My impulsive decision to participate in the UF China Retail Tour filled me with excitement, anxiety, and anticipation. I have always loved traveling. Spending enough time in a country to appreciate its culture, meet a few locals, and wander off the beaten path has always been an essential part of travel for me. Although joining the study tour was a rushed decision, it was an adventure I will never forget. My family and friends filled me with advice and warnings, as well as plenty of medication before I ventured off to a country that seemed “farther than the moon” according to my mother.

During our time in China we had incredible learning and business opportunities. Not only did we meet with CEO’s, government officials, and designers, but we also had the chance to visit factories and see what being “made in China” looks like first hand. My personal favorite was Brown Shoe Company. As we toured the company, I saw the hand drawn shoe designs on the wall as they were being critiqued. We were ushered through a series of rooms where we had the opportunity to see hundreds of workers creating the preliminary models of shoes. The women had their hair pulled back, they were bent over, their eyes focused on the sewing machine. I realized that I owned shoes from this brand - shoes that I loved, shoes that I will never wear the same way again. Seeing these factories helped me recognize that although globalization is taking place, there is still a vast disparity around the world. Despite a technology revolution, China still has room to grow.
During our free time I loved walking around the cities. I feel as though the only way to truly understand a city is on foot. Walking besides locals allows you to appreciate the relationship they have with one another. I was amazed at the respect the children had for their parents. I tried to imagine what life would have been like if the US had a one child policy. As I wandered down tiny alleyways with my camera, I smelled foods I had only read about. Strong smells of tofu, chicken feet, and fresh shrimp filled the air. As I tried to take it all in, I saw squid kabobs on the left and scorpion still twitching their legs on the right. Walking down the streets of Guangzhou, I noticed the tiny stores that lined the streets. They were all specific to a certain product. There was a button store, a ribbon store, a store for wheels that would be placed on a rolling chair, as well as a bead store. Many questions filled my head. How did these individuals make a living? Do they sell these products to companies, or locals? I walked forward in search of a pagoda temple and as I reached it, I looked up in awe. This architecture was over 1,400 years old and hundreds of people still came to worship. As the individuals approached the temple they had in hand three incents, one for happiness, one for prosperity, and one for longevity. I allowed the aroma to surround me as I observed the worshipers in prayer.

My time in China will live within me forever. There were challenges to overcome, new foods to try, cultures to observe, and relationships to foster. Although my trip has come to an end, I will continue to learn about China, as it has become a part of me. I am so thankful that this decision made on a whim allowed me
to grow, see a new part of the world as it continues to grow, and experience a new culture that focuses so much on heritage and family.