An Evening in Huangshan

My month-long adventure in China was packed with unforgettable moments: I climbed the Great Wall of China, visited the resting place of a terracotta army, and enjoyed uniquely beautiful theater, art, and architecture—both ancient and modern. And yet, the experience that still stands out most to me was arguably the most ordinary of them all.

The family of the professor who led the trip was gracious enough to host our group of thirty Penn State students for a banquet. Banquets in China are quite the ordeal: round tables with enormous lazy susans at their centers were piled with dish after dish of local cuisine. We used chopsticks to pile our plates with the often delicious, sometimes odd food.

At some point during the meal, I realized that I had a stalker. I have noticeably large, blue eyes, which stood out quite a bit in China—something that 6-year-old Rainbow picked up on quickly. “She thinks your eyes are strange,” Rainbow’s mom said with a laugh after her daughter met my friendly wave with a furtive stare from behind her mom’s leg. I began a mission to befriend my hostile observer, and eventually we were giggling and playing together with a coloring book app on my phone.

As dinner wound down, Rainbow’s mom approached me. “Would you be interested in coming with us to Rainbow’s English class?” she asked. “It might be fun for the kids to have somebody to help them practice their English.” I immediately agreed, excited for a chance to get away from the incredibly conspicuous group of 30+ rowdy American students I was traveling with and blend in a little more. I let the group leader and my friends know where I was going, and off we went on foot into the cool evening.

I traveled across China from city to city, witnessing astounding feats of engineering, arts, and culture. But that night, I had the chance to live like a Huangshan City local. Rainbow’s English class was on the second floor of a nearby building. There were three kids in the class, all giggly and a little shy at the presence of an intruder. The kids practiced counting in English and watched cartoons with animals speaking simple English and Chinese. We soon found that I was more of a distraction than a help, so Rainbow’s mom offered to walk around the city with me for the remainder of the class. “I can drop you off at the hotel when we’re done,” she proposed, which sounded perfect to me.

As we walked, we passed a park where a group of older Chinese women were practicing tai-chi. A little further on, a group of younger people mimicked a leader for a jazzercise class, a loudspeaker blaring the soundtrack. “We like exercising in the parks; there isn’t much room elsewhere,” said Rainbow’s mom with a smile. (I saw similar scenes in parks all over China.)

We walked past a bakery, and she ushered me inside to show me her favorite treats: immaculately decorated, tiny cakes and adorable baked goods. “You need rice cakes!” she declared. “The Dragon Boat Festival is coming up soon!” I protested, but we left the shop laden with enough rice cakes for the entire group. On a roll, she took me to a fruit market across the street. The store was cluttered with bins of all sorts of fruit, but I could only name a handful of them—most were definitely not available in my local supermarket. “You need to
try this; it’s a local fruit,” she informed me, pointing at a round, pale yellow fruit. The shop worker selected a few and chopped the fresh fruit up in front of us, packaging it in a foam container sealed with plastic wrap. We both tried a slice of the fruit, which was sweet and juicy, and added the rest to my stash of goodies for the group. I tried my best to pronounce the fruit’s name and got a thumbs up and a grin from the shop owner, although I knew he was just being polite. (One thing I loved about China was the endless encouragement I got from locals at my feeble attempts to speak their language.) We waved him goodnight and went on our way.

The street widened into a shopping center, alight with karaoke bars and colorful storefronts. “This is a good place for young people to hang out, but I’m here for the tea,” Rainbow’s mom said, gesturing me into a trendy-looking tea shop decorated with plastic foliage. Over orders of milk tea topped with a frothy layer of what tasted like whipped cream cheese (this became one of my favorite drinks to get while in China), we talked about the differences and similarities between growing up in China and the United States and laughed about the stereotypes our respective countries had about the other. As the night wound down, we picked up Rainbow from her class, and her mom drove me back to the hotel, where I rejoined the group with offerings of rice cakes and delicious local fruit.

Rainbow’s mom showed me Chinese hospitality and generosity and provided a window into a life that, although a world away, isn’t so different from my own. She gave me the opportunity to experience China not as a tourist or outsider, but to see China, her home. I will always remember that evening in Huangshan.