

My Mobility

Students from Ca' Foscari Recount their Learning Experiences Abroad

Another side of China

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Destination: Jilin Huaqiao University, Changchun, China

Cecilia Spassini decides to take control of her life in China by signing up for extracurricular activities: a dance club, and a volunteering group working with the disabled.

I have thought so many times about putting my experience abroad down, because I really enjoy writing about important facts, and maybe read them in the future. But since I came back, I couldn't do this. I strongly think that the reason is the difficulty of describing in a few lines an experience lasted five months, and this blocked me before starting. At the same time, when someone asks me: 'So, how is China?', I always answer with short sentences, or also jokes, and maybe by stereotyping. I would probably need so many hours to explain all my feelings and what I have thought during that time abroad. So that's the perfect occasion to start.

It happened that I won a scholarship in an unusual city: Changchun. I've met so many people who told me that for their first experience they decided to go to Peking or Shanghai, which are the main cities, but I accepted this challenge, without thinking about it very much, and so I chose it.

Changchun is a city located in the north east part of China, six hours from Peking. It has six million people and it is the capital of the Jilin province. Winter comes very fast: days, at the beginning of November, are already shorter and temperatures start going down, arriving to the average temperature of -20°C. The city offers some beautiful parks in which you can have a walk, you can visit the palace of the last emperor and you can ski during winter. The rest is all under construction. I tried, during autumn, when it wasn't too cold yet, to find some glimpse, some alleys, some typical shops, and I can't say I didn't find them. But the sensation of finding myself in a city I didn't belong to, and even more, in a city which repulses and doesn't host, never left me. High buildings, all the same, listless colors, few vegetation, lot of pollution, grey sky, streets and unfinished places. Gradually, temperatures started to decrease, and so I was forced to stay in inner places and I used to go out just for a few hours. I noticed that, at the beginning, there were some beautiful lotus flowers in the little lake inside the campus, but they suddenly disappeared, and the view was very desolating.

Even if I was very enthusiastic about living in the other part of the world, far away from my routine and my monotony, after a while I was already counting the days of my return. I also have to add that there were very restrictive rules imposed by the university: the curfew was very soon (at a quarter past ten), we were obliged to a compulsory attendance for the lessons (even if you were ill, you couldn't skip the lesson, otherwise they could decrease your mark), and they also kept checking your room. I felt like in a jail, and this made me nervous and not so disposed to open to this new world and to its new culture.

At a certain point I decided that I couldn't keep on doing like this: I started to take control of the situation, and thanks to my will I managed to make my experience unforgettable. I enrolled in two school's clubs: the dance one and the volunteering one. The second one, in particular, really surprised me. I made some interesting activities, such as going with disabled people: there was a day dedicated to them, in which they were trying to find out they're perfect soul. I found it a very original idea, that I've never seen in Italy. At the same time, I tried to concentrate on Chinese lessons in an active way, I mean not only by making my homework done, but by talking a lot in class, and by asking questions. I talked with shoppers, with taxi-drivers, with pedestrians.

I gradually realized the presence of another China, made of very friendly people who I can speak with, built on diligent workers, always ready to help you every moment they could. I found people who offered me some tea on the road; I found foreigners spreading their vivacity and their passion in everything they did. So I can say that, despite what I expected, the experience gave me a lot and changed me for the better.

During a trip in Peking I met some girls who were doing my same experience in Shanghai, and they told me they had many facilities. What shocked me is that they kept on complaining anyway, and I still don't know why. So I thank the destiny, or the coincidences that brought me in Changchun: I learned to appreciate the smallest actions, to face bigger difficulties, to find out new things by myself and learning to know them better. When I left Italy I didn't know anything, if not just at an academic level, about China and Chinese people. I didn't know what I could have expected and, even if I think I understood this huge and mysterious culture, I just know a little part of it, and I have a lot more to learn. What I realized is that there are many aspects I can't stand and which would bring me not to integrate in a society like this; but at the same time there are other aspects which I admire. Thanks to this incredible adventure, I can finally say that the more I travel, the more I see many beautiful places. The more I know about new cultures and the more I can appreciate my mother country. Travelling makes you appreciate what you have, and it encourages you to experience with your own eyes different situations, with the curiosity of a traveller, not of a tourist.