Hangzhou, China 2013
Queen Mary, Expedition Fund Report
Mary Boyce, BA Geography

With the help of the Queen Mary Expedition Fund, during the summer of 2013 I was able to spend 2 months in the South Eastern Chinese province of Zhejiang conducting qualitative research in to the imaginations of Chinese home and family life. Focusing on interviewing female students at Zhejiang University in Hangzhou, I was able not only to gain a better understanding of how the ideas of home differ across cultures, but I also gained an insight into how my own preconceptions of home have been created, and of why home is such a vital place to individuals and families alike.

Arriving in Shanghai on the 3rd of July 2013, with my fellow researcher, Nicholas Blundell, we found our way through the wide, dusty streets of the city to reach our hostel for the next few days. While we had no intention of starting our research in Shanghai, the stop over did provide us with some much needed relaxation, letting us recover from the worst of the jet lag. After an 18 hour journey, jumping straight into interviews was the last thing we needed, and as Shanghai proved to be an even mix of Chinese and international culture, we were able to ease ourselves into the culturally more gradually, avoiding the disorientation that often comes with travelling. On our first day in China, we strolled passed the world’s 9000th KFC (oddly serving a southern-fried chicken with rice), ate ducks’ tongues and mangos on benches, gazed up at the rather beautiful, pink oriental pearl building, and then climbed the ‘bottle-opener’, or the Shanghai World Finance Centre (which reached the dizzy height of 474 metres tall) and watched the sunset fade away behind the dwarfed skyscrapers. It was somewhat surreal to realise that this would be my home for the next two months, and thanks to the ‘Great Firewall of China’, there would be little contact with our families.

Once we had spent a few days exploring Shanghai, we headed on to Hangzhou to begin our research. Packed into the cramped train surrounded by commuters, it dawned on me how isolating the language barrier would be as English is often only spoken by students and young children, and as my Mandarin proved unrecognisable to the locals. Nick spent some time trying to teach me a few phrases and assured me that all I needed to know was ‘xie-xie’ (thank you) for my first few days, but I still felt butterflies in my stomach and anxiety at the thought that we would be staying in separate accommodation. Nick had been offered the chance to stay with host families and work as an English teacher, while I had booked a hostel near West Lake for the first few weeks. After we arrived in Hangzhou and Nick left with his host family, I walked out of the station and the sweltering wave of 38°C heat hit me like a brick wall. It was stifling and even breathing felt difficult with the humidity of the air. Dragging my suitcase behind me, I tried to wave down a taxi but had no luck until a couple of locals (who were very determined that I was able to speak fluent Mandarin) took me by the arm and put me on their decrepit tiny moped with a holey umbrella duct-taped to the side of it for shade. If I wasn’t nervous enough already, the driver stashed my 38kg suitcase below his
feet and raced off, leaving me to cling on to him tightly. We weaved through the bustling streets full of pedestrians carrying all sorts of food stuffs, and snuck through the traffic by driving along pavements, whilst I squeezed my arms around him, praying I wouldn’t fall off. After the frantic 10 minute ride, he delivered me to my hostel safely and helped me through the door; I breathed in deeply, shook is had in thanks, tipped him and then calmed myself, settling into my dorm for the next few weeks.

Throughout my stay at the hostel, I met some wonderful people from a wide range of places such as Israel, Germany, Canada, Australia and all over China, and they all had some incredible stories about their travels, yet I was really keen to start my research and to create my own travel story. Living in the hostel gave me the chance to explore Hangzhou. I cycled through tea plantations, visited pagodas and temples, sampling the weird and wonderful food, and strolled around West Lake at night with friends discussing our homes and future plans, admiring the clusters of tiny lights dappled across the lake from the tourist boats bobbing on the surface. After 3 weeks of hostel life, Nick offered me the chance to become an English teacher alongside him, and the opportunity to stay with Chinese families for the rest of my stay. For my remaining time in China, I stayed with host families whilst working as an English teaching assistant. Not only did this allow me to learn more about Chinese family life and their attitudes towards their homes, but it also gave me a chance to see how these views are taught to children from an early age. I became submerged in Chinese culture and it was an experience I will never forget. A month in, and I began the interview process for my research. From approaching students and from socialising in the cafes on Zhejiang University campus, I met around 21 female Chinese students who let me chat to them about their family life, their student life and what they wanted from and their home in the future. I conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews, gained around 8 questionnaires, 19 drawings of their ideal homes, alongside roughly 15 photographs of the individuals. This as well as living with and observing Chinese families allowed me to further my understanding of Chinese culture in relation to the home, which has become the structure of my dissertation. By living with families, I also had the time to reflect on my own imaginations and expectations of home and returned to the UK with a clearer idea of how I perceive home and my home family. I have become more appreciative of the people around me and I am ultimately very glad I have been given this chance with Queen Mary to travel. During the research period, I became friends with some of the girls and towards the end of our research, Nick and I invited some of them to come with us to KTV (karaoke), giving us the chance to thank them for all the over our time in Hangzhou.

China was a whirlwind, heady and fascinating experience that I will always remember and be grateful for. Without the Expedition Fund, I would never have been able to stay for as long as I did and therefore as well as my research findings being compromised, I also never would have made some of the friends I did and never met such a wide variety of people who all influenced me on my travels. After returning home on the 30th August, I will never forget the vast cultural difference, the intense heat, our endless consumption of iced tea, the joy of the locals who were shocked to meet a real life ‘foreigner’, the kindness of my host families, or the intoxicating and eye-opening experience that was China.