



Eight Canadian
students. Four weeks.
Two Chinese provinces.
One unforgettable
experience.

By Kori Liversage



CLIC: Canadian learning initiative in China

Recap

The best way to learn about a place is to go there.



An unexpected travel destination

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To be honest, I never placed China high up on my list of places to visit in my life. In fact, it was never even on the list. I have only started traveling globally within these last few years and the vastness of the world has begun to greatly intrigue me. Though I desired to travel to Asia, I never would have imagined that instead of my first visit being to a pristine island, I would spend a month living and studying in the most populous city of China.

During this past winter, I was contemplating doing a summer school course at the University of Ottawa when I had the glorious idea: why not spend the summer in an entirely new place while getting class credit for it? Thus, the mission was on to find a study abroad program

that would ideally be in a wonderful place and have a thought-provoking curriculum. Then I stumbled upon the Canadian Learning Initiative in China (CLIC) which offered a diverse range of programs in many different educational fields. The program that intrigued me the most was offered at East China Normal University (ECNU) which was in the heart of Shanghai. There was a dilemma for me because I had never been keen on visiting China, especially since I am a small-town kind of girl at heart, and Shanghai seemed incredibly daunting. So the question loomed: should I just stay and study in Ottawa where I am comfortable and have a routine? Or should I inscribe for an experience that would be challenging, nerve wracking, and life changing? Needless to say, I chose the latter.

I chose the Educational Internship program at ECNU because it focused on educational regimes within rural and urban China. I have worked with children my entire life and firmly believe that in order to have a functional and healthy society, we must nurture our youth and equip them with necessary skills to become efficient and compassionate adults. Since children spend a considerable amount of their developmental years in school, it is vital that the teachers and learning environment are stimulating and positively contributing to a child's education. As I pondered my own educational experiences in the suburbs of Ontario, Canada, I admittedly was getting more curious as to how Chinese schools would compare.

Goodbye Ottawa, hello Shanghai (aka goodbye comfort, hello unknown)

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I applied and got accepted into the CLIC program (despite my hesitation towards living in China) by the end of February. The weeks flew by in a blur of administrative tasks of getting visas, booking flights, and ensuring both my host and home universities were also prepared for this venture. Next thing I knew, I was loaded up with two big backpacks and bidding farewell to Canadian soil. Little did I know that regardless of how many times I searched on maps to try and see where my campus was situated in relation to green spaces or how difficult it would have been to be celiac and vegetarian in China, nothing could have prepared me for the experience that was about to transpire.

Sky scrapers filled every crevice I could see, car horns played on like symphonies, and you could get a whiff of a hundred different smells just by walking a few meters down the street. Much as I expected, Shanghai welcomed me in all of its chaotic glory. What I had not expected though, was the lush warmth that encapsulated the campus of ECNU. Thankfully, this oasis amidst all the haste would be my home for the next four weeks. As I arrived late Sunday night, all I could do was settle into my shared dorm room and wait for what was in store.

Day one of school consisted of meeting my seven classmates as we made our way into our first 8:30 am lecture. We were nervous as we had no idea what we would be learning, how rigorous the university was, or if the teachers were even able to speak English well enough to teach us sufficiently. As we would soon learn, none of these worries were necessary! The first part of our curriculum focused on the history of education in China. In comparison to what is taught in Canada, China's history is rich and long, with seemingly no detail spared. We learned about the different dynasties, how different empires taught their students, the inaccessibility of education for peasant folk, the branching of government run schools to more public and private ones, and much more. I now know much more about Chinese educational history than I do of my own country (though that will change soon!). During this first week, we also visited an elementary school in Shanghai which was our insight into an urban school in China. This school visit allowed us to see the infrastructure of the school while interacting with the teachers and students where we asked and answered questions, played games, and were pleasantly surprised by the proficiency of English and politeness the students all had. This school was one of the fanciest schools I have ever been to. It had a security gate, all the students wore preppy uniforms, and the overall vibe seemed to boast "prestige". My elementary school seemed like a dump compared to this, yet I was informed that this was the norm for Shanghai (and most other urban areas) and was nothing fancy at all! This was just one of the first "real world" learning experiences that would come from my time studying in China.

Outside of our classroom and visiting the elementary school, we were left to navigate China on our own since we only had class two days a week and this also led to a lot of learning – both about myself and the world around me. Not a day went by where I didn't have to ask for directions or food in a scene of overly animated hand motions and body language. I have never spoken, read, or written Chinese before coming here, but I knew that in order to survive, I better learn some basics. Communicating with my fellow citizens is important to me, so it was a bit challenging and isolating at times to be sitting next to people and not being able to strike up a full blown conversation with them. This sense of isolation was amplified by the fact I was surrounded by hundreds, if not thousands of other people wherever I went. My mental state got a bit short fused when I spent too much time amidst the crowds, and I was eager to get out of the haste of the city any chance I could.

"I am not the same, having seen the moon shine on the other side of the world."

– Mary Anne Radmacher

Luckily, during our second week of the program, we were whisked off to Guizhou Province where we were greeted by a much smaller population and the tall skyscrapers were replaced with rolling mountains. We spent this second week in a small town called Tongzi, (small in China meaning one million people) teaching English at a local high school and witnessing educational practices in a more rural setting. In order to get a more authentic experience, we all stayed with different host families which helped us bond with a Chinese student and get a better understanding of their lives, both academically and personally. Had we not stayed with our host families, I feel that we would have learned significantly less about China in general.

Much like the school in Shanghai, this high school was huge (student population of about 4000, with about 60 students in any given class) and the students were just as eager to have a bunch of foreigners spending time with them. We were treated like absolute royalty, both by the staff and students of this school. We were constantly asked to take photos and to share contact information; though it was nice at the start, it got tiring fast. In addition, we were constantly being fed overly fancy meals in special rooms in lavish hotels or restaurants. In my opinion, this was totally unnecessary. I feel that since we were in a more rural area, we could have spent more time living how the locals do, rather than feeling like our status as Canadians meant that we required more upscale experiences.

What did make us feel more local was the opportunity to become an English teacher (老师) for the week in Tongzi. We gave the students a chance to interact with native English speakers for perhaps the first time in their lives but beyond that, we encouraged them to make jokes, to call out in class, to dance, and to simply be goofy teenagers. For some, it seemed like this may have been another first for them: learning within a stimulating and silly environment. In the more intimate conversations I had with students, they would tell us how stressful their school life was. They would start school at 7 am and were lucky to finish class by 9 pm, not only on weekdays but also on weekends. I discovered that this was not uncommon. These long, arduous school days were the norm for most high school students. I could hardly fathom that students trickled in from all over the county and actually *lived* at their high school, much like dormitories on Canadian university campuses! It was clear to see that academia was deeply prioritized by the students, their parents, and the staff at the school - it could be argued that it was overly prioritized.

While teaching and in my personal interactions with the students, I urged them to think about what they loved to do outside of the classroom and to try and prioritize those things more. My meimei (little sister) that I stayed with that week was a star basketball player and loved to run, yet she was barely able to sleep and eat properly with the mass amount of school work she had, let alone extra “fun” things. This lifestyle of all work and no play was startling to witness

and be a part of, especially coming from Canada where we are constantly told to try new things, to make mistakes, and to explore interests beyond the classroom.

Our week in Tongzi came and went too fast; if I were to do this program again, I would request to have at least nine days there. That way we could try and get some more bonding time in with our host families so that we did not feel like we were burdening the students by taking them away from their studies. It was a tad overwhelming trying to cram being a teacher and being a tourist into six days. There was much more to be seen and done, both in the high school and in the surrounding area. However, I am very pleased with having been able to get out of the city of Shanghai and to be in nature while also experiencing just how different education is in China.

The final two weeks of our program were spent back in the classroom but this time the material focused on present day education in China and discussed the discrepancies between the quality of education between rural and urban schools. What was most interesting to me was learning about shabby village schools because I had assumed that we would have spent our time in small school houses surrounded by farm fields rather than at the grand school we taught at in the urban setting of Tongzi. I am curious if the Tongzi No. 1 High School is representative of schools in other “rural” areas because it had such a large student population and elaborate campus. I worry that we were not given a true picture of rural schools considering how well equipped and prestigious this school was. I hope that in future CLIC programs, there is a more selective process when it comes to choosing which schools to bring Canadian students to. I think it would be best to get us out of our comfort zones and to witness a true village school, in addition to the urban schools in Shanghai or smaller towns.

Whether urban or rural, it is apparent how stressful school is both for teachers and students because of how exam-oriented the curriculum is. With university being the final goal for most students, the students’ mental and physical health are sacrificed in order to get the best grades. Now that the program is over, I have a much better appreciation for both my experience as a Canadian student and for my comrades in China. I can only hope that as we have learned in our classes, the educational reforms in China continue to adequately adapt in order to teach and grade students in a more holistic manner. It seems that Chinese students are still placed under the pressure that existed thousands of years ago: take the test, climb the ladder, achieve rank, and repeat. Nowadays, there needs to be more emphasis on allowing children to be children, to engage with the world around them, to be creative and to partake in more inquired learning behaviors. To conclude, this CLIC program has undoubtedly change my life path – I am eager to start seeing how I can help the youth in my neighborhood, and perhaps even globally.

“At its best, travel should challenge our preconceptions and most cherished views, cause us to rethink our assumptions, shake us a bit, make us broader minded and more understanding.”

–Arthur Frommer

