

**Editor's Note:** Foundation scholarships enable Theta Chi students in many ways. The following story details how one such scholar became a student of the world, moving Theta Chi into an international setting. Corey Wielert is a multiple year winner of Foundation scholarships. In his article, he shows how his academic adventures allowed him to further his Theta Chi ideals and become "a promoter of knowledge, an advancer of culture and a builder of character."

It was less than a year ago that I began my adventures. As a brother of Theta Chi, a student at Missouri State University, and a citizen of the United States, I had the great opportunity to study in the Netherlands and the People's Republic of China for five months and two months, respectively.

**Exploring the unknown was my objective, but what followed within the next year was nothing I could have ever imagined.**

It had always been my dream to travel abroad, but the dream began to become a reality last year on a typical, rainy day in late March when I walked into the study abroad office at my university with few expectations, only the curiosity of a college student eager to travel. It was then that it came to me, "What better time to travel than during college?" Studying became the impetus for my decision to journey abroad, along with my strong desire to travel and inquisitive desire to learn about another culture. Given the travel opportunities, classes, city, and many other factors, Tilburg, Netherlands became the choice for my lengthy adventure to Europe. Leaving my friends and family behind wasn't easy. Additionally, the comfort of the American lifestyle, familiarity of the culture, and commonality of



Corey in Laoshen, China

# Into the Unknown

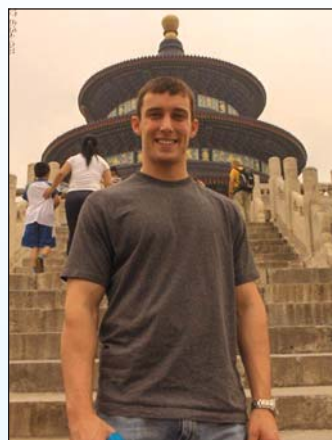
By Corey Wielert (Iota Beta/Missouri State '08)

the language made for a somewhat difficult departure. But all that disappeared once I boarded the plane. Twelve hours later, I arrived in Amsterdam knowing that the next five months would be like no other time in my life.

A short train ride took me to the quiet Dutch city of Tilburg, close to the Belgium border. The relatively peaceful, tranquil environment was flooded with bicyclers, the number of which I can only compare to that of the Tour de France. At no other time in my life have I seen so many people riding bicycles. From elderly couples and young children to families and college students, bikes were the main mode of transportation for many, including myself. A 23-minute bike ride from my apartment to the university took me through Dutch neighborhoods, shopping districts, and forests. I hadn't biked so much since I was 10 years old. Although the experience was an enjoyable one, the Dutch weather persistently tested my tolerance as rain was common and the bike rides were usually the worst around the time I needed to shop for groceries.

**Have you tried grocery shopping without knowing what you're buying?**

I do enjoy shopping for groceries, but I did become smarter the day I brought home pig's stomach. My Dutch wasn't good enough at that point to decipher what I was buying, but my dare-to-try-anything attitude made me realize maybe I should do a little more research the next time I went shop-



Corey Wielert in Beijing

ping. The one thing I could depend on tasting good was my weekly block of cheese. The Dutch pride themselves on their cheese and it's apparent why. My post-study snack every night brought me to the refrigerator in search of my delicious block of cheese.

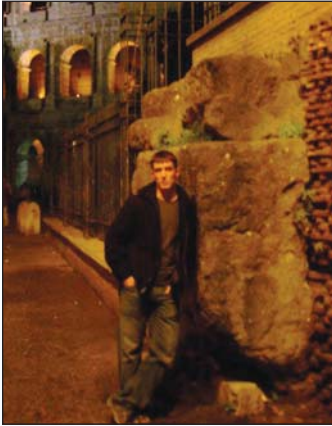
More than bikes and cheese, my five months in the Netherlands introduced me to a whole new world—a world with many diverse cultures, languages, and lifestyles. By far, the most valuable part of both my trips was the opportunity to meet students from all around the world. Yes, international students do attend our stateside universities, but it wasn't until I became one such student myself that I appreciated their presence. My three roommates, for example, were from Denmark, Bulgaria, and Hong Kong. By the end of our stay together, our daily discussions had led us to a better understanding of each other's culture and of one

another. I learned more about each of their cultures in a few weeks than I ever did throughout years of classroom education. It's this information that I used to understand the cultures of others, and it will be this information I intend on using throughout my life.

As I began to talk more about the cultures of others, I began talking about my own. It was meeting students from around the world and talking with them that not only gave me insight into their worlds, but helped me realize how they thought about ours. The five months I spent in Europe opened my eyes to the magnitude of differences around the world.

It was January, 2007 when I returned from Europe. Elevated and exhausted from my time overseas, I thought it would be a good idea to take some time off and continue my education back home. The semester was ending, so I began thinking of my summer plans. As any college student would do, I made a list of all my options: summer school, part-time job, or another internship. Thinking back from my time in the Netherlands, I knew I wanted to find another reason to travel. "Maybe I can learn Chinese," I told my mother over the phone. The hesitant and cautious response from her gave me some doubts about China, but her supportive attitude made me realize it was China I wanted to visit, and Chinese I wanted to learn.

Once again, my travels began. A trans-Pacific flight led me to Beijing where I spent the next three days touring. After learning how to use chopsticks on the flight to China, at least I could now successfully eat. It took me many tries, and a lap full of food, before I grasped how difficult it was to use chopsticks. So it was then that I asked an English-speaking local, "How come you use chopsticks knowing that a fork is so much easier?" "It's tradition," he replied.



Corey in Rome

From that moment, I knew the next two months would introduce me to a culture full of traditions foreign to me and so unique to the customs with which I grew up.

After touring Beijing, I spent many hours on a train to Qingdao, the city where I was to be study Chinese. Unlike the smaller Dutch city of Tilburg, Qingdao was a bustling port city of eight million people along the Yellow Sea in Shandong Province across from the Korean peninsula. As you can imagine, nothing would be the same for the next two months.

Classes began the next day, in which I was introduced to the interesting, but difficult language of Mandarin. I guess you could say I underestimated the intensity of this summer program, but with the passing of each week I became more fluent in the language. The first month was filled with much confusion and hopelessness, for there has never been a time in my life where I was so confused with my surroundings. But there was a sense of achievement and fulfillment that I received after communicating with the locals. Of course I was laughed at, but I didn't care, as long as they understood me.

My time in China, like the Netherlands, brought me closer to many international students. I will never forget the daily hikes to our

## The lessons and leadership I gained throughout my time as a brother of Theta Chi and as an American university student tremendously helped.

favorite restaurant around the corner or the weekly trips to the Western bars downtown. We learned so much from each other. Although arguments regularly occurred, it was these arguments and conversations that made us realize how different we all were. To this day, I remain in communication with the friends I met in the Netherlands and China, and, hopefully, one day we will meet up again.

### It was traveling that had sparked my interest in these endeavors.

Not traveling in the sense of 12-hour flights, six-hour train rides, or 14-hour bus trips, but traveling in the sense of walking along the streets of a foreign city. Whether it was stargazing at St. Paul's Cathedral, napping in the Roman Forum, or relaxing on the beaches of Barcelona, it was traveling that kept my curiosity alive. I made it a goal of mine to travel every weekend while in the Netherlands. One might think this would be a costly goal and they would be right. But, never underestimate the minimalist nature of a college student. Students are known for their cunning, yet simplistic ways of finding deals, and I did just that. The low cost transportation, as well as hostel living and budget foods helped keep my goal attainable. Living in a hostel nearly every weekend, while having a diet consist of only bread, ham, and water did have its unpleasant moments, but it was all for good fun. Every trip ended with many great stories to tell, but it wasn't until my arrival back to the United States that I could share them all.

I've always been amazed at how other societies can develop so differently than ours. I learned about

the lives of people living all over the world, how they spend their days, what they view as important in life, and how they analyze other cultures. But more surprisingly, I learned a lot more about my own country.

### I don't think I've ever talked more about the United States—its history and politics—as I did while studying abroad in Europe, and China was no different.

The two things I spent most of my time talking about in the Netherlands, as well as in China, were American foreign policy and McDonalds. Curiosity overwhelms the minds of foreigners. Their interest in understanding the American lifestyle was not so oblivious to me until my time abroad. Whatever it was I talked about, I knew there was more of a curiosity about our culture than vice versa.

It was less than a year ago that this all occurred. The lessons and leadership I gained throughout my time as a brother of Theta Chi and as an American university student tremendously helped. As a representative of both, I took pride in



Corey in Paris

what each aspect endeavors to support, "...a promoter of knowledge, an advancer of culture, and a builder of character." Studying abroad does just that: it puts one in an unfamiliar environment, forcing them to depend on those principles that encourage understanding. As I begin my senior year of college in pursuit of law school, I look back and appreciate every day I was abroad. It was difficult at times, but worth it in the end; and if there was anything I would have to say to my fellow Brother in Theta Chi or my fellow American, it would be to recommend travel abroad. Nothing has been more fulfilling throughout my college career than that, so please take advantage of the opportunities before you and dare to venture into the unknown. ■



Corey in Amsterdam.