



Laidlaw Scholars Undergraduate Leadership and Research Programme
Record of Global Experience Reflection

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Leading up to my departure for Shanghai, I remember booking a meeting with my therapist to discuss the huge amount of anxiety and nervousness I had to travel to another country. I had a bad case of imposter syndrome, fearing that I'd step off the plane and everyone would point and say, "she's not a *real* Chinese girl!" In reality, I would say my upbringing is quite different from the average girl who grows up in urban China. Firstly, I grew up in a "gifted school" which is just another way of describing classes that prioritized child exploration over knowledge consumption. This is very different from the typical schooling that most Chinese students experience, where they have to stuff years of accelerated learning into their young brains. Secondly, the Mandarin I spoke at home were based on basic and simple situations that happened in my day-to-day life. For example, I would call my mom and ask her what was for dinner or if she could pick me up. I had never used Mandarin to discuss abstract concepts or deep personal thoughts. Despite all of this, I wanted to be accepted by the locals as "one of them." However, this proved to be the least of my worries when I stepped off the plane.

When I began living in Shanghai, I realized that that everything relied on digital apps. If I dined in, a waitress would sit me down and prompt me to scan a QR code. The issue was that I did not know how to recognize characters so it was a gamble whenever my food would arrive to see what I had ordered. When I asked restaurant workers to assist me with the menu, they would simply tell me to read the descriptions on my screen. I would then have to explain that I don't know how to read Mandarin because I grew up in Canada but my parents are Chinese so I can still speak and understand Mandarin. Fortunately, many of the workers were quite understanding and receptive to help me if I had any issues. However, I felt bad for being bothersome and would be afraid to dine-in at restaurants and opted for convenience store food for the first part of my trip. The second culture-shift was how convenient everything was. The first observation was that

the transportation system in China worked extremely well. I was able to travel across the city in under 30 minutes and explore various parts of Shanghai. In addition, places were extremely accessible with escalators and accessible elevators being available in many places I went to. After I met students on campus, they showed me how to install China's version of UberEats. Not only was the food extremely cheap, it also came in under 15 minutes all the way until 4AM. While this convenience seems desirable, it also contributed to my feelings of loneliness being by myself in a big city for so long. Whenever I visited new places, people were glued to their phones and there was little interaction I had with people that went beyond a few lines of small talk. In addition, the new environment brought stomach issues and severe jet lag. For the duration of the whole trip, I struggled with digesting my food and had an upset stomach! This made it so that I was afraid to try new foods for fear of being nauseous or glued to the toilet for the next few hours.

When I began my interviews, this brought along a new host of issues that I had to work through for my research project. The first was an understanding gap between how I would state my interview questions. A series of my questions were philosophical or open-ended. For example, I would ask: what does success mean to you? The issue was that because of language differences, success doesn't have the same direct translation that I anticipated it would have. This prompted many students to ask me follow-up questions like, what does that mean? In response, I would provide some examples – which in retrospect is something that I regret since it would influence their responses. In addition, many interviewees would use idioms or modern phrases that I was not accustomed to. At times, this made it difficult for me to follow along and give detailed follow-up questions that extracted more meaning out of their statements. The whole interview experience made me reflect on the power of language that goes beyond just daily tasks

like shopping, eating out and making small talk. Instead, I was reminded about how language is a way to truly understand someone and get an insight into their personality and inner thoughts. This encouraged me to improve my Mandarin and enroll in a Chinese language course at the university this fall!

When I think of how living in Shanghai this summer has influenced me, I think it has allowed to recognize the fear of starting in a new place without a great understanding of the customs or the language. For me, I am incredibly privileged to understand the language. However, I think about people moving across the country and the amount of confusion, fear and nervousness they must have felt even during the most basic tasks. For me, I would be hesitant to go shopping in person because I would have to ask workers what the product did and how it worked. My mother, for example, had to do college in a new country with a newborn child in a different language than she was used to. When people were warm and understanding to me, it made a world of a difference just to feel like I belong somewhere. This experience has really prompted me to treat everyone with kindness, and in particular those who are starting over.