

Merging Into The World

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Some flights are rough. When faced with delays, turbulence, toddlers, Pepsi-only products, one can either groan against misfortune or one can accept that 7-Up really is the better beverage. Having a bright outlook means that even if you didn't get the window seat, you can look up at the sky any time after you land. Outlook is everything.



One of the AYC outings in Shanghai, en route to visit a teahouse and totally look like tourists in the process.

My story begins in Nanjing, a rapidly-modernizing city with a sizeable expat presence.

“It’s nice,” Jennifer says, my school contact at Nanjing Foreign Language School where I was assigned. “But it’s getting expensive.”

During my stay, I transformed from American recluse to Nanjing gadfly, joining the chorus of locals who loved and loathed their city in equal measure—too many people, too much traffic, too much noise, but very convenient!—in the way that metropolitan dwellers do all around the world. I extol Nanjing’s transportation system and its ease of travel. Metros, taxis, and buses are inexpensive by any standard, with minimal wait times, and I wish I could implant their efficiency on my native DC metro system. Perhaps Nanjing traded authenticity for convenience, but for someone who wanted to spend his time in China on Easy Mode, or Mild on the Taco Bell scale of spiciness for this lightweight, I appreciated the Burger Kings and McDonalds’; the Starbucks’ and Pizza Huts; especially the H&Ms. But while these brands were available, they were comforting visuals more than necessary fallbacks, as I marveled at and regularly sang the praises of Chinese cooks, or the prices of Chinese clothing. Also, I found wonderful sources for French

baguettes, which is an essential component of my Bolivian breakfast and occasional snack, so I was ready to excuse any slights against me, perceived or otherwise.



Nanjing: familiar when you need it to be, and foreign when you don't.

An experiment in solitude became an experience of growth. Although I was living in a country with over a billion people, I at first felt lonely. Possessing zero Chinese language skills and woefully poor knowledge of Chinese culture, separation became my unwanted companion due, quite simply, to these initial deficiencies. However, once I got an apartment with two other AYC teachers—and once I learned more words and customs—challenges shifted their connotation from negative to positive, and we used those challenges to guide our stay in the country, as we fixed upon what needed accomplishing and how best to accomplish those goals. Most of the time, pointing at things was enough for me to function alone in the wild, as I turned my index finger into a multitool for inquiries and requests. You'd be surprised with how much I accomplished with this simple gesture and rudimentary pantomime. I will forever appreciate the patience of Chinese cashiers, passersby, and store clerks who endured my gestures and my mumbles, my hand-waving, charade-playing self. Necessity may breed invention, but survival undoubtedly destroys shyness. Whenever I needed anything, the only way to accomplish my goal was to venture outside, surround myself with a language I could hear but not listen to, and make myself understood in any way my desperate mind could conjure—nothing less than lunch was at stake, or a cell phone plan.



Toured the Great Wall with the roomie (pictured right) on a whim, you know, no big deal.



I demanded this selfie after he helped me find an electric transformer. Thankfully, selfies, like pointing and doodling, are universally understood.



My assigned school, Nanjing Foreign Language School, where I teach Middle School students, and where they drew on the board for me.

While struggles make for funny, albeit whiny stories, it was the successes that created my most poignant memories. Early on, I set one thought to conviction: before touring my city, before looking for the things I thought were authentically Chinese—thanks, Hollywood!—I reminded myself that, first and foremost, I was here to teach. What an experience that has been. I worked quickly to undo my students' shyness, with my reasoning being that if I couldn't be shy in the street, they couldn't be shy in the classroom. I regularly made a fool of myself, waving my arms erratically, milking humor out of PowerPoint slides for all their worth, but if you'll believe it, I succeeded. It wasn't long before walking out in the hall meant saying hello to every student that passed by; or before my students took their best shot, often with stunning success, figuring out the difference between literal and figurative passages, which I began most of every class with; or before their hands flew up to answer my questions. They were especially eager to mimic my gestures, which functioned as a great strategy for memory recall after the laughter subsided.



Oh, class 2A, 8th period on Tuesdays—what a riot!

For me, the laughter will never subside. This is partly because I have enough videos of all my students to comfortably last a lifetime. It's also because I've made friendships in the program that I anticipate lasting beyond our tenure in China. The support has been consistent, the answers immediate—the experience, deep and lasting. But mostly, I'll continue laughing in optimism because of what the AYC program means: reminding one another that all around the world, there are people willing to teach and learn, to exchange ideas and cultures, to ask questions and be receptive to perspectives. And to share laughter.



That's a slogan I can agree with and certainly one that applies to all of us who venture abroad.