In preparation to work alongside Chinese planners at the China Academy of Urban Planning and Design, I had done some research prior to my internship. I was well aware that the pace of development and scale in China was impressive, that motor vehicles were overtaking the bicycle as the transportation mode of choice, that construction cranes dotted the horizon, and that to say Chinese cities had a lot of people was putting it mildly. However, my background research and conversations with previous interns did not prevent me from the surprises I experienced when I saw all of this firsthand and participated as a planner helping to shape the continued growth of these cities. Some of these surprises were simply due to the culture shock of being in a
completely unfamiliar territory, but other surprises came instead from expectations that did not turn out quite as I had anticipated.

I was assigned to my internship at the Shenzhen branch of the Academy. Shenzhen is a relatively new city, developed rapidly from over thirty years from a small fishing village to a massive city of more than eleven million residents (we should have a better idea just how large the population is when the Chinese census, currently underway, is completed). It is a huge city and although I was pleased to be in a lovely tropical setting and enjoy the air quality benefits of locating on the ocean, I have never been so hot in my life! Simply going about my daily routine in that heat and humidity definitely helped provide me with a new perspective in terms of Chinese transportation (specifically bicycling) and energy use (specifically air conditioning).

Assignments
While the Academy is a government academic institution, I suppose I had developed some misconceptions about what that would mean in terms of my daily work during my internship. In retrospect, I cannot really specify exactly what I had expected, but I do know I was surprised to see how much the Shenzhen office seemed to operate like the U.S. consulting firms I have worked for in the past. My planning team treated the local planners they work with as clients and it did not seem that a contract was assigned. How contracts were assigned or won was not clearly explained.

For the most part, much of my work during the internship was focused on research to help inform projects that my team were assigned. Projects included long-range land use and transportation planning for a greenway in the city of Xindu in Southwestern China and a long-range transportation plan for a relatively undeveloped city outside of Guangzhou. I also was asked to prepare weekly PowerPoint presentations on U.S. planning topics of interest to my planning team including public participation, redevelopment, transit oriented development, and bicycle and pedestrian planning.
The projects I worked on during my internship were generally just getting started and I did not have the opportunity to participate or observe a significant decision-making process. Instead, more of the work I participated in was during the exploratory, existing conditions phase of the planning process. However, I did find that our team approach during the exploratory phase and in the early recommendations was very collaborative and we frequently had similar responses to problems we observed. On the Xindu project in particular, I was impressed by the emphasis that the local planners placed upon integrating local culture, history and a “sense of place” into the plan. During our weeklong business trip there we spent a great deal of time in a field review of the river and the adjacent land uses. I did not consider this unusual. However, we also visited several museums and other cultural sites as part of the project because the client wanted to ensure that this was considered in the plan.

**Surprises and Challenges**

I had expected certain resources on the internet to be blocked but not knowing this ahead of time did not make it any less frustrating. The most frustrating aspect of this was that it was not clear why certain images or articles were blocked. Topics relating to controversial topics like democratic demonstrations I had anticipated might be blocked. But images of bicycle infrastructure or light rail stations? I found that unreasonable and was not only annoyed about how it impeded my work but also the fact that such censorship limits the resources of Chinese planners whose work might otherwise benefit. Despite the censorship of the internet and other media resources, I was delighted to find that my coworkers, many of whom became good friends of mine while I was there, were open to chat about what are considered controversial topics including public participation in planning, democracy, the “one-child” policy, etc.
I was also surprised to find that my coworkers were interested in public participation in planning and in improving walkability of the communities they design. One of my weekly presentations was on public participation and during the question and answer time I learned that some public participation is occurring with CAUPD projects. It currently seems to be largely limited to review of a draft plan and does not necessarily extend to the general public. It also seems that there may not be a lot of interest on the part of public unless their property is directly impacted. This appears to be in part due to a lack of experience, on both the part of the government and its citizens, in having public participation in government decisions.

However, there are some examples of expanding public involvement in planning decisions, particularly in the “rural” communities that abut urban land and which are managed locally rather than by the central government. Due to land use laws, these “rural” communities have greater control over the development of their land than urban residents. Although specific village representatives might be involved in the direct negotiations, there would likely be more individual involvement in the planning processes than in urban settings. Although I did not work on a project at CAUPD that involved negotiations with these “rural” communities, it was interesting to hear about the challenges CAUPD planners faced in coordinating development and enforcing standards.

You might have noticed that in the previous paragraphs, I’ve often said “appeared” or “seems.” I use these words because many times planning structures or processes were not clearly explained to me. At times, I felt more confused after asking for clarification. I realize that some of this may be due to language differences (even though my coworkers spoke English fairly well). Other times, my coworkers would admit a topic was complicated even for them to understand or explain. Sometimes, it seemed the that perhaps the newer land use laws were broadly written but lack in the specific guidelines that would help with implementation.
Transportation

Learning about the trends in transportation and the technology and designs that might be transferable to the U.S. was a strong interest of mine during this trip. Although I was not able to speak with someone at CAUPD about the details of transportation planning in China, through my daily routine I did get a chance to observe and ask questions of my teammates.

One major observation is that pedestrians most certainly do not have the right of way in China. Even at signalized intersections where motorists tend to give more deference to the traffic control, pedestrians still needed to be very alert. Thus, crossing the street was generally a game of Frogger, crossing a lane at a time and pausing to let vehicles pass. Although I got used to this quickly it never stopped irritating me, especially when I would see mothers with babies or older people darting across traffic in a downpour. I was also irritated by the motorists who would park their cars (and sometimes drive) on the wide sidewalks creating additional obstacles for pedestrians. My coworkers meanwhile found our pedestrian right-of-way laws in Oregon interesting and said they would like to see better conditions for pedestrians. Unfortunately, even though there are plenty of officers around, traffic enforcement is extremely lax in Shenzhen so I would tend to doubt the effectiveness of new regulations.

As I had learned through prior research, motor vehicle ownership is a huge trend in China. Shenzhen, as a newer and relatively affluent city, was built primarily for cars as demonstrated in its wide boulevards and long distances between destinations. However, there still remain a substantial number of bicyclists. Unfortunately, a huge percentage of these bicyclists are on mopeds rather than pedal power. Because they
often share paths with pedestrians and frequently travel fast and carry impressively large loads, this presents a safety concern. However, I can now appreciate why the average citizen would desire a car or a motorized bicycle; it is incredibly hot and humid there and frequently it pours rain! Despite the challenging weather conditions, I was pleased to see that a handful of my coworkers at CAUPD cycled recreationally and/or owned a Dahon folding bicycle that they used to commute to work.

Public transit in Shenzhen (and really throughout the parts of China I visited) was very impressive. I often rode the subway or bus to the office, both were very frequent and efficient. Conveniently, the payment for all transit in the area was coordinated, allowing passengers to use the same value-added card on both buses or the subway. In Hong Kong, passengers could even use the same card to purchase goods at certain stores! Several U.S. cities have begun to coordinate transit payment like this and I would like to see this more as it really improves the convenience for transit passengers. Another technology that could have application in the U.S. are the countdown signals. We have pedestrian countdown signals in the U.S. that indicate how long a pedestrian has to cross an intersection. However, in Shenzhen, several signals has countdowns for all users. Motorists and pedestrians alike knew how long the green phase would last as well as how long the red phase would last. I thought this was really clever and could potentially reduce red light running in the U.S. (in situations where motorists misjudge the length of the yellow signal).

**Overall Experience**

I really enjoyed this opportunity to work at CAUPD. I developed good relationships with my coworkers which really enhanced my experience both professionally and personally. Being able to view firsthand the challenges that Chinese planners are dealing with was very eye-opening and I would highly recommend another MURP student attending in Shenzhen.