

## Queen Mary Confucius Institute China Summer Camp 2019

The fish eye, staring out of the fish head upturned on the plate, bores into me. Judging me, probably harshly. I watched in silent, barely concealed horror as Samuel plucks out the eye with his chopsticks and chases it around with a spoon a bit before popping it easily into his mouth.

“It tastes like a hard pea”, he shrugs, as though a form of justification.

The food, admittedly, has been otherwise quite delicious here. However, it's also been quite an adventure in recognizing Western bastardizations of culture - the Chinese don't eat nearly as many noodles and kung pao chicken as we think they do in Chinatown. It's a lot more stir fries, boiled vegetables, sweet baked breads. And it's all so much better than your local takeout place. I still haven't gotten used to drinking hot water with every meal though.

I've been in China for two weeks with my university's Confucius Institute - a Chinese initiative across six continents to show off the best parts of China to foreigners. It has been an adventure in food, history, culture, and a very different political environment. Outwardly, China's largest, most cosmopolitan cities look quite similar to any such city in the West - huge roadways, trains rumbling overhead, people hurrying about, and a huge array of skyscrapers and storefronts. Walking out of the subway station, I could have been, for a moment, in any main square in any large city. However, with one look around, two differences became obvious which set Tiananmen Square apart from Trafalgar - smog and Communism. A thick fog covered the city, making the sky an impenetrable iron gray and anything beyond twenty feet slightly hazy. It felt as though we were encased in a darkened dome, without only the weakest sunlight struggling through. Yet the locals walked about in sunglasses, not a single face mask in sight - this was a pretty clear day in the nation's infamously polluted capital.

It also became evident that the lack of color could not be wholly attributed to pollution. In typical Red architecture, the massive buildings surrounding the square, and the towering monument in the center, were all rendered in the same featureless, imposing, and very gray style. It all worked, however, to draw one's eye across the square, where there stood an imposing, blood-red building. It was the entrance to the famous Forbidden City, the historical royal palace complex and political center of China. On the wall hung an enormous, gilt-edged photo of current president Xi Jinping, flanked by six Chinese flags across the palace wall.

Except . . . as we got closer in the smog, the photo and flags began to reassert themselves. The golden frame in fact surrounded a portrait of Mao Zedong, historical

leader, revolutionary, deemed creator of modern China . . . and widely considered a mass murderer by those ignorant fools in the West. We also soon noticed that those were not, in fact, Chinese flags, but plain red ones which fluttered over the city. In light of this discovery, it was slightly less surprising to hear our tour guide wax poetic about the vast history of Tiananmen Square, up to the founding of the People's Republic of China in that very spot by Mao in 1949, and promptly stopping after that event. Nothing noteworthy has happened here since then, according to him.

All in all, I thoroughly enjoyed my trip to China. It is an amazing country unlike any I've been to before, with an incredibly rich history, beautiful land and immersive culture. However, I am especially glad I went this summer. The main motivation for me this year was to decide if I wanted to study abroad there this coming year or not - and, as lovely as the trip was, and how brilliant the country is, I have decided against studying there. This is for a myriad of reasons that I never quite realised until I was there, such as the distance and just the difference between lifestyles here and there, but the language was the deciding factor for me. The Confucius Institute had us take two weeks of language classes there with a professional teacher, and while I learned a bit, mostly what I learned is that Chinese is really, *really* hard, and that even with dedicated study, it would be very difficult to even reach a conversational level even after living there for a year.

I've decided instead to apply to the Freie Universitat in Berlin, as I have been studying German for almost two years and think that would be a much more progressive step for me to take linguistically. However, even if I won't be back for a longer time this time next year, I am incredibly grateful for the opportunity to travel there, which was made wholly possible by the Expedition Fund, and the experience has helped me to make a crucial decision in my life.



A group photo at the airport!



We had our last dinner in the revolving restaurant at the top of the TV tower. The food was definitely a highlight of the trip!

The obligatory Great Wall were *amazing*.



Photo. The views