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## Students return from study abroad trip to China

By **Dawn Pauli**, contributing writer

A recent trip to China gave a dozen OU students the opportunity to explore a new country and an instructor the chance to return to a place where he studied as a graduate student.

Alan Epstein, special lecturer of political science, accompanied the OU students on a six-week study abroad program to the Foreign Affairs University in Beijing. Michelle Tang, special lecturer of modern languages and literatures, also traveled with the group for the first couple weeks to help students adjust to their language classes.

The students studied the Chinese language, history and culture with Chinese professors. They also researched a report about a China-related topic during their trip. The students lived in an international dorm and earned between four and 12 OU credit hours.

Epstein taught a special topics class, where he supervised the students' research projects and gave twice-weekly lectures to supplement the Chinese education. He also accompanied the group on excursions.

"The excursions were intended to deepen appreciation for China, its history and people," Epstein said.

The group visited historical and cultural sites including the Temple of Heaven, Ancient Observatory, Palace Museum, the two Summer Palaces, two sections of the Great Wall, Beijing opera and acrobatics performances, Ming Tombs, National Museum of History, Confucius Temple, Shanghai Museum, Memorial to Sun Zhongshan, and the Terra Cotta Burial Warriors of Xi'an.

However, Epstein said the students learned most about the country from living in and experiencing China.

"Students' routine interaction with merchants, bus and subway passengers, beggars, Chinese and international students, and the teachers and personnel of the China Foreign Affairs University were probably more the source of insights than any structured activity we undertook."

The trip was an eye-opening experience for the students.

"In America, we are a culture that is about possessions — CDs, cars, clothes. From my observations, most of the people in China live very Spartan lives and do not have a lot of stuff, partly because they cannot afford it," said Peter Coyl, junior public administration major.

Coyl also observed China is becoming influence by western culture. "You can find McDonalds, Pizza Hut and Kentucky Fried Chicken in most of the large cities. Most of the clothes in the department stores have English writing on them. The students we talked to all asked about American movies and pop culture, people like Britney Spears and shows like "Friends." What they know about America is what they learn from the media that is imported and lots of times the exaggerations of Hollywood give false and bad impressions."

Sarah Cook, senior political science major, researched Chinese opinion on U.S. foreign policy.

"The trip gave me the opportunity to study in a country that is, in many ways, a polar opposite of the United States," Cook said. "I have always wanted to study abroad and this was an excellent opportunity to study in a country that I love and want to know more about. This was an incredible opportunity to see the world and learn more about it so I can become a better world citizen."

For Epstein, the trip was a highly anticipated return to a country near and dear to his heart. He did his dissertation at Cornell on Chinese political economy, and he spent seven years living in China, Hong Kong and Taiwan.

"I haven't been back for over a decade. I was anxious to observe the changes and feel them," he said. "It was important for me to get back and see how it's changed."

Epstein noted a building boom throughout Beijing, Nanjing and Shanghai.

"The most obvious change is the massive infrastructure and construction projects that have been undertaken in Beijing. The new office and apartment buildings, roadways and the urban sprawl that is the metropolis of Beijing made much of the city I once knew scarcely recognizable. The Pudong area of Shanghai is especially notable for its literal transformation into a modern city of sizeable proportions. The highway between Nanjing and Shanghai provided a glimpse of a countryside that has prospered in China's reformed political economy. Most apparent was the refurbished and newly constructed multi-storied homes"

Bicycles, which once clogged Beijing's streets, are now sharing the roads with automobiles.

"The realistic aspiration for Beijing residents to own a car marks a profound change in the economics and sociology of the city," Epstein said. "A further, rather striking change is the sense of optimism one encounters among Beijing residents. People still rail against official corruption and other matters beyond their control, but there is a sense that the country is headed in a direction that will produce a positive future."

For more information about study abroad opportunities at Oakland University, visit the **International Education** Web site or contact Margaret Pigott, director of international education, at [piggott@oakland.edu](mailto:piggott@oakland.edu).

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