

# The One Thing that Transcends Time and Space

Lauren Lee

LLee48@uncc.edu

My experience exploring China was pretty similar to Cooper's voyage in the movie *Interstellar*. Okay, that was a stretch: I definitely was not an astronaut hero sent through a wormhole to save her daughter and humankind, although that would look nice on my resume, "humankind savior". With a little imagination, though, one can compare a NASA rocket to a plane, a planet to a country. But one thing that does not require imagination is love; love is the bridge between my time in China and Cooper's story in *Interstellar*. As Dr. Brand, a top NASA scientist in *Interstellar* on the mission to find another habitable planet, speculated, "love is the one thing we're capable of perceiving that transcends dimensions of time and space." Corny, right? I would have thought so, too. However, because I took the leap to travel, I learned that even from the other side of the world, love can be felt. I did not fully grasp how close and wonderful the world could be until I finally travelled there and was lucky enough to meet Charles.

Charles was the first face to greet me in China. Charles was my Dr. Brand; he introduced me and my peers to our new schedules and prompted us in our mission. Our objectives were simple: to learn and have fun. Even though we were foreigners, he treated us like students of his own. He had a warm, cheerful personality with a wide toothy smile and eyes that wrinkled into crescents to match, comparable to those of my *Gong Gong* (Grandpa). In the week my

peers and I would be living in Shan Xi, Xi'an, China, he would be one of our Chinese language instructors.

With multiple teachers to choose from, I was curious to take his Beginner's class for one day. Learning a completely new language, especially Chinese which demands the speaker to make sharp "zh", "ch", "sh" sounds, is difficult. Sometimes the students would become frustrated. With great patience, he remained smiling and would help them repeat the words correctly. When students could correctly recite "yi" ("one") through "shi" ("ten"), he would joyfully congratulate them. I could feel his warmth in his simple praise, as if we were his children.

Not only was Charles our teacher but also our tour guide. Charles accompanied us on the *Bodi Xue Xiao* (Bodi High School) grounds from the cafeteria to the courtyards. Later in the afternoons, my new-found friends and I would go to the school yard, with ping pong tables lined at the edges. Jade, in particular, was competitive and loved to challenge locals in ping pong. One day, Charles stepped up to the table with a paddle in hand. Their energy during their intense match was infectious. Soon after, I took my turn against Charles. Swinging left and right, I missed ball after ball. Throughout the game, he would try to give me pointers to improve my technique, a true teacher to the end. I was no match for Charles (ping pong is China's National sport for goodness sake), but we still spent the match learning, laughing and creating new memories. Charles told me I had improved since the last time I played and congratulated me with his toothy grin.

Towards the end of my adventure, the students were allowed to participate in a talent show to display the cultural knowledge and skills they acquired while in China. Possessing a

passion for spreading joy through dance, I participated in the group dance. During one of the final practices, Charles came to see how we were progressing. As we were stretching and resting, I overheard the teachers talking amongst themselves. "Lauren has a beautiful smile. She can make others happy just by smiling. She has a beautiful heart, as well," Charles remarked. Hearing these words come from someone who was always spreading happiness himself simply by smiling made me feel like those words were that much more genuine.

The year before travelling to China, I was always hesitant to smile. I used to be withdrawn and afraid to share myself with others. Because of my reserve, I had kept my mouth - my gateway to the world - closed with my lips sealed into a neutral rest. I so desperately wanted to overcome my self-proclaimed limits, and so I challenged myself to that. Fast forward a year, and I had become a courageous, joyful girl who wanted to smile for others. After all of the perseverance and effort I put into shaping myself, I had finally heard someone acknowledge it, simply by complimenting my smile. Learning that my struggle had become a gift I could give to others meant the world to me.

Two days later, I was waiting in Xi'an Xianyang International Airport with my belongings including the towel that dried in front of the wide window that would draw in the misty morning light and my books from the aged drawers with the mirror that me and my friends would get ready in front of before the day started. I was slowly realizing that I would really have to leave Xi'an, and not only the places and things I had been accustomed to seeing but also the people who had become a part of my life. While bidding farewell, I was determined not to cry. I had succeeded until I faced Charles. As usual, he was wearing his toothy grin paired with his crescent eyes. The one who had welcomed us was now the one to send us on our way.

As I went forward to hug him, tears streamed down my face. People whom once seemed so distant, culturally and spatially, made me feel so at home. This one teacher taught me so much more than language and culture; he taught me how love could transcend all those things, and asked for nothing in return. Just as Cooper's love for his daughter transcended time and space, Charles' love and warmth transcended the limits of language and space. Love is universal.