



“Best of China”

The following piece is written by Katie Huston, one of the 12 Presidential Scholars who participated on the 2004 Student Leaders Exchange.

Today, six months after my return, I open the folder of digital photos on my computer labeled “Best of China” and marvel at what I see. Was I really there?

It’s almost hard to believe, but I can still feel my quads burn as I climb eagerly up and down the Great Wall of China... see the sun rising before 5 in the morning over the city of Shanghai, already so alive with bicycles and vendors on the streets... taste the dumplings we made minutes earlier with students in Nanjing, or the fresh hot sweet bread we purchased for only *yi jiao* on an early morning walk, or the huge juicy white peaches left for us each day in our Beijing hotel... smell the thunderstorm approaching as I watch classical Chinese performances in a gorgeous Suzhou garden... hear the brilliance and passion in my host Hui Yin’s *er hu* performance, or the recording of “Qing Ba Wode Ge” and the individual voices of my fellow students over the music, sweetly out-of-tune but earnest and eager to share and to learn.

When I first got home, I overflowed with a new kind of knowledge, vastly different from and far more interesting and relevant than anything I’d learned in books or on TV: knowledge borne of immersing myself in another culture, of living with Chinese hosts, of asking questions, of connecting with people. The evening my parents brought me home from the airport, I couldn’t wait to pop the CD of photos into my computer and tell them about my experiences; after two solid hours, we had only gotten through half the pictures.

Six months later, I can no longer remember whether we attended the Ming Tombs and the acupuncture clinic on the same day; it’s harder to recall which city was known for which “local specialty” (I think we had dozens, most of them delicious); and though I can still write my two-character Chinese name given to me by my first Chinese host, I’ve forgotten the characters for the Chinese transliteration of my English name, which my second host taught me after we saw it in a newspaper photo caption. However, moments and experiences are etched in my mind; here I’ll share only a few.

In Wuxi, I practiced the characters of my Chinese name in my journal, over and over, in front of the TV. While my host showered, I scooted next to her mother to show her my work; she smiled and took the pen to show me how to write it properly. I can still hear her repeating it over and over, “Meng Xi,” laughing kindly at my inability to hear the subtle differences between her pronunciation and mine.

In Nanjing, my host Fanny and I spent four hours shopping at the night market; we took a taxi home rather than the group tour bus because we were having way too much fun to go home. I remember the way we laughed when we got lost together on a curvy side street, the way we hunted for a perfect pair of shoes for her, the way she ran off to get a water bottle for the sweaty craftsman as he meticulously carved my name into a stone chop.

In Beijing, we waited in line for 45 minutes to see Mao’s Memory Hall; I was astonished to see hundreds of Chinese behaving as though on a religious pilgrimage, wide-eyed children bearing flags and parents cradling flowers in their arms to leave near someone I had always thought of as an indescribably evil tyrant. I remember the conversation I had with Hannah Ma, a Chinese-American student in our group whose parents lived in China through the Cultural Revolution, and Jon Lowet, our group leader who lived in Beijing at the time of the Tiananmen Square crackdown in 1989. I was fascinated by the insight I gained from their perspectives and arrested by the realization that the Western way of looking at the world, of judging people, is not the only way.



When I fell down at the Beijing roller disco (awesome final-night-in-China activity!), before I could even prop myself up, a young Chinese woman held out her hand, her smile glowing brighter than her white sweater. We may have exchanged eight words we both understood, but we skated hand-in-hand for fifteen minutes. I can still hear my laughter blending with hers when we were joined by a Chinese man, a far better skater than either of us, who took my other hand and pulled us behind as he wove agilely through the crowds; I can still remember how fast we skated, that shared thrill that transcended any language barrier.

Six months later, I have a better sense of how my trip to China has changed me.

I'm more adventurous, more independent. Before the trip, I ordered a grilled chicken sandwich nearly every time I ate out; now when I'm presented food that looks strange, I remind myself I've tried much stranger: duck tongue, shark fin soup, snail, and about three dozen delicacies I had no name for. I'm more eager to embrace new experiences. Before the trip, I knew little about China and had no particular interest in it above my curiosity about all other nations; now my head turns whenever I hear about China. After spending time in a nation where everyone stared at me for being white, where I was often linguistically isolated from everyone but my host, I'm no longer afraid to do things on my own.

Traveling to China has also given me a completely different outlook on America and my life here. When I've traveled to different parts of the United States and Canada, I've noticed and marveled at what was different; in China, we delighted in anything that was the same. I suppose that suggests that I was going through some culture shock while I was in China, but that doesn't compare to the feeling I had once I returned home. Having experienced a different lifestyle with my Chinese host families and having learned about China's vastly different political, economic, and social paradigms, I now see my American home through new eyes. I can more critically evaluate my lifestyle and my nation. I realize how petty my problems can be and how much bigger the world is. Yet at the same time I've stopped taking many things for granted. I waste less water and use fewer paper towels. Even as I can be a critic, I recognize what is good about the political and social framework within which I live.

I'm still not certain what I want to do with my life, but my trip to China this summer made me realize that I want to interact and learn on a global level, and it inspired me to make a difference in the world, somehow.