

Joseph Leech (History)- Learn, Live and Intern in China 2015

The depth of Chinese civilisation has long been a personal fascination for me, and the 'Learn, Live and Intern in China' programme in which I participated this summer presented an unparalleled opportunity to deepen my understanding not only of China and Mandarin but also of the constantly turbulent Chinese economic environment. Along the way, equally importantly but more surprisingly, I found a network of friends who were vital companions and will continue to be good friends across the world.

I began the programme with a week of lectures on contemporary Chinese economics and politics at the University of Hong Kong, based at their beautiful Centennial Campus built into the mountainside of Hong Kong Island. Mornings of mostly very interesting lectures were followed by afternoons of exploring the city and territory with the other international students on the course. Hong Kong has always been one of my favourite cities and this visit did nothing to diminish that impression; from the buzzing energy of Central and a night spent in the world's highest bar to the peaceful coast of Lan Tau Island this unique gateway to the Chinese world was a perfect introduction. After a week it was, however, time to take a step further into that world, and we departed for our seven-week internships in Shanghai.

China's biggest and wealthiest city presented a steep learning curve. I gained, by immersion, an enormous amount. Negotiating the city's leviathan metro system, buying train tickets for trips out of the city, ordering one of a range of available bubble teas; all of these challenges conformed to the pattern that China never failed to surprise us in ways both more and less pleasant. The reward for that difficulty was a great deal of interest and fun. Shanghai's nascent nightlife and long-established culinary variety provided endless opportunities for trying new things. Our travelling experiences in other cities and the countryside taught us no less about the range of lifestyles in contemporary China, and offered some glimpse of the speed of its social evolution.

Working in a Chinese company was an eye-opening undertaking, if not always a straightforward one. I was placed in the Shanghai office of Lenovo, the world's largest PC manufacturer. The office presented an example of the persistent inefficiencies of the Chinese working environment. Despite extensive efforts by the company to inculcate a western-style business mentality, there were rather too many people in the office for the amount of work to be done, and many staff were fairly unmotivated in their work. As interns this meant that there was little work for us to do. A long commute meant that we often struggled to make the best of our work experience.

This did not detract from the personal interactions from which I benefited throughout the programme. My supervisor kindly gave me Mandarin lessons and we were able to have many frank discussions about life in China and the aspirations of young people and the growing middle classes. My other colleagues gave me insights into growing up in a society under the immense stress of rapid change. Moreover the opportunity to spend time with international students from a range of top universities and make some genuinely firm friends was a huge benefit. I enjoyed a trip replete with social experiences of the most positive kind.

As I came to the end of the trip I could reflect on a tumultuous two months. There were certainly lows, and my time at Lenovo involved a good deal of lost hours. Nevertheless as a history student the journey through two cities which once formed keystones of British maritime hegemony in Asia and now power the engine of the world economy could be nothing but fascinating. As that engine slows down China will enter a period that is likely to be more difficult than the previous two decades. I hope that my experience there will be useful as we all seek to understand its direction. Above all I thank the college for helping me to meet such talented and inspiring friends.