**Rachel**

I don’t know any mandarin.  Well, besides the regular *ni hao, xie xie,* and *xi shou jian zai nar*, I know close to nothing.  I know, it’s weird; I’m Chinese, this is a chapel talk about the china trip, and I don’t really know how to speak Chinese.  There’s a good reason for that, though, and that is because I am adopted.  People don’t really know I’m adopted because, well, I look like the child of my 3rd generation Chinese mom and my Caucasian dad.  And thanks to them, I got to have the decision of whether or not to go to Chinese school on Saturdays. I said no. I didn’t think I needed to learn the language, so my parents didn’t force me.  I didn’t realize that it would separate myself from other little Chinese girls. I hadn’t been to China since I was adopted.  The only things I knew about it was whatever I learned in history class, the news, and my family’s stories from my adoption.  So when the 2017 China Trip was promoted, I instantly wanted to sign up. I had discovered we were traveling to Chengdu, Lijiang, and Hong Kong – cities around the same area I was adopted from.  I thought, “This was my chance to learn about my past, to learn about my heritage.”

So, remember how I don’t know Chinese? Well despite that, locals didn’t stop talking to me in mandarin and Cantonese, because I still look Chinese.  And when they found out I was American and didn’t speak Chinese, they looked either embarrassed or confused.  When I was by myself, I struggled in telling them I only spoke English, but when my Caucasian friends were next to me, they automatically knew I didn’t know Chinese, and I felt judged.  It made me feel incompetent, thinking about how I am a Chinese girl who doesn’t know her ethnicity’s language.  Because of the language barrier, I was unable to dive into our cultural immersion the same way the other students were.  When we were visiting the Chengdu middle school, Jackie, Maya, and Justine were able to instantly speak mandarin with their student partners, while I sat awkwardly next to mine because we mutually knew little of each other’s language.  And when Caleb was negotiating prices with local vendors, I was walking towards the more western stores where I knew there was probably someone who spoke English.  Although I looked the same as everyone around me in China, I felt completely different.  I didn’t know the language, therefore I was unable to have the rich learning experience that I dreamed about.

However, over the course of the trip, I learned there are other ways to learn about the culture.  I learned I was able to observe and experience it the culture nonverbally.  Lijiang locals were able to show me they had a proud and rich culture through their regular traditional dances and pictograph language. And, as food is such an important part of culture, the meals we were given explained a lot about their geographic placement.  Chengdu’s spicy cuisine embodies the highlights of the Sichuan province, while the small city of Lijiang has simple food because of the surrounding mountains. And then Hong Kong’s food differs completely from the former two cities because of their Cantonese and British influences.

And probably the best experience I had was spending time with the Lijiang students.  Despite how much mandarin I knew, and how much English they spoke, we were able to connect.  As I learned on the 2015 China trip, I most definitely have more free time than Chinese students did.  The majority of their time is spent on intense academic focus, because they have one exam that determines their college.  However, the Lijiang students were able to express that they still had time to act their age.  During the time we had together, my student partner and I learned about the language of the local culture, giggled over the pictograph words, and exchanged mutual looks of interest when divulging about each other’s personal lives. The visit was capped off with the exchanging of contact information, and some over-exaggerated, competitive ping-pong playing (much like that of Priory).  Along with other students, I expressed that I didn’t want to leave.  Here were a bunch of people my age, who grew up in a different society, have different values, speak a different language, and yet are so similar to myself.  They were the ones that made me feel welcomed in a place I wasn’t sure I could be welcomed to.

So, I don’t regret the decision to skip Chinese school as a kid.  Not speaking mandarin did make my experience on the China trip difficult, but it lead me to discover other ways to learn about the culture of the area.  Although language plays a huge role in understanding other cultures and forming relationships, it doesn’t have to be the only way.  As I have learned, the exchanging of information, culture, and understanding can be experienced through ways different from verbally.  Being able to speak mandarin wasn’t my goal of the trip; it was to immerse myself in a culture I yearned to know.  Overcoming the language barrier was an obstacle I struggled in, but it ultimately rewarded me with friendships and stories.  And from the students, I was able to separate myself from being an American tourist stumbling around China, and instead became a Chinese girl returning home.  Instead of othering me for our lingual and cultural differences, we bonded over our mutual desires to learn, love, and explore.

**Kieran**

Over spring break I joined a number of priory students on the China trip. I have previously been to China with Priory when I was a freshman, however being more politically aware in my junior year, I found this trip to be much more meaningful.

When you think of modern china, what kind of images come to mind?....  Maybe you imagine choking air pollution, factories, crowded, impersonal, concrete cities.  I doubt that your first thought would be of pristine wilderness, beautiful, ancient towns or people so kind and generous as to stop their day to eagerly spend time with strangers.  …. But this is the China I think of after my time there.

Why is there such a disconnect between what we think of China and what it is really like? In our everyday lives we are bombarded with negative information about China from the endless array of popular social media outlets, news articles, and politicians with questionable agendas. At times it can be hard to decipher what is trustworthy and what has been blown out of proportion. The Priory China trip is the perfect example of the value of travel. Through witnessing the reality of China in person, we were able to move beyond damaging stereotypes and understand the real China.

The first thing that struck me when we arrived in ChengDu, One of the largest cities in China, was the air quality.  It was not the cancer inducing, soot filled monster I had heard so much about in the news. In fact I was surprised to learn that China is no longer the world's worst polluter. It is largely reducing its carbon footprint through its research in environmentally friendly energy sources. Traveling outside of Chengdu, the countryside was stunning with lush valleys and forest-covered mountains. Here, in one of the valleys we got to work with environmental specialists helping preserve the Giant Panda. We were able to clean their cages and hand feed the bears, while also witnessing another of China’s groundbreaking accomplishments in protecting the environment.

The second thing I noticed, was the respect for culture in the country. In school we learn about Mao Zedong’s cultural revolution, which worked towards purging any remnants of capitalist and traditional elements of China, and resulted in the destruction of countless artifacts and structures from China’s ancient history. While it is true that a tragic amount of China’s historic artifacts were destroyed, so much still remains.  After traveling through the country and seeing its beautiful architecture, huge, ornate temples, and meeting some of its ethnic minorities, it was clear that despite popular belief, the culture of China is still intact and well preserved. For example, we visited Qingcheng Mountain, a lush green area so peaceful that hundreds of Taoist monks have made it their home. Climbing up the mountain’s steep stone steps, I noticed the perfect condition of the temples and shrines that we passed. At the top of the mountain, we arrived at the base of a huge crimson pagoda, so tall that it reached up into the clouds above. Maintaining such a remote structure would be incredibly difficult, yet the temple looked brand new. China invests tremendous effort in preserving their remaining historical monuments and throughout the trip I continued to be inspired by this pattern of respect for culture.

Finally, what affected me the most was meeting the people of China. In the US, I have heard hurtful stereotypes that the Chinese people are rude, pushy, and overly businesslike, but getting to know many of the locals in the country proved to me that this was wrong. While I did have to get used to little old ladies pushing past me in line, once I became accustomed to the country's different rules of personal space, getting to know some of the locals was the most fun and inspiring aspect of the trip. We visited a school in the city of LiJiang, where we are lucky enough to be able to take a few classes with the students there and see what life is like for people our age. The students were so eager to learn about us and were incredibly respectful. They truly embodied the Benedictine values of hospitality and community, giving each of us an individualized gift and making sure we felt right at home. To my dismay, I learned from my host that the students there had six and a half day school weeks with school starting at 6:00 am and at times ending at 10:00 pm, yet they were so positive and filled with energy. Witnessing the hard work they put into their education reinvigorated my own work ethic.

In all, the China trip opened my eyes to the beauty of a country that is demonized in the US. It taught me to remember that you cannot judge a place without experiencing it and its people for yourself. At Priory, we are taught to listen with the ear of our heart, and in doing so we can break past the stereotypes and propaganda pertaining to other countries and cultures.Only when we view the world accurately, can we live our lives effectively. As global citizens we must channel the Benedictine values in order to break the barriers we have with other cultures and find what makes each of them beautiful and unique. It's the first step towards making a more unified and loving world.

Thank You.