

Hand Me a Shovel and Let's Dig this Hole Together

The best way to find out what is going on in any big city, from New York, to London, to Shanghai, is to simply ask your taxi driver. From the weather, to sporting events, to politics (although I would be careful with that last one), taxi drivers can give you a window into the life of the locality you may find yourself in. All you have to do is ask. Indeed, as an international student in China without access to any type of vehicle, the preferred way to travel was taxi, and believe me, I met a lot of taxi drivers. At first, my Chinese was limited, and our conversations were not usually too in depth. But as I improved, our conversations began to gain more substance, and with each taxi ride, I began to learn more about Chinese culture and the local way of life from these people that would daily get me from point A to B.

As I look back now, it was one particular experience with one of these taxi drivers that taught me maybe the most important lesson that I learned while I was in China. One day, my friends and I decided to take a trip across the city of Tianjin (the city we stayed in while on the trip), and, as we usually did, flagged a cab to get us to our destination. Upon entering the cab, we were greeted by a small, jovial Chinese man, who, by the expression on his face, was quite intrigued by the look of his new passengers. Surprised that we could speak his language, the man excitedly engaged in quite an animated dialogue with us, asking where we were from, why we were here, and what we had been doing. We talked about everything from the upcoming Olympics to our own personal stories. Then, as the man was describing parts of his own life, the tone of his voice and the pattern in which he was speaking changed. After listening carefully for a bit, we realized that he was telling a joke. With our limited Chinese, we implored the man to slow down and repeat a few times. Then, a breakthrough: The man was telling a joke about how he had never been to America, but that he wanted to dig a hole from China and come out in America on the other side. Amazing! It was so interesting to hear that joke from the opposite perspective. It was in that moment where I had my great epiphany: You know, we're not all that different!

I hadn't had too much experience being different growing up. I was your average white American boy for the most part. In high school, I participated in a lot of clubs, was a decent athlete, did well in school and

was president of our high school's Student Council. This trend continued in college, always keeping a good balance between school and my social life. I always knew that there were people that I thought "didn't have it together" like I did, and though I wouldn't try to ostracize them, in my head I would always "other" them. This was my worldview before I went to China, and indeed, it began to change from the moment I stepped foot off of the plane in Beijing and into a country where, outside of the other study abroad students, I knew not a single person.

As I walked the streets of Tianjin those first days in the summer, I was confronted with the obvious fact that, being a 6 foot 5 inch white kid from Michigan, I didn't exactly fit the look of the local people. Right away, I noticed the stares that people gave me as I walked by, and saw behind each glance a burning curiosity that accompanies the puzzlement one feels when confronted with something that is "out of place," which I clearly was. I would spend countless time over the next weeks trying to find places on a map that were listed in a language I did not speak, using my finger to point at items at the market that I wanted to buy because the shopkeeper wouldn't understand "I would like an orange," and trying to ignore the people that I was holding up in line behind me as I struggled to complete my orders at restaurants. At first, I was in denial, but after a few days, I began to entertain the idea that I, Dan Redford, was "different."

Accepting that truth was not as hard for me as I thought it would be. In fact, it really opened my eyes to the opportunities that I had every day in China to learn more about other people, as well as about myself. Every day, I was immersed in an environment where most people did not look like me or talk like me, and they noticed me just as I noticed them. I began to realize that the stares I got were not intended to make me feel out of place, but simply stemmed from a human's natural tendency to be interested in something that they have never encountered before, something that they have not yet been given the opportunity to understand. To make the most of my time in China, I knew that I would have to seek out these encounters where I could teach the Chinese people about who I am, and reciprocally, they would teach me about themselves.

The next weeks of my study abroad were filled with such experiences. It was not hard to meet new people; everywhere I went, people were curious to know about this man from America. I began to make friends with the students of the school we were attending, Nankai University, going out to their clubs and hangouts with them on the weekend, and sharing stories

of our lives as we would talk until the wee hours of the morning. Every day, I would have different conversations with different people, learning about their dreams, ambitions, and worldviews, while at the same time, I would share mine with them. Each of these experiences expanded my view on life, and helped me to develop a view of the world outside of my home in America.

As my Chinese improved, it became easier to talk with the locals. I had developed relationships with many people that lived in and around the Nankai campus. I had acquired “usuals” that one would normally associate with one’s hometown, such as the “usual” barber, the “usual” restaurant, and the “usual” bar. It was only after a few short weeks that people at the market stopped staring. They had gotten used to my presence as I had gotten used to living amongst them. They had accepted me as part of their community, and I was proud to be a member. I no longer felt different.

It was encounters like the one with the taxi driver that made me appreciate the true miracle of being assimilated into a culture that, on the surface, appears so “different” than ours in America. In talking with Chinese people on a daily basis, I found out that their ambitions and dreams, their goals for their lives, are not really that unlike ours. Everyone, no matter where they are from, wants to love and to be loved. We all have struggles, we all succeed, and we all fail. Sure, Chinese people don’t eat with forks, and maybe they have different ideas about what government is best or how to raise a family. What I learned, though, is that it is the similarities between human beings that bring us together and show us that we have common goals, and it is the differences between us that allow us to learn from each other, helping us to reach those goals together. Seeking an understanding of both is essential to making the most out of life.

By unlocking this truth, this “secret of life,” I know that my experience living in China has prepared me for my life after college. Our world is getting smaller, and interaction between cultures is growing at an exceedingly fast pace. Understanding that we are all just as similar as we are different is the key for growth; it ensures that we can all grow in the same direction. I learned in China that I can teach someone just as much as they can teach me. To be sure, mankind will never be able to tackle the problems it faces today if people aren’t willing to develop an understanding of others that seem different. What is most important to

me is that, through interaction with Chinese people, I understand that I am never going to have all the answers, and it will be up to me to forge relationships with people that can show me the way. I know now that it is important to seek out those that before I would have labeled as “different,” because it is likely that those relationships will give me the best opportunities to grow and make a positive impact on the world. Behind every difference there lies a chance to learn a new perspective, a chance to become familiarized with a different solution to a common problem. So, the next time I’m digging a hole to China, I’ll remember to call my friend in Tianjin and ask for directions first.