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## JORDAN GASS-POORE': Legends, realities found on China trip

Aug 4, 2013



Skyscrapers face opposite The Bund, a historic area in central Shanghai.

Photos by JORDAN GASS-POORE' | New Braunfels Herald-Zeitung

*Editor's note: New Braunfels Herald-Zeitung intern Jordan Gass-Poore' recently returned from a 10-day tour of China. The following is a first-person account of her trip.*

For five nights toward the end of last month in Beijing I did not see stars, or the outline of the sun or moon.

The sky was varying shades of gray with even darker billows in the shape of clouds, reminiscent of childhood school art projects where the urge to mix color shades is impossible to resist.

But this wasn't a cloud I was seeing over the buildings of various sizes that were nestled close to one another like people in antique family photographs.

It was smog.

As the tour bus drove past these buildings, I wondered who lived behind their walls: Bankers? Teachers? Those who the tour guide said made the equivalent of 230 American dollars each month?

I was on the 10-day tour of China with faculty, staff and one other student from Texas State University through the “educational and cultural exchange” program Legends of China.

In its 14th year, Legends of China has partnered with 200 U.S. universities, mostly on the West Coast, in an effort to expose people to the country’s 40-centuries-old civilization and for them to meet their Chinese counterparts.

But I am just reading from the informational brochure I received last fall when I was enrolled in a Texas State capstone program.

Texas State Dean of Students Margarita Arellano said she first heard of Legends of China when she worked at the University of Texas at Austin, which has participated in the program for years.

“It’s a very good program,” said Arellano, adding China’s just the beginning for Texas State, which wants to incorporate other cultural immersion programs to countries in Africa and South America. “It provides experience to those students who can’t study abroad. ... It’s important for student leaders to have those experiences.”

Tyler Dukes, Texas State English senior, was my roommate on the trip. Dukes said she also found out about Legends of China through the university’s capstone program.

My fellow capstone program alumna and I had some very eye-opening experiences while wandering around the Fifth Ring in Beijing, especially the “mall” across the highway from our hotel, where there was a line down the stairs and out the door of the Pizza Hut.

We also wandered around an outdoor market that sold seahorse, starfish and rat, among other interesting food items. This is where I tried fried scorpion, only being able to eat its limbs; I just couldn’t force myself to bite into its still-soft belly.

“After seeing all of the development that (China’s) done in the last 20, 30 years, it’s crazy how fast it’s developed, but the down side to that is it’s not necessarily the picturesque-type thing that you see in National Geographic,” Dukes said. “Beijing was very dirty-ish, with the

picturesque things mixed in there — it was very different than what I initially thought it was going to be. There's (still) some gems."

The cost of the trip first intrigued me (and Dukes). In total, it was under \$3,000 for airfare, food, ground transportation, entrance admission into popular sites, including the Great Wall, and stays in five-star hotels.

Even though Legends of China is not sponsored by the Chinese government, I was told by Texas State representatives, who also attended the trip, that it does subsidize some of the program's costs.

The Chinese government's involvement with the program was made more apparent to me throughout the trip when my tour group, B2, was sent to state-run stores (originally established for foreign tourists and government officials), such as a jade "museum" in Beijing and a silk "factory" in Suzhou.

There was very little jade to admire that did not have a price tag attached, and the factory included a brief silk-weaving demonstration and three stories of stores that sold products from the company's actual factory, miles away.

"Better quality," said B2's Beijing tour guide, who gave herself the English name Olivia, whenever the group was headed to a state-run store.

Besides the typically higher cost, the assurance of not receiving counterfeit money, the ability to pay in U.S. money and a letter of authentication, I did not find anything "better" about the quality of its goods.

Maybe I am just biased because I wish I would have bought the \$50 bag of green tea leaves from the state-run tea garden in Hangzhou, where similar street market products also were being sold in its gift shop at a higher cost.

'The new girl'

In hindsight, what really made me want to go to China had nothing to do with money, but to feel what it is like to be an outsider.

I have wanted to be the “new girl” since I was in elementary school, but, unfortunately, I did not leave my hometown of Seguin until I was 17 and enrolled at Texas State as an English, mass communication double major.

Through a series of events, I did feel like an outsider, especially in Beijing, with a population of more than 20 million people.

It was in front of the Forbidden City where, while posing for a group photo, taken by what I assumed to be a Legends of China representative, I really noticed that I did not physically look anything like the people staring and taking photos of me and the program’s other group members — I was an oddity, in the truest sense of the word.

There was another instance at the Humble Administrator’s Garden in Suzhou where I felt this divide; a woman approached me and asked if her “attractive husband” could take a photo with me. After I got over my brief shock that a stranger would want to take a photo with me, I agreed to the woman’s request and placed my arm around her husband’s waist. He flinched when I did so.

Go, go, go

It was outside of the Forbidden City’s walls where I felt more physically and emotionally close to the Chinese people.

As I clutched my purse to my chest and tried to politely push past the hoard of people walking and cycling this way and that, all the while maintaining eye contact with our tour guide’s purple umbrella in front of the line of Americans, I caught a row of men sitting on the sidewalk out of the corner of my eye.

Some of these men were missing limbs, others were facially deformed. They were singing and playing instruments behind boxes filled with Chinese currency. The multi-colored Yuan looked like flower petals floating on the water’s surface at the speed I was walking.

The areas of China I visited encompassed both the world’s past and future. I never felt as though I was living in the present, always being pushed forward: go, go, go.

Motorbikes and bicycles flooded the streets everywhere we went. The bright red bikes on the West Lake grounds in Hangzhou were part of a bike share program in a continued effort to discourage people from driving vehicles.

If I could have logged into Facebook while I was in China (or Twitter), I would have typed a status saying that gas in the country costs on average \$4.76 per gallon.

But the cost of gas is not as high as the cost of drug trafficking in China. Joe, our tour guide in the Shanghai area, said if someone is caught with 50 grams of drugs or more they will be executed.

I was always on the move; there was no time to stop, not even for an \$8 cup of coffee.

Joe told us on the bus from Hangzhou to Shanghai that 30 years ago (a number, it seemed, that's synonymous with Chinese prosperity), a large population of Chinese wanted to move to other countries, but now that is changing because of the country's economic success.

"When you move to another country, you are facing totally different culture and you have to adjust yourself to this kind of change and it takes time, and you doubt yourself that you can take it, adapt to this kind of change," said Joe, our tour guide in the Shanghai area, who lives in Suzhou. "Why should I take that kind of risk?"

## Education paramount

I witnessed this change firsthand from my Chinese counterpart, who I called Mae, during the Legends of China Future Leader Forum at Beijing Forestry University.

Mae's studying urban planning, having switched her major from water sustainability because, as she put it, there is no money in that field. She told me, over a plastic bag of plain yogurt she bought for me and herself from a nearby corner store, that she wants to continue to live in Beijing and work for a Chinese company.

I do not doubt Mae will succeed both professionally and personally; she's one of the most intelligent and nicest people I've ever met (and she speaks better English than most people I have encountered in the U.S.).

Education seemed to be at the forefront of people's minds in China, a way to make positive world change from home.

Both Joe and Olivia were university educated and had studied the English language for decades.

Olivia, who is of the Miao people, one of 56 official Chinese minority groups, said she had to make higher college entrance exam grades than her Beijing counterparts to attend a university in the city.

She continued by saying that much like the government tax enforced on having more than one child, entrance exam grades and university tuition costs are based on the Chinese province the person is from.

"(I) If I have the second baby in Beijing, the government could fine us 200,000 Yuan," she said.

During the Shang Dynasty, Olivia said the emperor's concubines would look to the zodiac for assistance on when to get pregnant with a possible male heir to the throne. She said some people continue this practice.

Maybe it will be different for Olivia's daughter, who she said was born and is being raised in Beijing, one of the world's most populous cities.

Her daughter is also part Han, the country's and world's largest ethnic group of people, because of her father, a traditional Chinese medicine doctor.

"People are negotiating everything," said Joe. "One exception: We will never negotiate the education of the children."