

At the end of their AFS exchange in China, we asked some recent AFSers from the USA to answer two questions:

- ❑ What elements of your host culture, compared to US culture, did you find most difficult to adjust to in the areas of family, school and/or social life?
- ❑ Please note any advice you would like to share with AFSers destined for your host country.

Here are some of their responses:

The Chinese culture is based entirely around school. It was very hard to make Chinese friends that could "hang out" with you making it so hard to do social activities with people outside of other exchange students.

Stephen, Semester, 2010

Not being left alone by host family. Soon I grew accustomed to it.

Leonard, Semester, 2010

A lot of times it is just better to simply go along with Chinese culture than to try and understand and oppose it because most Chinese people have a very stubborn mindset. It's not right or wrong; it's just different.

Sanjay, Semester, 2010

Don't expect anything. Go with few expectations, an open mind and a laptop to document the experience.

Leonard, Semester, 2010

Just the basic fact that everything is different and you have to adjust to the culture and the people, not the other way around.

Pashoua, Semester, 2009

The long school hours were difficult to adjust to. It was also hard because my family was busy all day with work and school (as their culture necessitated) and didn't have much time to spend with me.

Katherine, Semester, 2009

The expectation that all free time should be devoted to school work. On the weekends, my host sister brought me to her day-long English class with her. I often felt drained.

Jenna, Year, 2009

Keep an open mind - don't go there thinking it'll be like what you see in the movies because it's not. Remember: It's not right or wrong...it's just different.

Alexandra, Semester, 2009

China's different, not just the food compared to American Chinese food but everything. It's amazing how you find things that are not liked or are not okay in the U.S. but it is in China. It's just unpredictable. No matter where you are never cut yourself short, because you never know what you will encounter.

Pashoua, Semester, 2009

Be dedicated to your classes, even when you can't understand the subjects, and make an effort to reach out to your host family and classmates, even if it seems unreciprocated at first.

Katharine, Semester, 2009

You will only get what you give. Don't give up!!

Dana, Year, 2009

Be prepared to rely on you, the knowledge you gain will really get you there.

Maren, Year, 2009

Work hard and try to have fun. It's worth it if you try to make friendships with local people; that turned out to be the best part of my experience abroad!

Jenna, Year, 2009

Don't set expectations. Even if someone else gets a bigger house, or a better education, or has a crazier awesome time than you, only you can change the attitude you have towards your own experience.

Merry, Year, 2009

Have fun with every moment of your experience. This is a once in a lifetime opportunity and you should make the best of it.

Dakota, Summer, 2009

It was hard adjusting to a whole different lifestyle of a different family. They did things much differently than my family in many little ways that took me a



long time to get used to, especially because the Chinese are indirect people (as my host dad said), so they wouldn't point out my mistakes until it really got on their nerves.

Nancy, Year, 2009

Some things that were similar were that the Chinese had ethics and morals [similar] to the American set of ethics and morals. It was amazing how we were so far apart, yet we lived our lives with the same rules almost. It was hard for me at first talking with my host family because my Mandarin wasn't very great. I also felt that I was on a completely different planet. I live in a small suburban neighborhood with a population of 25,000. I was placed in a city of 3.9 Million. It was incredible, but also gave me tremendous culture shock.

Ryan, Summer, 2009

The food portions...every meal consisted of very large portions. At first this was hard to adjust to but eventually I adjusted.

Kendall, Summer, 2009

In China, they eat enormous quantities of food at every meal of the day. In America I might go out with some friends for a light meal of sushi, but in China, I ate with my family almost every night, and the amount of food they wanted me to eat was absolutely monstrous. Also, people are almost too generous and nice, but at the same time a hug is viewed as very "risqué." So you have people doing tons of nice things for you, but it's really hard to thank them in ways other than just repeating "谢谢" very often.

Dillon, Summer, 2008

[It was hard to adjust to] the different ways of life and concept of time. They did not like to waste time in China. Also seeing so many people in one area was a shock.

Dana, Summer Program, 2008

I found it difficult to adjust to the way Chinese people aren't as direct as Americans. Whenever my host family had a problem with me, they didn't tell me about it, so I didn't know that I was doing anything wrong. Instead, they went to my AFS teacher and told her the problem, and she would then tell me the problem. Chinese people don't like confrontation.

Lucy, Year, 2007

Try every kind of weird food at least once, it will impress your host family (and some of it is really good). If you feel like your host family has a problem with you,

go to them and try to talk about it, because they might not tell you about it otherwise. Try to speak Chinese as much as possible, even if you barely know anything. It will make the people around you feel like you are really trying, and it will help you make friends. Don't worry if you sound like an idiot, they won't laugh at you.

Lucy, Year, 2007

If your [host] parents look uneasy about letting you go somewhere but won't say "no", just don't go, it's not worth it; they have already done so much for you.

Rosie, Summer, 2005

Don't pack your whole closet. Arrive with at least a quarter of your suitcases empty. Also, make sure your host family knows what your gifts are. My host family thought maple syrup was makeup.

Lu Ann, Summer, 2004

One of the important things an AFS student should do is to attempt to conform and assimilate to the society. Then you can be accepted, becoming regarded as a family member, a neighbor, a student, a member of the local community. Therefore, study along with the students. It doesn't have to be what they're studying—study Chinese...while in class or at home. Your host parents will be more respectful and this allows your parents to be able to accept you as another son or daughter. Mingle with your family as much as possible. Be aware and fix any visible burden you're placing on them—help out with chores...cooking, laundry etc., like any other family member would. And put aside your own personal opinion and agree with your parents. Enjoy your time. Make everyday something to remember. Because this is something you will remember for the rest of your life, something you will cherish years after anyone around you cares to listen. Even the mundane has value. Take pictures of everything.

Sarah, Summer, 2004

Some of the most memorable times I spent with my host family were meal times. Chinese culture stresses an immense amount of importance on food preparation and presentation. As a guest, my host family was always trying to open my "foreign" eyes to new tastes and experiences. Going out to dinner is especially fun because in China multiple families always dine out together. So be prepared to answer questions about the US and your home state. Bring pictures! Everyone enjoys seeing what your life is normally. They have opened up their home to you, so open up a piece of your life to them.

Madeline, Summer, 2002

Older siblings in China yield to the young[er]. No bossing them around. Spoil them; play with them; your relationships with your host sister/brother (especially younger) is very important. Not only do they aid you in your language development, but they provide you an insight into Chinese culture and are a live-in friend. You will feel loved in your host country. Playing and interacting with a sibling can make your year abroad very worthwhile. By the end of the year they will become your brother/sister for life. Throw yourself into your classmate's social groups. A good way to break the barrier is to take part in sports [because] little language is necessary...Bring something from home that you can involve yourself in to relieve stress, sadness, loneliness, etc. Movies and books are great [but] don't forget to explore Chinese movies, books and comics [because they're] something to talk about at school. Learn as much as you can and take advantage of all opportunities presented to you. It's an amazing experience and I want to go back!

Jacob, Year, 2002

I would recommend bringing lots of little non-specific gifts. We met to a lot of kids our age that I wished I had something to give them. I think the perfect gift would be like something I saw a little while ago. They were these little pins that had the American and Chinese flag held together in someone's hand. They were inexpensive and everyone over there likes pins and they are not gender specific. I found that the closeness was a little difficult. Whenever we went anywhere my host sister would want to hold my hand. There are already so many people wherever you go and that closeness can be suffocating. I also had a little trouble with not knowing what we were going to be doing that day or week. So I would definitely be prepared to not know and be able to just enjoy what you are doing right then.

Quincy, Semester, 2001

I found many different elements of host culture difficult to adjust to. I wasn't used to eating out of the same bowls as my family, and using chopsticks. I wasn't used to how adamantly my host brother refused to talk about politics. The list goes on, but when I left Beijing I missed so much of it.

Alex, Summer, 2001