

China, My Tattoo

By Niyindabira Cheride

When I close my eyes and think about China and my life there, it's like a dream. I was 22 when I first landed at the Beijing Capital International Airport in 2009. From there, the 18-hour slow train ride to Nanjing in east China's Jiangsu Province, which was to be my first home in China, was both inspiring and fun. It was also my first train ride. I come from Burundi, where public transport is underdeveloped.

My destination was Nanjing Normal University where I had got a scholarship to study Chinese language and literature. It was in some ways a tough time, being away from my family and friends, but the desire to learn Chinese was deeper. I took comfort from the fact that we were so many students from so many different countries, and some of us didn't even know a word of English.

I felt lucky that I spoke English and could mingle with many people. However, the lack of Chinese initially meant that communicating with the locals and doing very simple things like going to the market were not easy at all.

I still remember how it took my friends and me a whole week to find out what a fork was called in Chinese and where to buy one because at that time we didn't know how to use *kuazi*—chopsticks.

One of my friends used shampoo as a body lotion the entire year because he didn't know what it was as the label was in Chinese. He liked the smell and so stuck to it valiantly!

Getting used to Chinese food was an amazing experience, sometimes even scary because there was so much food that I had

never seen in my life. It took me at least two years to start eating noodles regularly and now it's one of my favorite foods.

In 2010, I moved to Shanghai, where I attended Shanghai University to do a course in business administration. I wasn't very happy to leave my newly made friends and start all over again, but I had heard so much about Shanghai that I felt I had to go.

My worst fear about going to Shanghai was that I would get lost as everyone said it was a big city and with so many metro lines that it was almost impossible to know where one was going.

Thankfully, my compatriots in Shanghai came to get me at the train station and I found out later that it was not that difficult to use the metro; the signs are written both in English and Chinese and I had begun picking up Chinese characters by then.

Trying to major in business administration in Chinese was the most difficult thing I have ever dealt with. I remember in my first year, there were just two foreigners with more than 100 Chinese students. We couldn't understand even half of what the teachers were talking about and it was only in the second year that we started to understand all the jokes cracked in class and even started answering back. We would laugh at ourselves and that gave us more spirit to learn and make more Chinese friends.

I traveled a lot around China and I still remember that I couldn't eat chicken feet in Chengdu and shied away from getting an acupuncture treatment when my Chinese friend once took me to a local clinic.



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I had a remarkable time in China. It was where I made friends with Chinese and people from other countries who became like family. I call China my tattoo because I can show off my China days like a tattoo, feeling so proud to know I started from scratch but now can show off my Chinese. It was most enjoyable when I haggled with unwary taxi drivers who wanted to get more money from me, thinking I wouldn't be able to understand them or talk back. I would start arguing back in Chinese and it was a joy to watch the shock on their faces. It always felt like my moment of glory.

They say college life is where your life is made. I surely had mine made *a la Chinoise*. ■

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