In Beijing, when you hail a taxi, you raise your hand in the air and flap it up and down like you’re petting a dog. After nearly three months in China I could hail a mean taxi, but I could hardly get the driver to wait, the driver losing patience upon hearing my crude efforts in Mandarin, and the tones of the language being problematic as such: I was told one day by a Taiwanese friend that I said “kiss-kiss” each time I thought I was saying “please, please!” because the ching for “please” is a falling tone and the ching for “kiss” is rising, and I never did shake the feeling that a rising tone seemed most appropriate for a desperate plea anyway.

I spent early May to the end of July on the fifth ring road of Beijing, working in two different studios in the neighborhood of Caochangdi, an urban village made famous by Ai Wei Wei’s move to the district and its proliferation of galleries like Urs Meile and Pekin Fine Arts. I had a bicycle and lived in a high rise above a shopping mall just
south of the 798 Arts district. My bicycle ride to the studio took thirty minutes each way, but it afforded me a fascinating snapshot of the city--through the arts district so full of pedestrians it was like a Disney Land for art, through the throngs of other bikers on their daily commute, past a hundred neon signs and the smell of fried egg, red chilli and roasting peanuts.

The first section of my time in China was fairly structured-- I took an architecture class taught by UM/University of Southern California professors Mary-Ann Ray and Robert Mangurian called BASE (Beijing Architectural Studio Enterprise). The studio course analyzed the relationships between Beijing’s urban footprint, its satellite villages and China’s explosive development, and we went on site visits to neighborhoods around the city that had recently been demolished and were waiting, as flattened deserts, to eventually become high-rises, office parks or golf courses. Many of the projects worked on by the architecture students ranged from analyzing the geographic changes of the city from the last ten years, to documenting the possessions of residents in adjacent villages through photographs. I worked on a found-object project based on the idea of “neon archaeology.”

Our studio was a refurbished, vaulted hanger originally built in the 1950’s. Each student was given a bit of studio space and a desk and I took a small corner that gave me enough space to work but have some privacy as well. It was an open schedule, but we generally met in the
day about five days a week. The course included a weekly “Chinese Art History” class that was more like a conversation on contemporary Chinese art with the instructor than an academic course, but I loved it. It was taught by Valerie Wang, the wife of photographer Wang Ching Song, who has recently gained a great deal of international recognition for his gigantic photographs composed in film studios. The couple was based in Caochangdi. In our class, we candidly discussed the politics of art making in China and the ideological and practical concerns of artists working in a communist/capitalist arena. I was able to visit several artist studios, attended a handful of lectures by prominent Chinese artists and designers, and visited a number of exhibitions showing in Beijing by both emerging and established artists from the area and parts of Europe.

Though I was one of only two art majors of the architecture group, the structure of the class meshed well with my interests. At the mid and end point of the class, the BASE studio was cleared out for a public exhibition of the student’s work, and a huge group from Caochangdi and the nearby 798 arts district came. It was an exciting event, but equally exciting to run into so many committed artists and designers working in Beijing from all over the world--many visiting but many of them also living in Caochangdi.
In the second part of my trip, I was asked to work on an exhibition that a group of Chinese designers and Norwegian students were working on from Ai Wei Wei’s studio--the Gwangju Design Biennale. It was a project that Ai Wei Wei had agreed to curate the year prior, but he was put in jail for a good portion of its planning--which obviously caused a great (and terrifying) commotion on many levels. I joined the group a few weeks before his release, and it was an emotional frenzy once he was finally freed. I was so glad to have been able to meet him, and he was gracious even after all he’d been through for those last months. I’ve been a huge fan of his work for some time.

By my last two weeks in China, I was working around the clock with about five other designers on the Biennale (the rest of the participants were Skyping in from Norway, S. Korea and the US by then), but had to fly home before the culmination of the work because of my visa. The last of the work for the show I sent from The States, and the exhibit finally went up in September (and is still currently up) in Gwangju, S. Korea until the end of October.

China, for its duration, was an incredible experience, and I thank the School of Art & Design for their generosity with deepest gratitude. I learned so much and truly loved the country. Thank you.