5/12/13 07:41

Just woke up on Sunday for my first full day in China. We are going to tour the campus at 10 with Jackie, our TA who goes to A&M but did her undergrad here at Tianjin University. Right now I’m hoping to find the NBA games on TV, because I’m pretty sure the Thunder and Grizzlies play at 8 or 9 am. We watched a Bayern Munich soccer game last night for a few minutes before going to bed, so I’m optimistic that I’m on the right channel.

Anyway, yesterday after Mom and Karin dropped me off at the airport at about 8pm…. Wait, haha, there is speedwalking on the sports channel. Yes speedwalking and they have a reporter and everything. Hopefully the NBA game will come on after the SPEEDWALKING! Anyway, everything went well at the hotel and we got about 4 hours of sleep and took the train from the hotel to the airport and met with everyone and we were off. A short flight to Newark and then change planes to go to China. The flight was actually fun for the most part. It was a big 777, and they have all the TVs and all that, but my favorite was a flight path that they show on the monitor so we could see when we were over Canada, Greenland, Russia, etc. I sat on the middle isle next to a Chinese exchange student who was studying at some college in Ohio, and a group of A&M kids were next to me across the aisle. The flight was almost 14 hours and the landing was really rough. Some kids got sick. But we had made it. The Beijing airport was very normal-looking, kind of like a convention center architecture with the yellow beams and the natural light (no lights inside, just openings from the ceiling.) It was surprisingly empty. In our terminal it was all international flights I assume, so there were a handful of groups like us, one from SMU, but very few people overall at 1pm on a Saturday. We took 2 vans from the airport to Tianjin. The drive was about 2 hours, all on 4-6 lane highway. They drive really crazy though, using their horns as their turn signals. Horns blare incessantly on every road, even now on the city street below us. Some people likened it to driving in Mexico, which from what I heard is probably a good comparison. We made it to the hotel at about 5pm, got into our rooms and then had dinner at the hotel with some of the Chinese students. Dinner was awesome, and I have some pictures. They first brought us out like four plates. And I will just call the things what they looked like rather than going into detail on each one. So one plate of asparagus, one beef, one salad, one berries. All those things, and coke and tea were on a lazy susan that went around our table of 10. So I was thinking, oh no, we aren’t going to have enough food. But they kept bringing out more and more food- chicken, shrimp, a whole fish, tofu, rice, probably close to 20 plates by the time it was all over, and we just turn the table around and use our chopsticks to grab a bite of each thing. It was really good. After that, a few of us wanted to buy a couple things at the convenience store so we walked down the street and looked through a couple stores. YES Knicks Pacers on TV live! Channel 21. So that’s pretty much it for day 1. In total, I was up for 30 hours straight, except about 1 hour that I slept on the plane. But I slept through the night last night, from about 11pm to 7am, so that is great to get me on their schedule. It feels like 8:30am so I don’t think there will be any issue at all with the time difference.

We have an hour and a half until we meet this morning, so I’ll try to organize my stuff a bit in the hotel room.

5/12/13 23:25

Long and very fun day today. I didn’t intend to write again today but I wanted to so I wouldn’t forget anything. We met at 10am to tour the campus. We walked from the hotel to the main chemical engineering building on campus and then to our classroom and a couple other key points on campus. The buildings on campus, especially those at the front of campus, are very old and run-down. The chemE building is pretty big and the inside is strikingly plain. In fact, all of the buildings are very plain on the inside. As plain and ugly as my apartment in Charlotte, white walls, no pictures or decorations or windows or anything. Just plain black handrails on the stairs and empty hallways. But the labs are nice and the students gave us a presentation about the history of the university and the department. Tianjin University is the oldest college in China (1895) and the chemE department was ranked first in the country a couple times, so it’s a very cool place to be. They have 15000 undergrad and 13000 graduate students, so most students go on to get higher degrees. We kept touring along with the Chinese students and it was a great opportunity to have conversations with those guys. We saw our classroom and went to a cafeteria for lunch and it was okay, but not great. Normal cafeteria food I guess. But then we kept on touring for quite a while, probably until about 3. One cool thing we saw on campus was the grave of this guy, Dr. Chern, who was a very famous mathematician. His tombstone is about 7 feet tall and is carved with this proof of his derivation of some math formula. A bit of foreshadowing though, his wife’s name is also Chern, but it is spelled differently in China. This happens a lot because Chinese letters are so different than English letters, so the closest translation of two different words might end up having the same spelling in English. Next we went to a McDonalds, and a couple of us got coffee drinks (and this is where the foreshadowing comes into play.) I got a mocha frappe, but when I got it, it was this weird green tea thing. Turns out mocha (ch like church) means green tea while mocha (ch like hard k sound) means chocolate. So we all thought that bit of lost translation was funny.

Next we went to an electronics store to buy cell phones, because some of us wanted phones to communicate with each other and our Chinese friends. The place was huge! Like a 3 story best buy, but the whole place is filled with kiosks that each is filled with different types of cell phones. So I bought a sim card with 200 minutes and 200 texts, a phone number, and a used blackberry phone for 140RMB (about $22.) Everything is so cheap, I love it! I even got a discount on my phone number because it is an unlucky number. My phone number is 1-832-258-7214, and the reason it is unlucky is because it ends with a 4 and 4 in Chinese sounds like the word die. A 20RMB discount for that, haha, TIC (this is China… coined by Michael Phelps at the Beijing Olympics.) We spent a lot of time there, and pretty much everyone got phones. We went to the mall after that, at about 7pm. We took the bus to a downtown area with shops like H&M, Sephora, Guess, and a lot of other ones. We went to a restaurant that was pretty much like Genghis Grill, except the flavors were a lot different. Extremely spicy with steak, chicken, broccoli, carrots, rice, noodles and all the normal stuff. It was a family style thing, and it was really good. We shopped around after dinner, and I bought a fake nike brand golf shirt. I wear an XL shirt in China, which is like a medium/large in the USA. Throughout the day, I learned a lot of Chinese phrases from the guys who we hung out with all day. I think we’re going to get pretty good by the end of the trip. So, needless to say, I’m worn out now and ready to go to bed, though this writing was good to wind down. I don’t feel much of an effect from the time difference which is surprising, but good, and I’m not sick at all knock on wood!

5/14/13 19:14

Things are still moving very fast, so I’ll try my best to remember everything from the last couple of days. Right now we just got back from dinner and I’m listening to the Ticket’s morning show. They’re talking about all the sports that I haven’t seen. Apparently Tiger and Sergio played together and had some controversy, that’s always the best.

So yesterday we slept in a bit and then met up at McDonald’s. I haven’t had Chinese McDonald’s yet, but it looks pretty similar to American McDonald’s. Most of the guys wanted to go to this big Cathedral over by the big shopping center, but Adrian and I wanted to play some basketball on campus, so we did that instead. Basketball was pretty fun. The students were nice to us, but very few spoke English. And they weren’t very good. But there were a ton of them playing. We couldn’t exactly figure out what was going on because there were so many people there, some playing organized and others just hanging out, both guys and girls. We think it was some type of gym class, but they didn’t mind that we showed up. We played for quite a while and then took the bus over to the shopping area to meet up with everyone else. We had lunch at KFC (I know, first McDonald’s then KFC, we did branch out a lot this weekend, just not this time) and then went to some of the shops. First we went to Wal-Mart (this is becoming a funny pattern) to buy a basketball. It was fun to walk around Walmart. As with the electronics store, the Walmart was 3 or 4 stories tall, but each floor was much smaller than an American Walmart. They had a moving walk/escalator which was kind of funny, because you kind of slide down at a decline but there aren’t any steps to stand on. Then we just walked around for a long time through a rough part of town. The first thing we saw in that area was a farmers market. It had a lot of fruits, vegetables, and meats. The meats were really sketchy though, because they do not have refrigeration. The steaks were hung on hooks at each person’s kiosk and the fish were stuffed into small tanks and then fileted and just laid on the table of the kiosks. It was really interesting though, and really big. It looks like this is how many of the locals buy their food. We kept walking, and the area got worse and worse. The street smelled bad and there was some very sketchy street food. We kept walking for a while until we made it back to the nice shopping area. We went into a couple of shops. We went to one with some cheap jewelry and bracelets, and I got a couple things for Karin there. We went to a couple clothing stores but didn’t find anything that cool. There are some other shopping areas that will have some cheaper things that will be better for gifts and things like that. After all the walking, and it was a full day of walking, we took a cart taxi back to the hotel. These things are three wheeled electric cars that fit up to four people. They drive on some roads and some sidewalks and it’s an easy way to get back to the hotel. Taxis and cart taxis cost 20RMB, so for three or four people it’s only about $1 or $2 per person. I will be so bummed when I come back to the States and have to pay high prices for everything again. It feels like we’re playing with Monopoly money when we’re here. After we got back to the hotel we went to dinner with the whole group and with a few of the Chinese students at a Korean BBQ place. It was pretty good. I think they have these places in the US too, but I’ve never been. Then we went to the Italian Strip, which is a strip of bars near downtown. It is a nice area, and expensive (by their standards.) We went to a German-themed bar. We had a great time, and I think the Chinese students had a lot of fun hanging out with us. They have some other cheaper more college-type bar areas somewhere else, so hopefully they will take us there soon.

Quite a few of the guys and girls that are here will be in Houston over the summer doing internships, so hopefully I will get to see them when I get back. We talked about that some, and I’m looking forward to Houston a little more because of that.

Tuesday was our first day of class. I had almost forgot that we are going to be in class most of the day during the week! Our first class was bioreactors, which I don’t really care for, but it will be a good way to broaden my knowledge in the biological side of things. If this class is very practical, then I’ll be happy with it and at some point in my career it will be useful. The other class is safety, which is a lot of fun because it’s all about explosions and oil spills and that kind of stuff. It is more technical than you might expect, because we have to learn about all the reactions and chemicals and processes that we will have to analyze for safety. It will be fun, but for the Chinese students it will likely be very difficult. Our groups were assigned today, and Nathan is my partner, which will be great. We have two or three Chinese teammates in each of our classes and we will do our homework with them and study with them. Our Bio group is great. I know two of the guys from earlier this week and they are cool and know English very well. We also have a girl in our group and she speaks decently well. In our safety group, which is the much more difficult one, we have one girl who speaks decently and one guy who doesn’t speak well at all. That could be a challenge, so I’m glad I’ll be with Nathan so at least we will work well together and be able to work together to help the others without clashing with each other.

Other than that, the biggest thing to note is how I’m progressing with the language. I absolutely love learning Chinese, and I try to take every opportunity to use it in stores, restaurants, and with students. I think I’m doing pretty well, considering I’ve only been here three days and I can get around well in most situations. I can almost always communicate what I want to say to someone, but listening to them is difficult because obviously their vocabulary is so far beyond what I know. I’m using my iPhone to write down phrases as I learn them so that I can refer back to them any time. I know 34 phrases as of today, as well as numbers up to 999. I’m starting to piece together some sentences too, like today I was able to ask a cahier if they had cold coca-cola, “Nee yo leyunda coca-cola ma?” Because they usually serve drinks warm, even soda and beer. Usually they will ask something to clarify my question, and then I just have to say, “Wo bu dong” which means I don’t understand. It’s fun.

5/16/13 11:45

I’m going to write from the point that I finished writing last time so I can keep perspective from the moment as best I can.

When we were in College Station we had a meeting about going abroad, and they told us about the honeymoon phase, the frustration phase, the forming (or something like that) phase, and the home phase, which is pretty self-explanatory as far as the meaning of those things, and of course all of us had been in the honeymoon phase from day one. But yesterday I hit a trip wire into the frustration phase. I got my grades back and found out I got a 3.25 for the semester. Not bad of course, but it hurts because I got a B in materials, which is the easiest course in the whole major. I needed a 90 to make an A, and I made an 89. There isn’t much of anything more frustrating than that. Also the language is becoming more difficult to learn, because I know a couple phrases but it is difficult to move from that to actually being able to have a conversation and listen and understand what other people say. I just can’t seem to get past that barrier. I just moved to the chair on the far side of the room by the window acting like I wanted to look out the window while I typed so my roommate wouldn’t look at what I’m writing, because that’s the next part of the frustration phase. So our toilet didn’t work in our room for the first 5 days, but he kept using it and then just not doing anything about it, and I’m like, dude, you know it doesn’t work why would you do that? He is extremely quiet and has lived in Russia the past 8 months with his girlfriend, I’m not sure exactly what the situation is but he is weird to say the least. To be positive though, he understands very well the idea of, “Say nothing and people may assume you are stupid, but open your mouth and remove all doubt.” He says nothing, like ever, so most people think he’s okay, but I live with him and it is not cool. He is always in the room, so I never ever have space. I’d rather him come out with us and play basketball and stuff rather than come home to him just sitting there. You know, frustration phase. Little things when you write them down, but anyway we switched rooms (still have ---- as a roommate but just got one with a working toilet) so now our bathroom works and it should be fine. By now I’m zoned out to some Breathe Carolina so I’m feeling much better. I’ll find ways to get away even when I can’t get away. Journaling and music by the window will probably be my escape.

Bio class is hard, and I really don’t like it. Like I said before, kinetics is a drag and I got a C is that class from this professor, Dr. J, last spring so I don’t want a repeat of that. But the first unit is all that stuff, and the Chinese kids are Bio engineers, not ChE, so they expect me to teach them and I don’t know the stuff and this is their major. It is difficult, but at least the Chinese kids are very nice. It is just difficult to do schoolwork with them. So many experiences though that are so practical, just learning to communicate with people who are so different, I appreciate it even through the frustration. After a three hour long bio class, we had a break and went to lunch with those guys. The food is good, though as expected I’m eating mostly vegetables especially on campus. But carrots, rice, noodles make for decent lunch, and the body just adjusts. Speaking of adjusting, still no sickness and I only have had trouble sleeping one night this whole time, so that is really incredible.

Anyway, after bio and lunch, Nathan and I did our safety homework with our teammates and then we all went to a coffee shop under the cafeteria. We talked with our teammates for a while, Vivian and Justin. Justin was talking about how he learned a lot of English by watching movies, and his favorite TV is 24! Herro Mista Bowa. That Chinese bad guy is great. One of the guys on my bio team also likes American movies a lot. His name is Jack, and he likes Lord of the Rings, Star Wars, and most of the superhero movies. Ironman 3 is big here right now, maybe our group will go see it in a Chinese movie theatre. The movies are in English with Chinese subtitles. Apparently they added an extra 8 minute scene just for China. They filmed an extra scene in China, and I’m sure it’s hilarious and unrelated. I’m thinking samurais and Kung foo and then it goes back to the main plot. So then we had safety class, which is interesting because at least in the intro, basic part of the course is a lot of current events. We learn all about the West Explosion, BP, and some of the other ones throughout history. Our professor is Dr. Mentzer. The Chinese probably thing that is funny because in Chinese that sounds like Dr. Name. He worked for Exxon for 38 years and even though he started in research he ended up in public relations. He pretty much was Dick Cheney’s buddy and got approval for all the big international oil projects he did and wrote speeches for Exxon’s president. Of course these guys have huge egos so I know he tells us some stuff just to sound impressive, but still, he is a very important person. He has this smirking countenance that most people find odd and annoying but I think he is hilarious. After class we played basketball with about 10 of us and 5 of the Chinese, and we mixed teams and played to 2 points and then the other group came on and it was kind of a continuous thing. These are the small reasons why traveling with engineers is a good thing. You have a real-world problem, playing basketball with 15 people, and we figured out a way to do it and make it fun, so again, just can’t say enough good things about this group.

This was when we had to change rooms. The frustration was creeping in, but overall things were starting to get better so I didn’t mind it too much. We went to dinner with the professors at a nice Chinese restaurant, similar set-up to the first night with the lazy Susan and the 15-20 different dishes. It’s the best way to try everything: shrimp, jellyfish, sea cucumber, tofu, scallops, beef and pork, pumpkin, wasabi plant, noodles, duck, vegetables, I can’t even remember all of them, but most were good. They have some more exotic stuff but Mentzer told Jiaqi, our TA, to order more plain things, but we still got a good variety. I wasn’t by any means eager to try the tongue or the pig stomach (I did eat intestines or maybe stomach the first night, but it wasn’t bad so I didn’t mind too much when I found out what it was.) I sat next to Mentzer, and talked with him for a long time. I told him all about my background and my plans and my internships and stuff, and asked him all sorts of things about his time at Exxon. He told me he had even thought of going to law school and took a law class in college but didn’t like it so he went into research. Maybe I should take a law class while at A&M to find out if I like it at all from an academic point of view. We talked a lot about working abroad, and how different companies manage those big projects and sending people around the world. He spent a lot of time convincing people to move to Nigeria, he said, and by the time we were done with our conversation I was pretty sold on it, haha. Don’t worry, I don’t think I would do that, but he did say at Shell, for example, they let people put their resumes out for projects in certain countries very early in their career. Just find a project and a location that you like and apply for it and they just might give it to you. It was an interesting side of the industry to hear about, and just more questions to ask future employers that they will want to talk about in interviews. So a good reference sometime in the future, to say the least. After dinner a lot of us went to an American bar close to campus. There weren’t any Americans there of course, but they played music like Call Me Maybe and Wonderwall and other cliché American songs. It was so much fun. About 10 of us went. They served beer in these tall tubes, 3 liters each that the table shares and we pour into shot glasses. The common Chinese beer is Tsingtao, and it’s not bad. We don’t have class until 2pm today, so we stayed out pretty late. I slept in until about 10:30 this morning, and then did some homework and then did this journal. Class starts in an hour and I have one homework problem to do.

Oh one more thing, before I forget. Another ongoing thing with is these t-shirts that the Chinese wear with English writing that doesn’t make any sense. They say things like “Love free quiet inside. Love actually.” But the best one we have seen is “Never ever forever purple.” Derek found an awesome one at a store, so we are definitely going to go to that store soon and I’m going to get a funny one. It’s a really common thing for the Chinese to wear these shirts.

5/18/13 07:22

We’re about to leave for Peking (Beijing!) So I thought I’d write down what we’ve done the last couple days because next time I’ll have to talk all about Beijing. So Thursday and Friday we had just one long class each day. Thursday we had Bio and it was pretty tough. We had, wait I forgot I had a homework assignment to do. We’re leaving in 10 minutes so, Bio, Safety long. Noodle place. Basketball. Helen’s… Beijing.

5/22/13 19:19

It’s been a while since I’ve made a journal entry. I guess things have gotten into a consistent pattern and every day we aren’t going quite as hard, because we have a lot of schoolwork to do during the week. But there still is quite a bit to report. First of all, we went to Beijing last weekend, which is no small feat. We learned all about Chinese history and their culture and the political capitol of the most populous country in the world. I’m just going to paste the email that I sent to mom a few days ago to summarize the trip.

We left the hotel at 8am on Saturday to go to Beijing.  The night before we went out to this American bar by campus with a lot of our Chinese friends (there were about 20 of us in all) and that night was a whole story in itself.  So anyway, we somehow got up in the morning and made it to the bus on time with our backpacks and passports and money and phones and we set off to Beijing.  We traveled in a small charter bus the whole time.  We had a Chinese guide and driver from the travel company, and everything was very tightly scheduled, though not rushed.  We went to Tian’amin square first, and then to the forbidden city.  The forbidden city literally is a whole city that the emperor lived in with his family, top officials, and thousands of concubines.  It was cool to see just in understanding the emperor’s daily life, but overall it was not fun because nothing was original.  In fact, much of it was under construction.  I’d guess that most of it was 100 years old or newer, and all the paint was 10 years old or less.  The Chinese do not maintain their things well at all.  It doesn’t matter if it’s a classroom or the emperor’s throne or a dumpling restaurant on the street, they just let stuff decay and they don’t care about any aesthetics or historical integrity.

After that we had lunch and then went to the temple of heaven.  I didn’t like that either because it’s just a pagan temple, and it was big and run-down.  Things turned around though when we went to the silk market.  The place is a really nice mall, but all the stores are filled with fake things.  The whole thing is about bargaining, which makes the whole experience fun.  And the thing is, you don’t know what reasonable prices are, so you just have to bid low and pay whatever you want to pay.  For example, I got two polo shirts for $40.  The sticker price on them was 770RMB each ($120.)  They immediately gave me the “student discount,” which was 500RMB.  I said I’d buy 2 and I got the price down to 120RMB.  I got all kinds of stuff there.  Sometimes you win, sometimes you lose, it’s just fun.  But the salespeople are insane!  They are all girls, and they will grab you and yell at you to get you in the store, like nicely though.  Then you start to haggle and they get frustrated and then angry and they act like they are going to kick you out and then you eventually have to calm things down by leaving or giving a final offer.  Then the real negotiating happens.  Sometimes we will haggle for 5 minutes over $2.  It’s hard to explain but in the end everyone is having fun and it’s all just part of the game.  We also did Chinese tea tasting and went to an acrobatic show.

The second day we went to the Summer Palace and then the Great Wall.  The Summer Palace was like all the other sites-terrible.  It was on this man-made lake and you couldn’t even see across because of the haze of the pollution.  But the Great Wall was the real highlight.  We hiked up and took plenty of pictures and walked for about an hour and a half.  It is incredible.  Some of it is very steep, and it’s up in these really steep but not real tall bluffs.  It was a great view and so refreshing after all the gross city stuff.  It is difficult to put the Great Wall into words, so I’ll just wait to show you the pictures.

After we got back, a few of us went to our favorite hole-in-the-wall restaurant down the street and had some noodles and dumplings.  Tomorrow we don’t have class so we will all catch up on homework and stuff.  This week is going to be long.

So anyway, we had all Monday to recover and catch up on homework, which was great and much-needed. I slept in until about 11 and then worked out with Nathan and then Nathan and I worked on the safety homework for most of the afternoon and then met with our group to go over the homework later. We had pizza at this little café on campus, and it was okay. They have a lot of pizza here, though it doesn’t compare to American pizza or Italian pizza of course, but it’s a good thing to have sometimes. The best pizza we’ve had was at Helen’s, that American bar that we’ve been to twice. But Chinese food is really so good there is no reason to get American food. Chinese food is so much cheaper and for the most part it’s healthier. I haven’t gone hungry like I thought I would. I’ve stayed at the same weight, though I’ve gotten leaner because I’ve been so active. I’ve worked out a few times, played basketball a few times, and walked a ton. I feel great physically. Back to the topic of pizza, though, Sebatian, Nathan and I went to Pizza Hut last night and it was so weird. It’s like a full sit-down restaurant. I guess it’s more like an upscale Chili’s than a Pizza Hut, but the food didn’t look good at all and it was extremely expensive so we left before we ordered. American food and coffee are the two expensive things in Tianjin, and when you compare it to local prices, it’s really incredible. For example, at Pizza Hut, a personal pizza was over $10, and an 11” “large” was like $15. At Starbucks, a latte is $5, and Subway and McDonald’s and KFC are all about $6-8 per meal, just like in the US. But at our favorite local restaurant, for example, you can get a big plate of noodles and vegetables and eggs with a bottled Coke and even a large side order of dumplings all for about $2.50. Prices confuse me here. I’m going to miss the noodle house when I leave here, for sure. The little lady who owns the place (it seats about 15 people) knows us all and it is right by our hotel and it’s just so cool.

Monday we also went to a grocery store that’s kind of like Walmart and bought some children’s picture books so I can work on some sentence structure to put together some of the grammar we’ve been learning. I also got Django on blueray just to see what it’s the quality is like when I get back home.

Tuesday it was back to the grind. Class most of the day from 9:50-5:45. And that night we studied for the safety test that was Wednesday (today.) The test went pretty well I think. We will see. It wasn’t difficult but there were a couple tricky things. The next one will be much harder so hopefully I will get a good grade on this one. In our other class, we’re starting a long written project that I’m really not looking forward to. Especially because ---- sits in the room all day and uses the internet so I can’t ever get on. That’s really why I’ve been journaling so much, because any time I have downtime I can’t get on internet because ---- is using it 5 hours a day. Wireless internet is a wonderful thing and I miss it. I’m also starting to get behind in my bio lectures because those are online too. The one time I watched them was when we watched them together. I’m going to watch them now though because he just left. Maybe he can read my mind…

6/2/2013

Right now we are on our way back from Shanghai on the bullet train. Since I made my last journal entry, we’ve traveled to Luoyang and Shanghai, had a test in Safety and a presentation in Bio, so I guess things have just been moving so fast that it’s difficult to keep up in writing. I have an email that I sent to Mom about the trip to Luoyang, so I’ll copy that to catch up on that part, which was over a week ago now.

We just got back from Luoyang last night.  We left early Saturday morning and traveled by bullet train to this place.  The bullet train was awesome!  It’s like an airport, but much easier to traverse.  It has the efficiency of a subway system with the speed of a small plane.  I was so impressed with the whole thing.  Of course, it’d be nice to have one down I35 to get from Fort Worth to Austin in about an hour, or even to Minnesota in less than 6.  They go about 200mph and are set up like airplanes, but with a lot more legroom.  And you can walk around the car whenever so it doesn’t feel nearly as cramped as a plane does.  We’re planning a trip with just the students to go to Shanghai next weekend, so that will be lots of fun.

But we did see some things other than the bullet train.  The place we went was more rural, with mountains and caves and rivers and everything.  It was nice, but it rained the entire time we were there.  We went to this cave place where they had carved an estimated 100,000 statues of Buddha.  The biggest ones were just massive, and they were all done around 400-1000 AD.  The next day we went to the Shaolin Temple in Luoyang, which again, was a big Buddhist thing.  Buddhism is a huge part of their history, but I don’t think many of the younger people are very devout.

It’s Monday now, and I have so much to do.  We have homework, a quiz, a project and a test all this week, so it’s going to be long.

So that was from last Monday, exactly one week ago. Tuesday through Friday flew by because we had so much to do. Monday and Tuesday we had a lot of homework but the main thing we had to do was our Bio presentation. Our group, which consists of two Chinese (one guy and one girl) and Nathan and I, did our presentation on hGH. We pretty much just did normal internet research and made a powerpoint and made a 20 minute presentation in class. Every group made a presentation in class, which was good because a lot of times we have to do these types of projects but we never actually present them, so it’s kind of fun to do a little public speaking. The Chinese students are always interesting when they have to speak, because every person has to speak. Our girl, Cara, pretty much just read the slides in a whisper. It was bad. But on the other hand, our guy, Jack, made this whole process flow figure and made an entire lecture on the blackboard. He’s really smart and I like him a lot. Overall, the project went well. All the groups did a pretty good job. That was on Thursday.

Another fun thing this week was basketball on Wednesday. Since we were so busy, I only got to play for about 30 minutes, but it was so much fun. The Georgia Tech kids had organized a game against the Tian Da kids somehow, with refs and everything, and the Tian Da kids asked Adrian and me to play with them because one of them was in class with us and knew we played. My skills transfer pretty well to the small forward position, if you know what I mean. It was fun because it was pretty official. We were warming up, and all the Georgia Tech kids showed up with their flag and everything, and we were representing the Chinese team, and like I said it was us two Americans and the rest of the team was Chinese, and we had a lot of supporters too. I hadn’t played in front of that many people in a long time, so the warm-ups were fun. We did a layup line and everything, and I was feeling pretty good, maybe too good, forgetting that just because very few people are tall, and the tall ones certainly don’t have a vertical, doesn’t mean that I’m any more athletic or taller than I am in the US. Because of that, I attempted a dunk, and just being so confident with everyone watching I came really close to making it. I got my whole hand over the rim with the ball, but it went off the back of the rim. It’s probably for the best though, because I can’t really come back and say that I dunked in China even if I did. Maybe this week I’ll make it, though. It’s the best situation to do it though, because I’m relatively light and I’ve been working out light weights a few times a week with a lot of walking, so my vertical is probably as good as ever right now. But anyway, when the game started it was fun. I just played the first quarter because I had to meet with my group to work on my project after. The Georgia Tech kids, weren’t very good, but they were good enough to play seriously against and they were competitive, so it was the perfect situation to show off a bit. The first play down the court, the GT guy brought the ball down, tried to cross me over, and I just picked his pocket and took it the other way for a layup. The next time down I tried to pull up for three from about 25 feet and airballed it, so I decided the long ball wasn’t going to work for me. A couple plays later, we had a miscommunication of defense and one of their better players got open for a layup and as he’s driving I yell ‘don’t foul him.’ I guess he took it a little personally, because it’s kind of like saying, move in, when playing baseball, so he makes the layup and talks back to me, ‘you better foul me next time.’ So I’m like, okay, and I get the ball on the ensuing possession, cross over my guy, euro step past one and he’s there on the help side. He makes a lot of contact trying to block my shot but I laid it up high off the glass and in. They didn’t call a foul, but the Chinese kids loved it. It was a pretty good move, if I may say so. I left after the first quarter and all the Chinese kids gave me a high five or shook my hand, I felt pretty good about myself. Unfortunately, they ended up losing to the GT kids after I left. We have developed a kind of rivalry with the GT students in general, not just in basketball. I don’t know if rivalry is the right word, it’s more that we don’t like them. They went to the same bar as us a couple times and they were just super obnoxious, and that’s coming from our group which has been crazy in my opinion. The GT kids are just annoying though, they all act like they’re in high school.

So Friday then we had our second safety exam. Pretty much the whole week was dedicated to school other than that basketball game. The second exam was difficult, but I think I did alright. They are serious with these classes though. All the other study abroad students we meet are taking just general classes, and we’re taking Bioreactors and Process Safety. I think the classes make the trip better though, because they aren’t so difficult that I worry about them, but they keep us all focused. It makes it that much better when our group gets to do fun things like go out in Tianjin or travel places, because we’re engineers and we like to accomplish things, both work-things, and fun things. It’s a great lifestyle here taking classes with thirteen people, and then just enjoying each other when we are out of school without any pressure from school or socially or otherwise.

So after class on Friday we packed up quickly and took the bullet train to Shanghai. It’s about a 5 hour ride, but we had two rows of five together (10 of us went on the trip) and we turned half of the seats around and talked most of the way there. Friday night we walked around the Bund, which is the walkway around the river that separates the east and west sides of downtown. It was smoggy, but their skyline is incredible. The west side of the river really is the Chinese analogue to Manhattan, since it’s set apart by the water and that little area has all the biggest and most famous buildings. But it’s just now starting to boom, which I didn’t realize. Like Manhattan, you can find pictures over time of the Empire State building and how it was so big amongst just a few other smaller skyscrapers, and then at some point, I don’t know if it was 100 years or 50 years ago or what, the place just sprung up with the WTCs and all the other amazing buildings and the skyline became just massive. That’s how Shanghai has been over the past two decades. On the Radio Tower, which was their first big building (450 meters tall tower with observation areas up to 1100 feet) they show pictures from 1994 to 2012, and it’s amazing how far it has come. And this year, they are constructing what will be the second tallest building in the world. It’s already nearly as tall as the tower, and they have cranes up there, attached to the top of the construction, just building it higher and higher. In a couple years it will be incredible and once again change the skyline of city.

On Saturday we toured all day. We saw this old garden, and I don’t exactly know the significance but it was pretty similar to all the other historical sights that we have seen. We also went to a museum with some old jade and currency, some dating back about 5000 years. Then we went up in the tower, with the glass floor and that was a lot of fun. We had a bit of a fiasco with this whole river cruise tour that tried to add on to our tour. The tour guide was very young so he bought a cruise time for 4:00 which gave us almost no time to go up to the tower, which of course for me I’m like, I want to go to the top of the tower and I don’t care at all about any river cruise. So most people quickly went up and then back down in hopes to make the 4:00 since the tour guide said he couldn’t switch the times or get a refund. I thought surely we could change if we just a little pressure on him, because all you have to do is call the right person. It’s just a tour and there are plenty of boats and times. And a 4:00 cruise is pretty worthless because it isn’t even dark and the best thing to see from the water is all the buildings with all their neon lights. So Laura and I stalled as much as we could in hopes that we could climb up to the 1100 foot area. We were all at the 850 foot area and you have to walk up to the 1110 foot area so it was going to take a while, so our thought was that we could stall a few minutes and people would be like, well we’re probably going to miss the boat anyway so we might as well go to the top, and try to switch cruise times after even though they already told us we couldn’t. The plan almost worked perfectly, but they were pretty persistent and they already left and were waiting for us so we couldn’t take like an hour to go all the way to the top, so we just walked around some of the other floors that we’re that high that had little shops and stuff. Eventually we met up with them and we had missed the cruise, and sure enough the tour guide had found a way to get the time switched to 8:00, so mission accomplished, somewhat. If only more people had trusted that they were going to find a way to switch the time we could have gone to the top. Oh well, you win some, you lose some. After that we went to dinner at a great Chinese place. This place was finally one that I imagined Chinese food would be like. Not super cheap and crummy food but also not the whole communal 20 course of random things that we’ve been having everywhere. I got fried rice with beef and it was awesome. I asked the tour guide about the menu and he said I should order the pumpkin pie with the fried rice, and I’m like, okay, sound random but it’s not like I know better so I did. They were like little fried pumpkin pouches and they were really good. Saturday night we went to a couple clubs that we had been told about and that was a pretty crazy time, it was all lasers and club music and a lot of people and I guess Shanghai nightlife on a Saturday, so we experienced a lot in one day. Sunday we shopped around and hung out and went to a couple places that we wanted to go to that we weren’t able to go to Saturday. It was nice to have a whole day to do whatever we wanted, because usually everything is so structured. We split off into groups most of the time because it would just be too difficult to have no plan and coordinate 10 people all wanting to different things. Four of us hug out most of the day, and we met up with the group for dinner at about 6. I took a nap from 4-6 because I was worn out from the last few days. We went to dinner in a nice area (actually all the meals were good- for lunch we meet up with some Trinity University girls that Melina knew and one was from Southlake and we went to an American place for lunch where I got spaghetti) and in the area they had all kinds of small bars and restaurants. We had pizza and dumplings, which I guess sounds weird in writing but it makes sense here. I met a guy from Winona State there! He’s from Plymouth and studied at WSU and then in Korea and now is teaching kindergarten in China. There are always connections to be made, especially with the number of people that we’ve met throughout the trip. I’ve met people from dozens of countries, probably every continent, during this trip. So after dinner we went back to the hotel and most of the group went out, but I decided not to. I haven’t turned down opportunities to go out at all this trip but we had to get up at 5 this morning to catch the train and it was past 11 when they were going out, so I decided to take my 5-6 hours of sleep and let them go. I think they had fun, but they didn’t back until after 3 so they barely slept last night. Hopefully no one will get sick. And on top of that (remember we were also out most of the night on Saturday too) we’re going out in Tianjin with some of the Chinese students tonight. And we have two finals and a paper due this week, so at some point something has to give. Friday night will be the finale though, because our last final is Friday morning and we leave Saturday morning. So, to return to our normal pattern of sleep we are planning to stay out as late as we can on Friday.

This is why I always say I have to take things one week at a time, because there’s too much, I couldn’t even map everything past that if I tried. But we’re on the bullet train now, and only a little over 2 hours away. The next thing on the agenda is probably safety homework which is due tomorrow. Then I’ll work on my 8-page Bio paper when we get back, because I’ll probably need internet for that. There’s my update, that was certainly my entry yet, but I hadn’t journaled in a while, so I needed that. I still probably forgot things, but these were the highlights of the last week.