

## **Katie Pringle- Travel Report- China and Hong Kong, Summer 2016**

For four weeks during the summer of 2016 I was fortunate enough to be given the opportunity to take part in an English-speaking summer camp for Chinese children aged 11-15. The prospect of going to China for me evoked at once excitement and a sort of nervous anticipation.

China has been of huge fascination to me for a number of years, not least as a politics student, given its remarkable economic growth in spite of its largely communist political regime. I am also interested in China beyond its unique recent developments, as the home of the first modern state, with a rich history and a culture which both attests to this history while seeking to make its mark as one of the forerunners of global modernity. I was also intrigued by the personal, day-to-day workings of a China belied by qualities of intimidation and strength produced as a result of its economic growth.

We flew in to Hong Kong in early July (before taking the train to Guangzhou in mainland China, where the camp took place, the next day). Suffice it to say I have never seen a place quite like it. There were so many different buildings (though none below 20 floors in height), smells, colours, people and noises that it was like exploring a world within a city: even when I returned at the end of the trip to explore the city some more, I couldn't believe that I was in the same place. The only constant throughout the city, it seemed, was the dripping of water from air-con machines onto the pavement below.

The first couple of days in Guangzhou were fairly relaxed as we got to know the rest of the teaching team, comprising 18 English-speaking student teachers like myself and 18 tutors, who could speak both Chinese and English, and were there to help us in the classroom and translate when the children didn't understand our English. Having never taught abroad before, and confronted by a group of 15 Chinese 12-year-olds, the first day of teaching was slightly daunting. The children had completed a short test the day before and were accordingly assigned into classes based on their English speaking, writing, and reading ability, ranging from class 1 to class 8. My timetable was arranged such that I had class 7 straight after class 1, meaning the difference in ability really became clear. I, thus, had to learn pretty quickly how to adapt my lessons and behaviour to this difference in ability. For example, class 1 were less confident speaking out in class and often really struggled to understand what I was saying, so I was sure to give them a lot of 1-on-1 time. They really flourished, I learned, when they were given a few English phrases to include in fun activities, such as making a comic strip or acting out a story in groups. The first few days were quite quiet as everyone got used to each other and the camp environment, but after this there was a notable leap in enthusiasm and confidence among the kids, which was so nice to see.

The camp was designed to foster a very fun environment, which really helped everyone settle in and get to know each other remarkably quickly. As teachers, we were working from 9am until 9pm, spending most of this time teaching, running an afternoon activity (for example, football) and then spending time with our 'college' - a group of 12 or so children who we 'matriculated' on the first night. I was proud to be the head of Pembroke College, and can honestly say without any bias whatsoever that we were the best college (I'm really not competitive). The children would then compete in their colleges in the evening activity. These were run each night by 2 or 3 teachers, and included a singing contest, talent show, and mini Olympics. My favourite was the murder mystery. In this story, Taylor Swift was killed, and the students were supposed to act as detectives and figure out who the murderer was. A number of teachers dressed up as other celebrities and walked around the different classrooms being interviewed by the children in their colleges. I dressed up as Kanye West which was (ironically) hilarious, as I had to storm into every room screaming at fellow teacher Neil, who was dressed as Harry Styles. The look of genuine shock on the children's faces was priceless. Another highlight was the formal dinner, in which we all dressed up and had a Cambridge-style formal meal at a western-style Chinese hotel. I taught my college how to eat with a knife and fork, which many of them had never done before, and told them that the blocks of butter on the table were not for eating straight from the knife (though for some of them this advice came too late).

The idea of the camp was to fully immerse the children in English in order to improve their ability at speaking, writing, and reading, but also make them feel more comfortable in an English-speaking environment. The focus was not just on lessons but on the general environment and exchanges between the children, tutors, and teachers. In this way, I would say it was definitely a cultural exchange, and one in which I learned a lot more from the children than I thought I would. They loved it when you spoke any Mandarin, and loved it even more when you 'insulted' another teacher. Their favourite insult was 'ni fengle', which translates to 'you are crazy'. I particularly remember taking the students to the Guangdong museum, where they taught (or tried to teach) me lots of Mandarin, and were constantly pulling me in about 12 different directions because they were so keen to tell me about everything!

The whole experience was even more enriching than I had initially anticipated, and I can honestly say that never before have I simultaneously felt so many emotions. The long days and the (often 40 degree) heat made us all tired, especially towards the end of the camp, but somehow as soon as you enter a room full of loud music and excitement, you find the energy to high-five 170 kids and way-too-over-enthusiastically dance to Taylor Swift (which was played on repeat for days). On my return, I couldn't help but feel that for all the excitement and learning, I had only scratched the surface of the experiences this country had to offer. Though I can't deny that I won't miss the locals 'surreptitiously' taking our photo by pretending to type something on their phones while holding them about 3cm from our faces, I do hope that I will be able to return to China.

To this day, the kids are still talking to me on WeChat (the Chinese equivalent of Facebook), and every time I talk to them they remind me of an experience for which I have only the fondest memories. I would like to thank everyone who made the camp so wonderful, but above all the college for enabling me to take part in it.