Dealing with Culture Shock when Studying and Living in China

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Introduction

Jeremiah (00:09): Hello, this is Jeremiah Jenne and welcome to another edition of Barbarians at the Gate. With me from steamy, sultry Bangkok is David Moser. David, how are you doing in Southeast Asia during what is a holiday week for people who work in China?

David: That's right, holiday week. I like being in Bangkok because other than the weather, everything is so wonderfully distant from the worries and concerns of the world, partly because I don't speak the local language. So I don't have conversations about politics or their particular country's issues. But it's kind of nice to be free to just dip into social media whenever I want to see whether the United States still exists as a sovereign country.

Discussing Culture Shock

Jeremiah: Well, it's interesting you mentioned being in a place where you don't speak the language because what we're going to talk about today is culture shock. And for you and I, there's still culture shock even after all these years when we're in China. But it's a different experience because we are able to communicate. We are able to get around. We have at least a passing understanding of how things work. But it is different when you go or when I would go to a place like Thailand or Vietnam, a place where the culture may have a certain familiarity, at least being in Asia, but the language is completely different. I'm reduced once again back to phrase book sentences like it was when I first got to China. And it is a very different feeling.

David: Yeah, that's right. I feel very bad about that because, you know, one of my goals in China was to not be like that. I didn't want to be the little *laowai* who blissfully lived in English language environments for their whole life there. So I do feel guilty here and I wish I had more time to actually converse. It is a tonal language like Chinese. So at least I have the upper hand there. But I've only learned to say things like "I'm going swimming," you know, and they clap when I say a sentence in Thai.

But Jeremiah, you should remind our audience, or I will, that you and I, back in the golden age, were heading up overseas studies programs. So we had a lot of experience with students from all backgrounds and seeing secondhand their culture shock while at the same time going through our own. So we have a lot of examples to share with people. And also, culture shock ain't what it used to be.

Even back in that early 2000s, a lot of the things that you would count now as culture shock have gone away. Everything's adapted so much to sort of a worldwide normal in terms of social media

and so on. That some of the things that were strange and awkward have gone away, but there are new strange and awkward things. So it's kind of interesting to look back on it and also look what's happening now.

Defining Culture Shock

Jeremiah: David, how would you explain culture shock to your students when they would first step off the plane in old Beijing?

David: Well, usually I didn't really have to explain it to them because they were already feeling it. But of course, this sort of culture shock, especially for China, is unexpected events or unexpected situations that are different enough from what you're used to that you feel at least puzzled and a little bit awkward and at the worst, angry and upset and in the midst of a misunderstanding about what the other person is, how the person is relating to you. A lot of it is just about daily sorts of amenities, things like hot water and cold water. You find that the Chinese has a very different attitude towards those. And you go to a restaurant, you're expecting ice water or a Coke or something, and they'll give you a hot glass of water. That kind of thing, they're very, very minor.

But then there are other things too where you may be interacting with someone and you're finding that their body language is very strange and you don't quite know how to use your body and why is he so close or why is he so far away or why is he looking at me staring in my eyes and not politely looking away every now and then. These are the normal sorts of things that can have very often just a subconscious effect, things that when you're in the midst of the interaction you don't really... You're not really thinking overtly about what's happening to you, but you just feel discomfort. And it's only later on when you ponder it and think about it, you realize that there was a mismatch going on. And it may take a long time to even discover what those areas of misunderstanding are.

The Four Phases of Cultural Adaptation

Jeremiah: And I think there is that point when you arrive and there are the, first of all, how cool everything is, but then the challenges of where am I going to buy this thing or how can I actually get around if I can't ask the subway person where the next stop is, all of these things. And I remember when we were doing the culture shock or cultural adaptation workshops, there was this formula that was very popular in the study abroad or international education community about culture shock, there was the four phases. There was the honeymoon phase. There was the challenge phase. There was the phase where you start to adapt and change. And then there was a final phase in which you hopefully achieve some level of, a term that was often used was like mastery, but some level of cultural competence in the new environment.

And I was wondering, I have my own thoughts about this particular formula, but did you also, when you were working with your students, did you also use a format or formula or pathway from, "my goodness, I'm in China" to "I'm in China and I can handle myself"?

David: Yeah, well, one of the focus of FOSI [Foreign Overseas Studies Institute] of our program included language. And we actually took advantage of this saying, you will experience some awkwardness, you will experience some situations where you don't quite understand. Your job is to try and use the Chinese language as much as you can to resolve those problems. So in some way, we would see those problems go away in terms of how their language ability improved.

So when they came here, there were lots of very ordinary daily sentences and expressions that they couldn't quite master. But as time goes on, and they do and they can master them, then they began to avoid those kinds of discomfort and fear actually quite often. You're afraid that you've said the wrong thing. The taxi driver is gonna take you to the wrong location and so forth, right? So we used language as a way for going through these steps. The honeymoon period is when everyone's treating you very nicely and everything and you're guided by the faculty and your fellow students and the people who are heading your extracurricular activities. But then you start to explore the city and you run into these problems.

One thing, I do agree that there are these stages that you go through. And you're right that there's never really mastery, but they are able to get through enough of cultural knowledge and also linguistic knowledge, which mesh together, the culture and the language go together. But I would say with things like, for example, going to the hospital if you're sick, right? You can be up to a very high level feeling very comfortable in the culture in China. And you feel like, wow, I'm buying things, I'm making jokes, talking to the cab driver and everything's fun. Suddenly you get sick, you get a gastrointestinal problem or something. And now you're in a hospital and people are saying things to you, you're not quite sure what's going on, you want to hear a reassuring voice. You want to have an English language speaking environment when you're afraid of your health problem, right?

And that can take you back. I mean, you can feel you've made a lot of progress, but many students that had to go to the hospital was a very traumatic experience for them because they did not feel comfortable with the information that they were getting. So it depends on...it just depends on the student, the student's personality. Some people could handle it just fine, you know. They were stalwart. Other people, you know, there's problems that they need to deal with, feel very frightening to them.

Hospital Experiences and Language Barriers

Jeremiah: One reason that some of the Western or Western-style hospitals in Beijing continue to operate despite the fact that almost everyone I know has at least one story about particularly a certain hospital that's somewhere close to where you live, David, is because if ever I'm in a situation where I have to be in the emergency room, my Chinese is okay, but I think if the next thing coming at me is, "hold on a second while we re-break your nose," I'm going to want that to be very clear.

I'm not going to want to reach for my dictionary or my phone to figure out what's about to happen to me. Language competency and cultural competency, they go together. I experience this now. I'm now in Europe. My French is, I took two years of high school French. I read a lot of French for my research, but my spoken French has been not there. And I am reminded of this

when I try to speak. And of course, part of that is it does, even though in some ways where I live now in Switzerland is closer to where I come from. But on some level, sometimes I feel less confident because of course there's that language barrier that I don't have in Beijing that I do have in Switzerland.

The other thing about that formula too, this idea of honeymoon phase, challenge, and then some form of acceptance or growth and then mastery or competence. I mean, like all formulas, I think it does apply to some people. I think one of the drawbacks of using that formula, and I think about this now in retrospect for students or for anyone who's coming, going to a place like China, is that what happens when you don't quite fit the schedule? If there are people in your class or if there are people in your workplace or people in your group who seem to be progressing beyond the challenge phase that much faster, whether that's because their language acquisition is at a higher level or for whatever reason.

And I think it causes a lot of anxiety. Like "I'm never going to get there. Am I? But on these four steps and I'm still on step two." And the other thing is that I don't think it's a fixed one, two, three, four step ladder. I feel like it's much more of a constant cycle. Many years ago, and we referenced this on an earlier episode, I'm sure there was a blog that put out a graph, if you will, called the cycle of China funk. And instead of like this step-by-step progression towards mastery, it was more like a curve or a wave. And there, I think that was a far better representation of what most of us go through, which is that, yes, you're in that moment, you're at the high point of the wave, especially when you first arrive, everything's cool. And then you realize that things are very hard and you start to go to the bottom and you find yourself curled in a fetal position in your dorm room binge watching like when we first arrived DVDs now whatever you can stream and then you kind of pull out of it. You go to a dumpling restaurant finally for dinner and the person understands you and everything's cool and everything's great and you reach the peak and then something else happens. And I feel like riding that wave is one of the keys to just surviving in a new environment, especially in an environment like China, rather than trying to fight it and say, I need to be here and I'm not there yet. Ride the wave. There's going to be good days. There's going to be bad days. It's a journey. It's not a beginning point, end point.

Persistent Culture Shock: Squat Toilets

David: Yeah, that's so true. That's so true. I mean, there are many things that for me is still a problem. It's hard to describe as shock because I'm so used to it. But, you know, a good example is squat toilets. Now, you're in Europe, right? I think that they still have squat toilets in Europe. When I was in France, they did, I remember. But do they still have them there or not?

Jeremiah: They might, but it's not as common an experience as it is certainly traveling.

David: Well, in Beijing and China, it's in Beijing and in China, that's the default in public, right? So when I first came to China, went to China, this was a huge problem because how in the world, first of all, they were filthy and they're much better now, even in the hutongs, but back then they were unbelievably grungy and filthy. But how in the world am I supposed to position my body in this place? And also you had to bring your own toilet tissue because usually they didn't.

So this is a basic thing. Taking a crap is pretty basic life event that you have to do every day. And to this day, it's something that I just sort of shiver a little bit when I have to go to a public bathroom. When I first came to China, I kind of got used to it pretty quickly, which brings up something I'll mention in a second. You know, through most of my 30s, 40s, 50s, I kind of learned to live with it. I'm 70 years old now.

I have a much older body that's trying to go to the toilet and figure out a squat there. And I wasn't born in China. Chinese people seem to have a sort of a genetic ability to squat on the ground playing cards, you know, infinitely. I can't squat for more than about 15 seconds, right? So that's an example of culture shock that for me just never goes away. It's just something you have to learn to live with. It's very, very frustrating.

But there's another thing. You talk about the people who are looking around them and find that some people seem to adjust quicker or they seem to have less problems. I think there's some people, you and I probably in this category, which is in a way the difference, the strangeness is something that we actually kind of like. We have a kind of masochistic disposition where the hardship kind of makes you, it makes you feel a little bit more alive and a little bit more present and you're sort of wondering about these things and it's like a cult, it's like.

For me, the statement I've said is China is my drug of choice, which when I was here in the 80s, was definitely the everyday was like an LSD trip because there were some absolutely bizarre things to me that I had to adjust to. And I thought, well, that's what I came here for. I didn't come here for comfort and good old American cuisine. I came here to learn about this culture. So I think that some of those people that seem to have surpassed that are just those who actually like the challenge and they don't mind the hardship because it's sort of what they're expecting and it's what they see. It's sort of like doing push-ups every day or doing bodybuilding. You don't really like it, right? It's painful and sometimes boring, it's for a goal. It's what you want to do and so you're willing to do it. So I don't know about you. I think you're in the same category. I think you would agree with that.

Balancing Challenge and Comfort

Jeremiah: Well, I think the bodybuilding analogy or lifting analogy is a good one. It's a process of being comfortable with a certain amount of discomfort in the service of a greater goal. And I thought about this even when I was teaching. Also, you want to push the students to have an experience in the new environment in China that takes them out of their comfort zone, but not so far out of their comfort zone that it breaks their spirit. And there is a balance there. And it was especially true when we were planning things like the excursions. So we would take students on the road, either for an academic trip somewhere else. We would think about, so what kind of experience are they going to have? And here's an example. If we take them to a village in Yunnan, and it's a village that's not designed for foreign tourists, one of the things that they're going to have to deal with, all of us are going to have to deal with is probably toilets that are often outside, at least back then, almost always squat toilets, at least back then, usually overlook some kind of animal pen in some places, which is its own experience. You look down through that hole, the last thing you want to see is eyes looking back up at you. Doesn't matter what they're attached to. That is an awkward moment.

And you want the students to have that sort of, you don't want to make them uncomfortable, but you want to challenge what they think is normal. And you kind of help them through that. I had a graphic that I would show the students pretty regularly back in the day. And it was, you know, simple globe. It was something I found online. It was a globe and it had a little circle around basically East Asia and India. And what it said was over half the people in this world live within this circle. And what I tried to remind students when they say, "Well, you know, those toilets are weird or this is weird or that the way they're doing that that's so strange" is that the definition of weird or strange is not normal. The definition of normal is what most people do. If most people grow up within that circle and you student, me teacher did not grow up within that circle, then what we do may actually qualify as the weird one, not necessarily what we're seeing in front of us.

One of the things our program had, which was just an amazing feature was that we had a team of RAs. These were former students in our program who had graduated from university. They'd come back for a year and they were a great resource for the students and a great help for the teachers and the staff. And the RAs one year had put together this incredible poster that they had hand drawn with diagrams and step-by-step guides on how to use a squat toilet with particular attention paid to avoiding what the RAs refer to as splashback.

Learning About Yourself Through Cultural Exchange

David: That's right. I mean, part of the goal of these programs, and I think of cultural interaction in general, is not only to find out about the country and the environment you're in, but also to find out more about yourself. And I think...I have a good example of this. You know, one of the problems we had with my program was that they were...each of the American students were paired up with a Chinese student to live in the same dorm. And the Chinese student's duty was to teach the Americans Chinese and speak to them only in Chinese if they...as much as the American who was able to do that, right? I think it's the same with your program, right?

So we had, you know, this woman who was very angry because her roommate would always use her towel or would use her soap or would use her something or other. They would come to me and say, can you tell her that, you know, this is mine...I don't know how to do it politely, you know. I said, nope, nope, that's up to you. You've got to use Chinese to explain to her what she's doing and why you think, you know, you have to work it out in Chinese, right? So that's the whole point, right?

So, I mean, a little while after that, a few weeks after that, I asked her, how did you do it? Have you solved this problem with your roommate? And she said, you know what? I realized the problem was me. Why am I so picky? And she had begun to realize that, you know, Chinese people have a different way. They have a different notion about individuality. And if you're sharing a dorm room, you're kind of like family, you know? I had to be able to take some of your candy or something, or use your towel if I don't have mine, or something like that.

And she realized, you know, that's just the society. The barriers between us are different, and she takes my stuff as somewhat, you know, something that... And probably the Chinese student also adjusted a little bit. So they both found out a little bit about themselves. Another thing you

mentioned, I think I've had a lot of students over the years who would talk about their cultural shock. And some of them would say, you know what, the culture shock is not so much China.

It's about living in a huge city because a lot of these people from rural areas or cities of, you know, only 50,000 or something and they'd never lived with a place where there was subways and burgeoning populations on the street. And the problem wasn't Beijing or China. The problem was a big city.

Urban Overwhelm vs. Cultural Shock

Jeremiah: I should say, I'm one of those people. I grew up in a town of about 5,000 people and small town in New Hampshire. And I had lived in some cities or in some urban environments before, but still there's nothing like living in a large city in Asia, unless you have grown up there. I had exactly the experience that you talked about, which is that looking back now, a lot of the things, especially now that I live in a smaller urban area again, a lot of the things that would really bug me about Beijing had very little to do with China per se and just the fact that I was not accustomed to being in a bustling urban space with 23 million of my fellow humans. That was an adjustment I had to make that would have been just as true perhaps if I lived in Tokyo or in Mumbai. We used to do these kind of calls for the students who were coming in.

And they would always ask questions of us, like, what do I need to get ready for when I'm coming to China? Whether I need to pack all this stuff. And the question of course they all ask is what's the one thing I really need to be prepared for when I get off the plane in China? Usually the second most popular question after, "Are you sure my credits will come back at my university?" But this question, I would say, there's a lot of people here and people used to laugh. Like this was a joke.

But after they stopped laughing, I'm like, no, you don't get it. There are a lot of people in this city. Unless you come from a place where you're used to having that many people in your airspace at all times, it's going to freak you out. And it freaked me out too. But then just as you said, getting a little perspective helped. I'm still after all those years, I was still a sojourner. Imagine, I have to imagine what it would be like to grow up with that many people in your airspace competing for every spot in kindergartens, position in school, teacher's attention, college, job, boyfriend, girlfriend, husband, wife, whatever, all the way down the line. And this is probably a subject for a whole other podcast, but as much as that would affect me, I think I also had to take a beat and realized that I didn't have to experience that in terms of my whole life.

David: Yeah, population density is a thing. It's absolutely, you know, it affects every aspect of life, as you just said. And I think that's one of the things that Americans, a satori experience when they say, there are so many people here, no wonder they act in the way they do. It makes, you know, perfect sense. So it has to do also with the culture, with the background, cultural background. Because China has always had too many people and not enough resources. So there's lots of cultural legacies that have to do with just that particular fact.

Heritage Learners and Complex Identity

I just thought of something that's kind of interesting that probably people don't think of. But in our programs, we would very often have what we then called heritage learners, which is American-born Chinese or American-grew-up Chinese. I felt very sorry for them because their cultural shock was kind of sort of in two different directions. They would say, I always have this problem in the US that people say, where are you from? What's your race?

It's something that bugs me all the time. I thought when I came to China, I wouldn't have to worry about that because I just blend in with everybody, right? But the problem is when they get to China, if you're with a group of American students, the person who wants to communicate is going to go up to the Chinese heritage person and start speaking to them in Chinese, assuming that they must speak Chinese. And of course, sometimes their Chinese was worse than anyone in the group because they'd never learned it as they were growing up. So this was kind of a shock to them to find out that as a heritage learner here, I have to face these problems of different kinds of default assumptions, right? In the US, I get certain default assumptions, and now I have a different set of default assumptions that's equally annoying.

Jeremiah: You know, that's a very good point. I, looking back, I feel like that I, as a teacher and maybe even we as a program could have done a lot more to support heritage learners. And I'll give you an example. There's sort of this a pattern that you do in study abroad in China. You know, you're going to get your picture taken, but that's not true always. If you're say, for example, you, you read as somebody who is of Asian descent, or as you mentioned, you know, the interactions with people who are from China, if you look like me.

And I learned this really one of the first weeks I was in Beijing, my roommate at the time, the mighty Ho is from Columbus, Ohio. His parents are from Taiwan. He's still one of my best friends. He was the best man at my wedding. We still hang out as much as we can. But the first week we were there, he schooled me in this. He's just like, dude, if you say "ni hao," all of a sudden you get all these amazing credit about how awesome your Chinese is. If I can't quote Confucius from memory, I'm somehow betraying my ancestors. And he was right. It was a reminder that there are multiple experiences in terms of culture shock and how culture shock can affect different groups differently.

Reverse Culture Shock

One of the reasons I want to talk about culture shock today is that earlier this month, I published a review in the China Books Review on the novel Peking Picnic. It's a 1932 novel of manners that takes place in Beijing. And a lot of what's interesting about the book is that a lot of it deals with this sense of displacement that sojourners and expats have. And the book was also, I think, very prescient to not just talking about culture shock, but of the problems of reverse culture shock. The idea is that once you have somewhat assimilated, once you have mastered, once you have become competent in a culture, what happens when you try to go back home, whatever that means, and does that meaning of home change? And I wrote a little bit about this in the review and I was kind of surprised by the number of comments I got online. I even got a couple of emails from people who were like, you know, I'd never heard of this concept. And yet I, or someone I know that pattern, spent 15 years in China and now I'm back in wherever and feel this sense of displacement, but I didn't know there was a name for it.

Is this something you would talk about too with your students, this idea that going home can be a challenge and that sometimes the students who do the best at assimilating over the course of a semester or year, in my experience, and I don't have data to back this up, but I have pretty strong anecdotal evidence, many of the students who assimilated the best often find themselves affected by this reverse culture shock the most when they return home.

David: Yeah, I think it's a real thing. I think for just one semester, I don't think there's probably much, you know, reverse culture shock because that's too short a time to really be transformed. But I think as I said, you know, part of the goal is to learn about yourself and about your own culture and the differences. I'll give an example of that sort of thing. I guess the first time I was in China in the 80s, I was traveling with some other Chinese people and went to a kind of a gas station kind of convenience store, not exactly like we have now, but they had candy and chewing gum and stuff. And I went and I bought some chewing gum and I came out and started, you know, pulling it out, pulling it out and started chewing it. And I looked at the friends I was with and they were staring at me as if I had just farted or something. I'm saying what did I do? I had the wherewithal to actually ask somebody, what was the thing? Why were people looking at me? They said,

"Well, in our culture, if you go in to buy something, you have to buy something for the whole group. No one would go in and just buy a pack of gum just for them. You say, I better get some for everyone." And there's even a word for it in Chinese is to "eat a selfish food," right?

Jeremiah: I'm familiar with this concept as somebody who has a loving and wonderful and beautiful spouse who just cannot keep her hands off any food that's on my plate. And I love to share, but there's an assumption that what's mine is hers. That's right. "Are you sure you don't want French fries?" "No, no, I don't want French fries." "Okay. Absolutely." And then two minutes later, my lunch is served and half the French fries are gone.

David: She steals yours. Yeah, yeah. So anyway, that's kind of, I don't know if it's reverse culture shock, but you go back and you realize, hey, there's another way to see this. There's another, I think that's probably one of the advantages of being in a foreign country and especially these, which is why going back to our usual lament, I sort of lament the fact that there's so few people here, Americans in China having that experience and understanding from the inside out.

Because I mean, that's so important. You can only get that sort of deep kind of instinctual understanding by living in China for many, many years. And then, yeah, you go back and you'll have little minor things like, why do I have to tip everybody? That's a reverse culture shock I've had. I've had lots of, you know, I went one time after being in China for many years, I went back to the US, I got a haircut and was having a real friendly conversation with the barber. And then as I started to leave, he was giving me this look like, "You asshole, what are you doing?" It wasn't until I got out to the car, they went, I forgot to tip him. You know, sort of basic cultural knowledge I had sort of forgotten. So yeah, I mean, you do, it is true. There's things you don't even think of, they become a default. And then you go back to your home country and you realize, oops, I gotta re-adjust my, recalibrate my instincts.

Jeremiah: One of our RAs, these are the students who came back and worked at the program, was helping me do the cultural adaptation slash reverse culture shock presentation for the incoming students and relate a story that they knew they were suffering a form of reverse culture shock when their mom had to come find them one day and said, "Honey, why are you putting used toilet paper in the wastebasket of our bathroom?"

David: That's a good one. That's a good one.

Jeremiah: That's when you know that you've assimilated one way, but it may be a beat before you re-assimilate.

David: Right. That's a good example. Can I give you one example of a beautiful statement by our friend Da Shan, Mark Rowswell, right? I think it's a very funny thing. He said, whenever I go back to Canada and I find myself missing China, I just go to a Starbucks. And for someone who's been in China, Starbucks are almost as ubiquitous as they are, especially in the big cities, right? I thought this was very funny in a way that he probably went to more Starbucks in China than he ever went to in Canada. So that's the world we live in.

Conclusion

Jeremiah: Well, David, thank you for joining me from your holiday getaway in Bangkok. I hope you have a safe trip back to Beijing.

David: Thanks a lot. Look forward to our next one. You should definitely put your China book review links in the podcast. You're doing lots of great interesting stuff, the people that are digging back into classic books about China.

Jeremiah: Yeah, I'm having fun doing it. And then the China Books Review is a great site. They've got some fabulous interviews and also of course they're doing reviews of more current books as well. Speaking of books, next episode we have an old friend of ours from Beijing, somebody who is a fixture in that city for many, many years. This is of course Steve Schwankert who was at one time editor of the Beijinger. He was also the inspiration behind the outfit Sinoscuba, and he'll be talking about his new book, The Six, about the Chinese passengers who were on the Titanic, how they got there, and what happened to them after the famous wreck. Thank you all. Join us again on another edition of Barbarian at the Gate, and I do believe I hear the drums coming.