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“照片, 照片!” It was a beautiful day by West Lake in Hangzhou, China, but the tourists were swarming around us in a whirlwind. “Hello! 照片吗?” I don’t think I was prepared for how I would look and how I would be perceived by others in China. As a group of friends and I were standing and studying a map of the lake, trying to use our iPhone dictionaries to decipher characters, a group of Chinese tourists came up to us, motioned to their cameras, and begged us to take a picture (照片) with them. As we were taking the picture, more Chinese tourists formed a circle of phones and cameras, all trying to capture the moment of a Chinese man standing with his arms around two foreign women. I knew I would look different here. I didn’t realize I would feel the need to dodge the paparazzi.

The fantastic view from atop Leifeng Pagoda in Hangzhou



This truly is one of the major differences between my life in the United States and my semester’s worth of a life here in the Middle Kingdom. However, it is this difference that has given rise to my most profound self-discoveries. I knew before I came to China that I would look different; I don’t know too many people in China with light brown curly hair and an Eastern European heritage about them.

If you find someone, let me know. The moment I stepped into the line to board my Toronto to Shanghai flight, I instantly felt like I was holding a neon arrow with flashing lights blinking and pointing to my forehead, labeling me as “foreigner”. As I sat down in my cozy middle seat, I peered over the sea of heads in front of me. Everyone had black, straight hair. Everyone was speaking Mandarin. This was a feeling I have never had before, one that I am continuing to learn and adjust to every time I am on the subway here in Shanghai, every time I walk to get dinner, every time I go sightseeing around the city. Every day I find myself meshed into situations where I am always labeled as a foreigner, but I have realized that this gives rise to an avenue of self-discovery, and I would never have learned this much about China, Chinese people, my country, or myself in any other situation.

Above all things, I have learned to absorb everything that comes in the “foreigner” package. I know I will never be Chinese, my country does not have the deeply-seeded history built upon thousands of years, and no matter how fluent my Mandarin skills become, I will always be a foreigner. Yet, like the hidden prize secretly tucked away in the bottom of a cereal box, the “foreigner” package also holds one of the most amazing things about China. This country has made me feel immensely welcome.

After spending the afternoon hiking a gorgeous tea field in the mountains near Hangzhou, my three friends and I, mosquito bite-ridden, hot, tired, and immensely sweaty, slowly made our way back into the mountain town where we had previously eaten lunch. The owner of the restaurant basically shoved us inside, sat us down, and gave us tea and sunflower seeds, adding that we could stay and rest as long as we needed. She said this even after giving us a private tour of the tea fields. *The green tea fields of Hangzhou (see right).*

Every morning, I walk to my university’s cafeteria and order 奶黄包 for breakfast. The woman behind the counter helps me order, gives me recommendations, and makes me feel more special than any other cafeteria line I have stood in in the past. On the first subway ride after I arrived in Shanghai and met up with my roommate at the airport, she invited me to her family’s hometown for her big sister’s wedding.

I feel so unbelievably welcome here, and I can never express my gratitude for that. While walking along The Bund (the famous Shanghai strip), I was asked by a random Chinese couple to take a picture with them. Later, a Chinese woman looked at me and said laowai (foreigner) to her friend. I have begun to walk these famed streets of the Middle Kingdom, and it almost seems that every new mile I walk brings me to a new awakening about this country, my country, and how we different citizens see ourselves and each other. I know that when I return to the United States, I will never again look at a Chinese tourist with the same eyes as before. The eyes that will look at a Chinese visitor in my home country will be wiser; I will see that person’s hospitality, that person’s eyes staring in wonder at how different things are in The States. In a way, we will be the same person, both in foreign countries, unable to look like the people walking around us, both trying to successfully bridge this gap between our two countries. Now, we have both been laowai.



My First Work Experience Abroad

I remember the feeling of being on the Shanghai subway for the first time, trying to memorize which subway stop I needed to get off at to arrive at my internship. I was trying my hardest not to feel intimidated by the sprawling 17 metro lines reaching out to the extent of the city, while at the same time trying to calm myself down so that my sweat stains did not appear through my shirt. Once I exited the metro onto 南京西路 (West Nanjing Street), I rehearsed, “Okay, right on 南京西路, left on 泰兴路, and left on 北京西路 to arrive at Garden Square.” I remember the first time I looked up at the futuristic building I would be



interning in for the next fourteen weeks. It loomed above me, the lobby was sparkling as I imagined huge office buildings would be, and I knew I was entering a new journey in my life.

As I look back, I cannot believe how much I learned starting from that first time I entered into the large Garden Square skyscraper in Shanghai. During my marketing and social media internship at IMS Health Shanghai, I learned not only about the mobile health industry and about digital marketing, but I came to realizations about culture, about the Chinese workplace, and about my future career. In order to come to these realizations however, I had to force myself out of my comfort zone, and use my Chinese language skills and my interest in Chinese culture to connect to my co-workers on a personal level. I will forever be grateful that I made these valuable international connections.

I distinctly remember talking to my supervisor and another co-worker about the difference between the Chinese and American college systems. My co-workers asked me questions about the American college system I hadn't even thought of before, even though I currently belong to the system. As we exchanged questions and answers, my mind was opened to the possibility of living as a bridge between two cultures. As our world seems to become smaller and smaller, I believe it is more important than ever to possess cross-cultural knowledge. This is one of the major realizations I made during my internship in Shanghai. Striving to achieve valuable cross-cultural knowledge is one of the main goals I have set for my future career. I hope my future cross-culturalism grows as valuable as the cross-culturalism my co-workers at IMS Health Shanghai showed to me.

I remember the last time I stepped out of the sparkling lobby of the Garden Square skyscraper. During my walk to the metro station that day, I reflected on my time working abroad. I feel blessed that I experienced such a rich work environment and that I can look back now and see the fruits of this experience. I only hope I can help a young intern later in my life, a young intern who is excited by new possibilities and willing to embrace an international experience wholeheartedly.