Dear Readers,

It’s hard to decide what to include in a journal like this. Reading through my classmates’ entries conjures up the image of a travel log. I’ve never done one of those, and since I don’t intend to claim to be an interesting writer, I’m going to write a bit differently.

Before reading this, I highly suggest that any of you who intend to visit China take everything we say with a grain of salt. Come here without preconceived notions. Prepare yourself with our information, but try to not run your day by it. I read up on China before I arrived, trying to absorb as much information as possible. Every experience will be different for each person; even within our group of eight students, we’ve already had drastically dissimilar experiences.

*I will intersperse randomly good-looking photos in this entry as an eye catcher and distraction from my terrible writing.*

![Image of four people making faces](image)

Some things I have noticed:

- **Children will sometimes defecate into storm drains.** Publicly. Where you can see it. While you are trying to eat dinner ten feet away.
- **Sidewalks are optional.** Traveling in the street is perfectly fine, but remember that if a car is honking, it is because they are trying to warn you about their presence. Since bicycles and mopeds are considered pedestrian, I would keep aware even on the sidewalk.
- **Large trucks drive by playing ice cream truck music.** The music is a lie. They are water trucks telling you they are about to drive by. As far as I can tell, these trucks wet the roads so keep the dust and dirt from kicking up due to traffic. You will soon notice that
everything around you has a thin layer of dust on it, even in your apartment; it is probably best that the trucks are trying to keep it out of your lungs.

- **Tons of food are sweeter in China** than I was used to. Popcorn is sweet. Sushi is sweet. Juices and teas are even sweeter.

- **China loves mayonnaise**. I thought I did too until I received my first chicken sandwich with three tablespoons of it layered on. Granted, these things are not typical Chinese cuisine.

- **Cities paint the trunks of trees white**, why you ask? It’s limewater. The consensus seems to be that the lime keeps bacteria and insects out from under the bark and provides a modicum of temperature protection between winter and summer.

- **Your teachers and Chinese partners do not always have the answers you need**. When they do, sometimes details are lost in translation. At first, it seems like they are trying to lie to you. We have been led on three or four trips so far where large details were left out or miscommunicated – as a good rule of thumb I would say bring your phone, headphones, and comfortable shoes. By this, I mean sneakers or something you can hike in on a moment’s notice... We were told we were going to an irrigation festival, then as we are leaving on the bus, we were informed that we would be visiting a mountain and hiking up a mile or more of stairs. I was just glad I was not dressed formally.
Additional details I think are close to universal truths.

- **Foreigners are like an attraction** (especially ones that do not look Asian). An amusement park attraction. I have had people almost crash their bikes while rubbernecking to see me and the girls walk down the street. People want to take pictures of you wherever you go. In my experience, most of them only have the gall to openly record your beautiful visage if they think you can’t do anything about it. Situations like that include large spaces, events, and public transportation. In the span of two hours, I caught a few people taking photos of me and the group of twenty or so foreigners I was sitting at. We were attending the Dujiangyan Water Festival.

  If you want some entertainment on the side, see how many people you can counter-snap. I had been keeping my phone camera off to conserve battery (I highly suggest bringing a portable charger with you everywhere), so by the time I got my phone out some of the people had casually panned away as if we were just interesting scenery. I have included a few of my counter-photos at the end.

- **Do not trust the taxi drivers.** Didi (which is the Chinese equivalent to Uber) is pretty safe. When considering use of a taxi, make sure you have all of your belongings before going in and check the seats and floors before you leave. This may be the last thing on your mind when you are trying to stumble home, but us eight Americans have lost a collective five or so phones already. One of the Americans was trying to give the taxi driver directions and she handed him her phone through the window; he grabbed it and drove off.

  If you’re using a taxi for going in and out of downtown (like going home to Chengdu Daxue), I suggest haggling for a price beforehand. Taxi drivers have notoriously gotten ‘lost’ or taken ‘less traffic-filled routes’ that jack up the price. Some of the foreign boys we know will never take a taxi for above forty kuai. You can start there in the haggle if you want, but fifty is a
good price, and anything above sixty is ripping you off. A taxi at night time back to the university would be around eighty or ninety if you were to use the meter.

- **You will have more photos than you know what to do with** if you snap every little snippet of China. Scrolling through a plethora of thumbnails on my phone does not appeal to me and in my experience, I only enjoy reminiscing over the truly beautiful scenic photos (the Instagram worthy) and the photos of Humans. I have about 300 pictures of one fieldtrip and to be honest, about ten of them are worth keeping to look at a year from now.

- *Quiet spots and decent food* are not hard to come by, but finding a couple of them in the very beginning is a healthy step to peace of mind later on. A lot of us hang out in Annecy which has a Western restaurant style, good pizza, pasta, and coffee, strong Wi-Fi and electrical outlets available. A spot like this is more for studying and getting your literature homework done in a semi-private space. Mind you, it comes at a price, so spend wisely or head to the Library instead.

- Speaking **of spending wisely**, a lot of us were tempted into spending vast amounts of money in the first two weeks. When you calculate the US Dollar to RMB conversion, it’s a lot easier to convince yourself to spend 100 RMB on a shirt – it’s only 15 dollars we told ourselves.

Fifteen dollars, thirty, sixty… Spend that much every time you go shopping and it adds up. There are two big shopping streets near CDU’s back gate. There’s a farmer’s market, a small supermarket, convenience stores on every corner, food trucks, etc. There’s no shortage of things to spend your money on. Heading into the center of Chengdu is even more dangerous because you’ll be confronted with recognizable stores like Wal-Mart and H&M. Carrefour is a supermarket specializing in foreign products so you can finally grab some real wine, cheddar cheese, chocolate bars, and cereal. PSA: Any Chinese or non-imported brand of wine you see on the shelf is spiked grape juice, not wine. Do not be fooled into spending money on it.
Budget your money and keep in mind that it has to last you until you leave. I love the dogs my roommate and my friend bought in China, but they were impulse buys. The dogs here are cute and cold on the street; if you cannot afford to feed and immunize a dog (1000 RMB or more) and then bring it to China (more money and paperwork), please do not buy one.

Some pictures are more embarrassing than others. Learn to love yourself.
A few people taking pictures of us foreigners. A couple had panned away just in time.
Writing this entry is rather cathartic. There are so many details to keep track of and it is hard to put down what I want to say – what I want to convey and what I want those back home to know. If anyone has read this far, there is one last thing I want to say: I believe this trip is healthy for me as a person, but I feel so isolated from the community. Not just the Chinese one, but from all communities. I am out of touch with my American friends’ lives; I am out of touch with my video game friends; I am not fluent enough in Chinese to fully immerse myself comfortably. This experience is truly enjoyable, but to lose your communities makes me feel empty and wanting. I will attempt to remedy this by the next journal entry.

Stray off the path and discover China for yourself.

-Laurel N. Sargent, 花千蕊