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If someone told me that I would be joining the International Mission on Medicine in China to study Traditional Chinese Medicine I would have thought they were crazy. I didn't have the funds to go and although the trip would be amazing, it was out of the question. That is, until I received my grant from CWIL. I can't begin to describe my reaction when I open my email from the grant committee, but it was quite a sight! On May 15, 2004, I said goodbye to my family in O'Hare airport and left to join 65 other strangers in China. And so, my two week adventure began.

When I arrived in Beijing I tried my hardest to stay awake on the bus trip to our hotel, but it was just impossible. Although, I did manage get a few glances of Beijing at 1am. We arrived at our hotel and sat down to a late night snack Chinese style. It was an interesting looking sandwich, but at least the French fries were good. I called home to reassure my parents and then fell into bed, anxiously awaiting morning to come.

On May 16th I had my first true experience of being an American in China. I don't know if I felt like a tourist or the main attraction. My red hair and very fair skin stuck out like a sore thumb. I think that I can honestly say that for those two weeks, I was the most fair skinned person China had ever seen, or at least that's how I felt. At first, I thought it was kind of funny to have my photo taken with strangers, but then I realized that I was so different looking that I was picture worth. I can only begin to imagine what people thought when they saw me—fair skin, red hair, blue eyes—I was

obviously foreign. To me, it is not strange to see Asian people, but to the Chinese, I was quite a sight.

I suppose, the best way to describe how much I really stood out is to explain my time in Chengdu. It was only briefly, but I got separated from my group of friends and was standing in the middle of the shopping center looking around frantically. I obviously caught the eye of a store clerk, because she waved me down, and in broken English told me my friends were over here. I suppose it wasn't hard to assume that I was with the only four other white people in the whole square.

Some of the best experiences I had were because I was an American. When I visited the military university, it happened to fall on the same day that all the school children in Chengdu convene for a day of athletic competition. It was this day that I had the most vivid memories of introducing myself as an American. School children yelled "Hello" everywhere we walked and ran to us, pushing the one child that could speak English to the front to try to talk to us. I had numerous mini conversations about favorite American foods, singers and bands, as well as where I had been and do I like China. The children laughed at my attempt to speak Chinese and giggled when I said something in English they didn't know. I was simply amazing. These children of ten and twelve found me just as fascinating as I found them.

On my last night in Beijing, after our trip to Pizza Hut (yes they do have pizza huts, and pizza never tasted so good), several of my friends and I literally followed the music till we ended up in a giant square surrounded by thousands of Chinese people performing traditional dances. It was like a huge party in the middle of the street- old and young were dancing, playing games, and just sharing time with each other. We walked

around and even did a bit of dancing ourselves. One of our friends joined in a game of hackie-sac, and the number of people that stopped what they were doing to see the American guy play was outrageous. Once again, we were quite the sight see.

My many experiences as a total “fish out of water” have stuck with me the most of anything that happened to me in China. Well, except the day I spent in the hospital--as a patient. I guess its kind of humorous that while I went to China to learn about Traditional Chinese Medicine, I ended up being a patient, getting treated with Western antibiotics. There are many things that I learned about Traditional Chinese Medicine on the visits to hospital wards, but none of those affected me as much as just walking on the streets and being immersed in the true Chinese culture. I have never been a minority before and when I think back to those two weeks, I still can't get over being so different. I still smile every time I think of having my first picture taken. Every moment and every memory has left an impression on me that has opened me to the realization that being different is a beautiful thing. Thank you CWIL for the memories and the opportunity of a life time. I am eternally grateful.