Last summer, July 2013, I went to Renmin University of China in Beijing, China for their summer school programme. Being ethnically Chinese and having lived in Singapore for nearly my entire life, Chinese culture was actually quite familiar to me. I pride myself on being able to speak and write fluent Chinese and have been to China twice before, although not to the capital. Despite all that, I was still wholly unprepared for my month-long stay there.

Beijing is an amazing potpourri of the different facets of Chinese culture, all expressed to the highest extremes in the capital. As the seat of power since the later Chinese dynasties, Beijing contains a wealth of Chinese history and culture. It contains the architectural remnants of the Ming and Qing dynasty, the scars of China's battle in WWII, the ubiquitous effects of the Communist Revolution and the modern illusion of wealth and excess brought on by the Chinese economic miracle. Together with its vast size (with a population of nearly 30 million), Beijing is juxtaposed with stark contrasts that will fascinate anyone.

Living in a place for a month is totally unlike the experience of just traveling because that is when I got to uncover the more interesting aspects of China. The campus of Renmin University alone holds so many interesting insights into Chinese culture. For one, Renmin is known to be a breeding ground for rich and powerful Chinese families which send their children there to receive a quality education. Hence, the newly built sports centre there is in the shape of a coffin which is Chinese symbolism for power and success. Yet on the other hand, Renmin also holds the brightest students who worked hard to enter the school from the poorest rural areas of China. As a result, in Renmin, we find the poor students living (and sharing 6-to-a-room) in tiny, not ventilated rooms the size of the average Rootes kitchen while the rich students live in a luxurious hotel right inside the campus itself!
During my one-month in China, I attended 3 courses on Chinese economics, politics and tourism. They were all very insightful courses and at the same time, I made many new friends in class. After class, I would travel Beijing with my friends, sampling the exotic street foods in Beijing, visiting famous attractions and immersing myself into the Chinese way of life. Here is a bucket list of activities I would encourage everyone to attempt when in Beijing:

- Try the amazing and exotic foods like animal innards, the ubiquitous roadside barbeques, spicy Szechuan cuisine and the insects novelty stalls (I personally tried scorpion, silkworms, starfish, rabbit innards and a really spicy Szechuan hotpot)

- Do things the Chinese way (squeezing onto the Beijing metro, bargain at the shops, or even shouting for the waiter!)

- Visit the historical attractions in Beijing (Great Wall, Forbidden Palace, Olympic Games Stadium, Temple of Heaven, Mao Museum, World Trade Centre, etc)

- Experience the various recreation activities Beijing offers (rooftop bars, nightclubs, karaoke clubs, massage parlours, night shopping, etc)

- Try a homestay at a Chinese friend's place and experience wonderful Chinese hospitality!

- Travel to other cities!
Summer school in Beijing taught me new lessons and gave me many memorable experiences. However, most of my learning actually came from outside the classroom through my interactions with the different aspects of China and my conversations with Chinese people. I made many new friends from all over the world that came to attend this summer school and even though it was only one month, we actually forged strong friendships with each other. This experience deepened my understanding of China greatly and I would relish the opportunity to visit Beijing and the rest of China in the future!

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