



Having studied Chinese throughout high school and into university, I came to realise that learning the language was only one aspect in understanding and appreciating such a diverse culture. It became apparent to me that immersing myself in the language, the culture and the people, was the only way enhance my study of the language. The China In-Country Program not only allowed me to do this, but offered me the opportunity to gain independence and learn about myself in the process.

Considering the obstacles that were to greet me whilst living alone in China from inside my Australian bubble, I felt confident that grocery shopping, day-to-day communication, travel and so on would be relatively easy. Having

already travelled to China once before only bolstered, what later proved to be, my false sense of security.

The first shock I experienced, and one that I should have been prepared for, were the simple everyday tasks which I had taken for granted back home. Washing clothes, for example, and ensuring there wasn't too much detergent (this task proved more difficult than it seemed, as many times I had to wash my clothes for a second time because they were still soapy at the end of the cycle) was one of the many reality checks I experienced. In addition, the freedom to do what I wanted, when I wanted, has taught me that complete independence is a double-edged sword. This freedom meant, on occasion, students would attend class with the look of regret (because of a night out) on their faces. This gave me an insight into life without boundaries, and I now respect and appreciate such boundaries more than ever.

Classes were run weekdays from 8:20 am-11:20 am and consisted of, what translates to, oral class and written class. These classes were challenging to say the least. They were conducted entirely in Chinese, and although the first few classes had me questioning my own ability, by the end of the program, the sense of self-satisfaction and reward I felt because I was now able to follow classes, is indescribable. Classes were highly rewarding, as not only did my language improve, but my understanding of culture was also enhanced. We also had the opportunity to teach our teachers more about life in Australia. This proved interesting, especially when we tried to explain that the Great Wall of China was built "to keep the rabbits out". The joke was lost in translation. Nevertheless, class gave all students the opportunities to expand their language and bolster confidence.

The China In-Country program also allowed me the opportunity to travel during the weekends and experience the diversity of Chinese culture between provinces. I was able to eat Muslim street food in Zheng Zhou, try to wrap my mind around the highly confusing dialect spoken in Shanghai and was offered an insight into the life of the poor living in the Hutong district of Beijing. Such experiences shaped my memories of the In-Country program, as well as gave me the confidence to travel independently and mingle with locals in order to travel to more authentically Chinese areas.

Looking back at my time in China, again from the comfort of my sorely missed bubble, I have come to realise that this experience was a once in a life time opportunity, and one that I am glad I seized. The friends I made, the memories I have and the language skills I now possess, all made the trip a worthwhile adventure. I feel as though I gained much more than a better understanding of Chinese culture and the ability to speak more fluent Chinese. I witnessed my own, and many of my classmates', transition from naïve youth to independent and grounded young adult.

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