Christine Peters

China Reflection

Despite what seemed like a large cost for the program and having no prospect of a scholarship, I decided to go on this Retail Study Tour based on one central reason; I knew very little of current Chinese business practices. I had no idea of how this eastern powerhouse operated and I’ve heard a lot of stories that didn’t make sense in my western mindset. It seemed every company I’ve worked with has had business connections to China somehow. So, not only was it a learning experience in discovering a culture very different from my own, but I saw it as a step in my career development.

To begin with, the length of the trip was about right for what we were there to do. However, there could have been another free day or two added to a few of the cities; in particular, Beijing. Regardless, the planned cultural trips, along with the free days, were a huge highlight of the trip when it came to learning of the Chinese culture firsthand. The free time scheduled allowed for student-planned karaoke at a KTV, shopping, river cruises, and other city experiences to be possible. All in all, most of the trip had just the right amount of set plans and flexibility.

As for the cultural excursions, the Great Wall of China and Forbidden City were nicely planned and nothing short of amazing. I was amazed at the amount of Chinese tourists that flocked to the Forbidden City. I would have thought that the Chinese people would have seen their own Forbidden City before, but it was a reminder of how many people China actually has and how the majority of those are in a class where they may seldom travel even domestically. This also explained why several of us “westerners” were such a sight to see. Not only did I pose in about 50 pictures with the Chinese tourists, but they would stand next to us and have someone take a picture of them with us intentionally in the background. Beyond this experience being bizarre for myself, it was representative of what the common
Chinese view is like. There are multitudes of people in China, and it was hard to fathom what it is like to have dozens of cities that weren’t as developed as others and yet still contain millions of people.

We had the opportunity to get more insight of the common life in China through factory tours of Brown Shoe Co. and Umbra. Although labor wages have been going up in China, this aided in revealing how companies used Chinese labor for years. We toured a Brown Shoe factory and it was a little self-sustaining town in itself. The company had everything set up so that people didn’t need to go anywhere. There were housing units, a grocery store, a bank, a post office, and even recreational/workout equipment all there on site. They said they had about 3,000 people. There workers would put in long hours of overtime, so it was beneficial for them to have their family close and everything available to them right there. By American standards, one might feel constrained, but the workers there seemed happy to have the opportunity to work. We also traveled through the countryside by train at one point, which served as a nice juxtaposition to see rice paddy farms alongside our city travels.

The business visits provided unbelievable insight and many will serve as possible resources in the future. Some of my personal favorite “business visits” included Pamela Giss that led a concise and interesting lunch discussion, Lenovo that was informative and interactive, and the U.S. embassy in Beijing. The time at the embassy could have been far extended and no one would have been bored, yet it was still a treat for them to fit us in. Though these all weren’t really retail company visits, these were the stand-outs for me as an industrial engineer, currently in manufacturing. So although, I don’t have a huge interest in retail, there was variety in the lineup and it was great getting the retail insight as a whole.

In short, I was not disappointed with the knowledge and experience gained. The learning started in the classroom during the spring semester. Although I was made aware of the differences in Chinese business practices in the first part of the course, it was only able to brush the surface in an effort to
cover all the differences in culture. However, the second part of the course when we actually went to China did an amazing job at filling all the gaps. There were certain things you just had to experience firsthand.