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How my international experience
has affected my view of the world

Arriving in China

The flight from Japan to Beijing was where I first began to experience what is known as “culture shock.” It was not only unexpected, but much more uncomfortable than ever anticipated.

After arriving at the Narita airport in Japan and spending several hours, I felt fairly comfortable and sensed nothing out of the ordinary. The airport was small and although I did not speak the language, it was easy for a foreigner to navigate. I could buy food, figure out the currency, and find a restroom...all of the necessities. However, on the flight to Beijing, my newfound confidence became short-lived. Exhaustion from traveling set in and I found myself tired, not feeling well, and frustrated. The meal served on the plane was the first of many challenges in this new world. The identity of the food on my plate escaped me, other than a very strong smelling fish, as well as how to eat it, since I was challenged in the use of chopsticks. After several attempts, eating became obsolete as I felt the intense stares of the passengers seated next to me. They appeared curious as they gazed upon my awkward attempt to conform to the unaccustomed. I reluctantly settled for the familiar spoon and cup of ice cream on my tray, suddenly very aware of every movement I made and the strange, uncomfortable feeling.

As I arrived in China, I was faced with a myriad of new sights, smells and feelings. The meal on the plane faded in importance compared to what I experienced at a later time during the trip,

while in a small rural town in China. Here, I was shocked by something entirely different, more than just a strange meal on a plane, but a culture of people who I began to love and respect.

Similar to the United States, quality education depends on your location.

The city schools in China are considered better than the rural ones.

During a bike ride in Yangshuo, a few fellow travelers and I wondered upon a rural primary school. It was located down a narrow concrete walkway and I argued with the idea of following the path into the unknown woods. We had already passed many houses and watched children collect water from pumps to carry inside. There were elderly women hunched over from years of working in the rice paddies, eager to sell their souvenirs to the tourists. We had seen the inside of a farmer's house, particularly the kitchen where he and his wife kept their coffins, equipped with a rice cooker and an area with a large pot for cooking. The roof above had several holes in it that would let the rain in, and given that it was the rainy season, it was quite often. I was concerned about venturing off the main road and exploring alone.

This particular school in the small town of Yangshuo (near Guilin city, part of the Guangxi province) was representative of many poor rural schools that lacked basic resources unheard of in American school systems.

The school sign was in English and mentioned volunteers welcome, so after some hesitation, we entered the school gates. I was shocked to see classrooms with concrete floors and a simple chalkboard. Only a few

desks and chairs were present with the walls empty and the resources scarce. Upon further examination of the school, I noticed the rafters were exposed in the ceiling, a row of spigots on one of the outside walls for water, and a small, dark, dirty, and damp room that appeared to resemble a kitchen. The playground consisted of a few concrete ping pong tables and a very rudimentary basketball court. A single computer was stationed on a desk in the room adjacent to the kitchen. Electrical wires ran in different directions on the wall and a fan stood in the middle of the room. As we ambled around, it was unsure as to whether we should be intruding in the classrooms and entering when not invited. A woman who spoke a little English approached and we were able to communicate that we were teachers from America. She and a few other teachers smiled and I was surprised by their willingness to let us take pictures and meander through the school, even offering us water from the one room teacher office. This was not the picture perfect representation that was shown in the city schools. In fact, had we not wondered down that path and seen for ourselves, this piece of Chinese education may have been completely hidden from our view. As 'primitive' as this school seemed at first glance, the students began English instruction in the 3rd grade. The elementary schools in many states in the US do not offer a foreign language, one of the many budget cuts. Although technology was not the driving force here, the students were being taught a foreign language and according to Chinese rankings, still above many countries in education. Learning about

the disparities between the rural and city schools in regards to teacher education, I knew that it is difficult to find qualified teachers in rural areas. Yet in this small school located in the midst of extreme poverty and hardship, I saw the English alphabet on the concrete wall outside the school and English words painted in a variety of colors.

As I traveled abroad and placed myself in many unfamiliar situations, at times I became very uncomfortable. However, only until we, as educators, are willing to place ourselves in uncomfortable shoes and attempt to see through another's eyes, we will never truly understand or be able to empathize with a foreigner's plight in the United States. As an educator, it is beneficial and almost necessary to place ourselves outside of our comfort zone in order to experience, learn and better educate the students we serve.