

It had been pouring for days. My husband Gaz and I couldn't play one more card game, or eat one more bowl of instant ramen. Being trapped in the Shanghaishizabeiquzhengfu hotel was stealing our sanity. On went the raincoats, and we emerged, tentatively, from our dry prison onto the soaked streets of Shanghai.

We wandered through the streets downtown, and arrived at Nanjing Lu: a large, pedestrian shopping district. Big, bright, neon and modern—much of Shanghai's architecture resembled a 50s caricature of "The Future." A rainbow of glowing signs covered the shimmering glass buildings that flanked the wide walkway. In a packed sea of short, black-haired Asians, we didn't exactly fit in. Both blond and fair, my tall English husband and I (a freckled American) attracted street vendors like salmon attracted grizzly bears. They'd jump in front of us and go in for the kill.

"You want Prada? Shoes, bags? Dior, Versace?" they'd shout. I couldn't be less interested in designer fashion (not that any of it was real, anyway), so we'd wriggle out of reach and continue swimming upstream.

Upon arrival in China, my polite Yankee tendency was to be nice to vendors, smiling politely and saying, "No, thank you." The Chinese interpreted those signals as playing hard to get. Something got lost in translation. I tried to be kind, yet firm. Now, there was no kind. Only firm. I made no eye contact, shook my head and put my hand up. It felt rude, but if you wanted to actually get anywhere, that was the way it had to be done.

We meandered down Nanjing Lu in the rain, snapping photos and interacting with the locals with liberal usage of the word 'no.' Weary and wet, we decided to take the subway home.

I'd never seen a chaos like the Shanghai subway station. Lines didn't exist. Ticket counters resembled the New York Stock Exchange: lots of shouting and hands flying in the air. We finally acquired tickets and waited patiently at the edge of the platform, between two yellow parallel lines indicating where the doors would open. We were first in line.

The subway train pulled up, the doors opened, 237 Chinese commuters shoved past us in both directions at once, and somehow we were the last two people to enter the car. From my vantage point above everyone's heads, I spotted the last empty seat. I slithered through the crowd, turned and started to sit, and was violently bucked out of the way. I turned back to find a middle-aged, suited businessman nonchalantly ignoring the fact that he had borrowed a maneuver from the National Hockey League to steal my seat, literally, out from under me.

Hell hath no fury like a soaking wet tourist. Hands shaking, chest tightening, I glared into the man's brown eyes and shouted, "What the fuck is wrong with you!?" Gaz had been carried to the other side of the car by the tide of people, but he heard the strains of English profanity float over the din of the crowd. He wrestled his way back to me.

"This guy pushed me and stole my seat," I seethed. The man sat and stared straight ahead as Gaz yelled at him, clearly unfazed and probably unsure of what had been so upsetting. The other riders stared at the crazy travelers. Finally, we arrived at our stop, and again, barely made it through the automatic closing doors.

The next morning, still annoyed at being shoved at shouted at, we headed out of the city for a short break from the madness. We took an overland train north to Suzhou, a canaled town dubbed "The Venice of the East." Gaz and I settled for separate seats on the packed train. It was early, I was groggy, and I felt content to sit and stare at the spattering raindrops.

I dug in my pack and pulled out a new bottle of water, sealed so tightly I couldn't open it. A twenty-something man in the seat facing me watched my struggle and asked, in carefully and deliberately chosen words, "May. I. Help. You?" I smiled gratefully as he cranked open the bottle top.

The condition air in the train car gave me a chill, but when I pulled open the zipper on my backpack to retrieve my jacket, some of the fabric became caught. Really caught. A wrinkled, grey woman next to me watched me trying to wrangle the zipper open and grabbed the pack, rather forcefully actually, to give it a try. After no success, she nudged her equally wrinkled and grey husband across the aisle to fix it. He grappled with it for a while before looking at me and saying something which I translated as, "Wow, you really did this good, didn't you, Sweetie?" Eventually he liberated the jacket from the zipper's teeth. "*Xie xie!*" I cheered. Thank you! He laughed and replied, "*Bu ke qi,*" You're welcome.

I put my raincoat on and rubbed my hands together to warm them up. I gazed out the window. The rain streaked the glass, distorting the view of the green countryside. I took a moment to ponder my recent interactions with the locals. *How can a country have people that are so nice, and people that are so rude?* I acknowledge the idiocy of the question, as every place in the world has nice and rude people.

I then realized I had been thinking of them as mutually exclusive qualities, whereas maybe everyone in China had aspects of both. Would the kid who opened my water have cut in front of me in the subway ticket mob? Would the sweet old man who helped me with my jacket have hurled me out of the way to snag my seat? Would his wife have pestered me relentlessly on the street to buy a fake Hermes purse? I'd thought I had the Chinese all figured out, and my

new awareness threw me for a loop.

After getting off the train, we found an open plaza where young children ran around, blowing bubbles with plastic wands. I sat, content to watch them and their joyful innocence. They found so much amusement in popping a soap bubble between their palms. It was a sweet scene.

I then watched as an old woman picked up a toddler and squatted with him out in front of her. She held his legs up as he peed out of a slit in the bottom of his pants, right in the heart of the square. Adults milled and children played, unfazed, around the fresh puddle of human urine. My own bubble having been burst, I suggested we move on.

After a short walk through a wooded park, we sat down on a low wall surrounding some tall trees. Across from us, on the other side of some more trees, a group of older men, all about 60, played instruments and sang. They had a guitar, a keyboard, and a twangy instrument that looked like a tin can on a stick.

We observed them secretly through the trees, but when Gaz broke out the camcorder, they noticed and started playing it up for us. One man wore large glasses and a cheesy white baseball cap like you'd buy in an interstate gas station gift shop. He took particular interest in us,

looking over and actually smiling. Chinese locals usually stared blankly like we had three heads.

As darkness fell, the band dispersed. A woman in her 40s with black, glossy hair pulled into a ponytail stopped in front of us. She said “Hello,” and we responded appropriately. Then she stood there, looming over us, looking up to the sky and wracking her brain for the right words.

“Uuuuhhhh,” she muttered. She stood there for a long time, to the point where Gaz and I felt uncomfortable and looked at each other like, “What do we do with her?”

Finally she found it: “Where are you from?”

“America and England,” we replied.

A blank stare followed. She had worked so hard to come up with a question and obviously didn't understand our answers. Which made me wonder if she would have understood any answer at all. That led me to the question of why she had even asked. I appreciated the friendly effort, though.

Luckily, White Hat came to the rescue. He translated our answers to Ponytail, who smiled and nodded. As we continued to speak with them, a small crowd formed. With curious onlookers gawking down at us, we felt like creatures in a zoo. Nobody seemed threatening, but there was no way out. Traveler instinct kicked in, and we tucked our backpacks under our legs.

The curious crowd asked our translator tons of questions, like where we lived now, and how we met. Our appearance intrigued them. They requested that Gaz stand and show them how tall he was. Feeling more relaxed with every question, I stood up as well and started to enjoy the interview. Ponytail asked if my hair was naturally wavy (yes) and naturally blond (not really). I explained that it gets lighter in the summer from the sun. Her eyebrows raised in fascination.

White Hat then explained his French was better than his English, and so he and I spoke in French from then on. Translating from English to French to Chinese was a new experience!

“Tell him we liked the music,” Gaz suggested.

White Hat smiled. “They are old folk songs. During the Cultural Revolution nobody was allowed to perform such songs.”

The Cultural Revolution, started in 1966 and led by Mao Zedong, attempted to prepare China for a powerful communist future by eliminating the “Four Olds.” Ancient customs, culture, habits, and ideas were eliminated, based on a misguided theory that they were holding China back, economically. Destruction of books, paintings, furniture, architecture; and the disallowance of traditional opera, calendar, songs, and fortune telling helped to wipe clean hundreds of years of China’s rich cultural history.

“Now,” White Hat explained, “we are having a Cultural Resurrection. If you want to sing, you sing. If you want to dance, you dance. It doesn’t matter if you’re any good.” He smiled. “Every Saturday everyone comes to the park to enjoy their freedom to do such things.”

I was at the same time fascinated and appalled by what White hat said about the Cultural Revolution. Trying to erase an entire country’s heritage is not cultural progress. Cultural progress would be no kids peeing in the park. Regardless, I was very happy the Chinese were reveling in a resurgence of the old ways and a revival of the formerly forbidden arts.

At the end of this long, full day, we dragged ourselves back to the train station. Slogging along in the dark, I realized I had been charmed by the people in the park. They didn’t want anything from us, only to talk. Our experience with the Suzhou locals was exciting, authentic, and unforgettable.

I continued to rethink my attitude toward the Chinese. I decided if you can’t beat ’em,

join 'em. And if you don't join 'em, just get over it. I was a stranger in their country. If things worked differently there, who was I to get upset? Did I really think that by telling off every person who pushed or pestered me, I was doing anything to further the societal enlightenment of the country as a whole? Surely not. Theirs was the oldest surviving civilization in the world. They could do whatever the heck they wanted. All I was doing was wasting my own energy being frustrated at things I couldn't change. So instead, I changed.

I sat on the green vinyl train seat, gazing out the window again on the ride back to Shanghai. But this time, all I saw was night. No matter, I was lost in my thoughts. I decided to alter my outlook for the rest of the time I spent in China. I realized how much fun I was having, despite the culture shock. I loved it *because* it was so much harder than the other trips I'd taken. Coming to an acceptance of our differences was difficult, but I knew that once I did so, I'd enjoy my journey even that much more. I leaned my head back on the headrest, and shut my eyes. With a slight smile on my face, I drifted away.