

Expatriate Year: Reflections On A Changing Society In China

SOUSSE, Tunisia – I moved to Yuxi, China 13 months ago with a mission I cribbed from Glenn Heggstad, a global motorcycle adventurer I admire: “My intention was to better understand the real world and my own character, as well as to explore my own limits.” Now my year in Asia has ended and, after a wonderful visit home, I’ve embarked on a new journey.

When I was back in Ottawa Hills, friends asked, “What was China like?” I answered that I really don’t know. I lived in a vast country in a “small” city of 1.5 million people. If a Chinese man lived a year in Baton Rouge, Louisiana – or even Toledo, Ohio – would he be able to say what America was like?

I can, however, say what Yuxi was like.

The city I saw and called home for a year was undergoing rapid transitions. Some of these were obvious and physical. In the time I was there, I saw at least a dozen buildings of 25 stories or more begun or completed.

Major streets were dug up for the replacement of antiquated infrastructure and the construction of underground shopping plazas. Scores of older buildings were demolished to make way for new projects.

The people of Yuxi grumbled about all the disruption. The mayor driving these changes was widely known as “Mr. Finger” by un-

happy city residents, who believe that he drives by a building, points at it, and bang – it’s gone two weeks later. But from my viewpoint, all the changes seemed to be signs of a confident and prosperous society moving rapidly into a new era. I couldn’t help but be impressed – and a little envious.

There were obvious changes happening in society there, too. The Chinese government’s plan is to move 300,000,000 people from smallholder plots in the country into the cities. This creates some tension between the established urbanites and the newcomers. “They’re farmers with iPhones!” snorted one of my Chinese friends, coming upon the daily sight of a child excreting on a city sidewalk under the watchful encouragement of his mother.

The role of women was also changing rapidly. Established mores – e.g., arranged marriages, intense parental pressure on women to wed, third dates being tantamount to a proposal, no public displays of affection – are breaking down. But new socio-sexual arrangements have yet to cohere. The result is that Chinese women are living with one foot in the old and another in the new, a position that causes them considerable anguish.

There were changes occurring inside me, too. Living alone in a white-walled apart-

ment in a foreign society was like living before a big mirror. It reflected the American me, with both my scars and my muscles. Without the background noise of my own cultural assumptions, I could hear the inner voice more clearly and perceive my own emotions without the cultural shoulds and oughts.

I cultivated self-reliance and patience. My friends and family were on the other side of the planet. I couldn’t communicate with my neighbors or call the OHPD if trouble struck. For the first six weeks I kept a notebook in my pocket (to record basic logistical information) and a hunting knife by my bed (to intimidate imaginary bad guys).

I had to figure things out without being able to speak or read: how to pay my electric bill, where to buy chicken breasts, whom to see about a leak in my ceiling, what to do about a sprained ankle. At first even the simplest tasks took an absurdly long time, but gradually my competence and confidence increased in tandem. I eventually left the notebook at home and stowed the knife in a kitchen cupboard.

The distance and isolation gave me some new perspectives. Everyone knows there are some things you have to move away from to see better: impressionist paintings, marriages, elephant herds, regimes, and monuments. From twelve time zones away, America evokes a complicated response. As one of my Chinese friends put it, “Americans have a wonderful culture, but we don’t understand why you are always at war.”

Ouch.

Not all my days were good ones. There was yawning loneliness, made worse by being surrounded by people who shared neither my language nor my culture. There were times when I was sick and miserable and yearned for a return to Toledo and friends and family. But those times were outnumbered and outweighed by times when I loved my China life.

I miss walking the city at 9 p.m. and seeing hundreds of people out exercising, dancing, shopping, walking, courting, or just hanging out. I miss dumplings, light shows, fireworks, Asian fashion, and my students. And I miss people calling “hello” to me and wanting to take selfies with me. When you’re one of only thirty foreigners in town, you sometimes feel like a rock star. It’s pretty seductive. But it was time to move on.

After my too-brief stop back in the 419, I’ve left again for another year abroad. I’m writing this from Sousse, Tunisia, where I’ve taken a one-year gig with an American NGO. So stay tuned ...

– James F. Trumm

You can read more about Jim’s experiences of living abroad at www.jftrumm.com.

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