

Culture Shock

Sooner or later, it hits everyone. Usually, it's within the first few weeks, which will likely be some of your longest days in China. It's the realization that you are in a completely unknown country for a full year. The realization that you left everything familiar, friends and family are far away, and you have **no** idea what is going on around you. It'll have even seasoned, open-minded vacationers hugging their pillow for stability as they sleep at night, staying in their apartments downloading American movies, TV and video games, wondering why on earth they decided to work in a country so foreign. You don't know anyone yet, all the business men are spitting on sidewalks and smoking, old ladies are elbowing you, **everyone is staring at you all the time**, and above all, you don't know what's going on at your job. It's scary. It's culture shock, and it's unavoidable.

Relax: it's a fact of life. Moving from West to East is a bit like jumping from a hot tub into a cold swimming pool. All of us at Adventure Teaching have been there, and so have our many successful teachers.

What to Expect

At first glance, everything about China is different. Old ladies sit against buildings peeling vegetables, fish are sold outside, strangers are stumbling around in full formal business attire, and as far as the rest of the pedestrians are concerned, it's just another day. Even sit-down Western restaurants are glitzier, hipper, and often seem to have more employees than patrons. And we haven't even touched upon the larger societal differences, the Confucian social hierarchy that affects everything from the way Chinese look at family to the way they conduct business. But in three or four months' time, you'll find yourself living comfortably, shrugging off oddities, taking for granted the things you once swore you'd never get used to. You'll be drinking light beer with friends, both expats and Chinese locals, like you've done it for years and you'll wonder why you ever had

Expats' Voices: Nanjing Nick's Guide to Culture Shock

While I was still in Seattle, I was expecting to be culture shocked out of my mind upon arrival in China. Since I was expecting a totally different world, the differences weren't actually as extreme as I was expecting. China is an extremely cool, safe, fun and inexpensive country. With that said, there are a few things that I would have liked to know before heading over:

- Chinese people have a different sense of personal space. Be prepared to get bumped into frequently and not get an apology. People will stand (what we might think is) awkwardly close in places like elevators and subways.
- Your apartment's shower will most likely not be segregated from the rest of the bathroom. You will probably have a removable showerhead on the wall and you will stand in the center of your bathroom while you take a shower. It takes a little getting used to but it's really not that bad.
- As you may have heard, Chinese employers are notorious for last minute notifications. This is absolutely true and is astonishing to see in practice.
- People spit everywhere (men and women). Spitting is socially acceptable and people do it everywhere. You will see a group of businessmen walk out of a restaurant and then everyone will start hocking loogies... the stairwells are particularly bad.
- You're going to be lonely at first. It's really hard... and it **will happen** to you. Give yourself at least 3 months to adjust to your new life in China!

difficulties transitioning in the first place. As you meet teachers who've recently arrived, you'll remember exactly why. You'll sometimes catch yourself thinking, "I actually like it better this way," and you may even fall in love with the culture and its quirky differences. We sure did!

Let's be frank: you'll never be able to know exactly what the differences are like until you encounter them first hand, but mentally preparing and educating yourself beforehand will help immensely in your transition and limit the amount of culture shock you experience.

How to Fight Culture Shock in 8 Easy Steps

- 1. Get a phone, ASAP:** Setting up Internet or a cell phone in China is perhaps your most important lifeline to friends and family back home. **WARNING: Do not bring and use your cell phone from home. It might work, but it's a different network and the roaming charges are obscene.**
- 2. Read our stuff:** Our material was written by our staff to prepare you for your arrival.
 - Read "Let's be Frank" on our [website](#).
 - Read the China section under the Life Abroad Info Center. No seriously, read all of it.
- 3. Read up on China:** Read a book about Chinese culture or do some research online (warning: avoid the self-professed and jaded "experts." You'll know them when you read them.
- 4. Learn Mandarin:** At least the basics! It's no secret that some native teachers never learn a word of Mandarin and do perfectly fine. However, learning some of the language will not only prepare you for the culture (which, like the language, is characterized by hierarchical degrees of formality and politeness), it will also help you understand how your students think about language. For that reason alone, there's no excuse for not learning a little! Learning the basics is more fun than it is frustrating, and the more you know, the better your experience will be. Go on, get started!
- 5. Connect with other teachers:** If you're worried about making friends in China, don't be. Most teachers who come to China are by themselves, and many of the people you meet in the first few weeks will also be newbies. In many cases, you are replacing someone with a pre-existing circle of friends, and these people are probably going to want to get to know you. Bottom line: you're going to make **a lot** of friends in the first month. Here are some other ways to get ahead in friend-finding.
 - Adventure Teaching is an expat community in and of itself. "Like" the [AT Facebook page](#) and post on our wall – tell everyone where you're going!
 - Find out where the foreigners hang out in your neighborhood.
 - Join one of the many [Meet-up](#) groups in China.

- 6. Get involved:** Chinese people are notoriously hard workers, but they take their hobbies seriously too. If you have a particular interest or hobby, you'll most likely be able to do it in China. Chinese people and expats living in China have clubs for everything, from outdoor activities to organized sports to knitting and scrapbooking. As a brand new teacher, how will you find these awesome activities? Just use an online search engine after you arrive in China! It's that easy, so no excuses.
- 7. Mingle with the locals:** Often foreign teachers miss the beauty of the Chinese people because they do not make any Chinese friends. This is a shame, as good Chinese friends will enrich your life in China ten-fold. Many times you won't even have to find them because they will find you, and more often than not they are happy to help you book accommodations, rent whatever equipment you might need, and take you to unique areas. In addition, Chinese friends give you insights into the culture that you couldn't gain anywhere else. They explain why certain things happen the way they do, and they teach you to enjoy and respect their culture!
- 8. Attitude is Everything:** Working and living abroad is an adventure! Sure, it'll be difficult at times, but maintaining a positive attitude throughout your year is monumental. The benefit of attitude? It's always under **your** control. You can't always control your circumstances, but you can always control your own mindset.

A negative outlook will be toxic to your experience. A bad attitude creeps into every part of your life and consequently into the lives of those around you. If you allow yourself to be negative and start complaining, you'll likely miss all the great things that are happening.

Our advice? **Form your own opinions about your school and circumstances.** Often new teachers simply inherit the negative attitudes of their more experienced co-workers, making them view their situation through a tainted lens. We urge you to do your best to encourage a positive atmosphere at your school. It will be worth every ounce of effort that you apply to it. There will be tough seasons that will require maturity and resilience on your part, but much of your year will be a breeze. In the end, we can guarantee that with the right attitude, you will look back on this exciting time of your life and remember it fondly.

We hope this eases some Chinese growing pains. As always, we'd love to hear from you so don't hesitate to give us a call or write us an email with any further questions, comments or concerns.