A trip through paradise

As I stood there watching the iron gate slowly baring the school entrance, a little girl came up to me and asked for a hug. I gazed at her tear filled eyes as the overcast sky threatened us with rain by giving off distant rumbles of thunder. It was the end.

I was part of a group of students who went to Ningguo, a small town in Anhui province, to help teach students in rural areas a little about American culture. The local officials had arranged this to help give these students a little knowledge of what lay outside their everyday lives and perhaps spark some interest for a future “out there”. As our bus pulled into the grubby looking hotel where we were to spend the next week, I had a sudden feeling that this trip would bring me more than I had ever expected.

I was stationed at ZhuFeng school with three other volunteers. As we walked into the principal’s office, I was inevitably reminded of being sent there for petty misdeeds in my own high school days. I expected to see paintings aligning the walls and elaborately decorated furniture. What greeted me was bare room with a set of matching chairs and a well-worn desk. A middle aged man stood up from his desk and greeted us with a warm smile. “You must be the volunteers. Thank you for coming, the students are dying to see you.” He spoke in formality, as though he was greeting someone from the royal family. We quickly assured the principal that there was no need for formality and that we were here to learn from the students as well. Our schedule came in the form of two pieces of paper shared between the four of us. It was funny to see the words Mr. Shen representing me on paper, I had always just been known as Chris.

Our classes were scheduled to start that afternoon with me and Hanning teaching the first class. As I walked towards the classroom door, I was filled with curiosity about what the students are like. I wondered if the students would find my ill prepared classes interesting and enjoyable. As it turned out, the students were just as curious about me as I was about them. They swarmed out of the classroom to get a better look at the “foreigners”. It was a funny thought, I was only three hours away from home and yet I was a foreigner here. As I walked onto the rickety podium and wrote my name on a blackboard worn away by far too many years of use, I sensed the gaze of thirty or so students. I took a deep breath and began to speak.

Time rushed by is a swirl of multiple colors and shapes as we talked about school life, holidays, and general American culture. As we heard the bell signaling the end of class, I sighed in relief and began to walk towards the door. But the children weren’t ready to let us go. They crowed around us and began to ask all sorts of questions about where we have been and where we were heading. It was with great effort that we finally managed to reach our next class.

The next few days passed in the same fashion. We had to burn the midnight oil to get ready for all our classes. We tried Pictionary and Jeopardy to great effect. It did my heart good to see the students smile when they received simple prized like rulers and pencils for a job well done. The students seemed to have an unlimited amount of energy as they participated in the various games and questions we gave them. The class promptly turned into a miniature TV show as we moved onto tougher questions like American presidents. The laughter of those children was still ringing in my ears as I left the school that evening.

It was not all laughter and fun. Early one cloudy morning my colleagues and I were woken up at the crack of dawn to go visit some of the families that people in the school have sponsored. We were carted several miles away from the school deeper into the mountains where we visited a little girl who had lost her mother at the age of one. She seemed a little reluctant to show us her home as we approached it. We pushed open the door and found a house little bigger than my room with furniture consisting of nothing more than a few rickety chairs. Our bright clothing seemed to contrast oddly with the grey and cracking walls as we sat down and presented to her own present, some used clothing, books, and a container of cooking oil. It seemed like a lot for the small family as the girl’s father greeted us with tears in his eyes. We sat, and we talked. About what I couldn’t really remember. All that impressed upon me was the desperation in the father’s voice and his hopes that his girls would grow up to have something more than what they own today. As the little girl walked us to the edge of her village, she told me that she had never had so many books in her life.

We are humans, plagued with fault and inequality. We cannot hope to change the way things happen in this society by our own hands alone. But I hope that I can turn that little girl’s life around by just putting in a little effort, giving up a little of my time, and sharing a little more kindness with her. Perhaps, if we all gave up a little more, we could make a great change.