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## **From Wall Street to the Great Wall: reflections on teaching a travel course to China**

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**Abstract:** Globalisation has brought about radical changes to college curricula, especially in economics. Among other pedagogical tools, travel courses have become a popular component of different international programmes as they give economics majors a rare first-hand opportunity to learn about the current political, social, and economic dynamics that are impacting other countries' cultures and institutions. This paper discusses the issues involved in developing a travel course to China, as well as the objectives, content, organisational matters, and logistics of an international travel course. To guide the discussion, the authors use their own experience of taking 19 undergraduate students to China.

**Keywords:** internationalisation of curriculum; travel course; China studies; economics curriculum.

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## **1 Internationalising the economics curriculum**

Napoleon had once said, “Let China sleep, for when she wakes, she will shake the world” (Kyngé, 2007). China has been shaking the world since the 1990s. In 2010, it became the second largest national economy and last year it became the world’s biggest trading nation. It has by far the world’s largest current account surplus and foreign exchange reserves. Its growth has averaged 10% per year over the past 30 years. In short, China has turned into a global economic and political superpower. At the same time, it remains a country of huge complexity and unparallel contradictions. Its fast economic growth is coupled with abject poverty and inequality. Its rising middle class is driving more and more cars and simultaneously breathing air that damages the health of children and adults alike. A great improvement in the standard of living goes together with a rigid one-child policy. Modern economics students need to be able to understand the challenges and opportunities that exist in China today, especially those pertaining to its business environment, financial markets and institutions, and its progressing economic development.

Because they offer a first-hand experience with the country that has been a centre-stage of the world’s attention for more than a decade, travel courses to China have become a popular component of college curricula. In some universities they are offered as individual courses, in others they are part of China studies or Asian studies programmes. The authors of this paper have created a team effort to offer a new programme focused on Chinese economic and cultural development and the increasing role of China and the USA relations in the World Economy. The team has had extensive experience in teaching and travelling to China and has worked together in a collaborative effort over the past five years. With the support of the department chair, the dean, and the Confucius Institute (CI), we have created a focused China economic studies track, consisting of a five course sequence that includes the following courses: ‘China and US economic and political relations: past, present and future’; ‘Rising powers: China’s economic growth and development’; ‘Political economy of developing nations’; ‘China’s financial system’; and a two week travel course entitled ‘From Wall Street to the Great Wall’.

The travel course was designed to add a new dimension to the learning experience in the track. Technically open to all majors, in reality it has become popular mostly among economics majors. The reason is that prior to taking the travel course, the students must take one of the courses in the track. In addition, all China track courses require taking principles of microeconomics and principles of macroeconomics. As a result, the travel course builds on the knowledge and skills that the students gain in the other economics courses, ensuring that the students are equipped with some basic knowledge of economics, as well as gaining a critical understanding of the Chinese economy, history, and politics.

## 2 Teaching the travel course

### 2.1 Objectives and learning outcomes

The initial goals set for the travel course were as follows. First, we wanted to introduce students to China's culture and to the Chinese language. For many of them it was the first time they would experience an Asian culture and we wanted to submerge them in China's over the two week period. Second, we wanted to expand their knowledge about the economics of China's development. China has been a superstar on the global economic scene, growing very rapidly and reforming itself in many important ways. So we wanted to have the students see this first hand. Third, we wanted to open students' eyes to new ideas of international study and possible careers. All too often US students are only exposed to totally American culture and ideas and at best *only* North American culture. Our group of 19 was more multicultural than this, representing ten nations of the world, but still not totally familiar with a really world perspective on contemporary issues, problems and ideas. We also wanted to get the students interested in our new five course China economic studies programme and introduce them to the various opportunities of the CI. Finally, we wanted the students to reflect on their experiences in China and compare and contrast the USA and China and NYC and Shanghai. Their reflections were to be logged each day in a journal which they would keep while on the trip to China. The comparative and contrasting reflections would be seen particularly interesting when they returned home to the USA and thought back on the travel experience.

In this course we attempted to combine relevant concepts and theories from traditional economic analysis along with new models and new approaches derived from studying the historical and contemporary development of China in comparison and contrast to the USA. We designed the course as a journey to gain insight into why and how these two countries can better understand one another and how we as Americans can personally better relate to the Chinese.

Upon successful completion of the travel course our students could expect to:

- have an appreciation and understanding of Chinese historical and cultural heritage and the structure of its political, social, and economic systems
- learn more about the role that China plays in the world politics and world economy
- analyse and critically evaluate the key differences in the economic systems of the USA and China
- understand the relationship between economic theories and practical problems and apply current economic theories to the analysis of China's economy
- attain a greater understanding of the role of cultural, political, and environmental processes in shaping modern Chinese economy
- understand the logic behind Chinese reforms and the uniqueness of China's transition and its economic implications
- learn about China's financial markets, the people's Bank of China, and monetary policy during the 2007–2009 global financial crisis and today
- understand business opportunities, challenges, and problems in China and their implications to American investors

- communicate and exchange ideas with Chinese scholars and students in a Chinese University
- appreciate the cultural diversity of the world.

During the travel course, the students could also expect to have developed or improved:

- analytical techniques such as logical inquiry and comparative analysis
- the ability to identify development problems within a specific economic setup
- understanding and ability to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of state-led and market-led development models
- knowledge of China's basic political history, economy, and peoples
- basic knowledge of Chinese culture, business ethics, social norms and language.

## 2.2 *Planning the travel course*

At our university, instructors are responsible for all the work of organising the travel course (with the exception of collecting the payments, booking the flights and the hotels, and organising formal excursions – these are done with the help of a travel agent, affiliated with the institution). The process starts at least one year prior to the travel course dates and it consists of four parts – academic approval, preliminary administrative approval, final administrative approval, and final arrangements.

Part One starts with instructors submitting a *Faculty Application for Conducting a Travel Course*, preliminary academic course outline, including discussion topics, objectives, learning outcomes, readings, lectures, visits, etc. The instructors also are responsible for researching travel costs from the list of approved travel vendors and preparing preliminary travel itinerary for the course and an estimated course fee. After the application is approved by the chair and the dean, it is sent for approval to the international office. Once the approval is secured, formal marketing of the course may begin and the instructor proceeds with recruiting and screening of student participants. After the registration, the instructor confirms the number of students and reviews the budget and course fee with the International Office. He or she then notifies students of payment dates, as well as travel documents, passport copies, and visa copies that are necessary for the trip. All students must sign a waiver and release form and complete a medical information form.

Once students have registered and have paid in full all travel course fees and submitted all required documents and forms, the international office provides the instructor with a list of paid students, a copy of each students travel documents, emergency contact information and medical issues. A final list of student and instructor/staff participants, trip destination and exact travel dates is sent to the office of general services to finalise travel/accident insurance coverage. The instructors will be given a list of emergency contacts at Pace University along with the travel agents emergency contact information.

### 2.3 *Expectations of students/assessment*

What were our expectations of the students enrolled in the travel course? 'From Wall Street to the Great Wall' was designed as a writing-enhanced course that would require a significant amount of writing, in addition to exams, to help students learn course content. A written assignment was required for each of the seven class meetings. Formal writing elements, such as clear focus, good organisation, development, and editing were considered in grading, as well as content. Students received detailed written handouts for each writing assignment, specifying criteria and clearly setting forth expectations. Students received feedback for revision on at least one writing assignment before it was graded. The writing in final drafts was evaluated, along with content, based on evaluative criteria from a checklist or rubric.

The students were expected to attend all seven sessions while at the home university and attend all required classes while in China. They had to complete all reading assignments for the course that included articles on China from *The Economist* and participate in classroom discussions and in all group activities while in China. To monitor weekly progress, the instructors required students to write bi-weekly briefs, summaries of each week's reading assignment and class discussion. The students also had to keep a daily journal of travel experiences while in China and write a reflective essay upon returning from China on the knowledge and experience gained. In addition, the students were required to attend and participate in a coming together workshop gathering the following semester with various members of the Economics Department and CI Staff.

From the very beginning, the instructors made it very clear that during the trip, the students were expected to behave in an appropriate manner. They had to show respect for fellow students and the instructor by arriving for class/trip/meeting/departure/event on time. They also had to respect Chinese cultural norms, business ethics, and local people. They had to realise that Chinese culture and life style are very different from the US ones and that is why travel to China requires a lot of flexibility, patience, and an open and accepting mindset. The rules set by the instructors were summarised in a 'Do's and Don'ts' list.

Students were graded on their bi-weekly papers, their class participation, their journals and their reflective paper at the end. All were equally weighted.

### 2.4 *Course structure and content*

The travel course had three components. First, one-hour class meetings each week covered a specific aspect of China. The topics ranged from Chinese culture and history to economics and politics. We also invited guest lecturers (native Chinese) from CI and required students to take one hour Chinese language class and one hour 'eating with chopsticks' class, in addition to the bi-weekly meetings. This was all designed as preparation for the two-week travel component at the end of the semester (travel was scheduled in May, after the graduation ceremony, so there would be no conflict with any classes, final exams nor with the commencement).

During the two weeks in China, the students travelled to Shanghai, Beijing, and Suzhou, where they visited historical and cultural sites, learned about Chinese life-style and witnessed China's great advances and contradictions. In Beijing, where the students climbed the Great Wall, visited the Ming Tombs, and walked in the Forbidden City, they learned about the effect of historical isolationist policies on China's growth and

development. They also visited Tiananmen Square and learned about the radical changes of the Mao years and the rise of the reformist government of Deng Xiaoping. In addition, a tour of Hutong, an old part of Beijing, offered a rare opportunity to visit a local family and talk to a local resident who opened the young listeners' eyes on many hotly debated issues, such as the one-child policy, inequality and poverty, and the cultural revolution. In Suzhou, the students visited a silk museum and learned about the importance of the silk road to commerce and trade.

Most of the time, the students stayed in Shanghai, a major financial centre of Asia, where they explored the investment environment and China's financial markets and institutions. The visit to the Banking Museum helped the students to recognise the differences between the USA and Chinese financial systems. Going to the local factories, old city, and market place gave students an opportunity to learn more about dynamics of a rising economic system. Students also joined Chinese local residents in recreational and health-stimulating activities in a local park. Although the host university provided our group with a mini-bus, we let students use public transportation a few times, so they could do a comparative analysis of public services in the USA and China. The students also strolled local streets in poor and wealthy neighbourhoods to see a contrast between the social classes.

In addition, the students had opportunities to communicate and exchange ideas with Chinese scholars and students in a Chinese University, University of Shanghai for Science and Technology (USST). The second week, they had one Chinese language class every morning, followed by a lecture on doing business in China, education system in China, Chinese Art, etc. All lectures were given by USST professors in English (with the exception of language classes).

Upon their return to the USA, the students had to write a reflective paper, as well as participate in different department activities promoting China track and discussing their experiences.

### **3 Challenges and issues**

Teaching a travel course to any country is both challenging and potentially precarious. Some studies point out the dangers of focusing mostly on the content of the travel course, without taking into consideration "the psychological *processes* that accompany student group travel under conditions that are necessarily uncertain and stressful" (Ornstein and Nelson, 2006). Although the conceptual tools of crisis management have been discussed in the literature (Ornstein and Nelson, 2002) and are outlined by college travel course guidelines, many precautionary and safety measures are country-specific. Taking a group of students to a non-English speaking country with the largest population in the world pose enormous challenges and could be potentially hazardous. Therefore, it is important that some precautionary measures are taken to address potential emergencies and minimise the risk of crisis. The authors of this paper thought about three aspects of such measures: type of students who are given permission to register for the travel course, country-specific environment that may create particular obstacles and challenges, and the balance between free time and mandatory activities.

Choosing the 'right' travellers is one of the major factors that can either make a travel course a success or a failure. There is, of course, no 'ideal' student, yet, being generally risk-averse, instructors prefer to minimise potential disruptive behaviour among the

students, which may lead to undesirable and even dangerous outcomes. In addition, travelling to a large non-English speaking country with a culture, cuisine, and social behaviour vastly different from those of the USA, may prove to be difficult for someone who is not flexible enough or not emotionally mature enough to handle. Furthermore, the instructors must be aware of the students' health issues that may inhibit the students' activities, especially in a highly polluted environment. Finally, it is important to make a distinction between students who are genuinely interested in the culture, history, economy and business environment that the foreign country has to offer and those who just want to travel for fun.

We therefore felt it necessary to pre-screen the students who wanted to enrol in the course. A questionnaire probing the applicants' flexibility, travel experience, health issues, crisis management techniques, interest in China, and receptiveness to new ideas was given to every student, followed by two interviews (one with each instructor). Each student was given a score by each instructor, and the instructors made a final decision based on the combined score. Out of 23 students who applied, we took 19.

The second type of challenge that instructors teaching an international field course might face come from the country-specific environment. Travelling to Shanghai and Beijing is associated with such issues as air pollution, water contamination, high population density, aggressive (as opposed to defensive) driving style of motorists, and lack or inferiority of sanitary necessities, such as toilet paper in public toilets/university bathrooms, etc. Thus, it is absolutely essential to warn the students about these potential dangers and guide their behaviour in such a way that they are able to enjoy the trip and learn in a safe educational environment. For that reason we created a Do's and Don'ts list that was discussed with the students during the last pre-travel meeting. In addition, there was a list of things for students to pack, that included such items as hand sanitisers, toilet paper, medical kit, personal toiletries, and other things that would make travel easier and safer.

Finally, the instructors teaching a travel course must always decide a priori how much freedom they are going to give to students during the travels. On the one hand, the purpose of a travel course is educational and therefore the more activities the students are engaged as a group in, the more the objectives of the course are going to be fulfilled. Also, given students a lot of free time may create more opportunities for an undesirable behaviour. On the other hand, it is also important to realise that students have various interests and personalities, and what might be interesting and engaging for one, may be a bore to another. In addition, the students might benefit more when they explore local markets or local cultural sights on their own. The instructors have to have a general agreement on the question of freedom vs. control and make sure that they have a right balance of both.

From the very beginning, we made it clear to our students that our itinerary was very filled and that most of the activities were mandatory. At the same time, we did give our students freedom of choice on different occasions. For example, when we explored Shanghai downtown, the students were divided in three groups, with one heading for Fuzhou Road (to explore international bookstores), the other one going to the Art Museum, and the rest of the students going to Nanjing Road for shopping. We also left most of the evenings open to students, so they could explore local restaurants and cafes on their own with very strict guidelines and get a flavour of metropolitan night life in China. Finally, the students were given one free day for shopping. Whenever students were given free time, the instructors made sure that no one wandered alone and no one is

left behind. When the students were divided into groups, one Chinese-speaking person would accompany each group and assist in shopping, navigation through streets, and interpretation of signs/directions. This was mainly possible due to the fact that we had two travel assistants with us, provided by the host university.

#### **4 The role of a host university**

The value of the host university cannot be underestimated. Our host university was USST, specifically the Foreign Language School under the Dean Lule. Having a host university had simplified many organisational matters and logistics. USST assisted us with hotel reservations, transportation, lunch, students' activities (between our university and USST students), lectures by the USST instructors (Chinese language and culture/history/business), and travel. USST also arranged all airport pick-ups and drop-offs. Having a mini bus with the same driver let us utilise our time in a very efficient way and minimised the risk of having someone left behind. In addition, the host college assigned two graduate students to our group who were our interpreters and teaching assistants. They were middlemen between USST administration and our group, organising local tours, finding restaurants to dine, and helping our students to shop for souvenirs. Our student assistants also were a great source of inside knowledge about college life in China and Chinese youths' life styles.

Having a host college also allows student travellers to get engaged in different activities with local students. Our students were able to play sports together, visit Chinese students' dormitories and classrooms, and socialise with their Chinese counterparts. This fostered the US students' knowledge about Chinese youth, Chinese culture, and Chinese education system. USST also organised an Entrepreneurship Contest between our students, USST students, and Hong Kong students enrolled in the exchange programme at USST. Chinese language lessons equipped our students with some basic knowledge of Chinese phrases which they could then practice on the streets of Shanghai. Lectures given by USST instructors enriched the students' knowledge of business practices, education system, economy, and art in China. USST also organised trips to two modern factories – *Huber&Suhner* (which produces breaks for speed trains) and *Handicare* (which produces equipment for handicaps). Our students had a terrific opportunity to talk to managers and employees about production processes, working conditions, and human resource issues.

#### **5 Impact on students**

Studies show that travel courses tend to create strong positive effects on students because they lead to a high degree of satisfaction, as well as fulfilment of the objectives (Farkas and Murthy, 2008). Students who complete travel courses indicate that they gain a much better understanding of global issues, international markets, and diverse cultures (Bruening and Frick, 2004). We believe that our travel course had created a rare first-hand learning experience that was both enjoyable and beneficial to the students. While no formal follow-up survey was conducted, the students expressed their opinions about the educational experience in their daily journals and reflective papers. Below are



some excerpts from the students' evaluations of the course' content, its educational value and the impact that the trip's events and activities had on them.

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This was by far the best experience in my life and I am so glad I was able to go on this journey with such a great group of people. I will cherish the memories of this trip for the rest of my life. I learned so much and grew up as a person because of this experience.

Today was the day!! Today we left the hotel early in the morning to climb the Great Wall of China!! I have been waiting for this day ever since I saw the itinerary. I was so excited to see the Great Wall; I couldn't believe that today I would be able to actually touch one of the Seven Wonders of the World.

I was also surprised how well the employees were actually treated because I had the perception that Chinese factory employees would be treated like slaves. It was a great experience to observe the actual workday of a Chinese citizen. I was also impressed with how well the factories were kept and how modern they were as well.

Today was a special day. We had a great lecture by this lady who owns a Broadway business show in Shanghai. Great lady with a great story! She was talking about the differences in the business process in China compared to America.

The most powerful and thought provoking experience that I had [in China] was our meal with the working class family. The truth about people's perception of Mao and communist rule finally was brought to light.

So off to the Great Wall we went and oh man was I truly taken in by the sight that I saw today. The feeling was truly a unique one and indescribable. This was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen and I instantly thought about my family. One day, I would love to bring them here just so they can experience what I was experiencing at that moment.

I went back to the hotel and waited to go back to the school to play basketball with the kids at USST. Playing with them was really fun. You don't need to speak the same language to understand each other when it comes to sports. It was a cool way to interact with them. Yet another thing I won't forget.

I think that I found such a connection with China that a part of me will stay there forever and I will always carry China in my heart.

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One of the major reasons behind the success of our travel course was the fact that students felt that they were able to apply material learned in the classroom to the real life experience. Making another course on China a prerequisite and also lecturing students on different aspects of Chinese history, culture, economy, and political system prepared our students in such a way that they could draw associations between what they learned before the trip and what they saw or heard during the trip. If students do not see a strong link between the material they learned prior to the trip and the trip's activities, then the travel course fails to reach its main goal, to provide students with educational opportunities and create a learning environment that would make students more knowledgeable and broad-minded.

## **6 Summary and conclusions**

Globalisation has necessitated radical changes in high education curriculum, especially in economics and business fields. As a result, economics curricula have become more internationalised, with many colleges nowadays offering travel opportunities to students who want to learn more about the global economy and be better equipped for the global labour market. Because China has become a world superpower, there is a high demand

among students who want to get a first-hand experience and witness the country of astounding growth and enormous contradictions. Offering a travel course to China, therefore, has become a necessity in today's educational environment.

Nineteen undergraduate students, who were enrolled in the economics course 'From Wall Street to the Great Wall', a capstone course in the Chinese Economic Studies Track offered by the Economics Department at NYC university, had a rare first-hand opportunity to learn about the current political, social, and economic dynamics that are impacting Chinese culture and institutions. The one-hour meetings every other week during the spring semester culminated into two weeks of travelling and studying in China. The team of students and professors visited Beijing, where they climbed the Great Wall, explored the Ming Tombs, walked through the Forbidden City, and visited Tiananmen Square. They also visited a Silk museum and factory in Suzhou. The rest of the time, the students stayed in Shanghai, a major financial centre of Asia, where they explored the business environment and China's financial markets and institutions. Going to the local factory, old city, and Museum of Finance gave the students an opportunity to learn more about dynamics of a rising economic system. In addition, the students communicated and exchanged ideas with Chinese scholars and students at the USST. Overall, the objectives of the course were fulfilled beyond the expectations. The students found the travel course to be one of the best educational experiences they ever had. Some students became Travel Ambassadors, promoting China Studies, the travel course, and the economics major. Others expressed their interest in taking more Chinese language courses, going to China for an internship, or enrol in study abroad courses.

Teaching a travel course to China can be both challenging and rewarding. It takes time and effort to organise it in such a way that students could enhance their college experience and expand their knowledge horizons. When well organised and implemented, such a course can create unparalleled educational experience that impacts the students for the rest of their lives perhaps like no other educational experience they had.

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**Appendix**

*Questionnaire for screening the students*

| <i>Question</i>  | <i>Response</i>             | <i>Score</i> |
|--|-----------------------------|--------------|
| 1 Ni how ma?   | Wo hen how, xie-xie. Ni ne? |              |
| 2 Why do you want to go to China?  |                             |              |
| 3 What are you hoping to get out of this trip?                                   |                             |              |
| 4 How much have you travelled in the past?                                       |                             |              |
| 5 Do you have any special needs (food, medicine, etc?)                           |                             |              |
| 6 Can you afford an extra \$500–600 if necessary?                                |                             |              |
| 7 Can you take 14-hours of flight?<br>How well do you handle being jet lagged?   |                             |              |
| 8 How do you handle stress?  |                             |              |
| 9 How well do you follow instructions?   |                             |              |
| 10 How often do you drink alcohol? Do drugs?                                     |                             |              |
| 11 How well do you get along with others?  |                             |              |
| 12 What would you do if there is neither toilet paper nor water in the bathroom? |                             |              |
| 13 What would you do if you get lost?  |                             |              |
| 14 Additional comments   |                             |              |