Maymester Course: Narratives of the New China: Engagement and Exploration

In 2008, Beijing hosted a huge coming-out party as international attention turned to its Olympic festivities. The city of 17 million, known for its charming Qing-dynasty hutongs (alleyways), ancient temples, and Tian’annen Square, revealed its postmodern side as the dramatic Bird’s Nest and Water Cube buildings were unveiled. These changes are part of a communication strategy to show the world how China, an enduring civilization emerging as a cultural and economic superpower, is changing. With 1.3 billion people and the fourth largest national land area in the world, China is indeed on the move.

In May of 2010, a team of UCD students, accompanied by Drs. Barbara Walkosz and Lisa Keränen, flew for more than 6,500 miles to experience first-hand how China is crafting its public image. The intensive Maymester travel study course cultivated an appreciation of how China is using its past and present to create a vision for the future. Final paper topics spanned the meanings of the ubiquitous Mao kitsch to the tension between openness and closed-ness in Chinese culture. Originally conceived by Drs. Sonja Foss and Walkosz and grounded in theories of narrative and public memory, the course gave students the ability to uncover competing narratives about China’s national identity. The campus of China Agricultural University, which houses our International College at Beijing (ICB) (see the ICB article on page 6), provided classroom and work space, while site visits to the Great Wall, the Military Museum, the Forbidden City, and Buddhist and Confucian Temples comprised living laboratories for observing cultural narratives at work.

Additionally, the course provided ample chances for Denver-based communication students to interact with their Chinese counterparts. As Ruby Li of the ICB wrote on the course blog, “The talk between us [covered] . . . capitalism, social democracy, feminism, the change of lifestyle both in China and in the States, and Chinese history.” Drs. Foss and Hartnett hosted a banquet for ICB and U.S. students, while Kunya Li, Xindi Guo, Yi Yi Jiang, and other Chinese students generously served as translators when accompanying the class on many site visits.

U.S. student Rebecca Bernai summed up the experience when she wrote: “As I reflect on the past two weeks we have spent in Beijing, I am struck by its dichotomies. Beijing houses ancient architectural and historical treasures, yet its skyline and energy are very modern. It has gone from being closed off to outsiders to welcoming foreigners with open wallets. Beijing boasts an ultra modern subway, while hundreds of thousands pedal away on their cargo-carrying bicycles . . . For the delectable cuisine, the engineering and architectural wonders, the Confucian philosophy of respect, hard work and harmony, and your wisdom-filled culture, I thank you, China, from the bottom of my American heart.”