

Excerpt from
Failing Better
by Christina Brandon

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Introduction

“What was it like?”

Everyone asks this when I tell them I lived in China and taught English for two years there.

And I shrug and stutter something lame like, “Amazing. It was so amazing.”

Or if I feel loquacious: “Really interesting. Like, it was frustrating sometimes, but so amazing. I learned a lot.”

It’s a question that’s impossible to sum up with one answer. Chocolate is amazing, your favorite band is amazing. But living in another country? One word is not enough to convey the complicated and contradictory feelings toward a place, especially one where, when it comes down to it, you never felt like you belonged.

In many ways, China is mysterious. It’s physically far enough away and expensive enough to travel to that many Americans won’t ever be able to visit. And even if everyone could, the language barrier alone remains a deterrent.

We Americans have also done a good job of scaring ourselves away. Chinese history, culture, and language aren’t taught in most American schools—at least, they weren’t when I was growing up in the ’90s. What we “know” of China comes from a limited grab bag of news

stories, always with the subtext that America is better than China: pollution is choking their cities, their economy is taking over the world, they don't value human rights, they steal intellectual property, they censor their citizens.

In contrast to these stories, there's the romantic side we see in kung fu movies and lush historical dramas; there's the China we know in the form of lo mein, sauce-dripping beef and broccoli, and greasy egg rolls.

This was more or less what I knew when I packed my life into two very big suitcases to move to Anyang, an ancient capital and modern city of millions, in 2008, at age 25. The Summer Olympics in Beijing had ended the month prior and I was brimming with excitement and fascination for a country that could both put on a fantastical Opening Ceremony with awe-inspiring synchronized drumming and also mobilize thousands of citizens to clean up stinky green algae threatening Olympic sailing events.

I was not ready. But I was excited.

One of my unexpected duties as teacher was attending the English Corner on Friday evenings. It was meant to be a casual way for students to get extra practice speaking English, an activity that wasn't otherwise incorporated into their studies, unless it was in an oral English class.

English Corner was a great idea in principle, even if working on a Friday night was the last thing I wanted to do.

One of the five foreign English teachers and a pack of English majors congregated in the poorly lit basement of the Foreign Language Building. Just a few fluorescent bulbs dangled overhead. The floor was scuffed linoleum.

I had assumed this loose conversational activity meant the students would talk to each other, in pairs or small groups. It would start that way. I would rotate between groups to chat, help them out by asking questions or nudging the conversation along in whatever way I could—in English only. I knew no Chinese.

Soon, though, the mass of students formed a circle with me at the apex. They hurled question after question.

“Can you use chopsticks?”

“Do you like basketball?”

“What do you think of Obama?”

Over an hour we’d go on like this. It was less a conversation and more an interview.

As students trickled into the basement, the circle would grow, become amoeba shaped. As it moved, I found myself backing away, fighting for my requisite American arm’s-length distance of personal space but never getting it. The amoeba would slither deeper into the basement.

Ninety minutes ticked by. Then I would excuse myself and bolt, throat sore and voice hoarse. The questions never let up. They were often repeated, and I never figured out if the students were really just practicing saying English words or if they really wanted to know what I thought of basketball, but weren’t paying attention when someone else had asked.

But I wanted to believe they were actually curious about me, where I came from. They really wanted to learn English.

I think about my former students now, in 2018, at a time when Americans seem to be turning evermore inward. Not that all my students were great. With many classes of 50 or more, I had hundreds of students over the course of two years. I failed some; some never attended class. But the students who showed up at English Corner expressed more open curiosity about

a language and someone different than Americans who stay home with only the mouth of the TV to talk to them.

I worry how America is sinking into nationalism and rejecting anyone who is a little different by appearance, by language, by religion, by sexuality. We might be louder or more aggressive about it now, but we—my fellow white Americans in particular—we've always been inward looking.

As I was in the last bouts of editing this manuscript, I read *Notes on a Foreign Country* by Suzy Hansen, a book about what she experienced and learned living in Turkey and traveling around the Middle East.

She wrote “. . . [N]o one ever tells Americans that when they move abroad, even if they are empathetic and sensitive humans. . . they will inevitably, and unconsciously, spend those first months in a foreign country feeling superior to everyone around them and to the nation in which they now have the privilege to live.” (1)

My jaw hung open as she recounted moments not unlike what I experienced in China. My own assumptions and failings snapped back to me, like a boomerang clobbering me in the head: the “petulant kind of shame-rage” that burbled up when she started learning Turkish (2), the “parental concern” (3) that she had toward Turkey in her early days there.

There were others. I’m embarrassed for my younger self.

Amazing as it was, China was a place where I, a fair and blue-eyed American, had my “confidence . . . as a person, as a thinker” shaken (4). Americans think we can slip in anywhere, like McDonald’s or Walmart or Hilton. Instead we parachute in, big and dramatic and unaware, beaming with a particular brand of well-meaning but arrogant naïveté. Think Captain America somersaulting from a plane and landing neatly, with his hands on his hips, eyes gazing confidently toward the thing he must subdue.

I haven't figured out how to really convey this in conversation. A shortened version would be something like, "I realized I'm kind of an asshole." But that's not the whole truth either. I could blather on about the amazing: the students I became close with, learning to make dumplings, vacationing by the sea; and the strange: a three hour break for lunch! Eating mini scorpions!

But a chat at a party or in a bar is not nearly enough time to explain my warring feelings, how I deeply admired my students but at times found them exhausting and frustrating, how I felt so glad that I went but relieved and a little sad to come back. That I felt what it means to be a white American.

I usually conclude these "what was it like" conversations with an earnest plea: if you ever have a chance to live abroad, you should go. So go, go now!

This book is an attempt to answer that question, to really get into what it was like for this American to live in China, with a mundane teaching job in a grimy city in the middle of a tremendous and confusing country.

This is what it was like.

Chapter One

Over the course of the two years I taught in China, I found myself unmoored, without language or true understanding of the new world in which I lived. I left a cubicle in Chicago, armed only with an enthusiasm for adventure. I spoke almost no Chinese and knew little about the country's history or culture. But I was curious. I expected to learn and have fun. And I would travel all over and encounter new, amazing things. I would figure out the practicalities of how to get to all these places I wanted to see and communicate with my students as I went.

I taught oral English to university students, primarily to English majors. They had learned to read and write English in middle and high school but had little practice speaking. I didn't know how long they had studied English, but my task seemed simple enough: Get my students to speak it. However, in my first class on my first day as a teacher at Anyang Normal University, I was failing spectacularly.

"Do you have any questions?" I asked.

The forty-five students, mostly girls, were playing with their phones. A few read, a couple slept. A handful of boys were talking among themselves in the back. I had hoped that the pictures I passed around of highlights from my Chicago home, the Willis (*née* Sears) Tower, Buckingham Fountain, and John Hancock Building, would catch someone's interest. But all I got from the handful of students paying attention to me were stony faces. I counted on them asking questions, but I couldn't tell if they'd even understood me when I told them this was the first time I'd traveled to China, that I used to work in an office, that I was excited to be teaching, to be in China, in Anyang City.

"I want you to introduce yourselves," I said as the pictures finished making their way around the classroom. I got fingerprints of chalk dust on them when I picked them up.

I wrote on the board: What is your name? Where are you from? What is something interesting about you?

One by one the students stood and answered the questions. At first, I repeated back their names but stopped after the class kept giggling at me. There were too many students, with too many similar names my ear wasn't yet attuned to pick out, Li and Lu, and Wang and Fang.

The class grew bored with listening to people they already knew announce their names. The level of chatter rose until the cacophony became so loud I couldn't hear who was speaking. I repeatedly told everyone to quiet down.

Somehow, even after all 45 students introduced themselves, 30 minutes remained in class. I pathetically asked them again if they had any questions for me. I had hoped to lead a class discussion, an exchange of ideas like I had had in college, but I was realizing this wouldn't be possible in this class. I wasn't even prepared with a topic. I pleaded with them in my head: *Tell me what I should talk about.* They ignored me and returned to their phones or friends while I stood at the chalk-dusted podium like a chump.

I had one remaining defense. I broke the class into small discussion groups of threes and fours and scribbled another round of questions on the board: What do you like to do in your free time? What did you do during your summer vacation? What would you like to talk about in this class?

The class quieted down as I wrote, but they erupted the second I stepped away from the chalkboard. No one spoke English. I waited and watched for a couple of minutes and debated trying to talk to them. I could probably slip out and no one would notice.

But I didn't come here to do nothing. I wanted to at least teach the ones who wanted teaching.

I approached group after group and was surprised when a few girls asked me follow-up questions about myself and Chicago. Yet other students whispered to each other while I tried to get their friend to speak. Translating, probably, yet I was sure in the way that laughter dies as you walk into a room that they were talking about me. I stared down the group of boys in the back and demanded each of them answer the question "What do you like to do in your free time?"

I pointed at each one of them and dragged the words *play basketball* out of them.

"Very good," I said, standing and drifting toward the wall. I tried to look casual as I sagged against it. I felt as if I'd just had all the words pulled from me. I let the class continue as they were, like a group of kindergarteners with a substitute teacher.

The class I had immediately after, in the room next door, was a repeat of the first. They were both for students who had left high school early to study English at the college level for five years instead of four. I thought that meant they were advanced or exceptional in some way, the kind of eager, overachieving students who would come up to you after class because they wanted to continue discussing the topic. At the very least, I expected a classroom full of bright, eager, and curious people who were, above all, good students. That's what the stereotype says: Chinese students are diligent, respectful, always listening, always doing what the teacher asks. My students were none of these things. I wondered if I'd made a huge mistake, if I could handle teaching since it was obvious I wasn't prepared. I didn't know the rules of the classroom, and I couldn't even speak my students' language.

My third and final class was three and a half hours later because the university shut down for lunch. The day started at 8 a.m., broke at noon, and resumed for the last class at 3:30

p.m. Students and faculty rested and took naps during the long break, though the occasional student could be found taking advantage of the rarely quiet, empty classrooms to study. Classes themselves were held in two-hour blocks, with a ten-minute break in between.

I picked at my lunch of potatoes and vegetables slathered in a salty brown gravy while sitting on a bench in one of the university's gardens, surrounded by dry rose bushes and cherry blossoms. Though tucked off the main path, I still felt exposed. Students meandering by made no secret of looking over at me and my boyfriend and fellow oral English teacher, Chris, who was sitting next to me. He was using his flimsy wooden chopsticks to grapple with a slippery piece of broccoli. We had bought lunch at one of the numerous stalls outside the main campus because we could see all the cooked vegetables lined up in trays behind glass and needed to only point at the ones we wanted.

Chris's morning classes teaching Chinese as a second language majors had gone spectacularly. He had been talking to a student of his, Jenny, when I met him after class. She was all bounce and smiles while I strained, with tears and impatience, behind my sunglasses.

I gave him a recap of my morning, though I kept silent my worry that I didn't know if I could handle teaching if my other seven classes were going to be like the ones I'd just had. My vision of myself as the charismatic traveler-teacher had blown up in my face.

"I'm sorry," he said, dropping his chopsticks into the empty Styrofoam container. "It'll get better. Really."

I nodded, poking at my food. I was feeling too mopey to try to get these gravy vegetables in my mouth with wooden sticks.

"Should we go for a walk?" Chris suggested.

I nodded again. I tossed the remains of my lunch in the trash, and then we searched for a quiet place away from the staring students and bright sun. We had two-plus hours before classes resumed.

We circled around Anyang Normal University New Campus. Its other campus, the Old Campus where Chris, me, and the four other foreign teachers lived, was close to the city center, a 30-minute bike ride (or 10-minute cab ride) away.

This New Campus was built on the outskirts of town and looked much like a small American college with its rose-colored brick buildings, library, gym, and outdoor volleyball and basketball courts. There was a stadium off to one corner and plenty of pretty, grassy space with trees all around. You could circle the entire campus at a leisurely stroll in less than thirty minutes.

The student dorms were primarily by the “backstreet,” one section of campus where a little village of sorts had sprung up with shops and restaurants, including those outdoor stalls where Chris and I bought lunch. A variety of vendors sold fruit and quick meals of dumplings, stir-fried meat, vegetables, and noodles.

We ended up at the library, an uninspiring behemoth at the center of campus, where I hoped we could take refuge. It was locked over the lunch break so we sat on the steps in relative quiet until a couple security guards saw us and invited us into their nearby break room. They turned the TV channel to CCTV, the English-language news station, for us. They didn’t seem to speak or know much English and sat quietly in wooden chairs, insisting Chris and I sit on the leather couch. Gratitude shifted into discomfort—I didn’t want to interfere with their break and wasn’t yet used to such hospitality—so after several minutes, we excused ourselves, using smiles and hand gestures, to find somewhere to be alone. Lingering on campus for three and a

half hours was too much without a comfortable place to relax, so we decided to eat lunch at home going forward.

We stepped inside the cool, dark building where our afternoon classes were held. We found an empty room, sat next to each other on the hard, wooden chairs and read the novels we'd brought. For me, *On Beauty* by Zadie Smith. For him: *Gravity's Rainbow* by Thomas Pynchon. Even in Chicago, this was what a lot of our time had been—doing loner activities like reading together—for that's who we both were: introverted people inclined to privacy and keeping our own council.

The halls grew noisy within twenty minutes of class starting. More and more students trickled into the room, so we left to find our own classes: mine on the third floor, his on the sixth, in a classroom near where I'd had my morning classes. We took the stairs at the end of the hall by the bathrooms, where the stink of shit hung like a haze.

"Good luck," he said, pausing on the third floor.

I managed a small smile. "You too."

He continued the climb, and I walked down the hall to my classroom. I faced the door. I sucked in a breath and swung it open. Everyone stopped what they were doing and stared at me—all fifty students. The class wasn't due to start for ten more minutes.

"Hello," I said, taking a cautious step forward.

"Hello, Teacher!" they replied in unison.

"Hi," I sputtered. They were actually smiling at me, watching, like they expected me to do something.

"Uh... Call me Christina or Miss Christina," I said and wrote my name on the blackboard. They repeated my name, saying it almost perfectly, except that last syllable sounded more like an *er* than an *ah*. Most students would call me "Teacher," the proper, respectful way to address

a teacher in China, though it always felt so odd and formal to me. Even Miss or Ms. Brandon made me feel like an old lady.

I plunged into the activity, the exact same one I had given my morning classes. I passed out pictures and the students pored over them. When I asked if they had any questions for me, they popped out of their chairs and happily took turns assaulting me:

“Do you like Chinese food?”

“Of course!” I said.

“What do you think of Olympics?”

“Very exciting! It made me look forward to coming to Anyang,” I replied. The 2008 Beijing Olympics had finished only a month ago.

“Do you know Kobe Bryant?”

“Yes.”

“Do you like basketball?”

“It is... OK,” I replied. I got a few chuckles from that.

“Can you sing a song?”

I hesitated. My brand of singing was an exaggerated, croaky “talk-singing,” and I only did that on rare occasions and always as a joke. But I couldn’t turn down this enthusiastic, open class, so I humored them with a talk-sung verse of “Jingle Bells.”

“*Jingle bells, jingle bells*

“*Jingle all the way. . .*”

The class recognized the melody, a few even muttered along. They clapped when I finished. I felt a little like a celebrity with their attention so focused on me.

With my voice going hoarse, I had the class go around the room and introduce themselves. Many of them came from small villages in the Henan province. Many told me this was their first time seeing a foreigner in real life.

When the bell rang, no one in the class moved. The introductions had devolved into a Q-and-A session. Some asked me what I thought of China or Anyang or what my favorite sport was. Some students asked me to give them an English name, which I demurred on and promised to bring a list of English names they could choose from.

"All right everyone!" I interjected, before another student could holler out a question. My feet were pinched in my shoes and my throat desperately needed something to drink.

"It was nice to meet you! We will finish our introductions next week, OK?"

"OK, Teacher!"

"OK. Have a good night."

The class applauded as I gathered my bag. *Applauded*. I smiled, dumbfounded. My morning classes had ignored me while this one was clapping and smiling. I didn't understand the polar-opposite reactions, but this class, so excited for English and curious about me and America and Western culture, was just what I needed to have the open, discussion-based classes I envisioned.

"See you next week!" I left the classroom and skipped out the building.

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