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Expedition Report 2017

The Sichuan University Immersion Programme was a two-week program that invited students from around the globe to take part in cultural and educational immersion. The two-week university immersion program was designed to allow collaboration between faculties from all over the world through short course and lectures in classrooms with both domestic and international students at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. The aim of the prestigious program is to bring together students and allow different nationalities to create lasting friendships and stimulate global awareness. The event itself started with a festival in which different countries and ethnicities were celebrated. This was followed by welcome talks from Presidents of different universities across the globe including our very own university and its President. Sichuan university had successfully introduced China to the rest of the globe with amazing performances such as traditional Chinese dance, Kung-Fu and even magic shows performed by students.

The courses were designed in English and no prior knowledge was needed so students were able to select any module of their desire. I took this rare opportunity to gain knowledge of topics outside of my Physics degree. The first module I selected was called 'Introduction to neuroscience'. This course was indeed an introduction course in neuroscience with emphasis on the structure and function of the brain, how the brain works and is formed, how the brain guides us through changes in life, how we understand the brain and why is it so important to increase understanding of the human brain. Taught by the head of department of neuroscience at Sichuan university, the course ran smoothly and the final session consisted of students presenting their knowledge of the brain in small groups for the rest of the department.

Another module I enrolled onto which I enjoyed due to its diversity was 'Africa and the world'. Taught by Professor Nwando Achebe, an award-winning historian and feminist scholar at Michigan state university, the module highlighted the stereotypes of Africa created by the world due to lack of immersion. One common stereotype the class shared was that all Africans look the same. In Western media, Africans have been depicted as being one and the same wearing face paint and animal print in pitch black skin not to mention the bone like material used to make jewellery. It simply highlights that the Western world commonly views Africans as tribal and untamed. As for the skin-darkening—Africans, even sub-Saharan ones, have a range of skin tones, hair textures and other physical traits. The importance of recognising this stereotype is that when the media paints your face dark to look more African, it is in-fact reducing an entire continent full of different nations, tribes, cultures and histories, into one brown colour. Another dominant stereotype highlighted in class when Professor Achebe asked for adjectives to describe individual views of Africa was that Africa is a jungle and the streets are filled with untamed wild animals. Professor Achebe stressed the importance of breaking down stereotypes and used the example of Black activist Malcolm X, who visited several African countries and how he raised concerns of this portrayal. He not only discussed Western stereotypes of Africa but also how such stereotypes resulted in black Americans distancing themselves from the continent. "They always project Africa in a negative light: jungle savages, cannibals, nothing civilized," he pointed out.

In reality, only a small portion of the continent includes jungle, or rainforests. These tropical areas are located along the Guinea Coast and in the Zaire River Basin. Africa's largest vegetation zone is actually savanna or tropical grassland. Moreover, Africa's home to urban centers with populations in the multimillions, including Cairo, Egypt; Lagos, Nigeria; and Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo. It was interesting to see the raw portrayal of Africa from students in China as this was very different from the views of students in London who live in a multicultural city and often come across people from different parts of the world.

As part of the program, myself and the other international students had the opportunity to visit the Chengdu Research Base of Giant Panda Breeding. The giant pandas; a Chinese national treasure, are loved by the world. Found in Sichuan, Shaanxi and Gansu provinces, there are fewer than 2,000, of which 70% are distributed within the territory of Sichuan Province making them a must see for tourists. The research base consists of necessary facilities including sleeping quarters and medical stations to give the pandas great care. Noticeably, a great number of plants and as many as ten thousand clumps of bamboos and bushes have been cultivated to provide for the animals' diet and habitat.

Another group trip consisted of visiting the Leshan Giant Buddha. It has an enormous height of 71 metres and is carved out of cliff face that lies close to the Min and Dadu Rivers in southern Sichuan near the city of Leshan. The stone sculpture faces Mount Emei and is the largest and tallest stone Buddha statue in the world and by far the tallest pre-modern statue in the world. Upon our return, the students were treated to Sichuanese hotpot. Hotpot is a Chinese stew containing a variety of East Asian ingredients, prepared with a simmering pot of soup stock at the dining table. While the hot pot is kept simmering, ingredients are placed into the pot and are cooked at the table. Typical hot pot dishes include thinly sliced meat, leaf vegetables, mushrooms, wontons, egg dumplings, tofu, and seafood. The cooked food is usually eaten with a dipping sauce. Sichuanese hotpot is differentiated from typical Chinese hotpot due to its intense spices.

Chengdu is a beautiful city with amazing shopping centres and architecture. Must-see shopping centres include Tianfu Square and Chunxi road, in particular, their evening atmosphere is astonishing. The city is full of historical architecture including Chengdu Huangcheng Mosque; one of the most famous mosques in Southwest China. The mosque combines Arabian architecture with building style of Ming and Qing Dynasties. The existing mosque consists of an entrance consisting of beautiful inscription of four Chinese characters Kai Tian Gu Jiao (the most ancient religion) hung on a tablet. There are many block-printed Arabian and Chinese Quran in the library. Visiting religious structures helps one to appreciate the beauty of China and comprehend just how much history the country has to offer whether it be building the foundations of Buddhism or the establishment of Confucianism or even the trade and settlement of Muslims in China during the Golden Age of Islam. Essentially, the program was much more than an educational trip. It was also a spiritual trip and one that needs to be taken alone in order to fully appreciate the beauty of the country and fundamentally grow both in knowledge and wisdom.