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International Odyssey

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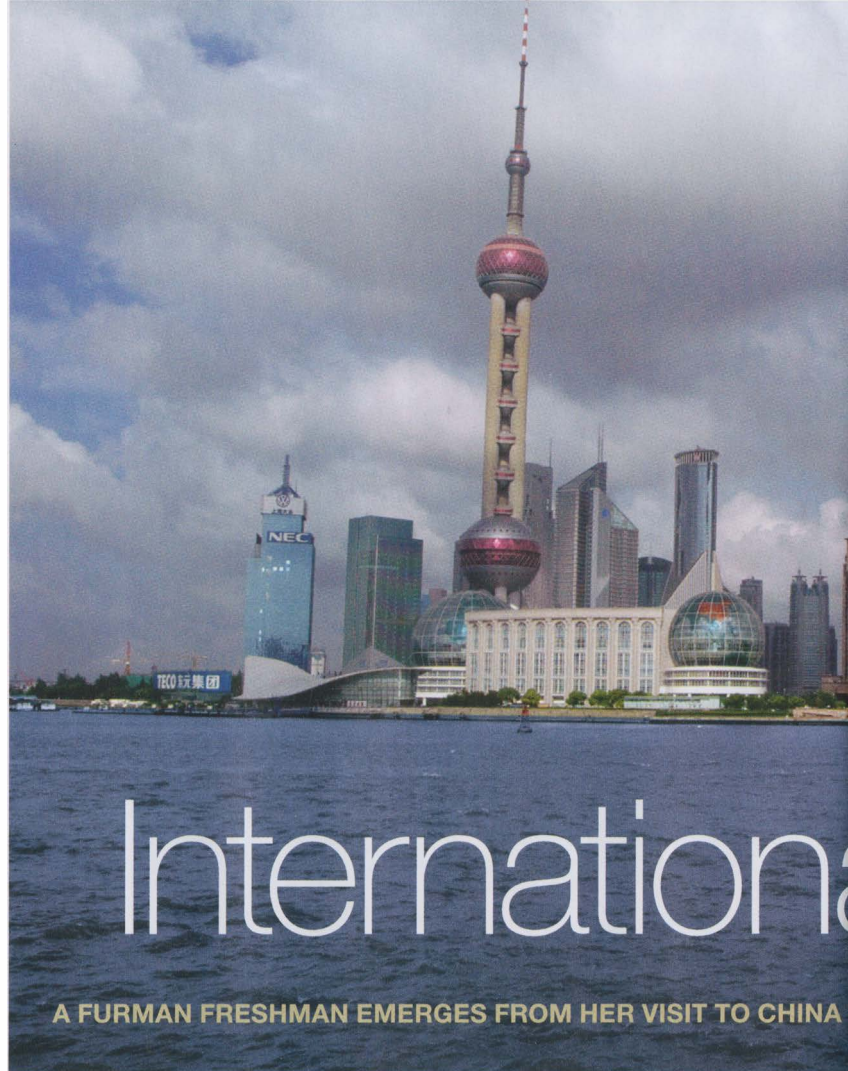
The nose of the Boeing 747 pointed toward Shanghai, but inside, the nose of the 18-year-old girl in seat 22C pointed directly toward the floor. As she gripped the armrests on her right and left, the plane headed down the runway to carry her to a new world. Turning ever faster, the wheels in her mind and those below her moved in unison as the plane began to rise.

All I could think as we took off from San Francisco that July afternoon was, “There’s no turning back.” I was en route to China, which meant that I had fully committed myself to two weeks of traveling with 16 total strangers, not to mention a year of studying the Chinese language. And although I didn’t know it yet, I had also committed myself to an experience that would change my outlook on the world, a challenge that dared me to question my own education, lifestyle and culture.

After a full 28 hours of traveling, 15 recent high school graduates (all of whom were set to enroll at Furman in September) and two brave Furman professors arrived at Suzhou University. Each Furman student was matched with an English-speaking Suzhou student with whom we ate, roomed and traveled for our first full week. While living in a university dorm, we shared everything from personal space to personal ideas and convictions with our new friends.

For five straight mornings, all 30 of us participated in three-hour lectures and discussions led by Furman history professors Jan Kiely and Lloyd Benson, as well as two professors from Suzhou University. We covered topics from traditional Confucianism to present Chinese-American relations. In these forums, I began to realize what a unique and challenging task I have before me: education.

Sitting among my international peers, I felt the pangs of my own ignorance pulsing through my heart and mind. For the first time, I felt my education had failed me. I knew very little about Confucianism, and what I did know wasn’t entirely correct. I knew nothing of the Cultural Revolution, Mao Zedong’s regime or the Chinese Communist party — and the list continued to grow as our topics expanded. Why hadn’t I covered these subjects in world history? Why didn’t I understand more? These



questions loomed in the back of my mind as I began soaking up as much as possible from our discussions.

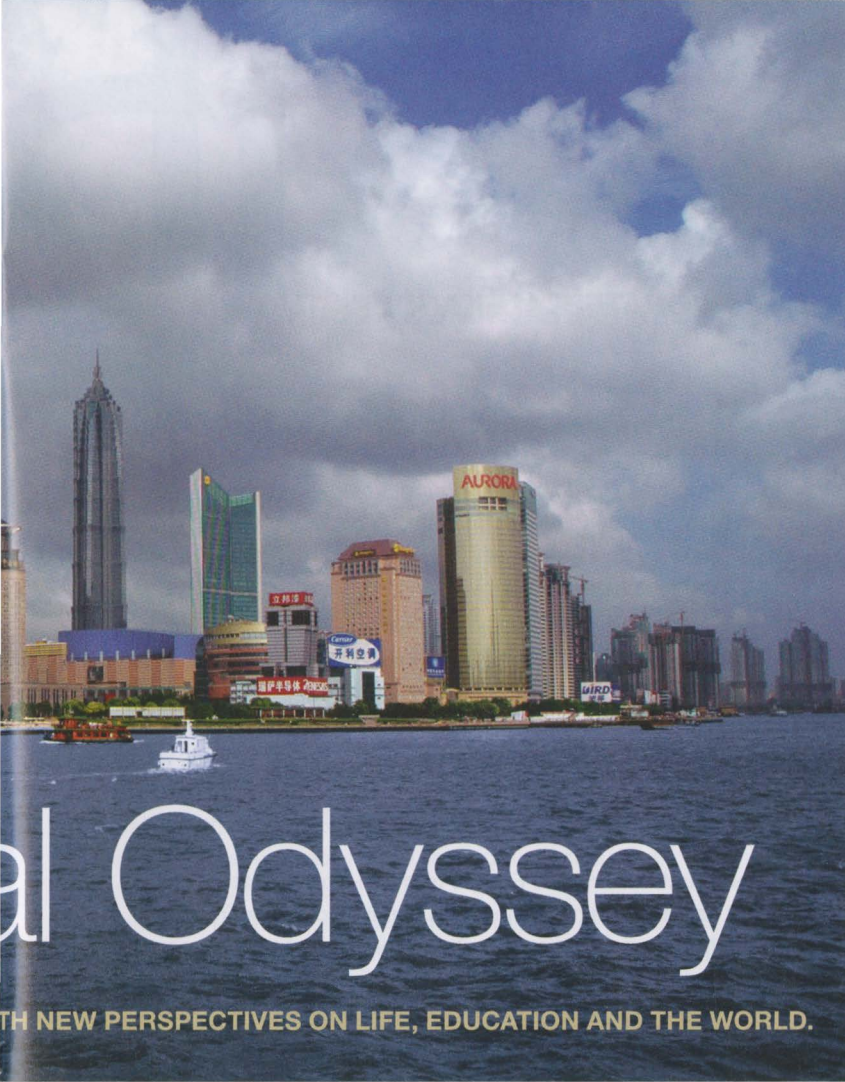
As the week passed, our warrior-tough group battled mosquitoes, a few minor infections and our first taste of communal showers. We began learning useful Chinese phrases such as “Hello,” “Thank you,” and “I lost my dorm key.” Unfortunately, just as we began to feel comfortable in Suzhou, it was time to leave.

I was disappointed to be leaving Suzhou, the Chinese students I adored and the discussion sessions that I had come to eagerly anticipate. I didn’t want to stop learning when we started traveling. Little did I know that through traveling, the real education would begin.

In Beijing, unlike in the Suzhou classroom, we were in the middle of the history I so desperately wanted to learn. While waiting in line for an hour to enter Mao Zedong’s mausoleum, Dr. Kiely offered me the *Reader’s Digest* version of the Communist Revolution in China and Mao Zedong’s rule. The history of the Chinese imperial dynasties came alive when we toured the Imperial Palace and Forbidden City. As we discovered the history of Beijing I felt like a young child, learning everything for the first time. It was invigorating.

Finally, our group came to the sight we’d all been waiting for: the Great Wall. (Insert soaring symphonic music.)

The Great Wall is like a fantastic piece of artwork that you can touch and climb. We could sit on its cool rocks, simmer in its shade and admire its views in full color. Although



MATT ALEXANDER

BY B. CLAIRE CARLTON

I cannot speak Chinese (yet), don't understand all of the culture and know very little Chinese history, I *can* appreciate the utter magnificence of the Great Wall. The experience was fantastic — and it was over before I knew it had even begun. Previously, in my mind, the Great Wall was only a structure that existed in textbooks. Now, it is a reality that existed beneath my feet for a few hours of my life.

The last five days of our tour were spent climbing Mount Huangshan and touring Shanghai, but for me, the trip climaxed at the Great Wall. In the middle of the largest man-made structure on Earth, I finally was able to appreciate the education that I thought had failed me. I also found a wellspring of gratitude in my heart for an experience I will never be able to repay.

My education in classrooms and textbooks, though lacking in Chinese history, opened the door for an education in real-time, but Furman's generosity to a group of rising freshmen made the entire experience possible. I am so honored and thankful to have been a part of a trip that taught me so much about Chinese culture and history, but also so much about myself.

As I begin my four years at Furman, I will carry this experience with me, applying the lessons I learned abroad in the classrooms across campus. Now, when I ask myself why I don't understand more, I know I will be surrounded by a community that is willing to send me around the world, just so I can. ●

For more on the Summer China Experience, visit the Web at <http://facweb.furman.edu/~bensonloyd/sce>.



COURTESY CLAIRE CARLTON

Claire Carlton (left) and Deborah Roos in downtown Shanghai. Above: A harbor view of Shanghai.