UNIVERSITY IMMERSION PROGRAM
hosted by Sichuan University, China

My first encounter with this program was way back in March 2016. I was on the school PC and there was an announcement for summer partner schools program on my.qmul.ac.uk. I chose to attend Sichuan University because of the dates, and with the knowledge that food and lodging will be covered. Ever since my application was accepted, I went through waves of excitement and anxiety prior to the trip.

On one hand, I was already on Trip Advisor and even Baidu (China’s version of Google) searching for the top tourist attractions and things to do when in Chengdu.

On some other days, I would ponder over what my time in Chengdu will be like. I have been to Beijing and Shanghai and they were both metropolis, I wondered if Chengdu will be the same. Will my time there be as advertised by study abroad programs; laughing with my group of multicultural, new-found friends under the sun? Can’t wait for exams to be over and fly across the globe for it!

And then there were days when I feel vulnerable and insecure. Are the streets of Chengdu safe? Will the rest of the exchange goers think I’m too quiet? Is the long flight with Thai Airways going to be alright? Why did I sign up for this in the first place?

Now that I’ve returned from the trip, here are some reasons why I think my summer abroad is beneficial for self-development yet fun:

1. **Put your independence to test**

   Can you handle being in a totally foreign place with a bunch of people you have just met? Going on an exchange gives you a feel of how comfortable you are being on your own.

   In my case, I enjoyed the experience of being a student in Sichuan University. On the bus ride to campus, my mind sometimes wandered off and I would think about how the whole idea of being in China seemed surreal. Then I get interrupted by the driver shouting out the name of the stop. Oh, yes! I am in China and it is time to head to classes.

2. **It is rewarding to step out of your comfort zone.**

   Looking back, I can proudly tell myself that ‘I did it!’’. All my worries turned out to be ridiculous and unnecessary. Not only did I explore a whole new city but also 2 new subjects. There were hundreds of short classes that we could attend I picked ‘Leonardo da Vinci’ and ‘Social Inequality’, which had no connection to my engineering degree at all. Never will I look at ‘The Last Supper’ the same way again. And now, I am conscious of the prevalence of inequality in our daily lives. As the saying goes, you can never stop learning.

Sichuan University have arranged a local student volunteer (buddy) for each international student to help us with translation, getting around and simply as a company. As there were 12 of us from Queen Mary, I have befriended 12 buddies and 11 Queen Mary students. We quickly became a clique because there was something similar in each of us that brought us together in the first place. Out of the 12 buddies, I still keep in touch with one of them since I left Chengdu. We text each other during Chinese festivals or just about anything interesting in life.

4. Get culturally shocked!

Think Chinese don’t eat much spicy food? Think again. Sichuanese cuisine is known for its spiciness. I was not only startled by the method of cooking but the food item itself too. In China, anything that moves can be eaten. During this trip, I have tried rabbit’s leg, pig’s brain and the famous Sichuan hotpot.

5. Enjoy nature from another side of the world.

Flora and fauna is greatly affected by geographical location. There is no place on earth more suitable to see the pandas than in China. I was very fortunate that it was included in our program. The sanctuary was packed to the brim, proving what an important landmark it is.
On one of the days, the buddies brought us to hike Mount Qing Cheng (青城后山). The climb up showcased the beautifully preserved forest in Sichuan. The streams flowed crystal clear water, you can hear birds chirping from deep inside the woods and you’re surrounded by lush greenery.

Had I not taken that leap of faith, I would have missed out on so much priceless moments. When travelling, I stick three principles which haven’t failed on me yet: don’t expect, keep your mind open, be adventurous.
Bonus: While you are already in the mountainous Sichuan province in China, do take the trouble to extend your trip and visit other tourist attractions. At the end of my program in Chengdu, I arranged for my parents to fly in and we travelled for a week. I signed us up for two short tours. We spent 3 days in the northern side of Sichuan to visit the UNESCO World Heritage Jiu Zhai Gou National Park and Huang Long Scenic Valley. Then, we spent another 2 days in the southern part of Sichuan to see the Leshan Giant Buddha and hike Mount Emei. In between these tours, we came back to Chengdu for a day.

Figure 7: (Left) Beautiful clear blue pond in Jiu Zhai Gou (Right) Waterfalls never fail to amaze. Also in Jiu Zhai Gou

Figure 8: (Left) The Rainbow Ponds in Huang Long Scenic Valley (Right) The trails leading to the ponds

Figure 9: Leshan Giant Buddha is carved onto a mountain

Figure 10: At the summit of Mount Emei with the Four Faced Buddha in the background