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Tomasz B. Stanek

California State University, San Bernardino, tomasz.stanek@vvc.edu

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Abstract
This 2011 study abroad analysis written on a sojourn to Xian and Beijing is a product of several constructs: culture shock, intellectual curiosity, cross-cultural comparisons and interviews performed by the author. The reflections are multifold and mostly concern school visitations, architecture, tourist sites, and travel in general and read as commentaries of a blogger on his sojourn. The article concludes with an intellectual observation that implied challenges connected to cross-cultural examination, especially when comparing schooling, education, and pedagogical issues.

Keywords
International Education, China, study abroad

Author Statement
Author, Tomasz Stanek, is a recent 2012 EdD graduate of CSUSB College of Education, a community college teacher and a scholar interested in a variety of research from history, migrations and diaspora, modern conflicts to education and educational theory. Dr Stanek teaches at Chaffey College and lectures at University of California, Riverside Extension School.

Email contact: tomasz.stanek@chaffey.edu tomasz.stanek@vvc.edu tomasz@post.harvard.edu

Cover Page Footnote
Special thank you to Katie for a wonderful experience of Xian through her eyes, translation, and insight: we will miss you. Thank you to Tina and friends from Lantian foundation, Angie, Fay, Zheng Zheng, Di Li, Prof. Baorong, Prof. Wang, Prof. Janet, and Newell who put up with the pace of “agreeable” experience of Xian and Beijing.

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Welcome to China

I came to Xi’an via a Hainan Airlines flight from Beijing on June 22, 2011. There were twelve of us in our California State University, San Bernardino (CSUSB) delegation. This international study program came also to be known as the “Study abroad China, 2011” trip from the College of Education. It was a great note-and-observe experience of China’s educational institutions: elementary schools, middle schools, and universities. Most of the group members were doctoral students from different cohorts within the CSUSB, with the rest composed of professors and administrators. Since our airline tickets were not coordinated to
arrive on the same aircraft, two groups evolved right away: those who travelled via San Francisco on United (my group), and the rest who flew on a nonstop Air China flight out of Los Angeles. My Beijing airport reaction on arrival was a humbling experience. I was quite amazed with the ingenuity and the sheer size of the airport canopy! This engineering marvel hit me immediately and perhaps set a tone for things to come. Not only was this type of construction unmatched in United States airports, but also the monstrous size of the arrival and the departure hall made me feel like a little ant in the midst of giant props.

View of the Beijing International Terminal. Note the endless ceiling.

After collecting all of our group’s luggage we’d reunited with the rest of our delegation, which by the way arrived few hours earlier and thankfully arranged for a hotel shuttle. The ride to the airport was filled with my excitement of being in a new country. I noticed most things immediately: the humidity, the road signage, the planted trees, large access roads, and the basic traffic order. I mentioned the traffic order for a reason. My recent trips to the Philippines exposed me to a different traffic image in the usually-congested Asian mega-city: a three-lane street used as a six to seven lane freeway, shared by jeeps, bikes, scooters, pedestrians, and any contraption that rides. Something that I expected in Beijing, or in China in general, was missing. A traffic order was quite noticeable. Besides, my only obvious apprehension, born out of ignorance of
Chinese language, was the theatrical show of advertisement mostly in the Chinese written characters and heavily included the 2008 Beijing Olympic logos. This first overwhelming experience with the non-Western based alphabet paralyzed my travel senses. From now on I had to rely on our group’s translator.

The Days Hotel near Beijing Capital Airport was a great Western-style hotel with well-equipped rooms, bathrooms, and amenities equal to a three star American hotel experience. The freshness of the facilities could be smelled (fresh concrete) and heard (work on higher floors was on going). Fed, showered, unpacked, and repacked for the following day, I fell asleep around ten o’clock that night. Xi’an flight was our next day’s agenda.

Do we ask right questions: Xi’an and Beijing visit.

Panoramic view of the Great Wall near Badaling, China. June 2011

The Hainan airlines flight from Beijing Capital to Xi’an was a welcome addition to my usual gray and uneventful experiences on United, Delta, or American. The flight attendants on this wide-body Airbus 330 were very courteous, attentive, and unusually fast! Any request for water, a pillow, or video assistance was met with a smile. What struck me the most, was the sign of respect and a sincere, “Thank you for flying,” through an unanimous bow from all eight Hainan flight attendants directed at sitting passengers! All of us were truly impressed by the service during this short flight.

The weather on arrival in Xi’an was fantastic. The humidity was gone yet the temperature still hovered in the eighties. We were introduced to our young translator, Katie, a 23 year old university graduate, who commanded a very direct style of English! We began our drive on a new freeway through Xi’an to Xi’an Fanyi University and our first official contact with the Chinese educational facility.

Again, and again, I was struck by the grandeur of the construction! New forty-some storey apartment blocks and modern top quality expressways were being constructed in every direction within the city. Crane after crane littered the horizon! Newly planted and landscaped green spaces, trees, flowers, and new cars were seen throughout the city, which confronted my long-standing bias of the Chinese streets full of bicycles, old shacks, and street vendors, as if the Indiana Jones China-town still existed as an accurate representation of modern China.

Our CSUSB delegation had entered the gymnasium of the Xi’an Hi Tech International School to a standing ovation. To our great surprise, the administrators, teachers, students, and their parents clapped their hands as we marched down towards the scene where
young 8th grade students were performing their graduate rites. The graduation ceremony included the usual pomp: coordinated dancing, songs, performances, congratulations, and, most remarkably, the recital of the principal’s poem by all teaching faculty. Each teacher emotionally recited part of the prose. As I observed, the principal’s position in this school was highly regarded and respected, perhaps too much, and it reminded me a party meeting of praise and personal glorification. I might be a bit too harsh here, but seeing a teary-eyed teacher reciting the principal’s poem to the audience and before the principal himself seemed unusual to a Westerner. Then again, I was there hardly four days! What could I possibly understand or misread by not having any lived experiences or cultural knowledge. In fact, I could not understand the language.

The subsequent visitation of the facilities gave us the most pleasure. Along with our group I walked in on a live class English instruction of 7th graders. After a quick scan, I had noticed the pacing instructor, while holding a piece of chalk I gestured politely to use the chalk board. She nodded with a smile! What followed surprised me. Most people from our delegation scattered around the school visiting and interacting with kids in different classrooms. Those who stuck nearby had seen me write on a chalkboard: “What is the capital city of China?” After I had turned my back towards the board expecting an answer; all the kids as if in choir shouted towards me, “BEIJING!” Buoyed by this sudden enthusiasm of about forty students I wrote again: “What is the capital city of the United States?” Again, all kids with enthusiasm shouted, “WASHINGTON!” I was having fun and all the students were trained on my next line. I said that this one was going to be difficult, “What is the capital city of Poland?” To my amazement, not all, but many exploded with “WARSAW!” Having a tear in my eye and completely impressed by their knowledge, I recognized that what was a difficult task for my community college adults, was just another rehearsal of geographical material to these bright 7th graders! I was truly impressed and so excited that I jumped and thanked all the students for a great time as I moved to another class. Shortly, the faculty meetings began.

Were we really prepared to ask questions?

After visiting some additional educational sites in Xi’an, Shaanxi province, on June 22nd and 23rd (Xi’an Fanyi University, Xi’an Hi Tech International School, and a Xian Hi Tech Middle School) with our wonderful translator, Katie, I found myself questioning the methodology and the meaning of our questions. Here we are in Xi’an, China, on an official school visit from California State University, San Bernardino intended to explore Chinese educational system in order to enrich our understanding of new pedagogical methods or ways, yet, all of our questions directed at the local administrators felt like, and were designed within, our own Western constructs and limitations. For instance, “What is your approach to special education students?” “Where are the special education students?” “How long have you taught at this facility?” All had an underpinning, “I got you!” strategy that pointed to our U.S. school system’s superiority and thus were intended to de-mask Chinese deficiencies. It almost felt as if we caught ourselves in a contest of addressing our own a priori assumptions of a timely (American) concern. Do not misunderstand, our questions expressed a
sincere concern for “special education” students and those who need extra help. In fact, those who asked were either the special education teachers or administrators facilitating these programs in California. The Chinese administrators replied that there were no special education students in this school. In fact, they mentioned that all special education students typically remained at home in the care of their families. No further comment or explanation was given, and most who asked these questions were surprised to hear that, perhaps disappointed, or were internalizing what they just heard. This perhaps became that “I got you!” moment. We had all the answers, our literature, studies and experience but they weren’t interested. Not at all.

Although most sites were very well-equipped, designed, new, and well-positioned among the up and coming areas (primary private school and public middle school) the observations and experiences derived from these facilities could not be representative of all Xi’an schools. None of the attending secondary teachers or administrators attempted to ask our delegation a single question pertaining to our schooling methods. As a result, the questions and the discussion were incredibly one-sided. I am not sure if our Chinese counterparts were in any way interested in truthful or constructive dialogue. The presentations felt routine-like and certainly rehearsed prior through similar past administrative meetings (all Chinese language power-points, lists of school’s accomplishments, some well-timed class observation in arts, music, and English courses).

Unlike the secondary school visits, the meeting and a tour of the Xi’an Fanyi University was quite fruitful. The dean of the foreign language department, Professor Yao Baorong was quite open and more than willing to answer all of our free-flowing questions. In fact, little or nothing was lost in translation since Professor Baorong had taught at California State University, Northridge, during her career. The constructs of our questions and meaning were thus really well understood and applied in our little talk. I was very surprised by the active discussion engagement by two English professors who asked some quite insightful questions, “How does faith and religion affect teaching in the U.S. colleges?” And a follow up open-ended inquiry on power and distance relations between the students and professors at the Fanyi University and the United States. As it turned out, this private teaching university exhibits very Western characteristics of academic camaraderie: mention of students as ‘sisters’ to any teaching faculty, little or no distance in terms of daily interactions, and clearly some evidence of academic freedom.

While visiting the university museum, which reminded all visitors of its humble private beginnings, I noticed the school motto: “To become the Asian Harvard.” The message translation points clearly to a close Western following and modeling, leaving perhaps little or no desire to follow a traditional Chinese public university model. After some questioning, it became apparent that in China American colleges and universities were highly regarded and respected, thus it was worth “replicating their academic excellence” in new localized Chinese equivalents.
Shaanxi Museum: Unexpected Fundraiser

It was not the museum that made the greatest impression on me but a group of four high school students and their parents selling “donation” t-shirts and gifts in front of the building. The foundation, as it was introduced to us in English with its Chinese banner behind, focused on the poor students from the countryside who could not afford even primary education. After conversing for about fifteen minutes I found out that the 50 Yuan donation was essential to delivering scholarships for young girls and boys who would otherwise not be able to afford even the most basic primary education. Most farming communities on the outskirts of the major cities and in the countryside could not afford to educate their children, which was especially true for girls in the two-sibling households. Often, or generally speaking, only boys are sent to school and the burden of tuition beyond grade eight makes it difficult for the family to educate their girls as well. The city (Xi’an or Beijing) primary school dynamic is a bit different. The 40 year-old “One Child Policy” (recently ended) eliminated this type of burden but at the same time limited families to one child only with penalties of up to 20,000 Yuan and a possible loss of employment in case of another pregnancy. As a general rule, in the provinces, a second child was allowed only if the first-born was a girl. Only one of the interviewed students during my brief stay grew up with a sibling.

The fundraisers’ stories were incredible: 1) all girls (high school juniors) spoke perfect English, 2) had visited the United States before (Washington D.C., and New York) for the model United Nations competition representing “Brazil,” and 3) possessed the highest
aspirations of attending American universities. Boston University, MIT, NYU, and Cornell were mentioned. I was taken aback by the number of photos taken by a man encircling our conversation who turned out to be one of the girls’ fathers, documenting their fund-raising efforts. Not surprisingly, most parents in China are highly involved in all educational and extra-curricular activities of their children. The passion and the tenacity that transcended during this brief talk was contagious. These young girls did not just own their rightful and earned stake in their community and country. They aspired to be heard abroad. What they have already accomplished in their short educational careers most likely will land them a spot at Harvard, Yale, or MIT. Their biggest worries were centered not so much on the tuition but the near-perfect but not 100 percent SAT/ACT scores! Paradoxically, they were most certainly competing not with American students but with thousands like them from all over China and South East Asia. As it turned out, all of them partook in some advanced placement classes at their selective and private high schools to include math, physics, English to name a few, and all of the girls envisioned our American universities as their dream destination. My initial reaction brought up Thomas L. Friedman’s warning remarks of all-encompassing globalization that out-paced American students in the tight competition for future ‘global’ and domestic jobs. Could I refute this construct after these observations? Certainly not.

Donation stand in front of the Shaanxi Museum. Author (second from left), Tina (fifth from left.
A few days later after this encounter, I received the following note from one of the four students collecting for the foundation. As it turned out my initial assumptions of these students were correct:

   **Dear Tomasz,**
   Thank you for your help on June 26th. I'm Tina, the girl in the History Museum, donating for the primary school in LANTIAN. It is so nice of you that you bought our T-shirt to help those poor students in the rural area. Now I'm going to tell you of our victory regarding you as one of the members of this group:
   We have gotten more than 2,700RMB by now and note that this is a pure profit! Isn't it amazing?
   We'll send the money to those students ourselves in September, because they are now on vacation. Perhaps I'll send you some pictures after visiting them.
   My English name is Tina, and my Chinese name is 冯雨桐, in Chinese; Yutong Feng.
   Again thank you for your help and your love, and I hope you'll enjoy the rest of your trip in China——regardless of the pollution and the hot weather. I hope that we can keep in touch not only in China but also in America!

   I'm looking forward to hearing from you soon.

   P.S.: I'm still not sure which e-mail box you are using because there are three of them, so I sent this e-mail to all three.
   And I hope that you don't mind any spelling or grammar mistakes I made.
   Sincerely, Tina

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**Street Xi'an**

How do we generalize or profile people of China? Do we look at the city, its skyline, and people to match them to our neatly constructed ideas of where one could possibly live, work, and spend time? I was intrigued and very curious and wanted to dig a bit deeper into the minds of those around me. One may never know the personal story of another if their encounters are limited to just few glimpses in a club, a store, or a coffee house.

Often our presumptuous instincts misjudge and mislabel people, leading to a general ambiguity. Three young dancing and drinking twenty-some year olds at the Xi'an dance club near our hotel turned out to be students from the University of Nevada Las Vegas, Boston University, and the Ohio State University. A young woman standing in line behind us at the Xi'an Starbucks happened to have two brothers studying and living in Oakland, CA. Without my spontaneous curiosity and the audacity to ask questions directly at some random strangers I would not realize that the youth of Xi'an (and China I presume) know as much about the West as we don't know about China.

Xi'an's local Starbucks, besides being a natural watering hole for all foreigners and the well-to-do locals, rewarded me with the greatest ethnographic experiences or Confucian conversation.
Often it took just few looks or glimpses at the nearby people to figure out who wanted to talk. Interestingly, a little excuse, such as, “You remind me this and that pop star, do you know him?” worked magic! When conversing, most young local adults enjoyed English and with the greatest curiosity asked for explanations of idiomatic translations, slang, and pop songs. When asked back, “What comes to mind when you imagine America?” most in a small crowd replied, “Wisdom and progress.” I was a bit surprised with this consensus. My bet was on Hollywood, music, and fashion. I had forgotten that I was speaking to some well-educated students who paradoxically have never been outside of their own country, yet, they were conversing in English! In this particular example, all of the students attended their senior year at local Xi’an Eurasian University. And on an interesting note, 10 p.m. in the evening was indicative of going home time for most female students who to my surprise clarified this in the following words, “Most respectable Xi’an girls will not stay out late by themselves.”

I truly regret leaving Xi’an for Beijing so early (after only six days). The large chimney coal power plants were clearly noticeable during our forty minute bus ride to the airport on a brand-new expressway. One could not dismiss the ever-present construction zones of high-rise-apartment neighborhoods along the way. Some were built even within a short proximity to the power plants that resembled our nuclear power sites. This type of urban expansion became a familiar sight in and around Xi’an. As our group drove by the scores of such sights, I wondered if there were any environmental or health considerations explored or discussed prior to developing these massive neighborhoods around these mega-coal electric plants? Or rather, whether the dilemma of not having enough dwellings for the booming and transient population outweighed any health or environmental considerations that could prevent them from being constructed in the first place. After all, the decisions in China were made centrally by the arbitrary ruling party that surely kept the demographic needs and social order as its highest priorities.

The overbuilding and the ever-present cranes creeping along numerous thirty-some floor apartment towers were characteristic of Xi’an. This ancient capital beyond its old city walls dating back to Marco Polo was being transformed into a vertical monstrosity. Xian’s new subway system was nearly ready for its debut in 2012. This modern build-up and the costs associated with its heavy construction seemed staggering and overwhelming.
Typical scene of the newly constructed apartment flats around Xian in 2011.

Beijing adventure

The capital appeared to be a different animal altogether: giant metropolis, humid, hot, and polluted. My initial reaction to the city was rather reserved and mixed. After I had fallen in love with Xi’an and its sophisticated young university crowds, Beijing presented itself as a typical capital with its large boulevards, less congested yet larger avenues, and monumental urban design typical of any capital. Similarly to my Moscow visit in early 1990, Beijing seemed to be designed to order: large squares, expansive government buildings, and imagery that constantly reminded all visitors of its grand and capital character. The crowd around the Tiananmen Square and the Forbidden City seemed simple, touristy, and unsophisticated. The caravans of school children, working men and their families on company-sponsored tours, and faces from all corners of China were the most visible. Most concentrated on the brisk transfers from one photo location to another in what felt like a 100°F heat and humidity! Not only was the size of the central square impressive, the flowers and other props in colors of China’s ruling Communist Party (hammer and sickle), closed circuit monitoring towers, soldiers, police, and common hagglers selling tourist paraphernalia in 95% humidity added to a general feeling of psychological entrapment. The communistic baroque (as most call it) and its imagery generated a grandiose feeling. I have taken some pictures, even those of the emblematic sickle and Mao Ze Dong. I was a tourist. Why not?
I was startled when a young woman ran towards me asking if I was interested in visiting North Korea on an organized tour. My initial shock poured through my senses not from the question she asked (as bizarre as it sounded) but from its sudden startling delivery. It took me a second to process this information. Of course, I was interested in North Korea but perhaps not there and not at that moment in time. After declining the offer and before heading to the Forbidden City, I managed to negotiate the deal of a lifetime: three Rolex watches for a total of five dollars. I had finally bought my souvenirs from Beijing!

After a few minutes of the negotiations involving Chinese and American currencies, I followed our group to explore the Forbidden City and its magnificent Summer Gardens. What was supposed to be a glorious tour of the ancient imperial court turned into a flowing sea of people sweating and
walking in unanimity from one courtyard to another stumbling, bracing, and photographing. The traditional ancient architecture was grand but very repetitive (not its fault at all), the walls and the surrounding areas weren’t really kept in utmost pristine condition as one would expect from the jewel of Beijing! I did notice some workers in the process of crude painting and debris removal directly from the walls and from behind closed-door courtyards. It did not seem like a deliberate and planned conservation but just another job. Overall, the Forbidden City grounds were a bit disappointing, as if the past was meant to be stamped out from the minds of the Chinese society. Ironically, the Starbucks Cafe in the middle of this palatial complex was a bit more than a slap in the face for the ancient tradition of forbidding ‘alien’ elements from its premises. After all, not too many places on the globe forbid Starbucks from doing what it does well – being everywhere!

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**Soho of Beijing**

Starbucks cafes never disappoint. The crowds were eclectic, energetic, and willing to intermingle with foreigners. In fact, the shopping mall of Soho felt incredibly Southern Californian: Cold Stone’s creamery, cafes, water fountains, Apple store, Nike, Bulgari, and Coach stores among scores of other American and European brands. What I cherished the most, however were the simple conversations with the Starbucks patrons. Angie and her assistant from Taiwan via the home office in Hong Kong generated quite an extensive discussion in English. These young and single hedge-fund directors were puzzled by how our ten-minute conversation turned: a discussion of the general apparel and how important that is in Asia. “Do not judge a book by its cover,” works well in California and most of the U.S., yet, its basic premises seem very puzzling for the Chinese. Image seemed to mean everything in China. “You wear your status here,” Angie said, in order to gain respect and recognition: the type car you drive, the purse you carry, and a brand of clothing, all indicate your place in society. You do not want to underdress! And overdressing seems better for everyone pays attention! Angie and her friend seemed to be caught off-guard by our initial simple appearance: a t-shirt and some khaki cargo shorts, which appeared to be unmatched to my business cards, which read: Associate Professor of History at Victor Valley College. The following night confirmed and corrected this role and appearance ambiguity. Same table, same hour, but a nice change: business casual chinos, plus a polo dress shirt with matching belt and shoes brought about totally different reactions. Dr. Jesunathadas and I initiated a clever conversation that included American culture, Beijing’s higher education, and English/Chinese language with two young working adult bankers.
Their appearance matched their status and profession and similarly we wore what was expected of us: an Indiana Jones appearance matched me to my history profession, and a neat polo golf shirt and jeans of Dr. Jesunathadas guessed him to be the science guy. What I did not expect at the end of our meeting was the show of respect from these young women: both got up and bowed politely as if this was some sort of interview. When I inquired, “What comes to mind when asked about California?” both answered unanimously: the shopping and the shoes! Why shoes? Ironically, most if not all shoes sold in the U.S. are made in China! Fashionably speaking, it is not the “made-in” sign but a quality and design that goes unmatched in China despite this paradoxical production.

**True Beijing conversations**

Meeting Janet a few days earlier, York University graduate and a professor of English at the International Studies University in Beijing, was one of the highlights of Beijing. Our discussion unfolded quickly and succinctly as soon as we arrived at the language institute for lunch. Besides the obvious basic food questions, courtesies, and introductions, this young host comprehensively defined the major obstacles and problems of higher education.

I asked one question, “What are the major problems you’re experiencing in your facility, teaching, or career?” I did not expect to get an answer at all and I was looking forward to a well-placed “agreeable” excuse.

Surprisingly, Janet laughed out loud, “Where should I start? There are so many.” This sudden burst of comfort and humorous reaction had really changed the dynamic of our conversation, which was taken by few instructors in our delegation as uncomfortable and rude. We or I, in particular, was not supposed to ask any politically charged questions. However, creating problems was not my intent. In order to find out the truth and to feel the real experience one must ask questions. Only then can true learning occur. To my surprise, Janet mentioned “lack of respect” as the number one debilitating obstacle between the administration/government and the faculty. Although Janet declared that the faculty at the university possess a great degree of academic freedom in instruction, the lack of respect and the overwhelming bureaucracy makes it almost impossible for some to teach or to create innovative courses and curriculum. All instructors are overwhelmed by teaching ten hours a week, and translating to a full load at the research university including the overcrowded lecture halls. Janet’s further comments surprised me even more and touched on the feeling of “incompleteness” in civic development in modern Chinese society. Just when the discussion became honest and revealing it was time for the whole group to leave. This sudden departure, as there were many, left a bitter disappointment among many students in our group. The primary purpose of this trip was academic in nature: school visitations of all levels and supposed discussions with local students and professors. What transpired, however, was a crude chase of the schedule, shopping vicinities, and tourist “101” attractions.

Discussions that produced a lasting effect were few and far between. Fanyi and Beijing International Studies University seemed the best. Thus the “street” conversations with strangers at cafes and sidewalks provided me with the utmost satisfaction. Perhaps we were caught asking all the wrong questions by dichotomizing the comparisons between the U.S. educational system and the Chinese counterpart through biased questions often intended to prove our
advances in pedagogy. What we didn’t ask in Xian schools correctly I attempted to ask in Beijing and got some surprising replies.

I was very impressed by the young and soon-to-be ruling young generation of college graduates in China. These thoughts are not the guessed assumptions but the interviewed and witnessed dialogues, which made me realize that there is an abyss of curiosity, drive, ambition, and intellectualism among new and educated Chinese generation, often missing from the American counterparts.

References