

My name is Eliot Cummings, I am a freshman at Western Sierra Collegiate Academy, and I received the full \$2,000 scholarship for the 2019 JSSCC Youth Ambassador trip. Thank you very much for your donation to JSSCC. My trip to China this summer was a memorable and breathtaking experience; I loved every minute of it. In those ten days, I learned more about Chinese culture than I could have ever learned through a textbook. I saw landmarks and monuments more beautiful than any picture could have portrayed it. Essentially, real life exposure of China is simply irreplaceable. It brings a factor of learning only this trip could provide. The cities of Beijing, Jinan, and Qifu each welcomed and introduced us to a different aspect of Chinese lifestyle. We toured Beijing, with its bustling energy and towering skyscrapers; Jinan, with its distinct style and grace; and Qifu with its timeless beauty and history. While every city fascinated me, what I loved most about this trip was the constant change and exposure we were fortunate enough to have. Never was I bored with any setting or felt like our group was missing out. Between Ms. Harimoto and our various tour guides' direction, we were given ten diverse and fun-packed days. Our group climbed a length of the Great Wall, visited Tiananmen Square, walked through the Forbidden City and into the Imperial Garden, dined lavishly at three incredible restaurants, and met our welcoming host families all in the span of two days— and yet we still found time to enjoy the commonplace activities of Beijing. I loved the parts of our trip where our group would walk down traditional Chinese streets, packed with stores and street vendors selling all sorts of trinkets.

Knowing select phrases while shopping made the process much easier. “这个多少钱, or how much is this,” I would say. I asked this often and drew excitement after hearing a response. It was then that I understood the fulfillment of intercultural communication, and why new language learners pursue this. Even communication as seemingly insignificant as my shopping experience makes the effort put in when learning a new language worthwhile. It was such a pleasure to be a part of a connecting language over one billion people share. I was reminded of my initial love towards Chinese class with Mrs. Peggy Kao and how enticing Chinese food, festivals, cities, etc. seemed. This interest motivated me in applying for the scholarship.

On day four of the trip, we took the high speed rail to Jinan in Shandong province. I was introduced to the Wang family: Mr. and Mrs. Wang and Jane, a seventh grader. Jane and I got along very well; she is very bright, and her English is nearly flawless. The Wang family took me to a mall and a Chinese hot pot restaurant. This was a completely foreign concept to me, but I ended up loving it. Later, and accustomed to my host house, Mrs. Wang was gracious enough to take me to Daming Lake, the scenic center of Jinan. She informed me of the history of the lake, the neighboring koi pond, and upon the sight of many couples posing around the lake, Mrs. Wang taught me about traditional Chinese wedding photo shoots, which take place the day before the ceremony itself. I then walked with Mrs. Wang through the heart of Jinan. I noticed many women carrying umbrellas as protection from the sun, and pedestrians negotiating the price of merchandise sold on the street. I cherished the following days spent with my host family, as they were extremely kind and hospitable. At this point in our trip, I played a Guzheng, saw the Jinan Olympic Sports Center Stadium, and even tried starfish (among other exotic dishes of seafood).

On day six of the trip, my host family and I parted ways, and I was reunited with my group. We proceeded to tour and perform at two middle/elementary schools. The kids were delightful, and the school board accommodating. The schedule, campus, and daily regimen surprised us all. I especially liked watching their singing and marching band performances, each carefully rehearsed and perfectly enacted. Some of the students even requested our WeChats to keep in contact. We waved goodbye to the students as we drove in our bus towards Qifu, the birthplace of Confucius. In Qifu, we toured the Temple of Confucius, family residence, and tomb. I left with a better understanding of Confucianism and why China idolizes him. It was a great way to conclude our excursion. In the journey back to America and the months following it, I reflected on the trip and how lucky I am to have had this incredible opportunity. My group was amazing; our hotels were exquisite. The scholarship I received from the JSSCC made this experience possible and ultimately, gifted me with the journey of a lifetime. This trip exceeded my expectations, and it's added to the fabric of my being. And for this, I thank the JSSCC and all of the donors who funded the scholarships. The JSSCC Youth Ambassador Program is beneficial and life changing. Thank you.