

Two weeks after moving to China, my computer broke. Western media that my aging iPhone couldn't handle – Netflix, Youtube, and the likes - was cut off. That was the day my head realized I was living in China.

I live in Jintan. A small, river-straddling town in Jiangsu Province about an hour's bus ride from a major metropolis. My life here exists within an eight to ten block radius, bouncing around between my apartment, school, and an odd abundance of cafes and tea houses. In many ways, I have my technological difficulties to credit for the vibrancy of my life here.

At the time of this writing, about seven months in, I have a gym, I'm a regular at a noodle shop, I have a play pickup soccer every Saturday, and I almost always run into people I know on the street. While in America, these are all common traits of a classic – almost cliché – small town life, and recreating that feeling of home in small-town China is the coolest thing I've ever done.

I teach at brilliant cohort of 16-year-olds at a 91-year-old public high school. When family and friends ask what I do all day, I usually explain my job as somewhere between English teacher and guidance counselor. Students like to ask about American culture or inane grammar rules then switch into any of the hundreds of pressures facing Chinese teenagers. Socially, it's a strange place to occupy. It's like living with one foot in a sense of belonging and the other in something that's still distinctly foreign. But being here and having that level of trust with students has so far been the honor of my life.

What I *like* about living here is that China will never feel “finished” for foreigners. Whether you've lived here 10 months or over 10 years, this country is too immense, old, and layered to be fully understood. And that's refreshing – even enticing. When most people join this program, they're coming right out of college, out of the world of deadlines and set semesters of beginning and finishing. Living in China is never like that. Chipping away - by learning the language, involving yourself in the community, traveling to great monuments, reading – only gives away to another twist or contradiction you didn't see before.

So if you're reading this with the intention of coming here or still on the fence, there are three things that you should know:

You will drink tea. You will drink black tea. You will drink green tea. You will drink ginger tea. You will drink tea out of mugs. You will drink tea out of pints. You will drink tea out of little plastic cups that are too hot to hold except for the rim and then you will drop the tea. You will learn how to sip tea so that you don't eat a salads worth of tea leaves. Every cup of tea in China is likely to be better than any “tea” you've touched back at home.

You will eat noodles. You will eat beef noodles. You will eat egg noodles. You will eat good noodles. You will eat even better noodles. And occasionally you will eat not so great noodles at a touristy restaurant near the Great Wall named “Carles”. That is fine too. You will learn to slurp because slurping is only way to eat noodles. If you pay more than \$2 or \$3 for noodles you are being scammed.

And you will use chopsticks. You've used chopsticks before. That's nice. Here you will use chopsticks to eat whole slices of watermelon. You will use chopsticks to break crab shells. You will use chopsticks to shovel rice. On the rare day that you use a fork you will think surely this crude instrument is for Neanderthals. Everyday at your school cafeteria, your colleagues will remark how impressive it is that a foreigner can use chopsticks. And you will smile. This China thing isn't so hard after all.



Three generations – a grandmother, a mother, and a daughter - pray at a temple in Zhenjiang, Jiangsu Province.



A coworker's daughter fires off a firework on the night of Chinese New Year Eve.



After lunch, a coworker and family members play cards and drink tea through the afternoon.



Tai, another EA, gazes up at snow sculpture commemorating the Year of the Rooster at the Snow and Ice Festival in Harbin.



Teaching English and making fart noises.



Mountain Mao in Jiangsu Province.