

Samantha Tate's Personal Account of China Trip

I've always had an interest in Asian cultures, but being able to actually visit and *live* in one was nothing short of an amazing experience.

Stepping onto the plane in Seattle gave me my first inkling of how the next month would be, suddenly being surrounded by people of Chinese descent, rather than African American or Caucasian. I was as giddy as a school girl as soon as the safety video started up, first explaining the safety procedures in Chinese, and *then* English.

After it went off my fellow seatmates and I were trying to get our little controls to the television in front of us out of the seats. We were able to pull them out, but had no idea how to get the cord to go back in. My first interaction with the Chinese was at that moment, when two lovely women from a row back helped us figure it out.

They spoke very little English, and we had to interact through movements and gestures as opposed to actual words. As comical and sweet as I found the encounter to be, I had no idea that's how I would survive the coming month.

The ride over was very long, but once we stepped off the plane eleven hours later, our American culture was thrown out the window. The traffic was our first cue that we weren't in America anymore. Had our bus driver just run that bike over? Wasn't that traffic signal red? Why was there a herd of bicyclists trying to skirt around our tour bus? Was that man really supposed to cross the street when traffic was moving in his direction?

We quickly learned the Chinese are desensitized to the sound of a car horn, and their roads are more of a 'yield to the bigger, faster moving object' as opposed to a turn-based, signal-directed system, like we're accustomed to in the U.S.

Another thing we quickly noticed was the difference in food. Of course almost every location is sprinkled with McDonald's and KFC, but their menus include items I doubt have ever seen the light of day in an American restaurant. How about a Green Tea Soft Serve at McDonald's?

As for the local food, it's...interesting. Something I learned is to not question what you're eating, just worry about if it tastes good. I hadn't realized how much I was changing at the

time, but now that I'm back in the United States I realized I've developed an interesting quality. Whenever I'm offered food, I taste it first and *then* ask what it is.

When I was in China I got in the habit of 'eat first, ask question later,' since none of us usually knew what we were eating until one of the professors would give us a little insight.

Speaking of food, I had a memorable experience when we were on Zhengzhou's campus. We were all paired up with Chinese students, and it became common for us to go out for lunch or dinner with them. Our 'buddies' became integral to surviving Zhengzhou, since they knew the area and, more importantly, the language.

One afternoon a few of us met up with our buddies and headed off to the cafeteria for lunch. I was next to my buddy, sliding my tray down the line, when I encountered a little morsel of food I'd come to like, but didn't know what it was. I asked her if she could identify it, and after a moment of careful examination, she claimed she didn't know what it was.

This was a student of the university, one she had lived at for two years, and even she didn't know what it was she was eating. It both comforted and unnerved me, since I realized the Americans weren't the only clueless ones, but was that necessarily a good thing?

Also very different was the overall behavior of the Chinese. Though this may persist in the large cities of America, I am but a simple country bumpkin, and found this to be very different from the everyday norm of Georgia. An example would be the simple concept of a line. That thing where you stand behind one another and wait your turn seems to be foreign in China.

On one of our final nights in Shanghai a few of us set out to walk a half a mile or so to a McDonald's, just to have an early taste of America after depriving ourselves of everything American for a month. We got in and all crowded around the counter, making a flimsy attempt at forming a line, but only because our American blood was telling us to do so.

Once our orders were taken, mainly by us pointing wordlessly at what we wanted, we crowded around the other end of the counter, blocking everyone else just to make sure we could have an easy walk up to grab our food instead of just waiting in the order

that we...well, ordered. Though I didn't realize it at the time, we had become like the Chinese.

Once we reached the airport in Seattle, we all sleepily found our gate and collapsed on the floors and seats. We were unconcerned with how much space we were taking up, since we had learned that if you want something, you just have to go for it. Where I saw the concept of the line challenged was here. One of the guys and I walked over to a Burger King. I didn't want any food, so I stood off to the side and waited for him to order. I noticed that after his order was taken, he walked over and stood right against the counter.

Everyone else stood at least five feet behind him, patiently waiting for their number to be called out as opposed to gaining counter space, just to be the first to grab their order. I mentioned it afterward, and he said he hadn't even realized he had been standing that close--it was just a natural instinct at this point.

One of the last things that will forever stick out in my mind is the lovely concept of Chenglish. Just as Americans proudly display Chinese words and characters on their clothing and, even worse, their bodies, the Chinese are guilty of the same thing.

Something I'm going to lovingly recount for years to come is something I saw on the campus of Zhengzhou. One of the classes I was taking was Sociology of Photography, and our homework every night was to find pictures of at least one concept that was discussed in class.

That night I was walking with a few of the Chinese buddies to a restaurant on the edge of campus. With my heart set on finding some Chenglish, I didn't have to look far. I quickly spotted a girl, presumably a student of the university, walking toward us. Her shirt was bright pink, and in big bold letters was the word 'acne.'

I couldn't believe my eyes, and I had to keep my smile suppressed as the buddies asked her if I could take her picture. They later asked what that word meant, as they had no earthly idea. I explained to them what acne was, and they were nothing short of mortified. There were many other instances of this, ranging from hilariously broken to strikingly offensive.