Hannah Jones Travel Log – China 2013

June 02 – Beijing

My first look at China was a limited view from an airplane window. It wasn’t that we were too high up to see clearly. As the wheels hit the runway, a gray haze obscured most of the field and nearly all of the horizon. The air in Beijing was muggy that day, and the low layer of clouds had sealed in some moisture and some smog. Every breath had a chemical tang to it. Eventually, my eyes would water and my lungs would begin to burn. For the moment, however, I busied myself trying to peer through the muzzy screen, squinting, craning my neck, stretching to get a real glimpse of China.

I didn’t see anything beyond an unfamiliar black bird with a long tail hopping through the grass by the landing gear.

When we finally got through customs and our guide, Michael, picked us up at the entrance of the Beijing airport, it seemed as though we had finally found China. China, it seemed, had all come together for one big traffic jam. We asked Michael if this was normal. For a weekend day, it was. Nearly a fifth of the planet’s people currently live in China, and many of
them live in large cities like Beijing. Many who do not live there work there anyway, commuting in from the countryside. China is bursting at the seams, struggling for the space, resources, and jobs it needs to sustain itself. In short, there is always a traffic jam. Always.

Our bus shambled along, stopping and starting, dodging motorcycles that wormed their way through tiny cracks between the cars and other bus drivers laying on their horns. The sound of brakes and car horns and accelerators was constant. Along the side of the road, I caught sight of some red, pink, and yellow roses made blurry by the smog. They seemed almost out of place.

We spent the afternoon in a shopping district in Beijing. We were happy to get off the bus, but we soon found that we were sharing the space with scores of other shoppers, at least ten street vendors selling toy airplanes and light-up toys, and a few clanging deng deng trolleys that made passes up and down the street. At that point, I was happy to move slowly. The shopping quarter was the China of all the old photographs I’d seen, with tiled roofs, big red columns, lanterns with dangling fringe, and brass dragons lurking in the corners of nearly every shop roof. Those pictures, however, did not include the golden arches of the McDonald’s down the street. Soon it was time to check into our hotel and settle in.
That night, a few of us went out to a local restaurant for dinner. We gawked at everything we saw along the way, from the shop signs in Chinese to the stray dogs pattering down the sidewalk. When we found a place with outdoor seating and made our best order in Chinese, (chicken, onions, and more onions,) we noticed the people at the neighboring table staring just as hard at us. That was a good indicator for the rest of our trip: a bunch of people, American and Chinese, just trying to get a good look at one another.

June 03 – Beijing
Our tour guide whisked us off after a hodge-podge breakfast from the Chinese and Western hotel buffet. We were going to see some of Beijing’s most famous landmarks. China’s Ming Dynasty edifices are still in good shape and open to tourists in the capital city. The streets of the Forbidden City are still paved with 600-year-old brick, and the Temple of Heaven still has the old cauldrons where the emperor offered sacrifices of animals to ensure a good harvest. The Empress Cu Xi’s dragon and peacock incense burners still stand at her summer palace, and the last emperor’s little throne sits where it did in the Qing Dynasty. We toured an endless stream of palatial gardens and lofty temples, saw a rainbow of colors in the architecture and on the surface...
of the waters of the empress’s lake. In the middle of these historic sites, it was difficult even to see the urban Beijing, a city as large as Austria, surrounding us.

At the end of the day, we went directly from the summer palace to two of China’s newest landmarks. Ai Wei Wei’s Bird’s Nest stadium and the Water Cube had made a recent splash on Beijing’s city scene. Just as the Temple of Heaven and the Forbidden City have taken a permanent place on a list of world-beloved structures, these two have quickly joined the ranks of unforgettable buildings. Yet looking at them, it would be difficult to attribute them to the same country.
China’s mix of old and new can sometimes be baffling. With the effects of the one-child policy quickly going into full swing, an older, more conservative generation is turning over the country to a much younger one, and the country is caught in the middle. China is a mix of age-old rice paddies and high-speed trains, Buddhist relics and an atheist state. Beijing itself, China’s cultural capital, is suspended somewhere between China’s colorful, illustrious past, and its full-tilt sprint toward the future.

That night, we all enjoyed a traditional Peiking duck dinner. This national favorite of China’s has not changed for years, nor have the traditional classical instruments or the shadow puppetry performed for us while we ate. Afterward, some of us went out to a nightclub to dance off the food to the thump of Western music; same China, different worlds.
June 04 – Beijing

That morning, our tour guide took us to get a taste of the new China. I had already had a taste of the new China’s new coffee – five cups of it, to be exact – and my stomach was a little unsettled as the bus lurched onto the highway to Beijing’s Hyundai factory. We watched a very short and very cheerful video on Hyundai’s optimistic future in China, which is becoming increasingly dependent on cars. As we walked to the assembly line, I noticed that the smog was low and gray that day.

The assembly line was cranking out cars by the dozen when we arrived, white, silver, and red Hyundai shells snaking their way through a maze of aisles and hard-hat workers. The factory produces 1,200 cars a day, most of which will be hard-pressed to find a space in the busy lanes of downtown Beijing.

Next, we drove out to an older Chinese industry: jade production. China’s national stone was precious in ancient times, and is still doing very well today. The low, smoggy clouds had...
suddenly turned sinister on the way there, and as we reached the factory, the sky split and a torrential downpour set in on us. Unfortunately, we weren’t inside for five minutes before the power went out. Instantly, about six cigarettes glowed to life and workers began to anxiously talk in corners while our tour guide attempted to shout over them. In the dim of the hallway, we passed the time inspecting glossy statues of rearing horses, smiling Buddhas, and toothy dragons in white, green, and amber. The power soon came back on, and we could continue the tour directly to the factory shop, where countless beautiful jade pieces were for sale. With, they added, a student discount. No pictures, please.

After a little shopping, we enjoyed lunch upstairs and headed to the oldest and most famous testament to Chinese labor standing today: the Great Wall. Its age was the first thing our tour guide touched on in his lecture on the wall’s history. The wall that is standing today is the Ming Dynasty version. It took over one hundred years to complete, but even today, we could see its ridged back sloping over the misty hillsides like a sleeping stone dragon. I was expecting the
smooth, paved stretch of pathway I remembered from my previous education – aka Disney’s *Mulan*. What I got was stairs. Lots and lots of stairs.

My group members and I hiked up as far as we dared and came back down with jelly legs and heaving lungs. The workers who built the wall made the same trip and more hauling stone blocks and mortar. With such an arduous project, it’s no wonder many workmen died during the wall’s construction. Many were buried right there, within the walls they lost their lives building.

After an incredible Chinese acrobatics show, we had just enough room for a dumpling dinner and a little time to relax at the hotel before bed. Outside the sky was darkening, and another workday in China was coming to a close.

**June 05 – Beijing**

On our last day in Beijing, our tour guide took us to Tiananmen Square to see Chairman Mao’s mausoleum. I was surprised to hear that Mao’s mausoleum was not, in fact, like our Washington monument or Lincoln memorial in that the man himself was still there. Mao’s
wishes were to be cremated, but he was so beloved by the people that they wished to keep him forever. Instead of incinerating him, they embalmed him and set him in a glass coffin to preserve him for the ages. Michael said that he had seen Mao before, and, he admitted, what he saw didn’t really look like a person anymore. All of us prepared ourselves to give up our personal belongings, dress decently, and keep respectfully silent in order to get an eyeful of the human beef jerky that was Mao Zedong, China’s first communist leader.

It turned out Tiananmen Square had other plans. The mausoleum was closed that day. At first we didn’t know what was going on, but Michael explained it to us in a whisper on one side of the vast stone courtyard. Our visit happened to coincide with the 1989 protests that ended in the deaths of several peaceful student demonstrators. It was no big deal, we were told. We would simply take a trip to the nearby national museum instead. I couldn’t help but notice, however, that our tour guide would not stop whispering, and the security officer nearby standing guard under the Chinese flag.
Mao’s giant portrait watched us as we left. China is not an official communist country. The communist party is actually one of several that can be elected into office by a selected college. However, year after year, the communist party candidate takes office for a term of five years. Recently, Secretary Hu Jintao turned his office over to Secretary Xi Jinping, both of the communist party.

The national museum had plenty of interesting artifacts on display, including one eccentric and elaborate swan sculpture given to Mao Zedong from Richard Nixon, and soon enough it was time for our last tour in Beijing: a rickshaw ride through the Hutong.

The Hutong is a close network of uniform gray brick houses. Since the properties are all still government-owned, the design of the houses cannot be changed. There, we visited the home of a local kung fu teacher and calligraphy enthusiast, who taught us how to write one through ten in Chinese with ink brushes. The house itself was snug, with a small kitchen in front, a dining room in the back, and an upstairs portion that we didn’t get to see. However, since the feng shui
of the house was optimal, it was actually worth a lot of money. The owner said he wouldn’t sell it for the world. It was also one of the few houses with its own bathroom.

From the Hutong, we went straight to the fanciest lunch we’d had in China so far, with crystal chandeliers and golden Buddha statues. The restaurant had plenty of its own bathrooms, which were mirrored and smelled of incense.

That’s when we said goodbye to Michael and headed to our next stop on our tour, Chengdu.

**June 06 – Chengdu**

Our tour of Chengdu began with a trip to the panda research center. Chengdu had clearer air than Beijing, and the streets were sparkling. This might have had a little to do with the Fortune 500 companies coming for a business conference that week. We had some sunshine for the first time in days, and the flowers and palm trees on the roadside spoke more of Florida than China.
We saw pandas everywhere before we even reached the research center. They were on the taxis, on the road signs, and in virtually every t-shirt shop. Sichuan Province is one of the panda’s few remaining habitats, and even those are shrinking to dangerous proportions. The panda’s population has dwindled to 2,000. As an animal that eats only one low-energy food, bamboo, and spends most of its life without company, the panda has a hard enough time surviving without construction and pollution reducing its chances. At the Chengdu research center, pandas are bred with artificial insemination techniques and put on display. These captive pandas not only serve as a hopeful reserve for the rest of their species, they also rake in a lot of funds for panda research. Visitors can pay a handsome fee to either pat the pandas on the head or even cuddle a baby one. When they’re not being hugged and coddled, they spend most of their time eating bamboo and lounging around. There were plenty of photo ops to be had, and plenty of panda merchandise to purchase afterward. Part of the funds, of course, went to the research.
Our second stop was the panda’s main competition: a shopping center. China’s Walmart held a strange mix of Great Value brand sundries (licorice-flavored watermelon seeds, for example,) and very fresh seafood (those turtles looked very much alive to me) all under one, noisy roof. The shopkeepers were all vocal and competed for our attention, shouting out the best deals, and we found ourselves wading through other customers. The Walmart prices were just as tempting as in the U.S., however, and plenty of us made off with discounted chopsticks and seaweed-flavored Pringles.
After Walmart, we did a little more traditional shopping and lounging at Chengdu’s ancient shopping district and the People’s Park. With the sun shining and music playing, we passed by dancing older couples, talented sugar sculptors, and picturesque ponds of rowboats. Chengdu proved itself the sunny, leisurely city our guide promised, and too soon, we had to return to the hotel and prepare to leave it.
June 07 – Hangzhou

Early June is the middle of the rainy season for Hangzhou. When we touched down in the afternoon, it was drizzling outside. Lacy, spangled Chinese umbrellas sprang up like mushrooms in the crowds. We all bought one for ourselves. We had plenty to do outside before we could seek shelter from the rain.

Hangzhou is home to one of China’s most trusted traditional medicine stores. We made a stop there and looked around at the various truffles, fungi, leaves, dried seahorses, ginseng, and tarantulas floating around in jars. These treatments have had some small success in treating everything from menstrual irregularity to lung cancer. These treatments, however, are usually only for the very wealthy to partake in. For the rest of us, there was more shopping in the surrounding quarter.

That evening, after a spicy Sichuan meal, we had the treat of seeing Zhang Yimou’s *Impression of West Lake* on Hangzhou’s West Lake. There are actually many “West Lakes” in China, but Hangzhou’s is said to be the most beautiful. The show highlighted the lake’s natural...
beauty, and gave some credence to its reputation. Colored lights twinkled and splashed through the water, which actors danced upon via platforms hidden just beneath the surface. The legend of the White Snake was set to a crystalline score by a famous Chinese pop star, and the crowd was charmed. That night, we walked back to the bus through the night-lit perimeter of the West Lake with the love anthem of Impressions in our heads.

Our guide had plenty of good things to say about other Chinese cities, including her hometown of Suzhou, but Hangzhou, she said, was the city where we were most likely to settle down and live. Watching the lights and green spaces whiz past the bus window, I found myself partway believing it.

**June 08 – Hangzhou/Shanghai**

That morning, we took in a few more Hangzhou scenic sites, starting with the beautiful West Lake. From there, we made a stop at a

*Tea as far as the eye could see at Dragon Well Village.*
Buddhist pagoda, and the famous Dragon Well tea plantation. The Dragon Well green tea, our guide said, has incredible health benefits that are largely to blame for the low lung cancer death rate in a population with such a high percentage of smokers. There were quite a few smokers living there in Dragon Well. The Dragon Well residents tend the plantation together. The women pick the tea, and the men fry it to release the flavor. Tea is as big a part of Chinese life as coffee is here in the states, and has been proven to improve memory, encourage weight loss, fight free radicals, and combat aging symptoms. A few of us were taken enough with the potential benefits to pay the premium price for some Emperor’s Choice before we headed to Wuzhen.

Wuzhen is an ancient canal city turned tourist town. Nonetheless, people still live there, distilling rice wine and making the precious blue cloth the town is known for. We got to wander the old, narrow alleyways and admire the antique furniture for a good while before boarding the bus once again. After the antiquated charm of Wuzhen, a surprise awaited for us in our next stop: Shanghai.
Shanghai is known by many names, among them “China’s Paris” and the “Concrete Forest.” There are skyscrapers springing up every day. In Shanghai, it’s easy to see why people joke that the “crane” is China’s national bird. The construction instruments were scattered throughout the city, which we got a good look at through the clogged transit from the airport to the hotel. The traffic in Shanghai was the worst we had ever seen. The transportation is expensive, the apartments even more so, and the shopping centers full of high-cost Western imports. From Wuzhen to Shanghai, I felt as though I had gone through some kind of time warp, or even simply boarded a plane to America instead of Southern China. The hotel room had a clear view of a gigantic LED screen, which beamed commercials through the window until 10:00 pm, when the lights were shut off to conserve energy. The city, however, continued to rumble long into the night. There was little rest to be had in Shanghai, and plenty left to do.
June 09 – Shanghai

Shanghai’s deep water port on the East China Sea was our first stop for Shanghai. We left the concrete forest and found ourselves in a sea of shipping containers, red, blue, green, and orange stacked like children’s blocks for as far as we could see. Thousands of these containers come in and out of the deep water port every day, facilitating China’s rapid inhale and exhale of goods. Ever since China opened back up to the world under Deng Xiaoping, it has been pushing itself further and further to compete with and trade with the rest of the world. For the most part, it has been paying off. China’s new market economy have made its GDP second highest in the world, projected to surpass that of the United States by 2030.
It’s not all rosy, however. While the GDP continues to skyrocket, the per capita GDP remains stubbornly low. Our tour guide told us about rural cities in China where citizens do not have proper housing, food, or education. Even in Shanghai, the high rates of apartment living and costly transit make the cost of living difficult to manage. With that sad, stark thought in mind, we headed to lunch and to Chinatown.

Shanghai’s Chinatown may seem a little unnecessary at first, but during the British and French occupation, this quarter was the only place where Chinese people could live and work. Today, it’s a bustling shopping district where we were free to haggle for souvenirs – or, for some of us, some more questionable prizes found in back alleyways with “Gucci” and “Coach” printed on them.
We ended our day with the sparkling lights of Shanghai reflected on the waters of the Huangpu River. The skyscrapers put on a nightly show with a rainbow of colors, and from the deck of the boat, we could see them all and take all the pictures we liked. It was dazzling, but a little bittersweet. There could be no denying the beauty of Shanghai’s buildings or the vastness of its ports, but how much are they worth compared to the happiness of its people? The feeling of wealth is something Shanghai specializes in. The follow-through, however, could use some work. We returned to our hotel, which was still glowing in the night, and tried to sleep.
June 10 – Shanghai

We crammed the day full of activities for our last full day in Shanghai. We wandered the Shanghai Museum, had lunch in the third tallest radio tower in the world, and toured a silk factory to get the secret behind one of China’s most guarded manufacture processes. Silk was one of the reasons the world came to covet Chinese goods in the first place, when the Silk Road trade route was created in the Han Dynasty. Nowadays, silk is still precious and coveted. The price was evidence enough of this.

The next stop was a little refreshing after the rich fare of the silk factory. Carrefour was the first European industry to come to China after the Opening-Up. It was a bit like Chinese Walmart. There were cramped aisles and fresh goods, crowds and noisy shopkeepers. The upcoming Dragon Boat Festival contributed to some of the discounts, and many of us found the cure we needed for the high prices in the silk shop. However, the aisles were a little maze-like, and we had to take three escalator ramps just to reach the store.

Yeah, like we're going to dance after this.
After a quick tour of the French quarter and the Bund, more of Europe sitting in the middle of China, we had a brief rest at the hotel before finding our own spot for dinner. Most of us settled on Chinese Pizza Hut, hoping to get a little taste of home. While the pepperoni pizza tasted much the same, the wait time, seating area, and décor were all reminiscent of a much ritzier restaurant. So too was the Alaskan salmon and octopus pizza, which was also on the menu. Somehow, the trip overseas turned Pizza Hut into a higher-class dining experience, a Western commodity in China where it was common fare across the ocean. Value, it seemed, was elastic across national borders. What China would think of our Panda Express, I couldn’t say. In the meantime, I was content to try a bite of salmon pizza, sip my bubble tea, and look at the glow of the Pizza Hut red roof logo outside the restaurant. This was our last night in Shanghai before going home to a real Pizza Hut on every corner.
June 11 – Shanghai

Our last day in China was a whirlwind. We got a quick tour of the Coke factory and an even quicker ride on the high-speed train to the airport, where a thirteen-hour flight waited for us. China rushed past my airplane window as we took to the air. Having spent ten days there, seen four different cities, and eaten a steamed fish in pretty much every one of them, I found that I still had few words to describe this country. China had surprised, and it had confirmed expectations. It had been extreme, it had been harmonious, rich, poor, healthy, and polluted. The people had been friendly, for the most part, except where they weren’t, and while I had taken countless pictures with them at their request, I didn’t feel like I knew them any better. All I knew was how complex this whole matter of China was, and would continue to be into the future. The rise of China includes an inevitable convergence with the United States. We are approaching this intersection as complete strangers, curious but wary, and somehow we will have to figure out how to cross an ocean of unfamiliarity.

Nonetheless, as the plane flew away from China, and me with it, I couldn’t help but feel optimistic. Travelers like me were coming to China more and more, reporting on what they’d seen, bringing ideas as well as taking them back to their countries. Our guide told us before we left that she wanted very much to go to America, and I like to believe she will. A partnership with China is what both of our countries need as the climate crisis comes to a head, hunger continues to ravage nations the world over, and the war on terror rages on. With this partnership, I hope, will come some understanding, or at least that same fascination we have had with each other for hundreds of years.
One last smile for China on the high-speed Shanghai train.