I have only been home for slightly over a month, and I still at this point find it hard to believe that I was ever in China. In my brain, I know that I was there, but it doesn't seem real for some reason. I see friends talking about taking trips to England, Switzerland, and Germany, interesting, sure, but none of them can say that they have been to China. I can. It was two weeks that felt like months, a barrage of new sights, sounds, tastes, and experiences.

The first thing I want to mention, and it is I hypothesize, the reason that the trip still doesn't seem real to me, is the feeling I got that I wasn't anywhere foreign. I found myself walking through places, but not feeling like I was in China. Very rarely did I feel like I was truly in China. Maybe it was residual jet lag from the 13 hour flight over there, or possibly it was because we started in a major metropolitan city like Shanghai. I think both played a part. When driving around you see skyscraper after skyscraper, tall apartment complex after tall apartment complex, I felt like I could be in any major city, New York, Chicago, etc. It didn't fit with my perceptions of what China was like. I should have been smarter, you hear in the news constantly about how China is the fastest growing world economy, and that there is a construction boom going on right now. I suppose that somewhere in my mind, I was still thinking of old temples, not towering skyscrapers.

Another thing that surprised me was the policing. From recent events in Tibet and Urumqi to the events in Tienannmen Square in 1989, I had expected an overbearing security presence everywhere we went. I figured that I would see some ominous-looking guardsman at every corner, just waiting for someone to come along challenging the CCP or the state. In my experience, that never happened. Sure I saw the odd guard here and there, usually at the entrances to certain
buildings (I'm assuming they were government buildings) But nowhere did I see an overwhelming show of force. Possibly if we had gone out west, where the most unrest has occurred recently, the case would have been different, but in the places we went, I was proved wrong. However, I have read many reports of a vast plain-clothed police force that the government employs, I wouldn't be able to figure out where the security was in that case, would I? Also sort of in that same vein of state control, I wish that there hadn't been such a language barrier, because I would have loved to know what the major news there was. I wanted to see and hear what is explained to us in the West as the propaganda that the State Television puts out. I felt like I was in a bubble due to that! I am a news junkie, at home, the first thing I do when I wake up is check the BBC World Service for the day’s top headlines. There, at least until we got to Beijing, I really didn't have any clue what was going on except for some brief headlines from the English CCTV channel. It claimed to be a “news” channel, but from what I watched, it was mostly pre-taped programming, only limited “news”. I wonder if the Chinese-language news channels are the same. Also, in Beijing, they had a business center at the hotel with computers, when I got online, I immediately noticed the heavy censorship of the internet, which outside of the country is referred to as the “Great Firewall of China”. For a few days, I couldn't get on either MSNBC or BBC World News. I also found that Facebook, Twitter, and other social networking sites, where content can't be monitored, were blocked as well.

I have to admit, I was woefully ignorant of Chinese history before I got there, even with the reading I had done beforehand. Going to some of the historical sites, like the Imperial Tomb and the Confucian temples, just didn't mean that much to me, since I only had a very basic understanding of the history. I wish that could have been different. It was especially annoying when we would be at a museum and something would be described to me as “Ming Dynasty” or
“Qing Dynasty” those didn't mean anything to me, because I didn't have a grasp of the order that they ruled or the time periods during which they ruled.

When it comes to the culture, I am surprised that I didn't go through much of a culture shock at all. The thing I found most unnerving and odd was the staring. Here at home, we're mostly raised with our parents' telling us “Don't stare, its not nice”. (Well I was raised that way, anyways) But there it's obviously very normal, since we were stared at everywhere we went! That was very strange to me. The worst was in the train station in Shanghai, while we were waiting for the fast train to Suzhou. There was one guy, who just stood there and stared. I counted and he was staring at us for about 15 minutes straight! I found that funny (also creepy), its not like we were even doing anything amusing and worthy of staring at!

Another thing, and I'm not entirely sure that it is culture related. But the restrooms really threw me for a loop. Before the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, NBC News did a few stories about China and how it is preparing accommodations for the games and dealing with security concerns. Some reports dealt with the internet censorship, some with unrest in Tibet, but there was one story on sanitation and how they were attempting to make restrooms in the capital more Western-visitor friendly. The squat toilets that we ran into really disturbed me. I know that most people in the world don't have luxurious restrooms like we do here, but seeing those were a shock. The worst, however, was how they didn't seem to make much of an attempt at keeping them clean. Many of the restrooms smelled badly, but the restrooms at the Forbidden City took the cake. We saw one of the toilets had overflowed and the lady took used toilet paper out of the trash bin to clean it up. That really grossed me out.

My favorite aspect of the culture was mealtime. In my house, we rarely eat all together, its usually just a grab-and-go situation. It was very nice there to have a huge table with everyone
sharing the same dishes. It was so much fun. On a side note, the food was absolutely delicious! That first meal in Shanghai was by far the best. I was slightly disappointed that I didn't get to try some more adventurous foods. (Duck feet, anyone?) I was amazed that none of the Chinese food made me sick in anyway, truth be told, the only food that upset my stomach was that breakfast at McDonald's! Also, and I think we discussed this there, the fact that its fine to eat vegetables for breakfast. Its such a foreign concept to me. My breakfast usually consists of cereal or oatmeal, and while there there I didn't even have any milk!

The final theme suggested in the letter you sent us is the one that I have most things to talk about. It was what aspects of the trip would I bring to their attention to pique their interest for next year's trip. I have too many to even talk about. The best was just all of the things we got to see. Its one thing to go see a museum, and we did a couple of those, another to go see a temple, we did our share of those as well. But the most fun things were the things we did in the cities, not so much the historical stuff. Walking down to the park in Xi'an to do Tai Chi. Going to the foreign language bookstore. Doing those things really gives you a feel for where you are. When you're riding around all day in a bus to go to some tourist hot spot like the Terracotta Warriors, you get a feeling of disconnect (or at least I did). But my favorite experiences were when we were just out walking around.

The most fun activity that we did was riding the bikes on top of the Xian City Wall. That city overall was, in my opinion, the best. But doing that really sealed the deal. You always think of the Great Wall, but you don't realize that walls were commonplace back then for defense, and considering Xian used to be the capital during, I think it was 13 dynasties, it makes sense that it would have one. It was a fantastic experience. Of course the other things like the Great Wall and the Summer Palace were amazing in their own right, but Xi'an was a pleasant surprise. I had
never even heard of that city before the trip, and I didn't quite know what to expect, but it exceeded my expectations time and time again.

If I were to try to convince students to go on the trip next year, I would draw all of my reasoning from Xi'an. I found it so much more fantastic than any other city we visited. The location of the hotel, just down the street from the city center, was amazing. That so many things were within walking distance was great. The city itself was lovely, minimal smog, nice people, it had a wonderful vibe to it. Every single thing we did in Xi'an, with maybe the exception of the Banpo museum, was brilliant. It was by and large my favorite part of the trip, and that one city alone makes me want to go back next year to do it all again!

Most of the trip was great, but the one city that I had trouble in was Qufu. Truth be told, I didn't like it all that much. That may have been because I was ill, or maybe because I didn't warm up to our guide as much as I had Angela, or a whole litany of other things. It was nice to see one of the less developed cities. But overall it just wasn't that interesting to me. The thing that I liked the most was the lecture given to us about Confucius. I liked how the professor was so frank in speaking to us. We're led to believe that the Chinese government has an iron grip on power, and can crush any and all threats, but he wasn't afraid to admit and tell us about how the government truly has fears and worries about things. (Like the rise of Christianity)

I have always wondered what it felt like to travel, this trip was my first flight, my first time out of the country, and it was amazing. It has brought on this overall sense of being in constant motion. I don't ever want to stop. I want to keep going, keep seeing, keep living. I saw so many beautiful things, met so many nice people. I was terrified before the trip. Terrified that I would hate it, that I would hate flying, that I would hate the food, that I would be so disappointed by it that I'd never want to travel ever again in my life. I am very happy that that wasn't the case. I was
also lucky enough to spend those fourteen days with such a fantastic group of people. You all became a second family to me, and I am very thankful for that!