Students to traverse China for credit

BY DANIEL VITMAN
FOR THE COLLEGIAN

In May, students will have the chance to traverse the Great Wall of China, tour a futuristic eco-city and explore the 600-year-old Forbidden City all through Xini Wu's three-credit ENGR 118 class.

The class, which runs from May 14 to June 6, according to Wu, has an engineering focus, though students from any major can partake in the abroad opportunity.

"It's a very beneficial experience," Wu said. "Some of my students graduated in accounting, and they still said it was unbelievable."

While the course is open to all, there is an emphasis on global applications of engineering, Wu said. Wu said since the official class began in 2009, he has taken students to both ancient and modern engineering marvels, some of which include the 2012 Olympic arena nicknamed "The Bird's Nest" and the Three Gorges Ship Lock, a five-stage dam that changes the Yangtze river by 490 feet.

Aside from the engineering marvels, students also have the chance to experience rural China and see a broad spectrum of Chinese culture. Lola Buonomo attended the trip this past summer, and said the most incredible part was meeting Wu's family in rural China.

"In rural China, it's very different. There is no standard food store where you can pick up food 24/7," Buonomo (senior-mechanical engineering) said. "We had bamboo shoots at the dinner they prepared because his sister had climbed the mountain and picked them fresh for us. It is just incredible the simple things that we take for granted."

Opportunities like these are the ones that allow students to have a unique experience that differentiates the ENGR 118 trip from a typical tourist vacation to China.

"If you ever want the opportunity to completely engulf yourself in a foreign culture this is the study abroad for you," Buonomo said. "I can't think of a more enjoyable way to travel to a foreign country than with 25 fellow Penn State students and your own personal tour guides."

Wu said this trip provides a unique chance for Penn State students to interact with students in China. During their time abroad, students will accompany Wu to the China University of Mining and Technology where they will have the chance to meet the university president, vice president and students. During the visit to the university, students will also get to watch a demonstration on calligraphy, Wu said.

"People can easily learn technical stuff," Wu said. "But to learn cultural issue and history in a classroom setting is hard. Being there, integrating in society, immersed in culture... you learn better. You never forget that way."

Connor Lavelle said the experience he gained from the ENGR 118 class far surpassed any travel experience he could have planned on his own. He said Wu's class wasn't simply a surface glance at tourist China.

"ENGR digs deeper than that," Lavelle (junior-industrial engineering) said. "Xini's connections led us to have the craziest adventures while learning at the same time."

Lavelle said visiting China in such an intimate setting provides cultural perspective. While visiting the Great Wall of China and the Terra Cotta Warriors was all impressive, especially from an engineer's perspective, Lavelle remarked that no aspect of the trip was bigger than the cultural immersion, which allowed Lavelle to gain a "profound respect for the country and people of China."

"The media portrayal of China in America gives off an unfortunate bias," Lavelle said. "I knew I had to be open minded and let it all in."

We recognizes a pattern among his students after each trip is over:

"The students tell me that they would not change this experience for anything else," he said. "I'm so happy we positively impacted students who participate in this program."

Applications for the summer of 2015 trip are now available online at sites.psu.edu/china, which also has all the information about ENGR 118.