



## Being Black in China

Posted by [Heather Greenwood Davis](#) of [National Geographic Traveler](#) in [Family Time](#) on April 18, 2013

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Being black in Beijing turned out to be a tourist attraction we weren't expecting. (Photograph by Heather Greenwood Davis)

Of all the countries we've visited as a family, the hardest, by far, was China.

A series of missteps on my part meant that, after a 13-hour flight, we found ourselves in a very non-touristy part of Beijing, at a "hotel" that was more like a businessman's rental apartment. Within a few hours, we were already wondering if our plan to spend a month there had been a huge mistake.

The next morning, our bad mood was emboldened by torrential rains—but after a harrowing ride with a cab driver to whom speed limits were merely suggestions, we finally arrived at the [Forbidden City](#). We had taken shelter under the cover of one of the arched gates and were waiting for our guide to arrive when we noticed something.

This man was trying to film us from afar when my husband turned his phone on him to give him a taste of what it felt like. It took him a while to notice, but when he did, they shared a laugh. (Photograph by Heather Greenwood Davis)

People were staring at us—and snapping pictures.

As we looked around, we realized that there were things about our family that made as many as 20 people at a time stand in line to get their photo taken with us:

1. **Our skin color.** We were in China for 30 days, but it wasn't until our last week, in Yangshuo, that we saw another black person. The American mother-daughter duo said that we, too, were the first they'd seen in the country. The sight of the six of us chatting in the street set off a camera frenzy big enough to draw shopkeepers out to gawk.
2. **We're tall.** My husband Ish is about six foot, I'm 5' 8", and our sons are big for their age. There are tall people in China, but locals seemed genuinely impressed with our height, sometimes even using hand gestures for emphasis.
3. **Our hair.** The boys' mini Afros may as well have been unicorn horns. People reached out to touch their heads all the time. Cameras were held so precariously close to my son's hair that I'm sure there are photos out there in which you can count the strands.

We weren't the only ones to draw attention in China—people with blond hair, blue eyes, red hair, or freckles were dealt a similar lot—but the scrutiny was overwhelming.

One of our sons dressed in traditional Chinese clothing. (Photograph by Heather Greenwood Davis)

My husband would be right behind me and then disappear into a crowd of elderly women intent on rubbing his bald head and pinching his black

skin. Or my kids would suddenly go missing, pulled by some mother who was determined to have them pose with their son or daughter.

It was amusing at first. And then it wasn't. We couldn't concentrate on tours because of all the cameras pointed at us. We couldn't walk quickly due to the crowds swarming us. We were grumpy. *What we looked like* was ruining our chance to enjoy *where we were*.

As a family that believes there are things to be learned from everything in life, we try to turn even the most frustrating experiences into teachable moments. Here are the lessons we took away from our time in China:

1. **It isn't easy being the outsider.** Not being able to understand the language and non-verbal cues in a given society makes it really hard to communicate. We need to be more forgiving of those who come to our country lacking the same.
2. **Having your every move documented gets old, and quickly.** The celebrity-obsessed culture prevalent in many parts of the world can desensitize us to what it's like to be on the other end of the lens. Our experience in China showed us how photo-taking can go over the line and taught us to be better at respecting privacy and personal space.
3. **If you don't like having your picture taken without permission, assume others won't as well.** After China, we began to think twice about photographing locals just because we could. If we didn't know the language, we'd motion at the camera and secure a nod before releasing the shutter. If anyone looked uneasy or refused, we moved on.
4. **You have the right to say no.** This was an especially important lesson for our kids, and provided an opportunity to show them the power of their own voice. Our guide taught them how to say "No, thank you" in Mandarin and empowered them to refuse a photo if they wanted. If someone approached us asking for a photograph, we asked the kids if they wanted to be a part of it rather than answering for them. Their confidence grew when they knew their opinions would be respected.
5. **There's almost always common ground.** We stumbled upon a local park where, for a few dollars, we could dress up in authentic period garb and pose for photos. Though the outdoor stage meant that, once dressed, the entire park could see us in full regalia, we jumped at it. After putting on our hats and robes, we stood together for the world to see. People came running over, cameras out, laughing and pointing. We caught a glimpse of ourselves and laughed right along with them.

**Heather Greenwood Davis** and her family were recognized as *Travelers of the Year* by Traveler magazine in 2012. Learn more about their journey on [globetrottingmama.com](http://globetrottingmama.com) and on Twitter [@GreenwoodDavis](https://twitter.com/GreenwoodDavis).