

An interns perspective

My story with China Next

I don't know China. Except for the most standard words I can't speak Chinese – can't read it unless it says noodles or beef. I don't know much about the history of this old land, can't name any emperors or generals or chairmen but one.

I see this nation through the lenses of a foreigner, through rare newspaper articles, political rhetoric and books. I see people on the street, laughing or fighting or sometimes even crying. Not knowing what they might be talking about, I imagine their lives and past, as individuals and a whole.

That is my perspective as an intern, I should mention this to put my remarks into perspective.

When I came to China, it was because I knew that everything here will directly impact my life in Europe. As a student I want to understand the role of this great country in future developments, the roots of its policy, cultural production and the fundamental views behind its contribution to the international conversation.

But more than interested in its culture, I was fascinated by its pace of change. I felt like a new world of endless opportunities and ideas was opening up on the other side of the world and no one cared to look. I wanted to meet the people who make that change, so I booked a flight and came to Shanghai. I found a city that leaves an impression somewhere between Starwars and the age of British industrialization. The towers are growing like flowers out of the ground and seem to have left no space for the old. I loved it.

The only thing for me to do was hope that it loves me back.

Apparently, we are in a complicated relationship. Its mind is confusing, the countless street seem to lead nowhere and millions of people seem to form an anonymous mass and flow down the streets like a river. I had to try hard not to drown.

Fortunately, swimming is a task to be learned and as the weeks passed, life got easier. First bits of language made sense and first glimpses of directions appeared in my mind. I mapped the city around me, found ways and places and started to understand. I studied. And not only in school, but simply by breathing new air. Something impossible to be thought in classrooms came to my mind: chopsticks are actually useful. No – really, they are, and Chinese food is nothing like the chicken curry they sell you at home. It can be spicy or sweet, sour, delicious or weird. But always, it's cheap. And always an adventure.

However, another kind of adventure awaits the traveler in sticky classrooms: the questionable joy of learning Chinese. It's not that this language makes no sense, as far as I am able to judge, but it seems to be designed to hide it from the pitiful student.

"Mr Wang, where is the Bank?" I was told to ask the wall (as I was the only student in the room) and eloquently answered on its behalf: "The bank is between the market and the park ", not knowing I just sold my sole, pledged to join a gang and accused Mr. Wang's family of unspeakable scandals. Equipped with such beautiful new skills, I decided to find my real Mr. Wang and use him in practice – but never found a bank. Or even the slightest clue of what was going on.

Thankfully, that doesn't really matter in a city full of ATMs and online banking and credit cards, so, when I finally completed my courses, I didn't feel too sad about my level of proficiency. I just promised myself to continue my studies when the opportunity arises and focused on work: Project Awesome.

We had a name for this project before we knew what we wanted to do. Nevertheless we knew what our goal could be: inspire creative involvement. Therefore we researched for the new. And we found the bizarre, fascinating and revolutionary, the stupid, naïve and failed. We collected charities we liked and made a tiny little collection, hoping it would somehow make a difference.

We also visited those who are working for the good in Shanghai to find inspiration our self and were left impressed by the commitment some are willing to give. One of the charities we visited, Be Better, gives a great example of early education even though the resources are rare. Warm Charity brings the joy of art to disabled children and integrates them into our society. Also, I am glad to be able to visit Alma Anta in one week time, an annual summer camp for disadvantaged youths.

Taking part in activities like these, we gained new insight into the reality of charity and the society they work in.

Having said all this, I can't stress enough how rewarding my experience with China Next has been and I can only recommend everybody who has the chance to do so to become a part of it.

David Fuhr

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