

## - How I Survived China –

Written by Tolani Edwards – January 2017

I was working for Pfizer Inc. at their Research and Development site in Cambridge, Massachusetts as a Facilities Engineer. Due to our site's diverse work force, our site hosted a cultural exchange social event held over several weeks. This provided the employees a way to learn about different languages, foods and customs. As a result I pursued learning Mandarin Chinese. My name is Tolani Edwards and I have been a member of the IFMA community since 2007. What I am about to share with you few have had the opportunity to do. Everybody's circumstances are different, but if you had the chance, "Would you move to a foreign country to live?" Before you answer that question, let me tell you about my experience.

In 2005 after working at Pfizer for three years, I noticed most of my customers were of Asian decent working in the labs at our site. I worked in the maintenance and engineering group that supported site operations. Our customers were scientists who worked in the labs and office spaces. They were a very close-knit group eating lunch together and speaking a language that was unique to my ear. I wanted to learn more about this culture.

In 2006, through the site's social committee I saw an opportunity and was able to attend a series of Chinese cultural exchange events. Then I took the next step in hiring a tutor outside of work for the next two and half years in covering the foundation of listening, reading, writing and speaking Mandarin Chinese. Then came practicing the language outside of our tutor. Each day I arrived at work, I would prepare questions to ask my Chinese colleagues and listen to their response. If I lead the discussion I was good at anticipating their response. If my Chinese colleagues lead the conversation however I was in a bit of trouble or you can say the pressure was on due to unfamiliar knowledge about the subject matter. As time went on I was gaining understanding of the language, to the point of walking in to an area where my Chinese colleagues were conversing and the room went silent. That's when I knew I was making progress with the language. Next step was going to Chinatown or starting a conversation with strangers to try out my language skills. Boy that was rough, I was nervous, I had sweaty palms, my pronunciation went out the window. I needed a language environment to be consistent with the language.

In 2009 I was able to plan a two-week vacation to China thanks to the help of my Chinese colleagues. This included getting a Chinese visa to visit the country. Did I mention that my wife and I were learning the language together? Just a note, women learn languages faster than men do. Our first city in China was Beijing; we did a group tour to all the famous site Imperial Palace, Summer Palace, Heavenly Temple, Hu Tong (small alley) and Great Wall.



During the trip our best friend was our Pleco English/Chinese Dictionary (an App on our smartphone). For two weeks we spoke Chinese the entire time, we learned so much in that short period of time. We were amazed at the things we were experiencing and the fact that we could communicate with the locals was an added bonus. We had a list of things to do and try, including the Beijing/Peking duck (famous roast duck). Our trip went by so quick; one other note was the jet lag which had lasted a few days. When we returned to the States we had tons of pictures that we shared with my colleagues. Then the company announced the acquisition/merger of Wyeth Pharmaceutical. Jobs would be affected. As time went on, our site was among a portfolio of sites that would be sold. Jobs status was unknown. In the start of 2010 my wife and I discussed the idea of moving to China to live and study the language and culture. In October of that year I learned I would be laid off. It took us three months to transition and move to China.



## A New Life

In February 2011 we left our families and the comforts of our country behind for the land of the Far East. We had a long trip over 20 hours from America to the capital city in Yunnan (Southwest China). Although we were tired from the trip, we were excited about our first day in China. The first thing was apartment hunting. On average it takes about seven to ten days to find an apartment. They offer a realtor agent to assist you. There are tons of agent companies and they are not connected due to competition for your business. So this can be a challenge in quickly locating an apartment. We were able to locate one we liked and signed a contract. The contract terms are different in China, usually agreed upon by both parties. For example a one-year contract could be paid by two six months installments or one installment. Once we had the keys, we spent a couple of days cleaning the place. Next we shopped for furniture for our place. This process was done by haggling over the price that was given unlike in the United States where there is a set price. We had to do this haggling in Chinese so we learned quickly how to cut the asking price.

The first three months of China life was a challenge, we had to adjust to the everyday spoken language, the food and the culture. We had to learn quickly what the locals say and do in the area where we lived. China is a big country and different cities have different word usage, food and culture. So in order to meet this challenge we enrolled in Chinese classes specifically helping foreign students to understand the language and culture of China. Attending these classes helped my wife and I have a deeper understanding of what we would experience in our life in China. Within six months of schooling we started feeling more comfortable moving around the city, buying food items, using our cell phone and paying billings. Within the year we traveled to other cities in China, we had not mastered the language by any means but knew enough to get by with the use of our dictionary or hand signals to express our meaning.

The biggest challenge of living abroad besides learning a language is the cultural foods. On one hand, you are used to certain styles of foods in your home country with the occasional international treat. Now you have more international treat and the occasional home treat. For us international products were very expensive even basic spices were 2 or 3 times what we would pay in our home country. So we treated ourselves occasionally, we bought local fruit and vegetables very cheap. Meats on the other hand were very expensive, pork was a staple and more reasonable priced. We bought fresh local fish more than transported seafood. We were not live by the sea, so we stayed away from shellfish, such as clams and mussels.

I would like to share a little bit on the visa process in China. Few countries require travelers to their country to apply for a visa before visiting. While others give you a two to three month temporary visa upon arrival into the country. The visa process in China when we first arrived was to apply for one year and every three-month we had to leave the country. If you live close to the country border just crossing it and reentering fulfilled this request. Living further inland you may have to fly to the nearest country, so we used this opportunity to visit other countries such as Thailand, Malaysia, Vietnam, Japan and Cambodia. Nowadays you will need an invitation letter from a Chinese local to be invited to the country.

I was able to work in China once we had the proper visa. I worked in a training school to assist Chinese high school students with a required test for English communication in order to go abroad to Study in an English country. I had various projects I worked on with the company, sharing work experience and cultural differences to prepare them for what to expect when you move to a foreign country.

In summary, my wife and I spent five and half years in China. We have learned how to adapt to a foreign language, culture and way of life. We have tried foods that we have never thought about or thought existed. We were tested in patience and courage in situations that seemed unfair. We made many new friends that we will never forget and their assistance was a big help to us earlier in our transition to life in China. We are grateful for the opportunity to explore a world outside our own. We will definitely cherish these memories for a lifetime.