**Emma Wahl**

**China**

“How is it?,” everyone at the table asked me. I had just spooned some purple sticky rice into my mouth and was now chewing it slowly, relishing the texture and flavor. Despite the nausea from the jet-lag that came with the 13 hour plane ride, I looked down at my plate filled with slices of duck, fried bread, stewed cabbage, noodles, and other diverse dishes I had never laid eyes on before. As I took another spoonful of sticky rice, I looked up, and gave a big smile. That was the first night of our small group’s experience during the last week of March, 2010, in the vast Southeast Asian country called China.

Since I had only read about China in textbooks, actually standing in the middle of a busy sidewalk in Shanghai was unfathomable. It never really hit me that I was on the opposite side of the world, about six thousand seven hundred miles from Cleveland. Throughout the trip, I noticed many things pertaining to the way Americans live their routine-based lives, such as our use of regular cars, traffic lights, billboards, and the layout of our cities. What really struck me was how different that country was compared to the one we live in. First of all, China is home to approximately 1.45 billion people. Because of the current overpopulation issue, pollution has become a huge problem that China has had to deal with for many years. For centuries, China has been centered around a structured society, which focuses mainly on family, tradition, and hard work. Though everyone our group encountered was amiable, most people we saw walking down the street were not smiling; how they carry themselves in public demonstrates how formal and civilized they are. Now I thought people from the US talked fast, but I changed my mind when I heard Chinese people speak. Chinese is known for being one of the hardest languages to learn and understand, and despite my best efforts, I came home knowing only about 5 words in Chinese. Because of the educational aspect of the trip, we had one-on-one encounters with many Chinese students. We realized how fortunate we are when we learned about their typical school days, which start at 7:30 a.m. and last until 5:00 p.m. Students remain in the same classroom all day and only have a one-hour break for lunch and recess. Almost all of the kids ride their bikes to and from school and they wear the same uniform every day. The difference that stood out to me the most was the food. Native Chinese food is unbelievably different from the American interpretation of Chinese food. Let’s just say that when sitting down in a restaurant for *real* Chinese food, you might not know everything you are eating. These attributes of Chinese lifestyle made our ten days in China even more unique, and forced us to keep open minds.

Over the course of the trip, we visited four major cities. The first city we visited was Nanjing, the south capital of China, home to almost 7 million people. Unlike many cities in China, it has a low pollution rate and is the nation’s leading water preserving city. During our four days in Nanjing, we explored many ancient temples, got accustomed to the food, and participated in the 2010 International Water Symposium. The next city we went to was Suzhou, located on the Yangtze River, known for its beautiful gardens. Due to its peaceful aura, it attracts thousands of tourists every year. The decorative pagodas and bridges are things rarely seen in the US, and many private mansions there have been donated for use as public zen gardens. Next, we visited Hangzhou, another small city north of Suzhou. There, we boated on the Westlake River, a beautifully preserved river in the middle of a park. We also took elevators up to one of the tallest temples in China which had been built centuries ago. For good luck, we threw coins onto neighboring temple roofs. Many people in China are Buddhist, and we saw monks praying inside the temple. We enjoyed every place we visited, but my favorite part of the trip was our stay in Shanghai. We visited the 2nd tallest tower in the world, the Oriental Pearl, which was built one year ago and consists of two glass observation areas and a revolving restaurant at the top. From exploring the city and shopping for two consecutive days in one of the busiest marketplaces in Shanghai, we all wished we could have had more time there.

Though we did lots of sightseeing and group bonding, the main event of our trip took place on our last day in the Nanjing -- the International Water Symposium. There, the World Education Alliance, including schools from Germany, South Africa, Singapore, and Hong Kong, gathered to discuss the topics of international water resources and conservation. Every year, this symposium is held in a different country. Each participating school presents topics about their country’s water issues and how water preservation can be achieved. Influential people from the Nanjing government attended the conference to listen to each school’s presentations and discussions. The symposium was extremely formal, and was held at the most prestigious school in Nanjing. We visited classrooms and met students at the school. The combination of each participating school’s excellent work and the Nanjing Foreign Language School’s hospitality made the symposium informative and memorable.

The other seven HB students and I did not know what to expect when we embarked on this journey, but we were all willing to shed the skin of our normal comfort zones and immerse ourselves in Chinese culture, tradition, and everyday lifestyle. The memories we brought home will stay with us forever. That said, I encourage you to empower yourself-- plan a backpacking trip through Europe, explore the culture of Southeast Asia. Whatever it may be, know that international travel has a way of reaching out to a person and changing him or her for the better. I believe that is exactly what happened to everyone who went on the China trip and that it truly was a once-in-a-lifetime experience.