Week 3 saw for an exciting trip to Ping Yao to see the annual photography festival. It was our first trip abroad since arriving in Tianjin, and armed with two weeks of studying we were travelling without our reliable translator, Adam. With our trains and accommodation booked we set off immediately after classes. This involved a 30 minute taxi to Tianjin railway station, a 30 minute bullet train into Beijing, then another 30 minute taxi to Beijing West railway station, then a 1 hour wait there, then a 4 hour bullet train to Tai Yuan, then a 40 minute wait there, then a 2 hour normal train to the city of Ping Yao.

We were met by a friendly Chinese man from our Hotel, holding a sign reading ‘Danielle’ upside down. He asked us to follow him, and as we walked one of us pointed to a vehicle which could only be described as an elongated golf cart with 3 wheels, saying ‘How funny would it be if that was our car?’ Our chauffer then walked up to it and put the keys in the ignition and turned to us with a proud expression. We shared nervous laughs and climbed in. Sam sat towards the front as we expected the thing to flip with too much weight on the overhanging back seats. Our driver pushed that thing through unimaginably tight squeezes at phenomenal speeds, leaving me incapable of doing anything other than yell out of both ecstasy and horror. We arrived at our beautiful small hotel which was down an alleyway, out of the way and noise of the busy streets after a total travel time of approximately 10 hours.

We dropped our bags and left straight away to explore our new surroundings. Ping Yao is a gorgeous and ancient walled city, the sort of place that we fantasized about when back in Melbourne. The streets were alive and full of welcoming store owners selling all types of colourful clothing and antiques. We met with Giles who had participated in the same YAAD program the year before us and had since graduated from our photography program back home. He had photography in the Ping Yao festival, coincidentally the work that he shot whilst studying in Tianjin. We also met two students from Parsons in New York on our first night, and it was great to hear about their course first hand. Being in a new location and meeting new and interesting people gave us the strength to stay out quite late, however we slept very easily that night.

Giles showed us around the festival with his friend Hardy who was another Australian photography student studying his Honours at ANU in Canberra. We saw work by photographers from all over the globe, students and professionals, leaving us all with the hopes to be participants in the festival next year like Giles. That night I was given the opportunity to present my own work at a public showing, which was slowly translated for the mostly Chinese audience. The next day was spent seeing more work and a bit of shopping, with each of us practicing our bartering skills. There were hundreds of fellow photographers walking the streets, and the Chinese had a real fascination with us there. It seemed like no matter where I turned there was a camera pointed at me, from near or far.

But before we knew it, it was time to leave. We said our goodbyes and thankyous the night before as we had an early start and we packed our bags. We decided to hire a private car back to Tai Yuan as the connecting trains didn’t line up. It was another tiring 10 hour journey home, but we all had a lot to think about, and with our textbooks in hand it was a convenient chance for some study. It was certainly a rewarding trip, and one that we won’t quickly forget.

- Matt Jones

(Top four images by Matt Jones, bottom four by Danielle Basser)