

**UNIVERSITY OF JOHANNESBURG
CONFUCIUS INSTITUTE**

ENCOUNTER WITH CHINA



Reflections on the 2018 UJ-Nanjing Tech Confucius Institute Winter Camp

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Cover: The UJCI Winter Camp Group at Nanjing Tech University, December 2018.

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The UJCI Winter Camp Group at Xuanau Lake, in good spirits despite the bitter cold.

Introduction

In December 2018, 13 students associated with the UJ Confucius Institute (UJCI) spent almost two weeks at a Confucius Institute Winter Camp in China. The group included undergraduate and postgraduate students as well as high school students attending outreach Mandarin classes at St John's College in Johannesburg. They were accompanied by two local lecturers, Ms Yu Xi and Ms Zhang Khun. The group explored two of China's most famous cities, undergoing, as one student put it, a "crash course in 5 000 years of Chinese history" in the process.

The tour began on 10 December with a week-long stay in China's capital of Beijing. While temperatures reached minus 16 degrees Celsius, the students enjoyed warm Chinese hospitality. Encouraged by their tour guide, Ms Bai, they ventured out to see the sights, learning about the emperors and empresses of the past, and drinking in the cultural experience that is modern Beijing.

They had a packed agenda. On a typical day, the group would leave their lodgings at nine in the morning and return at six in the evening. They visited Tiananmen Square; the Palace Museum; the Capital Museum, which contains a wealth of historical artefacts; the Summer Palace, first built in 1750; the Bird's Nest and Water Cube (built for the 2008 Beijing Olympics); the

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The UJCI Winter Camp Group on the steps of the Nanjing Tech library.

Beijing Science and Technology Museum; the Beijing section of the Great Wall of China; Confucius Institute Headquarters, where they interacted with a high-tech learning environment, and studied ancient Chinese philosophy; the Confucian Temple, which also served as the Imperial College for future emperors; and the Beijing Zoo, where they saw pandas.

The tour concluded with a visit to Hutong, Beijing's late Imperial neighbourhood that is still inhabited by private families. The excursions were interspersed with visits to China's world-famous markets, where the students could view and purchase souvenirs and gifts, and practise their negotiating skills.

Leap into the future

The coexistence of past and present did not escape the students, many of whom marvelled at China's leap into the future while still being anchored in the splendours of its past and the insights of its customs and traditions; where one can find a Starbucks in the same street as stalls selling traditional Chinese delicacies, and where one can rent a bicycle or motorbike for 45 minutes with a phone app for less than ten rands.

The students took away memories of cultural immersion, including traditional Chinese food (ranging from Peking Duck to dumplings, noodles, pork and tofu), and became familiar with the origins of Beijing, thanks to the depth of historical knowledge displayed by their tour guide, and the richness of the museums, palaces and monuments.

While the group's experience of Beijing was unforgettable, it had to end on 16 December, as another great Chinese city awaited them. On that Saturday afternoon, they dashed off on a

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high-speed train to Nanjing, home to the UJ's strategic partner and co-patron of the UJ Confucius Institute, Nanjing Tech University in Jiangsu Province.

Another packed schedule followed, marked by interactions with local people and students at the university. Among others, students held discussions with their Nanjing Tech counterparts about their lives in their respective countries, with each group talking about their backgrounds and experiences, and explored a common diversity -- with South Africa and China having 11 and 56 languages respectively, and facing similar challenges going into the 21st century which require cross-national collaboration.

Chinese culture and virtual conference

The group was exposed to Chinese tea culture, Hanfan traditional clothing, calligraphy and paper cutting. They also visited the university's Red Cross Society and engineering department, and participated in a virtual conference with students in the United States about the challenges of studying abroad. The group also toured the city of Nanjing, an earlier capital of China, and saw the Nanjing Museum.

Welcoming the students back from their tour, UJCI co-directors Prof Peng Yi and Dr David Monyae expressed their gratitude to their co-organisers in Beijing and Nanjing Tech University, Ms Liu Guoxin and Ms Shao Min, as well as Ms Yu Xi and Ms Zhang Khun.

Following their return, the students were nostalgic about China, and impressed with what they saw. Lucky Mamela, a master's student in engineering at UJ, said: "We greatly appreciate the warm welcome we received from a range of diverse people as well as the Confucius Institute as a whole."

Journalism student Ashley Rafferty expressed "a huge thanks to the organisers, the funders, tour guides, UJCI, Nanjing Tech University, new friends, and everyone who managed to make this camp successful", adding that it was a "life-changing experience".

Warren Masombuka, a senior student at St John's and a member of its Mandarin Club, said the trip had transformed his understanding of the Chinese people: "We have come to realise that in many ways they are just like us, and have the same hopes and aspirations as we do."

Reflections on the tour by six students follow.



Njabulo Kalisa at the Beijing section of the Great Wall.

All the Way to Beijing

Njabulo Kalisa

In these modern times we are living in, it is exciting to experience different cultures and to learn about different histories stretching back three millennia. Beijing, the capital city of China, is rich in breath-taking architecture – perfectly preserved historical buildings, as well as beautiful modern buildings. I was blessed to mingle with the people of Beijing, and share their daily journeys and other experiences.

Given that we had left South Africa in high summer, it was tough to arrive at the Beijing Airport and adjust to a brutal minus six degrees. We woke up every day to a new experience, including the food, which was very different from our typical pap and stew. It was interesting to see how the Chinese prioritise eating and how they ensured that, before eating, each of us drank a glass of warm water. They believe it has various digestive advantages.

Fuel-efficient transport

Eating with chopsticks from dishes circulating on a round table was more challenging than expected. During our travels around the city, we got to see the common means of transport on silent and fuel-efficient scooters, cutting down on pollution and reducing noise levels during busy times. The subway was another amazing experience, and we could hardly believe that we could travel around at a cost of two yuan – equal to about four rands. The subways are connected to shopping malls, which is an extraordinary concept – this means that people don't

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have to use cars or other vehicles to do their shopping, and all they need to do is use the subway. During our day-to-day excursions, we quickly discovered that many Chinese people have not been exposed to people of different races, so it was really interesting to see their reactions to our presence, and their eagerness to be photographed with us. This was strange at first, but we quickly got used to it.

One of the most challenging things was communication, since most local people do not speak English. Our main method of communication was basic Mandarin, with Google Translate and sign language lending a helping hand. Even though local people were very friendly, they were constantly on their phones, making it a bit difficult to communicate with them, since we did not know too much Mandarin. We came to realise that speaking and understanding the local language was vital.

Something else that took us out of our comfort zone was the toilets. They are not the modern western toilets we have grown used to, but more like the 'long drop' toilets in South African rural areas in that they involve squatting. Perhaps they have endured because this has health advantages as well.

Local business were the same in some ways, and different in others. Depending on the shops, we could bargain with the shop owners, sometimes bringing down the prices by as much as two thirds. This meant that the volume of goods you could purchase largely depended on your negotiating skills.

Shopping with WeChat

Clothing was relatively cheap, in the right shops at least. Underground shops were good, as they were cheaper, and suited student budgets. Another extremely interesting feature was the almost universal use of a cell phone app called WeChat to pay for items, instead of using cash. The app is managed by the government, which means that hacking it is close to impossible. This includes vending machines, which don't take cash, but present a QR code for scanning with WeChat instead. This really was mind-boggling.

There were cute little toddlers wherever we went, attesting to the recent abolition of the one family, one child policy. Visiting Tiananmen Square, the Forbidden City, and the Great Wall made me more aware of the importance of history. Learning about the times of the Emperors and how people lived then was very interesting, and informed our understanding of China and its people today.

Everywhere in the city, there were always policemen and women on standby, ready to take care of their people at all times, no matter the hour of the day. This also meant that shops could stay open late without having to worry about being robbed. Moreover, longer business and trading hours have helped to stimulate China's impressive economic growth.

All in all, visiting China was a truly extraordinary experience. Seeing people living very different lives from our own, but making it work in similar terms from day to day, broadened our horizons, and taught us to be more open-minded. One day, I will return to China, but next time I will be ready.



Lara van der Walt on the Beijing section of the Great Wall of China.

Two weeks of adjusting to China

Lara van der Walt

OUR time in China was filled with adventure and wonder, but did not come without its challenges. We had to adapt very rapidly to a completely different way of life. Even everyday activities such as going out of doors was a challenge, with temperatures as low as minus 15 degrees Celsius.

On our first day in Beijing, we went to Tiananmen Square. It was beautiful, big, and VERY COLD! We were all warned about the cold, but I don't think any of us were ready for the reality of it. Getting onto the bus or going into a building or shop was such a relief. The second week in Nanjing was much warmer, with temperatures ranging from six degrees Celsius to 15 degrees, and after our freezing week in Beijing it felt like 30 degrees.

We learned very early on that you are supposed to drink a cup of hot water before a meal, on the grounds that it warms your stomach, and helps it stretch when you eat. Our tour guide in Beijing, Fang Fang, taught us that drinking warm water solves all sorts of problems.

Guardian angel

Fang Fang was our guardian angel and our best friend. She went out of her way to make our trip the best. We all knew we could go to her with any problem or question, and she would always help us. There was a sense of safety in seeing her bunny through the crowds. She taught us about Chinese history and culture, not only the lives and times of the ancient Chinese emperors, but also modern-day life in this beautiful country.

The language barrier was a big challenge. We all could speak some Mandarin, but we struggled to have conversations. Many people spoke some English, and if we needed any help we could

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just ask one of our guides, or our lecturers Jasmine and Grace, who were always there for us. We communicated with others mostly through a combination of our basic Mandarin, the limited English of local people, and many hand gestures.

The next big challenge was eating a meal. We were treated to such amazing meals throughout our tour. We sat at large round tables with a rotating lazy Susan in the middle. A variety of dishes was placed on the table, and we got to taste each of them. Some flavours were familiar, but others were completely new to us. Due to the wide variety of dishes, there was always something for everyone. Of course, every meal started with a cup of warm water or tea, and most ended with fruits, like dragon fruit and watermelon. We had eel soup, and lots of tofu, and ate Peking Duck at a restaurant famous for serving it in Beijing. I was surprised to learn that the food in China is not at all like the Chinese food we know in South Africa. Eating with chopsticks was one of our biggest challenges. But we got better at it as time went by, and by the end of our tour we eating our meals with ease.

The local people made us feel like celebrities. Everyone wanted to take pictures of us or with us, and they were all so kind and made us feel so welcome. One of the highlights of our trip was when we went into a bar in Beijing, and there was live music. While we were sitting down and looking at the menu, the singer started singing 'Gei wo yi ge wen', which we had learnt in class, and we all sang along. I think the artist was completely shocked. I think we all felt part of their culture for those few minutes.

Three days at Nanjing Tech

During our second week, we spent three days at Nanjing Tech University. This was also a highlight for me. By that time we had adjusted to the weather and the food, and had learnt a lot about Chinese history and culture. Now, however, we got to spend time with students our own age. We learned a lot from them, and also got a chance to teach them about our own cultures and languages. We socialised with them, heard their stories, and shared our own. We sang songs together and exchanged WeChat numbers so that we could stay in contact after the tour was over. They made us feel so welcome on their campus, and were eager to learn from us and share experiences, just as we were eager to learn from them.

On the second day at the university, we had a few cultural experiences that were amazing. We learned about the tea drinking rituals. We also learned about Hanfu clothing, and some of us even got the opportunity to try on some traditional Hanfu outfits. Next up was a calligraphy course, during which we all tried to write some Chinese characters. The students showed us how to write names and phrases, and we even got a brush as a gift at the end. Lastly, we were given a paper cutting course during which each of us chose a picture to cut out. All the students who taught us these crafts that play important roles in their culture were kind and patient.

Our 14-day journey through China involved many challenges. We had to adapt very quickly to a completely different reality than the one we were used to back home. We got to learn about a very rich culture, and I for one felt immersed in it by the end of the trip. Adapting to and surviving in this strange new country was made so much easier by our amazing lecturers, tour guides, the wonderful faculty and students at Nanjing Tech, the kind locals we met along the way, and of course the amazing group I was privileged to be a part of. A group that I am now proud to call my friends.



Brandan van Deventer and other group members at the Summer Palace in Beijing.

Four sites that left lasting impressions

Brendan van Deventer

WE were all hugely excited about the prospect of finally seeing the Great Wall of China. The morning air was crisp and cold, but not as unbearable as the intense jaw-numbing cold we experienced at the Forbidden City. The bus ride to the Wall was filled with anticipation, although many of us were half asleep -- catching up on sleep lost as we recovered from jet lag.

James Rumsey and I planned to make as much progress on the Wall as possible. However, after a few steps, I knew this would be a major challenge. The steps changed from gigantic ledges to thin slates, and were a nightmare to navigate. It was hard, gruelling work, but when we reached the Fifth Tower and looked down over the vista below, I knew it was all worth it, and it inspired me to reach the top.

What surprised me was the sheer magnitude of the Wall -- the way it twisted and rolled through the mountains as far as the eye could see. In fact, it was not as impressive as the immense surrounding mountains. This really brought into perspective how small we are compared to this vast, beautiful world. I wish I could spend more time in those mountains. It was such a contrast to the busy streets of Beijing -- quiet, and surrounded by nature and those epic peaks. I will remember this beautiful experience forever.

The Forbidden City

Suddenly, after being at the other side of the world, the Forbidden City was just a hop, skip and jump away! After a short bus trip we arrived at Tiananmen Square, buzzing with excitement and enthusiasm. We were excited about our first day in China, and exploring its history, culture

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and food. We were transported by the amazing sights -- we could not believe our eyes, and could only feel a sense of awe. Our excitement was soon tempered by the staggering cold and strong wind. I could certainly not wear my plakkies. However, as we walked around the square, its sheer size impressed itself on me, and the cold took a back seat to the amazing view of the square itself and the gigantic walls of the Forbidden City.

The Summer Palace

We visited the Summer Palace in beautiful weather, featuring a gray-blue sky with just a mild chill in the air, a welcome change after the cold and pain of the Forbidden city. What initially struck me was the sheer size of the frozen lake and the beautiful temples looking down upon it.

I was very impressed with our guide's knowledge about the history of the site, including the Dragon Lady, and how she could answer any question we asked her. But more than its historical significance, I appreciated the Summer Palace simply because of its beauty. The air was fresh, and it was very peaceful. I would have liked to spend more time there and seen all the statues, bridges and temples. I also loved the garden design, and its close relation to nature. The huge rock formations were amazing, as I had never seen anything like them in South Africa. It was truly a harmonious mix of humankind and nature, embedded in a deep culture.

My favourite part was walking down the long corridor right next to the lake and looking up at the magnificently painted ceiling. It was beautiful, and what made it really special was that it told many stories of mythology, history and nature. It was a profound experience

We spent three days at Nanjing Tech University, and each day I was more and more impressed by its size and beauty. On the first day, a student took us on a tour around the campus. The first thing I noticed was the trees -- there were trees everywhere, and all their bases were painted white, complementing the white buildings.

We first visited the university library, which was as big as our whole school, if not bigger. It was a gigantic white building in the middle of the campus. From there we went to an opening ceremony, where we had tea and were welcomed to Nanjing Tech University. We talked about relations between China and South Africa, and were encouraged to build bridges between these two countries.

The next day, we attended a variety of interesting classes and discussions. It started with a class about Chinese clothes called Hanfu -- we learnt about the history of Hanfu, their benefits, and how they have been adapted to the modern age. Next was a Chinese calligraphy class, where three students showed us how to use a special paint brush and black ink to write various Chinese characters. We learned how to write the word 'hope', and our own names. Next up was a paper cutting class, where we could choose a picture to trace and cut out with a sharp blade. This took a lot of time and patience, but when we had made the last cut, and unfolded the final product, it was all worth it. We also visited the University's Red Cross programme, and were fortunate to view a demonstration of what Red Cross members would do in the case of an earthquake.

The overall experience at Nanjing Tech University was very educational and enlightening. I really enjoyed learning about Chinese culture and history.



Mzwandile Mahlangu at the Great Wall.

China – a land of opportunity

Mzwandile Mahlangu

Before starting to study Mandarin, and travelling to Beijing and Nanjing, the only thing I knew about China was that it is where everything is made. With one of the largest populations in the world, I thought the streets and pavements would be jam-packed with people, making their way to school and work and going about their daily lives. Some of my assumptions were correct -- people did go about their daily lives, but not in the way I had imagined. The places we went to were not overcrowded. To my surprise, many places in Beijing and Nanjing were similar to places in Johannesburg and Tshwane. After realising this, the idea of studying and working in China became more feasible.

Great opportunities

In Beijing, one of the first things I noticed was the large number of banks. While on our way from the airport to the hotel, we passed a bank branch almost every fifteen minutes. Large shopping malls were also a common sight. These places would offer a great opportunity for South African university graduates and professionals looking for international experience and exposure in the finance, technology and retail fields. However, they would need to overcome two obstacles: learning Mandarin and Chinese culture, and competing with Chinese graduates.

Mandarin is not an easy language to learn because it differs from many other languages. It is a tonal language, and has a pictorial writing system. This intimidates many people, and is one of the reasons why many people are reluctant to learn it. However, understanding, speaking

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and reading Mandarin is essential for any person who wants to pursue a professional career in China. Almost everything – including road and other signs, rail maps and food menus – is written in Mandarin. While some English translations are on offer, they are often inaccurate and misleading.

Nanjing is like Beijing in many ways. Public transport systems are extensive and efficient, and historical monuments are found across the city. We got to spend a lot of time with students at Nanjing Tech University. We engaged in conversations and were treated to cultural experiences ranging from Chinese tea culture to Chinese opera, which was my favourite. We got to spend time on a university campus, and experience university life. The students were similar to their counterparts in South Africa; many were from other provinces, and some were less privileged than others. But all had come to university to get a good education, thus enabling them and their families to live a better life. They are hardworking and dedicated.

Competitive environment

Anyone from outside seeking opportunities to live and work in China would have to compete against these and other Chinese students. This will not be easy, because they are native Mandarin speakers who have grown up in a stimulating and competitive environment. At the same time, this challenge would not be impossible to surmount.

Beijing is a beautiful city with a long and well-documented history. It boasts some of the greatest historical monuments in the world, including the Great Wall of China, the Forbidden City, the Summer Palace, and the Bird's Nest.

It also offers many opportunities. Its affordable and efficient transport system allows you to go anywhere at any time, and innovation and development is evident everywhere, including people on motorbike trucks delivering products within minutes of them being ordered online.

Streets in the busy Hutong Nanluoguxiang area are lined with shops selling anything from "choose your own design" t-shirts to small shops filled with people buying multi-flavoured milk tea. Provided they put some effort into studying and practising Mandarin, and studying Chinese culture, those seeking opportunities in Beijing are sure to find them.

Nanjing also has plenty of monuments and institutes dedicated to the preservation and study of history and culture, including the Nanjing Museum. Through multiple bursary programmes, Nanjing Tech University offers great opportunities for those who want to improve their knowledge of Mandarin and Chinese culture. The university also offers meaningful opportunities for students and scholars to work together, share ideas, and develop relationships that could benefit China as well South Africa.



Lucky Mamela on the Beijing section of the Great Wall.

A stroll through the Confucius Institute headquarters

Lucky Mamela

The People's Republic of China has shown great progress towards adapting to the Fourth Industrial Revolution, among others by utilising artificial intelligence, and incorporating this in the culture and daily lives of its people. This includes technologies for the automatic translation of a wide range of world languages into pinyin as well as Chinese characters.

When one walks into the Confucius Institute headquarters in Beijing, also known as Hanban, one immediately sense a special atmosphere, created by all the dedicated people who work there. There are flags for all the countries in the world where the Confucius Institute is to be found.

The Confucius Institute is a non-profit public educational organisation affiliated with the Chinese Ministry of Education. Its purpose is to promote and encourage the Chinese language and culture, support local Chinese teaching internationally, and facilitate cultural exchange programmes. The institutes operate in cooperation with local affiliated colleges and universities around the world, provides them with financial support, and shares the costs of all CI initiatives.

Hanban also features a fascinating display of the latest Chinese technologies. This includes devices that take pictures of people's faces and print them out as if they were wearing traditional Chinese clothes. Then there are various interesting electronic games that can be played in different ways to achieve a common objective, namely to promote Chinese culture, while encouraging the usage of new technologies.

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Another device on display takes pictures and prints them out together with the signature of the person taking the picture. There are also extensive collections of books about Chinese history, including the National Cultural Revolution.

Why the Confucius Institute matters for South Africa

When South Africa joined BRICS, it entered an alliance that opened the way to trade, industrial, academic, commercial, political, and social agreements and exchanges. The PRC became an important strategic partner, and growing numbers of South Africans developed an interest in learning Mandarin. Moreover, China has become an increasingly important developmental player in the whole of Africa.

Why learn Mandarin?

Many leading business people worldwide are arranging for their children to learn Mandarin, and learn about Chinese culture, not only because this is the most widely spoken language in the world, but also because they understand that people who speak Mandarin have a huge advantage in tapping into the Chinese market.

In terms of business, the ability to speak Mandarin makes it much easier to develop crucial relationships and interact with other people. Also, the PRC is a wonderful travel destination, and getting getting around and finding your way is much easier if you can speak Mandarin.

Chinese cultural history dates back thousands of years, and learning some Mandarin provides a valuable gateway to deepening an understanding of Chinese music, theatre, architecture, cuisine, clothing, and other aspects of its culture.

As noted earlier, the Chinese have developed new technologies for learning Mandarin, which makes this much easier and faster. Following our journey to China, I would like to convey that this is a more rewarding exercise than most people imagine.

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