

my trip to... China: a surprise encounter

A UK medical student describes an unexpected meeting



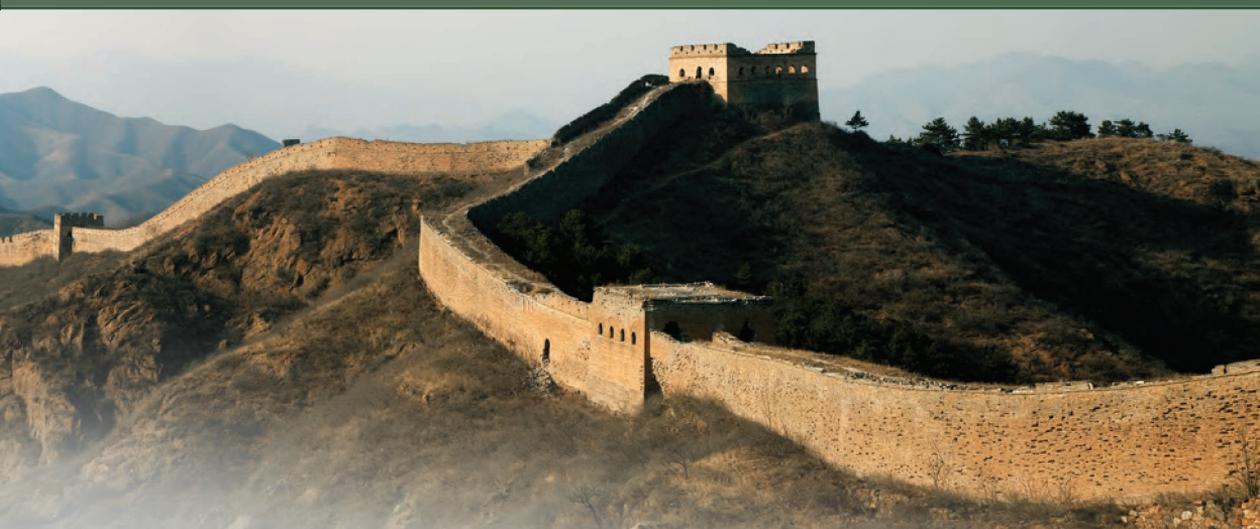
My interest in China grew from the CMF Global Track. This programme for students and juniors broadened my awareness of the global Church and made me realise how narrow my ideas of God and his purposes for the world had previously been. I realised that I knew next to nothing about this vast nation which, according to some estimates, has more Christians than the UK has people! Thinking that China could play a huge role in the future of Christianity, I began to learn Mandarin, read books about Chinese history and eventually secured a place on a three-week summer school in China through the British Council's programme.

The political situation for Christians in China is complicated. Generally, foreign Christians can meet freely but native Christians are far more closely monitored, and in some cases controlled, by the government. For this reason, many Chinese Christians choose to congregate in informal house church networks. When I travelled to China, I had no means of contacting these Christians, so viewed my three-week cultural immersion programme as a mere stepping stone towards engaging with the Chinese church in the future. That 'future' however, was to materialise much sooner than I had expected.

One evening, I was feeling a bit low and had decided to take a stroll by myself around the city. I was trying to pray as I walked when I was approached by a Chinese lady completely unknown to me. She greeted me (in English) and asked if I would like to come to a Bible study. Startled, I listened with mixed curiosity and reticence as the woman, June, proceeded with a short explanation of the Gospel and informed me that the Bible study would take place in a few days at 'her sister's house' and that she could meet me at the metro station to take me there. I enquired as to the subject of the study and was reassured when she said Deuteronomy. I reasoned that this was probably true since if it were some sort of scam, the prospect of reading Deuteronomy was probably not the most effective way of enticing unsuspecting individuals off the street! I took the woman's number and told her that I would be in touch.

After much vacillation and conflicting advice from people back home, I decided to go to the (supposed) meeting with a friend from my summer school who had agreed to accompany me, although she wasn't a Christian herself.

We met June at the metro station and she led us up a dark tower block into a small apartment.



We entered the bedroom (which was the only room besides the tiny kitchen) which was soon filled with about 15 other people, mostly young women. I tried cheerfully greeting people in broken Mandarin but after their abrupt replies, they sat quietly reading their Bibles, muttering prayers under their breath.

Soon however, things became livelier as we began to sing. The songbooks had lyrics in both English and Mandarin and although I recognised some songs (one was by Rend Collective), others seemed to be original Chinese worship songs. Then came the prayers. These would start gently but then periodically accelerate to a fever pitch accompanied by exclamations of 'amen' from across the room. Although everybody spoke in Mandarin, there was a lady beside me translating at an impassioned pace. It seemed like she drew a lot of her vocabulary from the King James Bible, which only added to the surreality of the experience! The study itself was an exposition of Deuteronomy 19 and talked about how Jesus is our true 'city of refuge'.

However, my favourite part of the meeting was the testimonies that followed. People shared very openly about their lives - it seemed that everybody there had become Christians as adults so there was a very clear demarcation in their personal

narratives between life before and after Jesus. June shared about how much she had struggled with envy, and even though she was sometimes still envious of another 'sister' present at the meeting, by God's grace that sin was being crucified daily!

After the meeting came to a formal end, people became much more talkative and were very hospitable to my friend and I, sharing their food and calling a taxi to take us home. I realised that what I thought was unfriendliness before was just an expression of their reverence when they met to worship God together.

I met June one more time before leaving China. She gave me lots of gifts to take back to the UK and a letter explaining how Jesus had changed her life to give to my non-Christian friend. We both expressed how surprised and encouraged we had been to meet a Christian brother/sister from a completely different country and culture. I came back to the UK so grateful that I had been given a glimpse of another side of God's Kingdom that he is building literally across the world. ■

To protect the subjects of this article, it is deliberately anonymous, and some details have been changed.