Trip with the Confucius Institute to Beijing and Shanghai

China was never somewhere that I had planned to visit, but I knew I wanted to travel during the summer and push myself out of my comfort zone. I knew this opportunity would allow me to meet new people and spend time away from my comfortable London bubble to explore a new culture. China is such a curious, peculiar and fascinating country, so I couldn’t resist the chance to experience it first-hand.

Our first destination was Beijing. It’s incredibly cliché but as soon as we entered the airport I was hit with the smell of Noodles and other delicacies. Then I realized that we really were in China. One of the many highlights during this trip was definitely the food. Noodles can be eaten for breakfast, lunch or dinner. I enjoyed how we would all sit round a table that had a rotating tray so we could easily try lots of different delicacies in one sitting.

One of the most memorable parts of the trip was visiting the Great Wall of China. The walk was estimated to take about half an hour but was closer to an hour due to my eagerness to absorb the breath-taking scenery and take photos. Near the top of the wall, was a peculiar cave that was mysterious and quaint, making for a great place to take a break in. My legs were truly tired after the hike but it was well worth it.

Once we arrived in Shanghai from Beijing, we were able to take Mandarin lessons with the Shanghai University of Finance and Economics (SUFE). I was a little concerned about my ability to keep up with the class but was relieved when I realised that most people were complete beginners like me. Mandarin is definitely a difficult language to learn and I believe it far surpasses French in difficulty (which I’m learning) because of all the different tones. After a few lessons my confidence really improved and on arrival to a market I tried to use my new found skills to interact with some locals- I then realised that I had a long way to go as they could not even make out what I was trying to say. Another interesting aspect of the trip were the “free” markets, where we had to haggle. At first, I believed I had a knack for this when I managed to reduce a bracelet down from 85 to 45 yuan (£9 to
To my horror, the next day I saw the SAME bracelet at a stall for only 10 yuan. Annoyingly, throughout the trip I kept seeing this same exact bracelet for less than the 45 yuan that I paid.

Another thing that I was shocked by, were the Eastern toilets, comprising literally, of a hole in the ground. Thankfully, in our hotel we had western toilets, and it was usually when we were out and about that we would encounter these difficulties. When shopping in a mall, to my delight there were western toilets, although, they were a confusion to many of the locals and guidance had to be given as to how they should be used.

A few days later, I had the opportunity to try on traditional Chinese clothing. At the main campus of SUFE they had lots of beautiful outfits that are traditional to the Han ethnic group. I wore a light pink Han Fu. We also learnt how to formally bow to people we respect. I was shocked when I learnt all the different ways to greet people - there’s a separate greeting/bow for parents and teachers, friends and even god. Also, the greetings vary based on if you’re male or female and whether the person you’re addressing is male/female.

On our final night in Shanghai, we visited the Oriental Pearl TV Tower. This tower is incredibly beautiful and is one of the tallest towers in Shanghai. It has a sightseeing deck that allowed us to admire Shanghai. There was also a section of the deck where the flooring was made out of glass. This really brought home how high up we were as you could look down and spot all the cars and people below that looked like ants. It was scary but breath-taking and definitely memorable. We had dinner in the Revolving Restaurant within the tower. Eating dinner here was an unforgettable experience as since the floor was literally revolving so we had a superb view of many different parts of Shanghai. Also, since the buffet area was also revolving, it was easy to try lots of different food as whenever you get up, you’ll always spot different food to try. The cuisine in the restaurant wasn’t Chinese alone and there were more food options than imaginable, from fried rice to octopus and squid. The meal was lovely and definitely helped to fuel me for the 24 upcoming hours of travel.

I had mixed emotions about leaving Shanghai, my trip was eye-opening and exciting, but I also looked forward to returning to London, seeing my family and having home comforts. One thing I was relieved about during my trip was that with the right VPN I was still able to use WhatsApp despite it being blocked in China. This trip showed me that I can travel away from home without family or friends but still meet new people and establish new friendships.

The expedition fund massively helped to make preparation for this trip less stressful. Although the trip was largely sponsored by the Chinese government, and the majority of our language lessons and food were paid for, we had to pay for our own flights and this was a considerable financial undertaking. It was lovely to be able to be able to purchase memorable souvenirs such as a tea set from Shanghai. My experience in Shanghai and Beijing were unforgettable, although I know that there is so much more to China then these two cities and would be fascinated to learn more about other areas as well. I’m particularly interested in Chengdu, as I know this is where many Pandas are
indigenous. I would definitely recommend travelling to China to those who are fascinated by the culture and want to learn more.