

4 days  
3564 km of round-way train  
287 school bags  
311 scarfs, hats and muffles  
About 100 candies  
30 hours of train in total

What will happen when French students meet the children in Gansu, China?

From 14 to 18 November 2019, 4 students from SKEMA HOPE Suzhou association, together with Tangmama, local charity association in Suzhou, went to Huining (a less developed area in north-west China) and bring the supplies to the local children.

Let's follow the diary of Julie (member of HOPE Suzhou) and see what their special journey is like.

*HOPE Suzhou: HOPE stands for Humanitarian Organization Promoting Equity. In Suzhou, our main objective is to provide better learning conditions for children. Our actions are mainly local. We organize fund raising, events, food selling and other actions to provide furniture to a local school. Once per semester we spend half a day in a school for migrant's kids in Suzhou and this semester, we tried to enlarge our actions and start new projects.*

### **Day 1**

We left Suzhou on Thursday 14/11 after class and met up at the train station, heading for Huining, Gansu province, a less developed area in north-west China. It is our first time to do charity activity out of Suzhou.

### **Day 2**

Still on the train.

We initiated the project thanks to SKEMA 10th anniversary jazz concert. The first idea was to organize a fund raising and a book collect. We collected hundreds of books during the event and rose 1800 RMB thanks to the tickets selling. SKEMA also bought 100 school bags in addition for this project.

In October, we rose 2067 RMB thanks to our participation at the Food Festival. We used all the money to buy candies for the children and a part of the trip as well. We paid the rest part with our own money.

As to Tangmama, it is an association who does the most charity actions in Suzhou and is widely trusted by local people. Tangmama initially wanted to deliver the bags to a school in East China, but I thought it would be more meaningful if we went there too. I asked SKEMA and Tangmama if we could organize a trip and they both said yes immediately.

Meanwhile, Tangmama provided 187 more schoolbags thanks to donations from other partners.

After 20 hours on train, we finally arrived at Huining. It was cold but fortunately, we had prepared warm clothes so we could face the cold temperatures.

### **Day 3**

On Saturday 16 November, we woke up at 7am to get ready to go to the school. We could not go there by bus or other vehicles since there was not any public transportation. The village was so small and had no real roads, so we had to drop the car and finish the journey by walking. I was quite surprised to see that those people were kind of 'isolated' from everything.

When we arrived near the school, all the people stared at us like "animals"! I think they had probably never seen European girls before. They spent three hours in front of the school barriers to look at us and of course, we took hundreds of photos with them. We spent about half a day with them, which was full of fun! The school bags and warm clothes were already delivered. All of the children went out and we gave each of them a hat, a scarf, muffs, and a school bag with stationary inside.

It was absolutely so happy to see their smiles shining when we put the hats on their heads or the scarfs around their necks. I did a short speech in English and Ge (member of Tangmama) translated it in Chinese for me in order to thank SKEMA, Tangmama and to express our warm thoughts for those children. It was quite impressive to stand in front of all of those people who cannot understand a word of what I was saying but still were impressed and listening carefully.

After this speech, we played with the kids. They had prepared a mini show for us. Some of them were dancing, others were singing or counting poems, it was so touching!!!

After a busy morning at the kindergarten, we walked (or I would rather say we climbed) through the mountain to reach a little house. Some local people prepared a delicious lunch including potatoes, homemade noodles with soup and other dishes that we cannot tell the name. They were very poor but still enjoyed their lives. It was questioning and really mind changing for us since we had never seen such a level of poverty before, but the people were so nice to us and they didn't seem so miserable which was good at some point.

In the afternoon, we drove to another small village and stopped in a primary school. We met 27 children to whom we offered the same warm clothes and candies. We were all surprised when we found out how well they can speak English. It really shows that education is a priority in China, no matter where people are living or no matter what are their living conditions.

We spent the afternoon playing football and other games with them. We felt really close to them and to be honest I think that the time we offered them, the consideration we had for them, the happiness and good time we shared with them were more meaningful than the 'material stuff' we provided. We definitely felt that!! They were all so happy to play with us and they would not stop smiling at us and hugging us! I can assure you that it was an unforgettable moment!!

Then we left the school and went to another tiny house for dinner. One of our members (Chiara), learnt how to cook local homemade noodles and we ate them right after. It was really delicious! The local people that host us were living in houses paid by the government. From what we understood, in order to reduce poverty and help people from remote areas, the government built a certain number of houses so that those citizens would have somewhere better to sleep and live. Although there are disparities between different regions of China, the government is always working hard to narrow this gap.

#### **Day 4**

The day after, we met a disabled child who needed surgery but could not afford it. People like Annie from Tangmama sponsored this little girl, her brother and her sister. We went to the museum with them and spend once again a good time with them. We tried to say a few Chinese words and they tried to speak a few English. It sounded ridiculous but it was so funny!

We all ate noodles (yeah noodles again) for lunch. They all laughed when we asked for non-spicy food and when we fought against noodles with our chopsticks!! I wished I could have a fork and a knife to show how we eat in France!

## Day 5

The last day was just about going back to Suzhou with 10 hours of train. We were almost all sick (probably from the cold weather) and very tired but I think we all agree that we could do it all over again if we had another opportunity!

Candice: "I am so thankful to have this opportunity to participate in this humanitarian trip. It was a wonderful experience to see children, being able to help them and bringing laugh and smiles. Being able to see a different side of China is what makes my stay in this country complete, China is not all about big cities but also the countryside.

I was surprised to see that even in the countryside, children were taught English at school. They spoke English quite well.

Throughout the whole trip, people were nice to us. Locals were really generous and made food multiple times for us. They always made sure that we liked what we were eating and that we had enough to eat.

The whole experience was really eye-opening, and I wish in the future I will be able to help more children."

Chiara: "I am grateful to have this experience in China with Hope Suzhou. It was really interesting and enriching to learn so many things about the countryside. I was really happy to meet children and members of the other charity who were really nice. I will always remember of this memorable experience."

Julie: "I'm first of all very proud to be part of the first students going on this kind of mission. It was of course very stressful and new for us and I felt like I had many responsibilities towards both the children and my team, which was gratifying at the end when everything works well.

I am also thankful of course for having the chance to work on this project. Being able to contribute to a better education and living conditions for those children is so powerful and meaningful.

Besides the educational and materialistic aspect, it was a real human experience. We exchanged so much in terms of feelings, smiles and emotions that even if we could not speak the same language, we understood each other. This is why I love volunteering: giving a piece of my happiness to people who need it.

I am still very surprised and concerned about the living conditions there. I discovered something I had heard about and I had seen in books but I would never imagined it existed today in China. I think that it is interesting to see this aspect of China and those areas to understand better the construction and development of China.

It's overall a lifetime experience that we are going to remember for a long long time! "