

DANIELLE PANZA



Hello. I graduated from Valpo in May 2001. I majored in Political Science and Public Relations. Now I am a teacher at a fairly poor teachers college in Jiujiang, a city in Jiangxi Province, one of the poorest provinces in China. The greater part of my senior year was spent realizing and agonizing that I was not ready for a career track. I felt like I needed to do something important, useful, or just different in my life before I grew up and joined the real, 9-5 working world. What though? Well, call it what you will—fate, divine intervention, luck—I was given the opportunity to be a teacher in China. Oh, don't think I jumped all over this and signed up immediately. I mean I wanted to do something different, but China?! I had never really had a desire to go there, the whole idea was a bit extreme, and considering that at the time I was highly active in Students for a Free Tibet, it was a laughable notion. Long story short, I kept pushing it aside and it kept coming back. I finally skeptically researched it, tried to find anything else to do but go to China and be a teacher (something else I had also never been particularly keen on) and in the end realized that nothing could compare with the experience I was being offered. Damn it. I have begun to write this little blurb about my life in China so many different times. I have about five pages of thoughts, notes and half finished ideas saved. The longer I am here the more difficult it is to put down any coherent thoughts about it. If I had been smart, I would have written this right away (like had been requested) and in my naivety and newness I could have told you all about the differences of China and the US, what I liked, what drove me crazy and about all the new things I have encountered. But I am now too entrenched in this society, in my job and in my life here to give you black and white descriptions. One thing I heard quite a few times in preparation to come here and when receiving culture shock advice was: You see things not as they are, but as you are. Profound? Yes. True? As with anything, not always, but from my experiences, it does make a big difference. Life here is different because of the physical surroundings: the buildings are different, the people look different (or more strangely—not as varied as I am accustomed to) and the food is different. But the real differences, the ones that really fascinate you—or drive you crazy, come from the people—the culture and what, how, and why they do things like they do. I have been here for about eight months of my two-year term. I guess I am not exactly a rookie anymore but anyone who says

they are an expert on China should be looked at skeptically. Sure, you can be an expert on Chinese food, art, literature or history, but it takes much, much more to really understand this culture. I am by no means ready to say that I understand it all, or even a majority of it. For better and for worse, I was pretty clueless about China when I came here. I knew a tiny bit about modern politics and a bunch about their current human rights abuses, but little else. I could not even use chopsticks with anything resembling grace. I wish I had studied the language, even if just the basics, or known more in general. But, because I was so clueless, I came in fairly open and aware of my own ignorance. This may have been a blessing in disguise because I knew I had no right to jump to conclusion and tried to understand what I saw rather than judge it. Often, in passing or in brief correspondence, get asked the question what is life in China like? This question makes me laugh, I could answer it only slightly better than I could the question what is the meaning of life? I am sorry if you read this to learn more about China. I'm sorry if you read this to learn about what a foreigner's life, or more specifically a foreign teachers life, in a small city is like. I'm sorry if you wanted factual answers from this. If you do have any specific questions for me, I can try to answer them. My e-mail address is: daniellepanza@hotmail.com. And yes, if I had the choice, I would do it all over again. I'm in China, would this be complete without a quote from Confucius? "Real knowledge is to know the extent of one's ignorance." Now to really show off, here is something from the Taoist, Dao De Jing (The Way and the Power) that I think applies to life in China –actually, to life, period. "To remain whole, be twisted! To become straight, let yourself be bent. To become full, be hollow. Be tattered, that you may be renewed. Those that have little may get more, Those that have much, are but perplexed." About the content The content of these pages do not constitute, nor are they intended to convey, any official VU content. The content, view, opinions and positions expressed on these pages are strictly and exclusively those of the author.

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