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Person to Person in China

Ashley Streich
Linfield College, astreic@linfield.edu

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Field Notes from Abroad: Person to Person in China

From the moment I stepped off the airplane, I felt as if I had entered a different world. Despite the modern feel to the city of Beijing, China, it could not be any different than the United States. Freedoms that we take for granted every day, such as internet, electricity, heat and hot water are highly regulated here in China. Michael, my conversation partner and interviewee here in China, explained to me that the heat here is regulated by the government and it was upon their say, that the heat could be turned on. Many in Beijing will not get heat until mid-November despite the snow that has already hit us. That is not to say all of China is completely totalitarian but government control over such things is interesting compared to the individual rule over such things back in America. Another thing that surprised me about China was their commitment to education. The more people I talk to, the more I realize how easy I had it throughout my high school years. Like many high school students, I complained about the amount of homework I had or the lack of free time I had due to my many extracurricular activities. After hearing the stories about the pressures of education here, my high school experience pales in comparison. First, to get into to high school, each student must take an entrance exam. This exam will determine where the student gets to go to high school. Once the student is in high school, a typical day, according to Michael, is as follows:

- 5:30am: morning running
- 7:00-8:00am: breakfast
- 8:00-10:00am: morning classes
- 10:00-10:30am: morning calisthenics
- 10:30-12:00pm: class
- 12:00-1:00pm: lunch

- 1:00-5:00pm: class
- 5:00-6:00pm: dinner
- 6:00-9:00pm: study hall
- 9:00-11:00pm: quiet homework time
- 11:00 – lights out

This schedule is repeated Monday through Friday. On weekends, most kids go home to see their families as most high schools here in China are a lot like boarding schools unless the student is lucky enough to live close to the school he or she got into. I personally cannot fathom having a schedule like this. Apparently it only gets worse as the student gets closer to the college entrance exam. I suppose this would explain why Americans are falling behind countries like China in our education.

Despite feeling as if I am in a different world, I found that it only took me a week or two to adjust to the life here in China. Sure, there are differences but those differences have almost become a part of who I am over here. I have a new found fondness of cats (there are cats everywhere over here), I truly appreciate a batch of well made jiaozi (dumplings) and I can walk across a busy street without batting an eye. The few differences I have yet to accept would have to be the fashion sense, the affection for McDonalds, and the overall lack of a sense of privacy. I cannot begin to tell you how many times I have been asked if I have a job back in America and how much I make or if I am married or who I am voting for. According to Michael, not much here is considered private therefore, it is not rude to ask those kinds of questions. Perhaps, given the time I have left here in China, I will grow more accustomed to these differences as well.

I truly think that this experience has taught me a lot about China. As our world grows more and more interdependent, I believe that China and the United State's relations will grow

even closer. Experiencing China now will give me a unique look into a culture that is still growing and that is still finding its footing in the developed world. I believe that China is a misunderstood country and only by coming here can you understand the people, the culture and the way of life. Like America, China has its own struggles and its own problems that it is trying to solve in the best way it knows how. I think that the world judges China based on its government's decisions rather than on the people. If only more people had the opportunity that I have been given, they too would begin to see the hidden wonder of this place we call China.

Interviewee: Michael (fellow student)