actually serve as teachers for the playgroup. As an attachment researcher, this made me extremely happy because I know the positive impact such parental involvement can have on the children. Children whose parents are involved will likely have more positive life outcomes and more secure relationships; therefore, this represents almost a better situation than children being boarded and separated from parents like at the other kindergarten. Overall, the playgroup represented an amazing collaboration of parents and teachers modeling and effectively teaching this behavior to the children of the group. Therefore, despite my first impressions, I would have no apprehensions whatsoever sending my child to somewhere like the Sihuan Playgroup. I hope one day I can return and see how the school continues to develop and grow.

Picture of the Day:
Journal Day 3:

I have never been so exhausted in my entire life. After a full day of sightseeing in Beijing, a delayed flight, and an hour on the bus, I now know exactly what it feels like to be a zombie. To make matters worse, a welcome party of other Purdue students was waiting for us at the hotel, and I was positively mortified because I was in no mood to be social after the day I had. The only acknowledgement I could give them was an excuse for our group being so dead; moreover, I still felt extremely rude. On the bright side, due to the reactions of the other Purdue group, we were upgraded to a five star hotel from the three star hotel we were originally supposed to stay in, and this place is beyond swanky. I feel like I am not supposed to touch anything or raise my voice like in a museum. Plus, don’t get me started on the service. It is so nice to speak English to the workers and have them understand me. So far, I am extremely impressed. Enough about the hotel though, today was one of the craziest days of the trip, and it really had nothing to do with how busy we were.

First, up until today, I thought our guide Elaine was lying about the Chinese fascination with Americans namely our white skin and blonde hair. I have never been so wrong in my entire life. Today, the group visited Tiananmen Square and the Forbidden City, and while this was probably one of our cooler sightseeing days, it was kind of tainted by the amount of pictures I was both forced and volunteered to take. Everywhere I turned a camera was trained on me, and while at first I was flattered, it got extremely tiring as the day went on. This experience was also a little scary at times because along with “discreetly” taking pictures without permission and politely asking for my picture, people began grabbing me and forcing me to take pictures with them. At one point, I was crossing the bridge into the Forbidden City and was mobbed by a group of about twenty tourists grabbing at me and taking pictures. This was one of the most frightening experiences I have ever had because for about five minutes I lost complete sight of the group and even as I tried to break free, I was held firmly in place by multiple
Chinese hands. Thankfully, Dr. Hollich came back and extricated me, but I must admit it was a stressful experience.

The second aspect that really made today crazy was the sheer number of people there were everywhere we went. Even after staying in Beijing the last several days, it took going to these two historical sights to really get the full span of how populated China is. Everywhere we walked, stood, or sat, there was someone there. When our group stood in line for something, people tried to rush in front of us or push their way in. When we tried to take pictures of the Forbidden City, walls of people stood between us and the objects we were trying to capture. It really put the country in perspective, and I couldn’t help but think to myself what it would be like to grow up somewhere as populated as this. The One Child Policy suddenly made a lot more sense when put into the context of this mass of people. Imagine being a child in a family of eight in an already incredibly populated country. What kind of life would you have? I can imagine you would spend your entire life never quite getting what you need or want, and that makes me really sad to think about. Today, I am very thankful for growing up in the United States where I not only have my needs met, but I simply have room to grow. I hope the One Child Policy is effective in giving this to the children of China as well.

A final bit of craziness for the day was our first domestic flight. While getting to the airport wasn’t too difficult, the process of getting to our flight was a little stressful. It began when we found out that the weighing system for domestic flights is a tad different than we had anticipated. Instead of being allowed to have a checked bag of fifty pounds, we each were only allowed a bag of 20 kilograms which is about 48 pounds U.S. For me, this wasn’t an issue, but for others who had come with a ton of stuff and added more in Beijing, this was quite the trying revelation. Thankfully, all the stressing was needless, and the airline weighed us as a group allowing the lack of weight of some to compensate for the excess of others. After the baggage debacle, we headed to security where in light of the recent Chinese terrorism seemed to be heightened from when we arrived in China. I was forced to remove all my
belongings from my backpack before passing it through the scanner, and then, I was thoroughly patted down resulting in a bit of awkwardness between me and the male security guard. Unfortunately, this still was not the most unpleasant part of the journey, and to the group’s dismay, we found that domestic Chinese flights are MUCH different than domestic U.S. flights. Boarding and unloading are like a Chinese fire drill (pun intended), and the flights themselves are anything but relaxing. Apparently blaring music and turning the lights on halfway through a late evening flight is a thing here, and I must say the group was not pleased.

Overall, despite today being crazy, we still managed to enjoy ourselves; however, judging by the schedule laid out by our new hosts, tomorrow is going to be much of the same. Hopefully, we find some time to sleep and relax in here. I don’t know how much more of running around on empty I can take, but I know I will be glad we did so much in the end.

Picture of the Day:

Journal Day 4:

I don’t think I’ve ever had so much fun in my entire life. Our gracious hosts the Nanshan Group decided that simply touring us around the city of Longkou was not enough, and instead, they planned an
elaborate itinerary highlighting the many industries that fall under the umbrella of their conglomerate. Fortunately for us, the industries include everything from a yacht club to a golf course, and even more fortunate for us, the Group was more than happy to let us try out their many attractions without any additional cost. Today was truly a day of firsts, but there were definitely a couple of activities that stood out more than others.

For example, we started our day in the home of a worker for Nanshan group, and despite being in China for now almost five days, this was my first time in an actual Chinese home. The apartment was much more spacious and well-kept than I had imagined. Everything seemed relatively new, and the apartment appeared to have all the modern amenities that I have grown accustomed to in the U.S. The owner explained to us that the apartment was a benefit of working for the Nanshan Group, and that an apartment of similar size and quality would cost half a million in a city like Beijing. In addition, the owner expressed extreme gratitude to the Nanshan Group for giving her and the four family members she lived with such a nice home. As I listened to this woman’s story and saw the conditions she lived in, I wished for a similar company to come into the poor areas of our country and make the lives of the people there better. Longkou used to be a rural area comprised of many poor, small fishing villages, and now thanks to the Nanshan Group, it is an up and coming tourist area with several thriving industries employing countless people from the once poor fishing villages. While I realize not everyone here lives this way, it was nice to see that some people in China are living well and are being well-cared for, and I am interested to how situations vary for others around Longkou and around China in general. Experiencing a Chinese residence for the first time was a great way to start the day.

Another fantastic first from the day was our trip to the Nanshan University for Elders and my first ever Tai Chi lesson. At the University, I was struck by how unlike anything in our country the facility was. The Nanshan University for Elders celebrates and honors the older generation of China, and it provides a place where they can stimulate their minds and continue their self-growth after they leave
the workforce. Offering everything from calligraphy to Tai Chi to private music lessons, the University enables the older generation to keep their minds and bodies active while also forming bonds with others in similar situations. Now, imagine for a second if facilities like this existed in the United States. How many fewer nursing homes would we need? How many more active and healthy elderly would we have? How many less depressed people would there be in the older generation and how many less suicides? These were all questions racing through my mind as I watched these incredibly youthful and happy older people enjoying their morning Tai Chi. As I joined them for a lesson, I felt the flow of positive energy in the room, and I thought that I could use a little more of this sort of activity in my own life. I loved the way the group moved as one, and it gave me the feeling that I was part of something bigger than myself. Overall, it was an extremely positive and eye-opening experience, and while it was my first time doing Tai Chi, I imagine it will not be my last.

A final impactful first from the day was the time we spent with the students of Nanshan College playing Ping-Pong. At first, I didn’t know exactly what to expect from the evening. As the students climbed aboard our tour bus and sat down, many were extremely shy and quiet, and I was worried I would not be able to have a conversation with them. As we dispensed with the usual pleasantries, I found the more comfortable they became with me, the more willing the students were to talk. After we exited the bus and the paddles came out for Ping-Pong, all awkwardness and shyness seemed to disappear. For many, this was their area to shine, and I found myself being instructed on proper technique and asked about everything from school to boys to the United States in general. I had an absolute blast, and despite it being my first time, I seemed to get pretty good at Ping-Pong with the excellent instruction of my Ping-Pong masters.

Overall, this was an exhausting and exciting day, and I can’t wait for what’s in store for tomorrow. I am especially looking forward to the horseback riding. I hope it is nice enough for us to go.
Journal Day 5:

Today was another extremely rough travel day. Maybe it was the three hours waiting to check in at the airport, or maybe it was the extremely turbulent flight. Either way, I, as well as the majority of our group, am absolutely exhausted. Kim, one of our girls, actually fell asleep waiting to check-in at the hotel in a lobby chair. Needless to say, Dr. Elicker took pity on us, and he moved our schedule for the day back a couple hours. Now, it is time for some glorious and well-deserved sleep; however, before I drift off, I must write about the amazing day we had. So much happened, I may forget if I don’t write it all down.

First off, I was offered a teaching position today at the Nanshan Bilingual School. I never imagined that an opportunity like this would come my way or that I would consider taking it; however, after touring the school today, I am strongly considering their offer. I loved the children, and the curriculum seems extremely engaging. I also really loved the combination of the arts, exercise, and discipline to help children reach their full potential in the primary school setting. After talking to some of the staff members, it also sounds like it is a great personal development opportunity, and that the staff...
is really collaborative in their teaching which would be good for someone like me who hasn’t been
formerly trained. The only drawback for me is the school may be a little too strict. They run their
classrooms very similar to a military school with all the children sitting up straight, facing forward, and
reciting facts on command. This may be a little too structured for my taste, so I will have to think about
it a little longer before I come to a decision. Overall, I was very impressed with the school though and
the skill levels of the children. I would love for my child to go to a school as accomplished as Nanshan
Bilingual School.

Another cool feature of the day was our journey through the Nanshan Buddha temple. I never
realized how elaborate or how massive a Buddhist temple could be, and after climbing the mountain to
the Nanshan Buddha, I feel honored to have been able to see this sacred place and watch a traditional
Buddhist blessing ceremony. For personal religious reasons, I did not take part in the ceremony, but I
still found it extremely fascinating to witness. The ceremony really got me thinking though about what it
would be like from a child’s perspective to be Buddhist. Currently, I only know adults who practice
Buddhism, but if you were a child being raised in this religion, how would life be different for you. I can
imagine you would have to have a lot more self-control, and you would be a lot more
self-sacrificing
than others; however, I cannot be sure. This is something I’d definitely like to look into to satisfy my own
curiosity, but for now, I can only guess. Apart from the ceremony, I also really enjoyed seeing the view
from the top of the Buddhist temple, and I must say this is one of the prettiest spots we’ve been.

And just when I thought the day couldn’t get more amazing, it did. Not only did we go cherry
picking and have a wine tasting, but our group had the opportunity to do my favorite activity on the
planet: horseback riding. Ever since I was a little girl, I have loved horses and wanted to learn to ride.
Over the years, I have ridden off and on, but I have never had the opportunity to ride English saddle.
Today, it was my lucky day. Our group was able to ride three beautiful horses at the Nanshan Riding Club
with English saddles, and I had the time of my life. It was definitely a lot harder than I expected, and the
instructor was definitely telling me I was doing it wrong like the whole time. It didn’t matter though. I had a great time regardless, and I hope I get the opportunity to ride English again sometime.

As you can imagine, the last couple of days have been both exhausting and exhilarating. I can’t believe we fit so much into our time in Nanshan, but we did. Now, I am looking forward to a little less back-breaking pace and a little more time to explore the city of Nanjing. Hopefully, our rough entry into the city will soon be forgotten, and we will enjoy our time here. Fingers crossed. It will hard to top the amazing time I had in Longkou.

Picture of the Day:

Journal Day 6:

    Every day, I think to myself, “There’s no way that today can top what we did yesterday”, and every day, I am pleasantly surprised. Tonight, the fabulous students of Jiangsu Second Normal University threw us a “Welcome to Nanjing Party”, and I don’t think I have been more touched in my entire life.

    When we pulled up to the school, we were all feeling a tad apprehensive about meeting yet another group of university students and struggling through a couple hours conversation; however, our fears were instantly assuaged when we saw the “Welcome Purdue students” sign and group of excited
Jiangsu Second Normal students. Met by such a warm and welcoming group, it was hard not to immediately open up to them and begin rapid conversations about school, life, and just anything that came to mind. For whatever reason, more than ever before I was taken with this group of students, and I found myself making really fantastic connections for the first time despite the language barrier. Furthermore, as the evening continued, it was clear that this group of students was truly special. Not only did they offer us beer with dinner (a first for any of the universities), but they threw us a party complete with performances, games, and gifts. I felt so incredibly welcomed and special, and more than at any other university, I felt like I met students who were just like me. I made some new and awesome friends tonight, and I am so looking forward to keeping in touch. This was my favorite university visit so far.

And if all the excitement of the evening was not enough, our group also had an amazing day exploring Nanjing. Nanjing is truly a beautiful city with such an interesting and complex history, and I thoroughly enjoyed learning about some of it. Some of the highlights of the day were the Yangtze River Bridge, Sun Yat-Sen Mausoleum, and the Ming Tomb. I think my favorite though was the Ming Tomb. Tucked away in a tranquil garden, the Ming Tomb in Nanjing represents the final resting place of one of the last Ming emperors. While beautiful, the site was a little disturbing to me because our guide informed us that one hundred concubines were buried alive after the emperor’s passing. Despite this fact, I appreciated the beauty of the tomb and the architecture leading up to the final treasure mound (visitors are not allowed in this area). Apart from the overall splendor, I think what really made the tomb my favorite was the series of stone animals standing guard along one of the pathways leading to the tomb.

About twenty four in all, there were six types of both real and imagined animals represented at the Ming Tomb. Each type of animal had a pair lying and a pair standing, and as our guide Fred explained, this was because a set of each was always standing guard over the emperor’s spirit. Fred also
told us that at night it is said the animals switch places, and the other pair stands to let the standing pair rest. The park is closed at night though, so there’s no real way to tell if he’s telling the truth. Regardless of wherever the legend is true, the amazing detail and size of these stone creatures made them one of my favorite sites we’ve seen on the trip, and I had a great time taking pictures of them with the members of our group.

Tomorrow, we tour two kindergartens, and then, we have a much needed afternoon/evening off. Despite all of the excitement of the day, I am definitely looking forward to getting a little more sleep. I need it.

Picture of the Day:

Journal Day 7:

I think I have found a new home here in Nanjing. Today, we visited Gulou Kindergarten and Nanjing No. 1 Kindergarten, and while I was impressed by both schools, Nanjing No. 1 was by far my favorite of the trip. In fact, Nanjing No.1 Kindergarten offered me a teaching position in their international department, and I am seriously thinking about taking it because I had such an amazing day interacting with the teachers and the kids. In addition, after sitting in on a couple of their English classes
and participating in a massive water fight, I definitely think it would be a good fit for me. Everyone is so energetic and happy. I couldn’t imagine a better place to work. My understanding is the position pays 10,000 RMB a term and includes a house and a car, so basically, all I would need to move here and start teaching is the plane ticket. As you can imagine, this is EXTREMELY tempting; however, the money and the perks are not what is drawing me to teach at Nanjing No.1.

While visiting Nanjing No. 1, I was struck by what an exciting and stimulating learning atmosphere the school had created for its students. Every classroom was covered with artwork, and by incorporating nature, the decorations made the rooms feel alive. When I asked the headmaster about the decorations, she explained to me that part of the schools philosophy is to create balance between the classroom and nature. The headmistress also added that they continued this theme in their play spaces, and one feature of their play yard that I thought was particularly impressive was a little garden that the children tended themselves and a pond where the kids could take daily walks after lunch.

Along with the wonderful classroom and play atmospheres, the school also has a fantastic international program established. The international department employs multiple foreign English teachers, and it offers the opportunity to teach English through the lens of foreign customs and activities. For me, this seemed like an ideal situation for the students because what better way to learn English than through the customs and from people who are native speakers. In addition, domestic and foreign parents alike are highly encouraged to take part in school activities and participate in the classroom. Overall, I was highly impressed by the program Nanjing No. 1 has created. With all this in mind, I will have to go back to the States and seriously consider returning; however, as of right now, I definitely want to take advantage of this opportunity.

As for the rest of the day, I am going to take advantage of our afternoon and evening off and catch up on some much needed sleep. Tomorrow we visit the Nanjing Massacre museum and some
other historical sites, so I will definitely need my energy. I would just like to say as of now Nanjing is my favorite city, and I am looking forward to learning a little more about its rich historical background.

Picture of the Day:

Journal Day 8:

Today, I had a very melancholy day. It may have something to do with the fact that the trip is almost halfway over, or maybe it was just the subject matter of the day. Either way, I found it harder than usual to get my spirits up especially after the Nanjing Massacre Museum. I think this had a lot to do with my tendency to internalize and analyze through introspection, and I definitely took in a lot of hurt and pain at the museum. Despite my mood, I feel I saw and experienced some very important things.

For example, I started my day off with a ton of food from Paris Baguette, and while this may seem menial, I found that my entire perspective on spending money here has shifted. Instead of buying what looked most delicious and would bring me the most immediate satisfaction regardless of price, I now understand the weight of the currency and how much I am actually spending. I started asking myself how much I was spending in RMB and thinking about quantity over quality which the opposite has been my spending style in China. This may have to do with my previous lack of understanding of the currency, but I think it more has to do with my settling into the culture of China. I know here they live on
much less and must spend more wisely to provide for their families. I believe I am starting to adopt that belief as well, and I am grasping the concept of spending in RMB rather than American.

Another interesting aspect of the day was our conversation with the college students. I realized I am getting extremely good at simplifying my group’s English in order to translate for the Chinese students. This has much to do with my compelling urge to be inclusive and understanding, but I also am just genuinely curious about my group’s topic and want to get as accurate of information as possible. On one hand, the Chinese students asked us much of the same questions, but on the other, I found that our group has finally gotten comfortable asking questions, and we were really able to dig in with the students. Something I found most interesting was the games here are extremely similar. The students taught us a Chinese game called “Throw Towel” which is much like the American game “Duck, Duck, Goose”. They also explained a game called “What’s the Time?” which is identical to “Sharks and Minnows”. I became very excited about these coincidences because of their implications for my portion of the group project. In addition, the familiarity was nice, and it enabled my group to establish some common ground and ask more of their questions. Overall, the talk went much better than some of our previous discussions.

Apart from the discussion with the college students, we spent the rest of the day sight-seeing and shopping. I don’t have much to say about the mall or the Treasure Boat Yard except that I thought the boat yard was beautiful; however, I would like to spend some time on the Nanjing Massacre Museum. I found this to be one of the most saddening experiences of the trip. It upsets me that atrocities like this have occurred throughout history and continue to occur in modern times. Maybe it affected me more because like I mentioned I am very introspective and tend to internalize everything; moreover, I think anyone who sees what the Japanese did in Nanjing would be affected. One of the most impactful parts of the museum was reading the testimonies of the survivors. One woman watched as her brother, sister, and mother were all raped and slaughtered in front of her, and she later lost her
father due to a stabbing that occurred at the same time. I could not imagine witnessing such a horrendous event and living to tell the tale. My heart bleeds for the people of Nanjing, and I will carry the stories I read today until I too die. I plan to take back the information I learned today as well as the pictures I took, and I wish to educate others about what happened here. It is so true that only through knowledge can we prevent history from repeating itself.

Therefore, with a heavy heart and an exhausted mind, I say goodbye to day eight of exploring China. I am so looking forward to the Children’s performance in the morning and our last day in Nanjing. It will be hard to leave, but I really hope I will be able to return one day.

Picture of the Day:

Journal Day 9:

After much anticipation, the Children’s Day performance was everything I could have possibly hoped for and more. Due to lack of transportation, we almost weren’t able to go, but of course, the wonderful Nanjing Normal University students graciously arranged for a bus to come and take us to the show. I must say this performance was unlike anything I have ever seen children perform. The performance was not only televised, but it was complete with professional lighting, music, and
costumes. While very impressive, there were a couple aspects of the show I found both interesting and upsetting.

First, while I thought the costumes were amazing, I felt at times that they were extremely gendered and slightly inappropriate for the children’s ages. For example, there were instances when the little girls wore nothing but skirts and bedazzled bandeaus, and while this may seem cute and innocent now, I feel this sets a bad precedent in regards to future dress and gender expectations. These sorts of costumes indicate to little girls that you need to dress this certain way to be pretty and feminine which is not the case. Personally, I would not allow my daughter to wear some of the costumes that were worn in the show. In addition to the revealing nature of the costumes, I was also a little upset with how different the costumes were for each gender. Little girls wore pretty dresses and skirts while the little boys wore military uniforms and other more masculine items. While some may argue there is nothing wrong with this, it disappointments me because it is sending a strong message to the children about gender roles and where they fit into them. I would’ve liked to see more equality in the costuming, and unfortunately, this theme of segregated gender portrayal continued throughout the show especially with the teachers.

Another part of the show that I didn’t quite care for was the flouncing of the young and beautiful teachers. At one point in the performance, they had a solid ten plus minutes of the teachers traipsing across the stage in dresses and somewhat revealing clothing to offensive Brittany Spears music, and I thought to myself, “What is the point of this?” I really thought it detracted from the celebration of the children, and I wish they had not included it in the show. I found it degrading as a woman to watch, and I hope they realize the kind of negative gendered stereotypes they were reinforcing. I think a fair portion of our group agreed with my sentiments, and after the show, the teacher’s “performance” was a hot topic of conversation.
As I said, apart from these two details, I thoroughly enjoyed the show, and I wished we had something more like this available to our children in the United States. I am so glad we had the opportunity to be in China for Children’s Day and have such an important cultural experience. I am also super excited about the implications of the show for my project. I definitely have some really fantastic material to talk about in regards to gender because of this performance. Overall, it was just a really good day, and as we head to Guilin, I am looking forward to getting out of the city for a while and relaxing in the countryside. I hear it is absolutely beautiful.

Picture of the Day:

Journal Day 10:

Every day we see and do amazing things, and every day I think to myself there is no way tomorrow can top what we did today. And every day, it seems I am pleasantly surprised. Our first day in Guilin was no exception. Guilin is the most beautiful place I have ever been in my entire life, and I cannot imagine anything topping what I saw and did today.

We started our day with a sort-of ski lift ride to the top of the highest peak in Guilin, Yao Mountain. At first, I was a little scared of the ride partly because of the height of the mountain, but mostly, I was afraid I would fall off of the lift. I am one of the clutziest people you will ever meet, and I
wouldn't put it past myself to manage something like falling off. Fortunately, I made it to the top of the mountain without incident and what I saw astonished me.

At first, there were clouds, so the group really wasn't able to see much to our vast disappointment; however, when the fog lifted, majestic purple mountains manifested themselves to us and stretched as far as the eye could see. I literally thought I was in a movie like King Kong or Jurassic Park because of how beautifully untouched this place was. Unfortunately, I was not able to get very many clear pictures even without the fog; moreover, even if I had, they wouldn't do this place justice. I think if the day had ended there I would've been completely satisfied. Fortunately for us, Yao Mountain was just the tip of the ice berg.

After the group descended from the peak, our guide Lily (who is my favorite so far) took us to an organic tea farm. Again, I couldn’t believe a place as beautiful as this existed. Imagine fields and fields of green tea bushes with a beautiful mountain backdrop. This is what the tea institute looked like. Personally, I love tea, and this place was absolute heaven. Not only did we get to learn about the different types of tea and see how the leaves were prepared, but our group had the opportunity to take part in a traditional tea ceremony and tasting with a tea master. As someone who has drank an exorbitant amount of tea in their lifetime, this was the best tea I ever had, and I ended up buying some to take home to the States. It was just far too good not to share with people. When we finished at the tea institute, we proceeded down the bumpiest road I have ever been on in order to visit the most magnificent place called Crown Cave. This I can say with absolute certainty was my favorite part of the trip so far.

Our exploration of the cave began with a cart ride, and I must say we were a comical bunch. The carts were made for two people; however, the only way to fit two was to have one person straddle the other. Along with this the carts didn’t always like to function properly, so at times, you could see many of us trying to scoot ourselves along the track by rocking back and forth. It was hilarious and super fun.
After the carts, we entered the cave, and I was shocked by its enormity. Full boats could travel through it, and the stalagmites and stalactites in residence were about three times the size of a person. I was in absolute awe, and I probably could have spent the entire day exploring the caves, but the cave was not the end of our day’s journey.

The last stop of the day was Daxu Ancient Town, and I must say this was probably my first realization that I was actually in China. I think what really opened my eyes was walking through the village and seeing for myself how differently the people in rural areas lived. The people of Daxu lived in small dwellings lining the street that I assume were shop fronts at one point. Every home was stone from floor to ceiling with little furniture except a TV and some chairs. Children and animals ran through the streets, and it was clear that the area was poor from the smell and the living conditions. With such a sharp contrast to the city, Daxu reminded me of why I had come to China in the first place. This trip was not about five star hotels or sight-seeing. It was about observing a culture and seeing how growing up in China affects children. This really got me thinking of what it would be like to grow up in these conditions and how much access to resources shapes one’s future.

As we travel the rest of the trip, I will definitely keep what I saw today in mind and remember that not all the children in China live in the conditions I’ve been seeing in the city. I wish we could spend more time observing rural life, but maybe on a future study tour students will get a chance. As you can imagine, today was an amazing and exhausting today, so I will leave further musings for another time.

Picture of the Day:
Journal Day 11:

I am mentally and physically exhausted from navigating the mad house that was Yangshuo this evening. In all of our travels, I have never been more aware of how overcrowded China is and why the One Child Policy was so necessary for population control.

Tonight, the group went and saw an amazing lights show that was designed by the same man who created the show for the 2008 Beijing Olympics. While I thought the show was spectacular, it was almost not worth going to because of the chaos that ensued afterwards. As we walked home, I was pushed, pulled, tripped, and peed on by a little boy in the street. In addition, there were times I felt I was going to suffocate in the sea of people because I literally could not turn my head without hitting someone. Fortunately, the whole group survived the hour trek, and we all made it home with only one sprained ankle in the group. I am relieved that China has not been like this the entire time because I don’t think I would be able to survive if the crowded conditions were constant.

Aside from our horrific walk home, I still had a fantastic first day exploring Yangshuo, and I especially enjoyed our trip here. When I got up this morning, I was so sad to be leaving the beautiful city of Guilin, but the riverboat ride definitely eased my pain. The scenery was absolutely gorgeous only made better by our private compartment attached to a lookout deck. Personally, I fully utilized the deck as a workspace because what better place to write about China’s beauty then out in it? The group also got some amazing pictures, and it was really spectacular to see some of the natural landmarks along the Li River.

After the riverboat tour, we spent the day touring the city and visiting other natural landmarks like Moon Hill. Yangshuo is such an interesting city because it is the perfect blend of rural and town, and while there is plenty to do in the city, the countryside is absolutely beautiful, too. There are so many options for our free day tomorrow, but I am definitely looking forward to just taking a day of rest. I may
go shopping, but after tonight, I don’t know if I feel brave enough to go back out into the crowds. I guess I’ll see how I am feeling in the morning, but now, I sleep.

Picture of the Day:

Journal Day 12:

Today, the trip finally caught up to me. We had a free day to do whatever we wanted, and what did I do? I slept. I slept a solid twelve hours, and then, I spent most of the rest of my time Skyping home and catching up on work for the study tour. Today was a good day though, and I spent a lot of time reflecting on the trip so far. In a lot of ways, this trip has challenged and stretched me, but I really hadn’t gotten the chance to slow down and think about them. Here’s what I have concluded so far:

First, I am an introvert. There are no if, ands, or buts about it. For most of my life, I believed that I was as extroverted as they come. I’m loud and opinionated, and I never have met a stranger I didn’t like; however, I find the company of others absolutely exhausting. It was explained to me recently that extroversion and introversion have little to do with personality, and mostly, what determines if you are one or the other is how you get your energy: from people or from being alone. After spending many days perpetually exhausted, I have finally come to grips with the fact that as much as I enjoy the company of others I get my energy from being alone. I never realized this at home because I had my own room and spent a lot of time by myself studying and such, but here I am always with someone. Until today, I hadn’t had a moment alone except when my roommate was showering and even then I was acutely aware of her presence; however, after she left and I was completely alone at the hotel, it
felt like taking a breath of fresh air. I finally was able to relax and sleep soundly for the first time all trip, and I felt completely recharged when everyone returned from the day’s activities. I amazed that it has taken twenty years to figure this out about myself, but I am so glad I know now. I will be careful to take some alone time the rest of the trip, so I won’t be so wiped out.

Second, I have discovered I have an uncanny ability to adapt to my surroundings. When I first chose to come to China, I was extremely nervous about adjusting to everything from the food to the people to the language barrier, and now, I feel like I could literally live anywhere here. Of course, I have had to make some adjustments mostly in perspective but also in my behaviors in order to adapt; however, I feel like I am more at home every day we spend here. For instance, I now carry hand sanitizer and toilet paper wherever I go. In the United States, I never would have had to worry about such things, but here it is like winning the lottery if you find a western-style toilet and winning the power ball if there is soap. Therefore, carrying these items has become second nature, and I have shifted my perspective on what is the “right” way to “sing a song”.

Furthermore, apart from this new learned behavior, I think what has me most convinced of my adaptability is my willingness to completely embrace and immerse myself in the culture. I love the big cities, I love the small towns, and there has not been a single place we’ve gone that I haven’t felt comfortable exploring, asking questions, and just learning about the people around me. In addition, I seem to have a natural ability with language, and I have begun to master the little Chinese I do know. All of these things indicate to me that I am fairly skilled at integrating myself into foreign life. I will be interested to see if this talent carries over for future ventures abroad.

Third and I think most importantly, while I pretend to be the most independent person on the planet, there are still some people who I depend on and have missed terribly while I’ve been away. It is sad, but I have spent much of this past year detaching from and saying goodbye to a lot of really important people in my life namely a now ex-boyfriend, some now graduated close friends, and family
members who it’s healthier to keep at a distance. With all these losses, it’s easier sometimes for me to pretend I need/want to be close to no one, so I don’t get hurt; however, I know from the helping field I am in that everyone, EVERYONE needs someone. Thankfully, I have realized being away that I do have a couple someone’s who I truly care to keep close; however, this has complicated being away quite a bit. I definitely had time to miss them today, so while it’s a good thing I made this discovery, it also kind of made me really sad and mopey today. So I guess the moral of the story is, truly no man or woman is an island. This trip has made me come to terms with the fact that I do have people back home who I need, and that is okay.

So while today I wasn’t the most productive or adventuresome, I feel I really learned some valuable things about myself as well as spent some good time rejuvenating for the rest of the trip. I wish I had a couple more days to explore, but I know I will return to Yangshuo one day. It is too beautiful not to share with the people I love.

Picture of the Day:

Journal Day 13:

Today was mostly a travel day to Shanghai, but we did have the opportunity to visit a primary school in Yangshuo before we left this morning.
I think what initially stood out to me about Yangshuo Primary School was the condition of the school in comparison to some of the others we had visited. Instead of a lush, green play yard, Yangshuo Primary had a cement slab of play space on which the kids could run around, play basketball, jump rope, etc. In addition, the buildings and classrooms seemed to be a little worse for wear, and the classroom materials were definitely lower quality than the other primary school we visited in Longkou. While I don’t think all of these things are necessarily detrimental to the children’s education, I think the most different and concerning feature of the school was the large class sizes.

According to one of the teachers, class sizes at Yangshuo Primary can range from twenty to fifty students in a class with one teacher. In the United States, a class of twenty students is sometimes viewed as too large, and fifty is just unheard of. Therefore, I question whether the children have access to enough individual attention and aid in order to reach their full potential in such a large class setting. I was not able to observe the older classrooms, so I don’t know what the skill levels of the older students were. I did, however, teach and sit in at the fourth grade level and compared to students we saw at the primary school in Longkou they were pretty far behind. I would have been interested to see how the older children performed, but time the way it was I was unable to observe an older class.

Another stark contrast from the other schools was the behavior of the children themselves. Unlike most of the children we’ve encountered, the students at Yangshuo Primary seemed relatively indifferent to our presence. In the classroom, my group tried to interact with the kids; however, they really made no effort to communicate with us and instead used the free time to play and chat amongst themselves. In addition, when I tried to play with some of the girls in the play yard, they would not share their toys with me or let me participate in their games. The students’ reactions to us may have had something to do with them being older children, but they were definitely very different than what I had previously encountered even at the primary school in Longkou.
A final note about Yangshuo Primary was there more than anywhere else I witnessed extremely gendered play. At recess, the divide in the play yard was distinct. One half was little boys who were rough housing and chasing each other. The other half was little girls who were jumping rope and doing cartwheels. Again, this may have had to do with the age of the children, and the fact that the gender divide is becoming more prevalent at their age. Furthermore, I thought it was really interesting that the children formed these groups on the playground naturally. I wish we had visited more primary schools, so I could determine if this was a common theme. Moreover, I am excited about the implications of the children’s play behavior for my research for the group project, and I am glad that I was able to witness my hypothesis being proven at least at this school.

Picture of the Day:

Journal Day 14:

After my first full day in Shanghai, I am left feeling a little disappointed. People we met on the trip as well as the HTM group from Purdue talked up the city so much, and to me, it just feels like any other big city we’ve been. Granted, it seems much louder than any of the other cities, but this may have to do with the placement of our hotel. I haven’t been able to sleep because of the honking at night, and currently, that is really the only comparison I can make between the real New York City and the supposed “New York City of Asia”. Hopefully, as I get to explore more than just the mall, I will discover the amazing Shanghai everyone has been talking about.
Apart from my disappointment about the city, I still really enjoyed our day in Shanghai and meeting the students of East China Normal University. For me, the Q & A session today was one of the more successful Chinese student interviews, and I felt like I was really able to get some valuable information for my research.

For example, the students gave me a decent amount of information about what activities children participate in and enjoy in China. Most notably, one of the students, Emily, informed me that children really enjoy role playing especially role playing that involves pantomiming future careers. Another student, Ling, also talked about how many activities and even class subjects like P.E. or science experiments are separated by gender. Further questioning and confirmation from the students on the panel generated similar answers to my research questions as the other universities; therefore, I have more confidence that the information I have gathered is somewhat accurate. With group projects coming up, it was nice to have some consistency in the data and find some confirmation.

Overall, I found today to be extremely productive for the project, and I am eager to pull all my information together to start drawing some conclusions. I am starting to not feel well; however, so, I think I am going to call it a night. Hopefully, a little sleep will help. I don’t want to miss our one day of sight-seeing in Shanghai.

Picture of the Day:
Journal 15:

Unfortunately, due to mitigating circumstances, I spent the day in bed today. So while I’m sure my sleeping all day and working on coursework would make an enthralling journal entry, I am taking the day off. Fortunately, I still have a cool picture.

Picture of the Day:

Journal Day 16:

After being sick in bed all day yesterday, I could not have asked for a better day back out with the group. Today, we took a day trip to Suzhou, and I cannot believe how many activities we fit into one day.

We started the day with my first bullet train ride, and while this may not seem very exciting, I saw it as another one of our fun activities for the day! I think I found the bullet train so interesting because it is one of the only forms of transportation we really don’t have in the U.S. Currently, the activity of riding the train from West Lafayette to Chicago takes longer than driving; however, imagine if this time could be split down to maybe a third of the time. That would be amazing, and that is what the bullet train does for people travelling back and forth from places like Suzhou to Shanghai. All this said,
riding the bullet train was an extremely cool experience, and I will be interested to see if they start popping up in the United States over the next several years.

Another highlight of the day was the group’s trip to the silk factory. The Chinese continue to amaze me with their attention to detail and how they make such beautiful things out of the most unlikely materials. Honestly, who thought to themselves, “Wow! Moth cocoons would make lovely cloth.” I just find the entire concept absolutely amazing, and I think what I loved most about the factory was seeing the entire process first hand from the baby silk worms to the finished silk products. It made me feel like I was getting an inside scoop on an ancient Chinese secret, and in a way, I was. It’s hard to believe that something with the consistency of cotton candy can be turned into fiber strong enough to make parachutes. So, while enjoying the silk factory this much may make me a nerd, I think our visit there may have been my favorite part of Suzhou.

After our trip to Suzhou, I am happy to say I returned to Shanghai and finally explored the parts of the city everybody has been raving about. Eager to see more of Shanghai, a group of us took a trip to the Bund which in essence is the Times Square of Shanghai, and it was truly spectacular. A blast of light and color I couldn’t help but wonder how much the electric bill cost. Despite this concern, the experience of seeing the Pearl Tower and Peace Hotel in person was so amazing. My only complaint was as always that it was super crowded. I could barely take pictures, but this was kind of a good thing. I feel like I was able to actually enjoy the experience rather than being concerned with snapping the perfect shot.

After tonight, I am so looking forward to our free day tomorrow. I can’t wait to discover more amazing parts of Shanghai and take in as much of the city as I can before we leave.
Picture of the Day:

Journal Day 17:

It’s the final countdown. Tonight marks our second to last night in Shanghai, and I can’t believe we go home in less than two days. Where has the time gone? Because projects are due tomorrow, I ended up spending my adventure day shopping and working on the group project instead of exploring the city. Fortunately, shopping turned out to be more of an adventure than I had initially anticipated.

First off, today marked the second time I have ever ridden a subway, and while this may not seem very adventurous, I must say I personally felt like Indiana Jones exploring the Temple of Doom. There were so many twists and turns in order to navigate from subway line to subway line, and while there were signs everywhere, I still got lost once or twice. Fortunately, many of the signs were in English, and as I found through trial and error, most of the subway lines lead to the same place. Like I said, it doesn’t seem like the most adventurous activity, but for me, it was the little victory of navigating home by myself that made it such a rush.

Along with navigating the subway, I discovered that finding my way through the market was also quite the expedition. Unlike most malls or stores, the knock-off market where I did my shopping has no directory, and basically, it is a make shift labyrinth of vendors and stores. There were several times I left a vendor to check a price elsewhere, and even if I wanted to buy the original item, I couldn’t navigate my way back. I kind of felt like a rat in a maze; however, while at times frustrating, I still had fun to
exploring and challenging myself to locate the items I wanted. Eventually, I got so good I was leading the rest of the girls to vendors where I bought souvenirs, and as you can imagine, I was extremely pleased with myself.

The final aspect of shopping that truly made shopping an adventure though was the haggling. For the first time all trip, I was able to haggle and not feel bad about it. Before Shanghai, I would feel guilty for driving the price too low with vendors because I felt like I was cheating them out of their livelihood. Now, I understand better, and I realize that the sellers make pretty good money. In addition, I discovered I’d been the kind of yuppie they take advantage of. So, in the market, I showed no mercy, and I had a great time arguing prices and striking great deals. In one day, shopping went from scary to exhilarating, and I feel haggling really made it that much more of an experience. So, while the day didn’t go quite as expected, I still had my adventure, and I got some awesome souvenirs to take home for my family along the way.

As I mentioned, tomorrow is group presentations, and I am so excited to see everyone’s finished products. Hopefully, all goes smoothly, and we can celebrate with a fantastic night of KTV.

Picture of the Day:
Journal Day 18:

I am sitting on the plane frantically trying to finish my journal entries, and it is finally hitting me that we are actually going home. I don’t know how I expected this to feel, but I definitely never imagined the wave of sadness and uncertainty. I have spent the last three weeks in an amazing country with amazing people, and now that it’s all over, I can’t help but wish we had more time. Life was so much simpler in China. No cell phones, no toilet paper, no problem. Okay, slight problem, but it turned into much less of a problem than you’d expect after three weeks. It’s funny because after three weeks I finally feel like I settled into life in China, and now, I am going back to the U.S. As I am looking over this journal, I realize I have written a novel of sorts, so I will try to keep this final entry concise. Basically, I have two major takeaways from our final day in China.

First, the group presentations were absolutely amazing, and I feel like the experience of doing a project like this across majors was extremely valuable. As we traveled the last several weeks and gathered data, it was hard at times to see the big picture of what we were doing in China. After yesterday though, I feel like it all finally makes sense. As I listened to the other groups present, I realized we were all looking at the same things but through different lenses, and honestly, I feel like this was what this trip was all about. The projects helped us work together and understand a culture in a completely new way as well as understand each other in a completely new way. All of us may not be studying in the same areas, but we are all intelligent and valuable people with common goals. The project helped us realize that through collaboration we can make things and discover things that are much bigger than ourselves, and while this may not have been the original motive, I still feel it was a valuable lesson we learned through our presentations.

A second and I believe equally valuable realization from the trip is not to be afraid to take risks. I have done more, seen more, and experienced more than I ever imagined was possible on this study abroad tour. As I watched Dr. Hollich’s summary videos yesterday, I thought about how I almost didn’t come on
this trip; however, through this experience, doors have opened like teaching abroad in a kindergarten that I never would have had if I had stayed home. So, while it may be cliché, I think one of the most valuable lessons I learned from this trip was how to take risks and live life to the fullest, and as I fly home, I can truly say I regret nothing.

My one request is that a trip like this must happen again. I don’t care how, and I don’t care when. Future students must have the opportunity to experience what I have experienced. Never in my life did I imagine I would go to China, and now, here I am heading home after three amazing weeks. Purdue Study Abroad and (you) my fantastic professors made that happen. Without the opportunity to go in school, I probably would’ve never set foot in China. This has been an invaluable experience, and one that I will cherish the rest of my life.

With all this said, thank you for an amazing trip, and please, please, please continue to enable future students to have access to this amazing study abroad opportunity.

Picture of the Day:

(I think this picture says it all. We had a fantastic trip!)