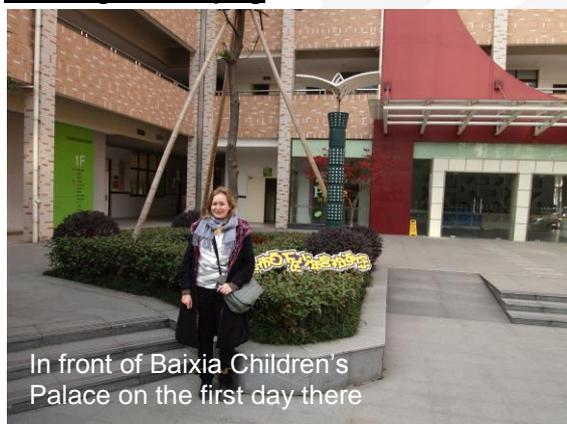


My Experience Visiting Nanjing with MBL

In December 2012 I went to Nanjing for two weeks with MBL. It was an unforgettable experience in so many ways, and I am so grateful to everybody at MBL for helping me to organize it, especially Xiao Li, and my host family - Zhuli, her husband Pan and her daughter Tong Tong (English name Angelina) - who were so kind and generous to me! It's been over a month now since I got back and with time I am able to appreciate more and more the importance of this experience and what it taught me. Luckily I made a very detailed diary whilst I was in China and so I can tell you now about some of the experiences I had whilst I was there.



Arriving in Nanjing



One of my most distinct memories from this trip will always be standing at the side of the street as the taxi drove off, with my very heavy bag and absolutely no idea what was going to happen next. I was pretty sure that I was in the right place, and I rang Zhuli who was coming to meet me, but I had never met her before, and I had only spoken to her on the phone for the first time 30 minutes earlier when I arrived at the airport. I had no idea what she, or her husband or daughter, looked like; I had no idea what their

house or flat was going to be like; I had no idea what was going to happen to me for the next two weeks, really. I felt incredibly conspicuous as a very tall, blonde, white girl with a massive suitcase in the middle of a very Chinese street... there was a primary school behind me and several of the children had stopped playing in the playground to stare at me through the gate, and the construction workers further down the road were looking at me curiously. But at the same time, I felt oddly calm... there wasn't anything I could do at this point, to change the situation, to make myself more comfortable or to put myself back in my comfort zone. I had already made the leap and now I was just surrendering to the thrill of the fall... and I would worry about the landing later!

Visiting BaiXia Children's Palace for the first time

The first day I had at BaiXia followed a night in which I did not sleep at all, without exaggeration, due to a combination of bad jet lag and nerves. I was feeling pretty ill, exhausted and a bit out of my depth when I walked into the building. I can honestly say that at this point BaiXia was the proverbial light in the darkness, the oasis in the desert! Having sought refuge in local Arts Centers for most of my adolescent life so far, I felt immediately at home in this relaxed, arty



environment. BaiXia, in the short time I was there, really seemed to me to be a wonderful place, and the MBL Workshop Room there is also gorgeous: I enjoyed spending quite a few hours sitting in there with one of the other teachers doing translation work over a cup of tea! All the teachers at BaiXia were incredibly friendly to me, and some of my best memories are chatting with them in mandarin over a delicious lunch (whilst at the same time marveling at my own brain that was making mandarin come out of my mouth quicker than it ever had before, and with a fluency that it had refused to produce during my A level oral exams!)



Conversations with Zhuli and Pan

Every evening after coming back home I would have a chat with Zhuli or her husband Pan. I talked with Zhuli about various things including the differences in the education systems

Me with my host family: Zhuli, Tong Tong and Pan



of our countries; the Chinese gift-giving culture; and the positives and negatives of families with only one child. Mr. Pan helped me with my characters and we discussed Chinese history, politics and economics... It was so wonderful to be able to use my limited Chinese to have these 'real-life' conversations which prove so elusive when you learn a language through a pre-decided exam curriculum. I gained such an insight into the culture of China through chatting with people, and it made me realize all the more what an amazing place this is and how much there is to learn about this country!

Things on the street

Just walking through the streets and taking the bus every day was so astonishing for me - there were so many sights on the streets that I had never seen in England before. On the walk from BaiXia to the bus stop, for example, there was a cage of white husky puppies on the pavement outside one of the shops; sausages hung out to cure on the electricity lines; a kind of shed with a fish shop inside it that consisted of a lot of red plastic buckets with fish swimming around in them. And washing hanging everywhere! I was constantly cursing myself for only having two eyes - I could have just walked around all day staring at everything. I also remember walking back to the apartment one day when it was the end of the school day: The street was thronged with people, children on the back of their parent's motorbikes, children eating snacks and shouting to each other, cars trying to navigate the crowds. In all this chaos I suddenly looked up to see a young Chinese woman guiding a white man through the crowds in the opposite direction - I was so taken aback to find a Westerner in that street that I stared very rudely at him in shock! It suddenly occurred to me that I hadn't seen any other Westerners since I got here, and I hadn't even really noticed. But from that point on I did begin to realize how homogenous Nanjing seemed to me, especially as somebody who grew up in London which is probably one of the most

diverse cities in the world. As a fair-skinned, blonde person I did stick out like a sore thumb, especially on the bus in the morning, and I remember a particularly amusing day where an old man sat down next to me and proceeded to stare at me for the entire journey... I stared out of the window and ignored him, but subsequently I wished I had had the nerve to engage him in conversation!

Food

The thing I miss most about China, apart from the people, is the food. I cannot describe how delicious every single meal I ate was! Even mundane, everyday food was gourmet to me, and there were always so many dishes to choose from, so many different types of food, even though I am a vegetarian and don't eating meat (and I must say thank you to everybody who cooked for me for being so accommodating of this!). I mentioned on the first day that I liked 西红柿炒鸡蛋 (tomato fried with egg), a dish that my Chinese teacher had taught me how to make, and word somehow got round - I ended having it every day without fail and it was delicious every time!! I am also now obsessed with Chinese style breakfasts... I think eating 油条 (not sure how to translate this, umm, fried batons of dough, kind of?!) and stuffed buns and spring rolls has got to be the most delicious breakfast I have ever had. This is something I have since tried to explain to friends in the UK, and they find it hilarious that I would want to eat noodles for breakfast - but I am salivating just thinking about it!



With Teacher Zhou

The supermarket

I make no secret of the fact that I LOVE supermarkets. In the UK, going to the supermarket is one of my favorite activities to do when I come home! I love goggling at the choice, and exploring the different sections. Every time I go it seems I discover a new product to try out. Every time I visit a country I try to go to at least one supermarket, because they say so much about a culture, and they are very different in different places!

China was definitely no exception to this. There were so many fruits and vegetables that I had never seen before, and many that I recognized but were triple the size; brands that I knew from England but with Chinese names; aisles of things in packets that I couldn't even hazard a guess at what you were supposed to do with them. I could have spent a whole day in that supermarket! I also tried to get tinned tomatoes, pasta and cheese to make a basic pasta dish so that I could cook 'Western-style' food for the family that evening. Zhuli helpfully handed me some butter, saying "Here's the cheese". I cannot tell you how envious I am (and surprised I was) that she didn't know what butter is - do you know how much butter has probably ruined my health and my body with its deliciousness and English people's addiction to it?!!

Rock paper scissors

Many of the experiences that stick out in my mind from this trip involved Tong Tong, or Angelina (her English name), the daughter in the family I was staying with. She is such a vivacious and bright girl and in that way reminded me a lot of what I think (from videos that I have seen and from what people tell me) I was like when I was her age. Weeknights we would go to have dinner at Zhuli's parents' house, and as we were walking home through the dark streets on the first night, Tong Tong holding my hand, she suddenly struck up a game of "rock, paper, scissors" in Chinese. It was such a surprise, and a comfort to find such a familiar game so far from home. We played it for the entire walk home everyday

Zhuli and Tong Tong playing in the park on Saturday



after that, and I very much miss those endless games now! As it was approaching Christmas in the UK, I had brought Angelina an advent calendar, as well as bringing the one my Mum had given me, and it became a daily ritual to open them and show each other what was hiding in the little windows. It was so nice to share this childhood tradition and see the joy that Angelina got from it! I was impressed and intimidated by Angelina's homework schedule - I thought that I had worked hard when doing my A levels but it was nothing compared to the relentless string of homework and drills that

Tong Tong did every single day. The amount of commitment really astounded me, and I felt seriously embarrassed by my own working habits (when I got home from school I used to watch TV and surf the internet before finally dragging myself to my desk)! I remember waking up after my first night in China to the sound of an English vocabulary CD: "Doctor. Doc-tor. Homework. Home. Work." etc. As someone who only started learning Chinese at 13, which is pretty early for most people here in the UK, many of whom don't start until they are adults, I was amazed to find out that it is compulsory to learn English from primary school in China... the West has some serious catching up to do!

You don't clean your face every evening?!!!

On the first or second night, I came into the bathroom whilst Angelina was washing her face in order to brush my teeth. There subsequently followed a mutual trying-to-hide-our-amazement at each other's bathroom customs... the intricacies of teeth brushing and face washing and hair brushing and going to the toilet and all the other mundane things that we, in some form, do every single day of our lives. I will never forget Tong Tong's quietly shocked surprise that I do not wash my face every day, or her quietly asking Zhuli why I was brushing my hair, and was it because it 'felt nice'? Then there was my confusion at the bedding situation - why was the mattress hard, and what did I do with the two quilts? And my confused delight at being encouraged to drink hot water... I don't think I had ever drunk hot water in my life, but it makes so much sense in the winter and it is a habit that I have brought back to England, much to my family's confusion! I also remember being repeatedly referred to as/being made aware that I was a 美女 (beautiful girl), and being very taken aback and flattered to realize that it wasn't a joke!!

There was also some alarm when I showed photos of my cats sleeping on my bed at home - aren't they dirty? Why do you let them sleep on



T'ai Chi class at BaiXia

your bed? But I think the whole collection of "cultural difference" anecdotes I accumulated during this trip has to be topped off by trying to explain the UK student 'drinking culture' to one of the BaiXia teachers ... she could not understand how students' parents could let them waste away precious educational opportunities getting drunk every other night. Why would they do that? And I had no idea what to say in reply! As my answer to all the other why's listed here became: "I really have no idea why, I'd just never thought about it like that before..."



With Mr. Lu, the lantern maker, and his wife and assistants

Bravery

Whilst I was in China, quite a few people expressed how surprised and impressed they were that I had come to Nanjing on my own and I was 'only 18'. A lot of the people I met had never had the opportunity to travel abroad before. I remember watching one friend playing with a globe and asking her whether she had been to any of the countries she was running her fingers over. She told me that although she had never been abroad, she had travelled to many places in the pictures and the maps that she had seen. This really hit

home to me, because to be honest, most young people I know (including myself, I am ashamed to admit) take going abroad on holiday for granted - it's very common for people my age in the UK to go off to some faraway place and travel for several months as part of a gap year or university holidays. It just made me feel very humble to have this opportunity and all the others I have had to experience other cultures, and made me determined to make the most of those experiences. I often struggle with being a pretty anxious and risk averse person, and I often find travel far more scary than I would like to admit, but the more Xinran books that I read, the more inspired I am by the unbelievable bravery of the women she writes about, and the bravery that she has shown in her extraordinary life. Those stories give me such strong resolve to really live life to the fullest and not shy away from fear. In this vein, I listened to this song on repeat whilst I was in China because the lyrics spoke to me so much about my experience. It's called 'Headlights on Dark Roads' by the band Snow Patrol:

"For once I want to be the car crash/not always just the traffic jam/hit me hard enough to wake me/and lead me wild to your dark roads/ My tongue is lost so I can't tell you/Please just see it in my eyes.../ Headlights/on dark roads/so beautiful, so clear/Reach out/and take it/Because I'm so tired of all this fear..."

And some last thoughts...

I did not go to Nanjing for a very long time, but despite the brevity of my stay this trip was one of the most life-changing experiences I have had. Having never travelled on my own before, part of this came from the sheer terror of not having anybody else who was in the same boat as me to talk to, but by the same token that made the 'cultural immersion' aspect of my trip so much more 'immersive'. If I had gone to China with somebody else, I would have been able to retreat back into a Western bubble, a Western way of thinking and speaking, at the end of the day. Going alone forced me to pop the bubble completely, and that was completely revelatory in the way that it made me question so much about my everyday beliefs and attitudes, the way I talk and use language, and the way I relate to the people around me.

There are so many misconceptions in the West about China and about Chinese people - the biggest one being what I just did, lumping all people that live in or come from China into one over-arching group ('Chinese people', or worse, 'Asians') that conjures stereotypical images of the piano-playing, maths-genius, quiet, well-behaved 'Asian'. I do not pertain to know a lot about Asia or even China, I'm just beginning to find out about it, but this attitude, and the way that most people in Western society seem to accept it, bugs me so much! Evidently it is not true. I knew that even before I came to China for the first time in 2010. But having such an undiluted cultural immersion experience has made me

realize the full extent to which it is not true that all Chinese people are the same (and I have only visited a tiny area of China), as well as making me realize how damaging this assumption is. The number of people who have asked me pretty blatantly racist questions about my experience in China since I got back astounds me. Most of these questions are based on assumptions that lump Westerners and Asians into 'us' and 'them'. I really, really wish that more people could go on trips like the one I have gone on so that they could understand that the world does not operate on an 'us and them' basis!! I strongly believe that in a world like ours, that is becoming more and more international every day, it is vital that people are able to understand how ingrained their cultural background is into their worldview, and how important it is to challenge that if we are going to be able to tackle global problems together as an international community. There is such a massive West-East deficit in terms of cultural understanding of the East in Western societies at the moment - for me, the most obvious example of this being that Chinese kids learn English in primary school when most people in the West can't even say 'hello' in Chinese. How can we possibly expect Eastern and Western governments and organizations to work together in the future to solve global problems when the West is not bothering to do their part in educating their future leaders, the kids of today, about even basic aspects of Eastern culture, language and history? I hope that we step up to the bar, soon, and I feel like trips like the one I did, and organizations like MBL, have a big role to play in making sure that this happens.

Lilly 丽丽 Neubauer
20th January 2013

The view over Nanjing from SunZhongShan's tomb.

