

## China Travel Diary 2018

David & Lois Sykes Travel Grant diary – *Liliana Barbieri, 2nd year DPhil in Biomedical Imaging (ONBI DTC, Oxford)*.

In April 2018, I went to China together with my supervisor and a research colleague for a scientific collaboration at the Institute of Biophysics (Beijing, China) of the Chinese Academy of Sciences. This trip consisted of one week of scientific experiments and two weeks leisure. To take the most out of this journey, I travelled in China with my partner with the support of the David & Lois Sykes Travel Grant. In total, I stayed for 21 wonderful days, visiting Beijing, Xi'an, Guilin, Shanghai and Suzhou.

### Beijing

I stayed in Beijing for 12 days from the 14<sup>th</sup> to the 25<sup>th</sup> of April. I found this period of the year ideal in terms of weather, because it was pleasantly warm, with temperatures averaging from 25° to 35° C. On the other hand, it was also quite humid, which unfortunately made long walks feel somewhat exhausting.

During the first week in Beijing my group and I were very focused on our planned experiment in a close collaboration with Chinese researchers. The great opportunity of working with them on a daily basis and having interesting conversations about their traditions and lifestyles really helped me to familiarise with the Chinese culture. For example, I found out that one of the most popular activities in China is Karaoke, which they typically perform in a club or on open streets.

Personally, I found food to be one of the most important aspects of the Chinese culture. I was positively surprised in seeing how similar Chinese food was to European, especially, Italian. Food and meals in general have a symbolic meaning in both cultures. Meals usually last at least one hour with colleagues, friends, and family. In one of the conversations with Chinese colleagues, I learned that when eating with guests, it is extremely important to order or prepare more food than the group would be able to eat. In fact, the Chinese people express their affection to other people through food, which often leads to new friendships or emotional bonding. Abundance of food portions thereby are a sign of respect for the guests. I will always be grateful to our Chinese group for the astonishing welcome and kindness. Every evening, they brought us to a new local restaurant, where we could try different specialities of Chinese cuisine. The variety of choices and the cooking style, which are so different from the European cuisine, made my experience unique and fun, although the Beijing cuisine was sometimes too spicy for me! :-). Tea came with every meal – hot or cold. While hot tea is unusual in the European culture during summer time, it is often offered during hot weather in China as a way to help you to naturally cool down.

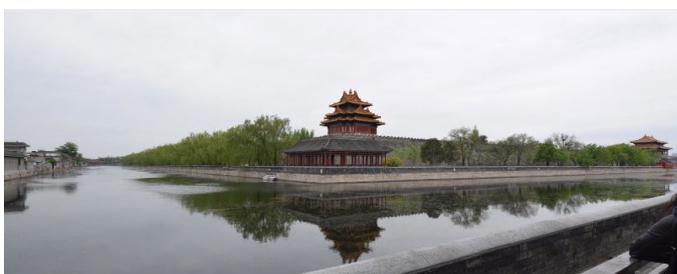
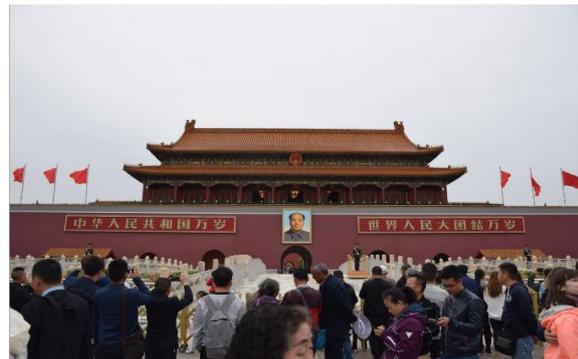
After the week of experiments, my lab group and I spent three days visiting Beijing.

**Great Wall - Mutianyu access.** Being at the Great Wall was such a breath-taking moment to me! We enjoyed walking the Great Wall the entire day. To reach the top of the wall, we climbed more than 4000 steps and then we walked along the wall for a total length of 5 km. Although one can find food shops in close proximity, prices are relatively high compared to supermarkets. Hence, we decided to bring all our supplies of water and food with us. We also benefited from planning our trip in advance. To this purpose, there are lots of helpful webpages (<http://www.tour-beijing.com/blog/beijing-travel/how-to-get-to-mutianyu-great-wall-by-bus>). I felt very grateful to the many people who described the ideal travel plans using public transport to the Great Wall. Even though it was very warm and tiring, I would do it again without hesitation. On our way back, we decided to do the so-called slides. If you have the chance to go there, I really recommend it! We had a lot of fun! After a refreshing

ice-cream in a bar, in front of the slide gate, we took a bus and went back to Beijing. Overall, if you have a possibility, I would suggest avoiding both a rainy (the Wall becomes slippery) and a very sunny (there are almost no shady spots) day for the Great Wall. A partly cloudy day would be ideal. Don't forget your sunglasses and sun cream or a hat for your journey to the Great Wall.

**Beijing by night.** On our second day, we explored Beijing by night. First, I visited the Donghuanmen night market, since food street markets are one of the main attractions in China. I was very impressed by the variety of food, pleasant smells, lights, and the many colours. Later, I continued to see the public shopping area next to the food market with shopping malls and high fashion brand shops. Finally, after dinner I visited to the Olympic stadium and tower for a walk.

**Forbidden City and Tiananmen square.** On the third day, we went to the Forbidden City close to the Tiananmen square. The Forbidden City is an enormous palace complex with a selection of unique rooms and small museums. We visited the Tiananmen Gate Tower with beautiful Chinese tapestries, and a jewel museum with extraordinary collections. We then had lunch in one of the restaurants within the palace offering reasonable prices. In the evening, we went to another area of Beijing called Sanlitun. This area of the city feels more European-like, full of pubs, karaoke clubs, and cocktails bars, offering a nice combination of fairly priced and tasty food from different cuisines and lots of local music. Because the restaurants were international, prices were higher compared to the local food prices.



*From the top left to bottom right. Mutianyu Great Wall; forbidden city, the Tiananmen Gate with the portrait of Mao Zedong; the moat of the Forbidden city; large Stone Carving (Forbidden city) with nine coiled dragons, symbolises the emperor's supremacy (Qing dynasty, 1761).*

Overall, Beijing is an enormous city (21 million habitants) but is very clean and friendly. Personally, I think that Beijing deserves at least one week of exploration time. For all my daily visits, I comfortably used the subway. The subway is very modern, and all the information is translated in English. Since the last metro of the day runs at 11 pm, I also used Didi (the equivalent of Uber) or standard public taxis. Didi works extremely well, offering cheap prices and good service. Walking around this enormous city, I could observe the evident contrast between poor and rich areas. Something that

particularly caught my attention was that in specific areas even windows of high-rise buildings were built with metallic gratings.

After Beijing, my lab group went back to Oxford, while my partner and I carried on with our Chinese adventure. In each city, we stayed 3-4 days. From this point of our travel, neither of us could speak Chinese, therefore we planned everything with the partial support of the travel agency, Mistral. Their service included all the transfers from airport or train stations to hotels and one day of tour in each city. This was extremely useful because, while in Beijing it was easy to find people that could talk in English and the subway had instructions in English, we could not find anyone speaking English in Xi'an or Guilin. Having the support from the travel agency Mistral was very helpful: we could phone them up at some occasions, and they helped us to understand the locals or provide us with useful tips. The travel package we chose included a tour guide in each city based on a local Chinese travel agency and a local person who was picking us up to drive us to a hotel or to a main site.

### **Xi'an**

We travelled with the high-speed train from Beijing to Xi'an. I was very impressed by the efficiency of the public transport. Initially, my choice to visit Xi'an was purely based on my desire to visit the well-known terracotta warriors' exhibitions. I was completely unaware of the beauty of Xi'an's ancient city centre, which I would describe as an explosion of life, so dynamic and elegant.

The first day, we decided to explore the city. We climbed up to the wall, and visited the Bell and Drum towers, where bells were playing at dawn and drums at sunset to mark the time of the day. Then we went to the Muslims street, which is a vibrant street food market. We also visited the Wild Goose Pagoda square and the Music Fountain. In the evening, on the way back to the hotel, we came back to the wall to see it light-up. I was mesmerised by the entire centre for many reasons. First of all, compared to Beijing, Xi'an is full of flowers in each corner and street, and the flowers are arranged in an artistic way as you can see from the picture I took. In addition, the city is full of outdoor exhibitions, dancing groups, and music. Every 30 meters we could see groups of people dancing typical Chinese dances, singing karaoke, or bands performing. The following day we went to see the Terracotta warriors. That day we had a fun experience that helped us to understand even more the local people. In the morning, we were waiting for a private bus to go to the Terracotta warriors as the instructions printed from the Mistral agency said. But after more than half an hour no one came to pick us up. I then went to the receptionist in the hotel explaining my problem and wondering if they received a call (it was written in the programme that the driver would call them a day before to confirm the plan). Unfortunately, I do not speak Chinese and English is not very widely spoken. Hence, I needed a fast idea to communicate with them. I then decided it was time to use my skills in the Pictionary games, acquired during all my life, to draw my message. Drawing a bus, a terracotta warrior (the worst warrior I ever drew!) and a clock, they understood me and using a Chinese app for translating from Chinese to English they wrote to me "traffic". It turned out that traffic is also bad in Xi'an and that being one hour late is quite standard. Thanks to this funny story, from the next day on we were more relaxed with all our plans. Overall, it is astonishing how different cultures can communicate and understand each other's overcoming language barriers, with creativity, patience and the desire to help each other. Together with the tour guide we first went to a terracotta statues industry, then to the Terracotta warrior exhibition, and finally to the Archaeological site of Banpo with the foundation of prehistoric houses. In the evening, we went to the Shaanxi Sunshine Lido Grand Theatre, famous for serving a variety of dumplings during a dancing show. Very nice and elegant, particularly if you like music and colours.



*From top left to bottom right. Terracotta warriors exhibition; local dances by night; typical flowers compositions in Xi'an; drum tower; typical dumplings (Chinese food) from the Shaanxi Sunshine Lido Grand Theatre; city wall.*

## **Guilin**



From Xi'an, I took a flight to Guilin, where I stayed for 3 days. I would consider Guilin as a small, rural village compared to Xi'an and Beijing... let's say "only" 5 million inhabitants in total! The landscape is wonderful, and I was completely astonished. If until now I could see a modern and pulsating China, thanks to Guilin I could also appreciate another aspect of this incredible country. Guilin in fact is well known for its landscapes, full of vegetation,

rivers, and limestone karst hills with peculiar shapes. These mountains are very famous, so much so to appear in the 20 Yuan note.

The first day in Guilin, I went to the Reed Flute Cave. The experience was amazing. The cave, full of stalactites decorated by lights games and music in the background, has a magic atmosphere. In the

evening, we walked on the main streets of the city centre and went to an Irish pub (sometimes it was also good to have a break from the local cuisine). The second day me and my partner went on the Li River Cruise. The cruise goes from Guilin to Yangshuo, and it takes around 4 hours, with optional lunch on the boat. The experience was breath-taking! That day the weather was rainy, nevertheless I do not regret at all every single minute spent there. The landscapes, the fresh clean air, the fishing boats all around us and the fantastic vegetation were all just astonishing. Once in Yangshuo, I took a tour on a small fishing boat. This one took place in ambient sites of the ancient China. However, because it was more artificial and showy, I did not appreciate it as much as the big cruise and I would not suggest to others. Instead, I suggest spending a night in the Yangshuo village or just come back to Guilin after the cruise. After the small trip in Yanhshuo, I went back to Guilin by a bus. In the evening I had a very tasty dinner at the Li River Restaurant. I tried rice noodles and the roasted duck, a delicious speciality of Guilin that I highly recommend. On the street I had a refreshing tasty coconut to refresh myself, because it was in fact quite hot even in the evening.



## Shanghai

From Guilin I then travelled to Shanghai, the last destination of my trip in China. Shanghai is a West like metropolis with a population comparable to Beijing. The main symbol of Shanghai is the Pudong district, a small island within Shanghai full of skyscrapers. Bars, clubs and shopping centres are the main attractions in this city.

In my experience a few days are enough to gain a good impression of Shanghai, including visits of a few museums and gardens. For the first day, we organised with the travel agency a guided tour towards the old area and the so called French area of Shanghai. We visited the Buddhism temple, the Yu garden, and a silk and pearl industry. Shanghai is also fascinating by night, with its vibrant nightlife. A walk in The Bund by night is a must. One evening, me and my partner went to the Peace Hotel, a place made popular by the legendary Old Jazz bands.



## Tips before and during your journey in China.

I thought to dedicate this small section to all the people who are planning to travel to China. The most crucial thing to do before starting this amazing adventure is to plan the trip in advance. The enormous size of the Chinese cities, the number of tourist sites, the different Chinese language, and new social media applications, require sufficient planning and preparation prior your trip to the far East. Good preparation puts you at ease: once that is settled, there is nothing to worry about. Unless you have a

VPN connection, you cannot rely on Google translate or maps, or our commonly used social media (such as Facebook and WhatsApp). Listed below are a few things I found extremely handy and helpful:

1. WeChat (is the equivalent of WhatsApp). I downloaded and asked people I wanted to stay in contact with to do the same.
2. Offline map downloaded on the phone. I highly recommend OsmAnd, it worked very well for me.
3. Print all your hotel addresses and destinations in Chinese. For non-Chinese speakers it is quite hard to pronounce any word correctly, which makes it very hard for Chinese people to understand you. Therefore, showing the original name in Chinese printed on a paper to a taxi driver or a hotel receptionist, will save you time and prevent you from getting lost.
4. The equivalent of Uber is "Didi". It is very straightforward to use. The service is very efficient and safe. I used it almost all the time.
5. An offline App that can translate from English to Chinese can be quite helpful as well. I couldn't find a good one but "Waygo" works offline, has 10 free trials per day and it worked quite well.
6. Credit and debit cards do not always work. I would say that cash is always the safest option. When I went there £1 was around 10 RMB and a maximum withdrawal per day was around £200. As an alternative, you can pay using WeChat.
7. Internet on your phone. Everyone recommended me to get a Chinese sim card with an internet tariff. In my case, I bought a Unicom SIM card with 2GB of internet and I did not have any issues.
8. A travel guide book with a basic Chinese dictionary can be handy as well.
9. China is a relatively safe place. The main issue I observed was fraud. As a generic rule, I would suggest (as local people suggested me when I was there) to not trust anyone who is too kind and persistent with you in selling a product. Ask always for a meter and a receipt before choosing a taxi and try to bargain when shopping in street markets (There's a saying in China: almost "Everything is negotiable").
10. Regarding water, it is not recommended to drink cold tap water if you travel in rural or poor part of China, since it might not be filtered or sterilised.

I wish you a lovely trip!

My trip to China was a fantastic and highly engaging experience. I am very grateful to University College for awarding me funding through the David & Lois Sykes Travel Grant, giving me this amazing opportunity.