

Helena Roy (Economics) – ‘Learn, Live and Intern in China’ HKU, China, Summer 2014

This summer I took part in the nine-week ‘Learn, Live and Intern in China’ programme with Hong Kong University (HKU). The programme comprised two weeks spent in Hong Kong, studying a course entitled ‘Global Business in Asia’, and seven weeks working in Shanghai. This year was the first time Pembroke had taken part in the programme, which brought together around thirty undergraduates from across the world.

As part of the programme, I interned at Lenovo. Founded in 1984 and now the global leader in the personal computer (PC) sector, Lenovo is a Hong Kong-owned technology company with immense operations in China.

The company provides a rich example of the complexity and uniqueness of the Chinese model of economic development. Much of Lenovo’s dominance in the PC sector comes from its acquisition of IBM (in 2004). This event came close on the heels of the news that China contributed more than the USA to global GDP growth. That China had become powerful enough to subsume an iconic American brand took the world by storm - emblematic of a fast-rising China with aggressive efficiency and a flourishing business environment.

And yet, Lenovo is such a success story only because it was able to operate outside of the Chinese business environment. The elements of Lenovo located in China provide manifest examples of China’s distorted labour market and lack of home-grown efficiency, while the success of Lenovo is based on the neoclassical economic climate of Hong Kong. This dual-economy system is an unsustainable and unattainable (aside from in exceptional historical circumstances) model for development.

Working in Shanghai showed me the true local side of the city. Each day, getting the metro was a squeeze with a plethora of people. Many stopped in Lujiazui, the financial district, or Century Avenue – transferring to different lines spanning the breadth and length of Shanghai. In Shanghai, many people have to commute for around two hours to get to their work, and the metro system is one of the quickest ways to do it. Cramming into cars and crushing with commuters to get a coveted space on the escalator is a daily must.

Upon emerging from Zhangjiang High Technology Park station each morning, you are greeted with lines of street food stalls along the pavements, selling their wares to hungry commuters while playing thumping club music. The sounds of frying and boiling fill the air, and an orchestra of scents emanate from the different omelets, pastries and juices up for temptation. Vans stop and men jump out with crates of fruit to sell to passing employees.

My mentor became a good friend during my internship. We talked about the hopes of many young Chinese people, her hometown and family life (she came from the countryside, and her parents had had three children). Learning about the thoughts and experiences of a twenty-something in China was fascinating, and her comments on safety in Chinese cities, the unrest in the west of the country and government policy towards families and raising children were touching and revealing.

The Chinese governmental system is so desperate for stability, it must maintain a façade of economic enfranchisement, which it does by upholding unrealistic employment levels. Though theoretically this benefits people as they earn wages, many are unhappy with the repetitiveness of their work and the absence of intellectual challenge available in their day-to-day life. The Chinese corporate culture lacks, most significantly, an understanding of how to incentivise the human mind and business drive. My time in Shanghai brought me into contact with many people, whose hopes and dreams seemed quashed by the minor nature of their work. Whether or not government obstructionism will realize this is questionable.