A view of the PuDong district from the Bund in Shanghai, China

2013 China Internship Reflections

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INTRODUCTION

The front entrance to CAUPD, Beijing

This summer, I spent eight weeks working with the Chinese Academy of Urban Planning and Design (CAUPD) in Beijing. While I have managed to travel quite a bit over the last 28 years of my life (I’ll let you guess how old I am based on that), I had yet to make it to China. A number of my international travel experiences were long term (such as study abroad and extended volunteer visits), and I found that those experiences were the most meaningful in comparison to the short, one or two week visits. The promise of an eight week internship to work on and study urban planning issues in China seemed too good to be true, but luckily for me, was indeed a reality.

This internship provided a great opportunity for me to witness and experience the mass urbanization taking place within China’s largest cities (and consequently, the world’s largest cities as well). Students of urban planning can study such growth in any growing country, though there is something special to be said for this phenomena in China. This is the largest urbanization that the world has ever seen, and perhaps along with it, one of the most rapid social conversions as well. With high-rise
developments—dozens being constructed at a time with cranes bobbing up and down on the 
skyline—now overshadowing traditional agrarian areas, one cannot help but feel they are on the cusp of
something large, the likes of which is absorbing all of the world’s energy and resources. Even on a
personal trip to Tokyo, the world’s largest metropolitan area, the energies there pale in comparison to
that of Beijing, Shanghai or Hong Kong. To use a cliché, there is indeed a certain *je ne sais quoi* to
Chinese cities.

**BEIJING**

Upon learning that I would be going to Beijing, I was ecstatic. Beijing is the political, historical and cultural
center of the country, and I knew it would be a great opportunity. While many people are familiar with
Beijing because of the 2008 Olympic games (and perhaps even more know it for its notorious smog), I
would venture a guess that most people’s knowledge ends there. And truthfully, my knowledge of the
city was not terribly extensive beyond that either. Needless to say, this past summer was a learning
experience in many ways!

When I arrived into Beijing, it was a warm, stormy night. Because of bad weather, my flight landed at
about 2am local time rather than 10pm. I was worried that the currency exchange would be closed, and
worse yet, that I would be unable to find a taxi operator at that hour. However, in a city of 20 million
people, there is probably more incentive to operate a business during all hours of the day than not, and I
was met with dozens of taxi drivers willing to take me, the *lǎowài*, to their desired destination. Funny
how your fears wind up being totally baseless.

Beijing was a joy to experience. Between the thousands (and thousands) of years of history, it’s also the
political and cultural center of the country. While in Beijing, you truly feel that you are experiencing the
quintessential China. It offers its visitors a glimpse of its past with venues such as the Forbidden City and
the Great Wall, but also offers insight into China’s future with its futuristic design and development in
areas like Sanlitun.
Working and living in the Haidian district also offered a special experience for me as a long-term visitor. While Haidian is hardly known as a hotspot for foreigners, I believe it allowed me to have a much more “Chinese” experience. Very few business owners spoke much English, and it allowed me to practice some of my Mandarin. Curious people came up to me to say hello, and presumably practice their English as well! Our conversations typically consisted of a few key phrases such as, “How are you?” and “What is your name?” It may not have been much, but it was still a chance to build cultural bridges that may not have been formed before. Living in Haidian also provided me with the chance to see what life is like for typical Beijingers. After eating dinner with my colleagues and friends, we would often stroll the blocks and watch ladies perform various aerobic exercises. We even joined in a few times! Though I experienced a great deal by living in Beijing, I also learned more about China through my time as an intern at CAUPD Beijing.
A view from the Black Bamboo Park in the Haidian District in Beijing. The building on the left hand side is/was infamous for its illegally constructed rooftop garden. Workers can be seen on top taking the structure apart.

A week before my internship, I sent a quick email to my boss to introduce myself. I heard back a few days later, and as luck would have it, it turns out I would be leaving for a business trip less than 48 hours after arriving into Beijing itself. How fortuitous! Once I found out that I would be going to Dalian, the next thing I had to do was google it. Like many large Chinese cities, Westerners probably are unaware of them until they find out they will be going there on a business trip—and clearly I was one of those people!

THE INTERNSHIP

Dalian has about 6 – 7 million people, but those estimates are from 2009, so it is surely larger than that by now. It is a port town, situated between the Yellow Sea and the Korea Bay. Because of that location, Dalian is a hub for Northeast Chinese shipping, manufacturing and now a financial hub as well. Its fresh air is another draw, especially when considering how smoggy some of the nearby cities are. In particular, there is a great deal of development to attract wealthy Beijingers to purchase second homes there, or
even relocate entirely. Having spent only 48 hours in Beijing before departing for Dalian, I could appreciate the draw of going elsewhere. The heat was practically oppressive, and the smog was even worse. If you had spent a great deal of time in Beijing, the draw to Dalian would be a no-brainer.

When I arrived into Dalian, the weather was indeed cooler than in Beijing and the air was much fresher. It was almost akin to June in Portland—cool, cloudy with just a hint of dampness in the air as if rain wasn’t too far behind. In many ways, Dalian was the perfect way for me to bridge the gap between Portland and China, and settle into the next two months of my life. However, there was very little time to reflect on my arrival into China—we were here for business! After collecting our luggage, we were immediately off to the Yifang Real Estate Development Company’s offices on the outskirts of Dalian.

Yifang Real Estate Development was partnering with CAUPD to develop a 25sq/km site near its offices. This site is currently home to a number of farms (namely melon farms in this area) and small villages. If you look to the south from Yifang’s offices, you can see the encroaching urban development—dozens of 30-40 story buildings going up at the same time. However, if you were to look north, you would simply see little, if any development. This site is going to be home to the Dalian International Ecological Satellite City, a 100 billion yuan project. It will include a wetland area, cyclist infrastructure, and many eco-friendly business parks, cultural centers and residential developments.
Because Dalian is also situated near Russia, Japan and the Korean peninsula, there is hope it will draw in a great deal of international investment as well. As such, the development in Dalian is decidedly international, with design details matching recent Western developments. Aloft Hotels, a subsidiary of Starwood Hotels and Resorts, will be situated near the site, and was chosen because of its ability to fare well in various European and North American locations. In fact, Dalian recently announced it would be offering a 72-hour visa-free stay for foreigners—another tool to attract visitors to this up and coming metropolis. After touring Dalian for a few days—seeing old and new parts of town—it became apparent to me that Dalian was becoming wealthier and more international, with new developments looking eerily similar to European and North American ones.

A hotel under construction in Dalian. Its design is modeled after the Château Frontenac in Quebec, Canada.

When our team returned to Beijing, my assignment was to look into cyclist infrastructure in certain North American cities—Minneapolis/St. Paul in particular. My boss mentioned that Dalian officials were particularly interested in that area because of its many lakes and wetland areas that are located in an
urban environment, and hoped to have that in Dalian as well. When I mentioned to my boss that I was originally from that part of the US, they were even more delighted to hear about my experience interacting with such developments.

While researching cyclist infrastructure, it is virtually impossible to ignore European cities such as Amsterdam and Copenhagen. These two cities are some of the most renowned in the world for their rates of cyclist commuting and investment in cyclist infrastructure. As much as US cities would like to emulate those two cities, it is far too car-oriented to even compare. I decided to include European standards because I felt they were so much more advanced than the US. As I presented on Minneapolis/St. Paul, I snuck in a number of slides about Portland (how could I ignore Portland?) and Amsterdam and Copenhagen. When I finished the presentation, very few people asked about Amsterdam and Copenhagen. They replied that they knew those cities, and were more curious to hear about US cities. As I answered more questions about Portland and Minneapolis/St. Paul, the question came to the percentage of people who commuted by bike in these cities. I said Portland had the highest rate at just over six percent, and that Minneapolis/St. Paul was second. Most people were in shock at the low rates of cycling, and said that even Beijing—as smoggy and car-filled as it was—likely had a higher rate than these two US cities.

After I presented, I began to wonder why the US served as inspiration for cyclist infrastructure when so many other international cities are doing it better and for a much longer period of time. Cities in the US are currently retrofitting themselves to become more bike and “green” friendly, whereas European ones have had a great deal more time to change their habits and cultures. Considering this site in Dalian is practically a blank slate, I thought this would have been the perfect chance to start from scratch and follow European examples. While my theories are just that—theories—I have to wonder if cultural imports had something to do with it.

I had a chance to ask my boss what were some of the important priorities in Chinese planning. One of the things he mentioned was creating a car culture. Because wealth has been steadily streaming into China, car ownership is a sign of wealth and modernity, and a sign that one has left behind the old ways of living and is now a part of the 21st century. Perhaps this is a reason why my Chinese counterparts were interested in hearing more about US development trends—this was a chance to hear from an American and ping her directly. In fact, many of my colleagues asked if I owned a car, if I had to share it with anyone, how often I drove and if I ever drove around for fun.

As I continued to question this theory, I had more work to do. My boss then asked to hear about underground and skyway systems. Dalian is known in China for its cold winters, so again, Minneapolis/St. Paul and its skyway system would serve as inspiration. As I began to research skyways and underground systems, it became apparent that Western urban designers were less and less enchanted with these styles of development. These systems would often leave city streets bare, a trend which is only made
worse by the fact that car-oriented cities leave sidewalks fairly quiet already. It seemed to me that very dense cities, such as Tokyo and Hong Kong, could support using skyways and underground systems because of the sheer number of people and the fact that cars were not as widely available.

An excerpt from the Dalian Plan’s skyway system model

As I finished my presentation, which included a critique of skyways and underground cities, my boss was surprised to hear anything negative about Minneapolis/St. Paul. This question made me wonder again, why does the US serve as inspiration when there are many other places utilizing far more progressive (and arguably, more successful) urban planning principles. If skyways and underground cities are successful elsewhere and not a focal point of US urban planning trends, why look to the US for inspiration? On the other side, am I seeing the best side of Chinese planning? Or the worst side? I suppose that is the entire point of this internship—to examine your role within planning and the various cultures of planning in order to create the best (however the word “best” can be defined) urban area as possible. I certainly hope that my presentations contributed to that notion. For me, I know that I have come away with an appreciation for some of the methods that my Chinese colleagues are currently using, something I would have likely been unable to do without the exposure from this internship.

FUN STUFF

While waxing philosophical on planning may not be considered “fun” for most people, I did manage to get out of my office (and my mind for that matter) and experience China through other means. One of the more memorable experiences was my first Chinese business dinner on “Qixi,” the Chinese equivalent of Valentine’s Day.

While many lovebirds in China spent that night with their beloved and/or searching for their beloved, the head of my department at CAUPD took me and other staff and interns out to dinner. While I suspect the purpose of the dinner was not romantic, I imagine it was to show appreciation for the work that the team has completed over the past few weeks. Regardless, there was a great deal of
celebration, including food and drink. While this all may sound pleasant enough, one must mind their manners when out to a formal dinner in China!

To start, seating in China is incredibly important. The host will take their seat at the head of the table, or in the case of a round table (most common in China), at the seat facing the door. From there, the guest of honor is invited to sit at his/her right, and the rest of the guests are seated by their standing in the hierarchy with more important people closer to the host.

 Wouldn’t you know it? I was seated at the host’s right side!

The next thing that came was the toast. As in the US and many other countries, in China the host will start the night off with a toast to the celebration, guests will then clink their glasses and drink up. As the waitress came around with tea and drinks, I noticed she set a giant bottle of beer right in front of me. I was under the impression that this bottle would be for me and my immediate tablemates, but it seems that it was my personal bottle of beer. *Well, that’s fine, I like to wet my whistle from time to time…*

However, as the toast progressed, I realized there is not just one toast in China, but toasts are continual throughout the meal.

This is where I suspected I would be in a bit of trouble.

As I drank to honor the first toast, I was met with another toast from a tablemate, thanking me for the presentation I put on earlier. *Well, thank you, too!* And not more than 5 minutes later, I was toasted yet again by another one of my tablemates. *You are also very welcome! I didn’t know you were so eager to learn about skyways and underground cities!* Unsurprisingly, another tablemate came up and thanked me for my presentation and welcomed me to China. *I’ve been in China for 6 weeks now, but yes, thank you!* And pretty soon, my bottle of beer was empty, consumed wholly on an empty tummy. And magically enough, there was another bottle of beer in front of me. *Oh! For me? You shouldn’t have!*

And yes, I was soon feeling the effects of all the toasts.

For better or for worse (for me, it was the latter), the conversation soon turned to more academic matters, such as urban planning practices that Chinese planners can learn from their American counterparts. I was knee-deep in a circular rant about organic farming, government subsidies for corn production and the ever-present question of why people are going hungry when there is enough food produced to feed everyone. The two fluent English speakers at the table had to ask a number of clarifying questions of me as the conversation continued to circle. Luckily for me, other than some people likely picking up on the fact that I was not making a great deal of sense, the food arrived and acted as a distraction to my fading rants. And luckily for me again, I am somewhat adept at using chopsticks so there were no noticeable effects from all the previous toasts.
The night progressed with more cheers, good food (thankfully, the food was able to quell the effects of the continued toasts), and plenty of discussion (no longer nonsensical by thanks to the presence of food). We then got the bill, and began to pack up. However, as it was Qixi, the waitress brought a box of mooncakes for the host. He then directed her to give the box to me! ME?! REALLY?! I proceeded to say that it was too much, and questioned if it should be given to me. They told me to have it, and I obliged. Upon consulting the internet about Chinese customs, I realized I should have made more of a fuss and refused even further, but I was assured by the English speakers at the table that I did just fine.

All in all, I had a lovely night and learned what it’s like to go on a formal business dinner in China. Lessons to learn? Make sure you can handle all those alcoholic toasts, if not, refuse politely. Know how to use chopsticks. Try not to get too into discussions about agricultural practices. Refuse any gifts, but then eventually accept. Then when you’re alone in your hotel room, gorge on the delicious mooncakes.
CONCLUSIONS AND TAKEAWAYS

It seems nearly impossible for me to draw a conclusion to my time as an intern in China. I still come to new conclusions daily, and often question some of my past conclusions as well. However, this was one of the first chances that I have had to learn about urban planning in an international setting, and perhaps more importantly, in some of the fastest urbanizing places in the world. While us Portlanders like to think of our methodology as some of the best in the world, I realized there is another dimension of planning to learn more about that is completely unavailable to us here. I also had a chance to make a great deal of personal and cultural connections while in China, and could not imagine what my time there would have been like without those experiences as well. I continually find myself recommending this program to anyone who expresses the slightest bit of interest, and I am truly pleased that I was able to have this experience.

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