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A cultural exchange

BY SHANE SNIDER, CORRESPONDENT

CARY - Twenty-year-old Doom Tiam held his breath as he watched a balloon-cushioned egg fall through the air – thousands of miles from his home in China.

The egg, which was part of a science experiment, landed safely on the ground. But some of Tiam's notions about America were smashed during the recent RTP International Cultural Exchange program at Hopewell Academy in Cary.

Tiam and 25 other Chinese students ages 13 to 20 mingled with Hopewell's other summer camp members for two weeks. There were three exchange groups visiting the Triangle this year through the program; the others hosted at academies in Durham.

"Americans are really friendly," Doom said after congratulating his friend on a successful egg drop. "We learned a lot."

Hopewell founder Cecilia Gabriel said summer camp-goers are exposed to different cultural ideas and global issues. With field trips every day, the Chinese students visited museums and marveled at the differences in everyday life.

And the American kids learned about ideals very different from their own – like the Chinese government's control of the media and limits on freedom of speech.

"The Chinese students were most taken by the unfettered access to news media and Internet," Gabriel said. "They didn't understand why certain documents were public record. I think it was interesting to hear a different point of view."

Gabriel said many of the Chinese students were also surprised to learn that many Americans don't carry guns.

"One of our students mentioned something about 'riding shotgun,' and that brought up some interesting discussions," she said.

After that, the class explored the meaning behind some American colloquialisms.

For 12-year-old Autumn Cogg, the experience

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Chinese exchange student Jack Boyuan, 12, puts the final touches on an egg-drop experiment at Hopewell Academy in Cary. The school hosted about 25 Chinese students for a summer camp.

SHANE SNIDER



Hopewell Academy summer camp students gather to watch a science experiment.

SHANE SNIDER

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for 12-year-old Autumn Cope, the experience was an eye-opener.

"It was really interesting to see that the stereotypes we have about people from other countries (are) wrong," said Cope, who lives in Apex. "They are really similar to us in a lot of ways. And we learned a lot about their culture."



Friday's end-of-camp send-off included activities throughout the day, such as the egg drop, a talk about safety with the Cary Fire Department, a talent show and more. Students read from journals kept during the visit.

"Each group is different, and we learn more from them every year," Gabriel said. "Basically, our students learn that other cultures are much like their own. But we also talk about the differences."

Camp is over, but local students plan to keep in touch with their new friends through an online blog.

"I think some real friendships were made here," Gabriel said. "This is definitely a program we want to maintain."

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