

Melody Guo's Speech at Diverse Bananas, Global Dragons Conference 2014

If I learnt anything about public speaking, it would be not to show a graph at the beginning of your speech.

And guess what...here it is: the inevitable statistics showing the growth of the NZ/China relationship.

I'm sure that you have seen similar graphs before, but you might not have realized exactly how this might impact you...

To start with, NZ is part of the Asia Pacific Region, in other words, you are already in Asia. So whether or not China fares better or worse, it would have a direct/indirect effect on NZ...if you are still attending university, you would have noticed the increase of Chinese international students, 1 in 4 international students are from China, and the number is increasing, if you are in the early stages of your career, no matter the creative/professional occupations, no matter education, tourism or business sectors, you would find understanding Chinese increases your job prospects...now imagine...if Chinese students no longer need to come to NZ to learn English, if Queenstown is duplicated in Xi'an, if the shape of this graph is to change, what would happen? Like Pam said, we are not in a NZ/China relationship is not unique, so how can we keep China interested, and what can you do to contribute to that relationship? You might still think China is very far away, it does take 12 hours on a plane...but reality is: even if the smog will not drift our way tomorrow, we need to start thinking about it, and prepare for it now, because it is closer than any of us could imagine, and we need to work together to overcome the challenges it'll bring...

Now that I have your attention, you might be wondering about how you can learn the Chinese language, how to build a stronger connection with China, and how to get to the country itself? The short answer is to visit the country...the long answer is that there are no short answers.

So I'm here to tell you stories, stories about New Zealanders and their adventures in China, and hopefully they will help you to find some answers to those questions.

The easiest way to go to China when you are young is by way of teaching English, while it is the easiest route, it might not be the best one. Life in China is very enticing, if you think Smith and Caughey's window display makes you want to go shopping, then try the whole Queen Street, and that include the upper Queen Street to be full of Smith and Caugheys, only more vibrant and more stylish...you might not go to China to shop, but my point is, China is full of enticements that makes you want to spend money, Shanghai didn't turn into a materialistic city for no reason...the bars, the restaurants, the 24hr taxi service, the messages (now don't get me started on those), the whole city is dedicated to please, but only those with the cash...so many young people when they arrive in Shanghai, all with good intentions and strong minds, often get carried away with the life of Shanghai, they teach English to merely sustain their partying lives.

There are also those who enjoyed the parties, but made their success in China. A friend told me that he arrived in Shanghai 8 years ago, he first enrolled in a Chinese class, but only for a few months, he studied 4hours a day, and in a few weeks, he was able to communicate...then with time and persistence, he now speaks fluent mandarin. He claims that he does not have a gift for languages, and believes that anyone who studied as hard as he did could make it...Another kiwi I met was even more impressive, not only can he speak fluently, he can also type Chinese nearly as fast as the local Chinese, he didn't believe in attending classes, so he learnt Chinese from communicating with his colleagues and self-studying. He has now been in China for over 10 years. Although I grow up speaking Chinese, I still found it hard to be a confident speaker when I first arrived in Shanghai...the different dialect and accent made me feel like I'm an

outsider. It was only with time that I started to build confidence. So learning Chinese is no easy task, and it is difficult to focus when there's so much distractions around you...so what can you do?

Find a job, one that would require you to work with Chinese people...within 4 months of arriving in Shanghai, some NZders were able to find work opportunities. A young guy arrived in Shanghai at the age of 25, he found his first job through contacts he had, but he was successful in his application because of his skills and his familiarity of the industry. A year later, he was able to lead a group of Chinese engineers working on a big project. He has recently registered a WOFE in China, and now has his own company. The other friend was working in the technology sector when he wanted to move to China, his experience was good enough to land him a job in an international company in Shanghai. After changing his jobs several times, he now works for a fortune 500 company as one of the managing directors. Although success might have come easier for the people I mentioned, since they went to China much earlier, before the diaspora of the huge ex-pat community. But they all have one thing in common: professional experience. Employers are the same everywhere, they would not hire you unless you can bring value to the company.

Does this mean that you want to give up on China? I nearly did. In an email correspondence, my friend described my first few months in Shanghai as a series of unfortunate events. I was on a journey of finding my own heritage, to finally come to terms with my identity...but instead of falling into welcoming arms, I was left alone and poor. Alone because I didn't really know anyone, and no one seemed to pay much attention to me; poor because my cellphone just got snatched from me, and I got ripped off by the second hand phone vendors...my tuition fees, scooter repairs (yea I crushed the scooter, several times actually), plus a few other issues left me in despair and terribly homesick. So I asked myself should I give up or should I stay? It was not an easy decision to make, but I thought to myself, if I give up now, I might never want to come back again, if I give up now, all my previous efforts would go to waste, and it can't possibly get any worse than this.

I think it was during those times, that I started to transforming my challenges into my strengths, it gave me a new perspective, but more importantly it made me believe in myself, and that gave me confidence to face my challenges. Someone once said, "finding meaning in life is as true as forging meaning. In my case, it was through forging meaning in Shanghai that I built an identity that I didn't know existed...my own identity.

On reflection, I believe I could have done my preparation better before leaving NZ...on reflection, I think I overestimated my skills and language abilities, and I underestimated China and its challenges.

I'm sorry that this talk has been rather heavy...there have been many pleasant memories during my travels that made everything worthwhile; there have been many wonderful people who came to my aid when I needed help most; and there have been friendships that will endure for a lifetime...and you are welcome to come and talk to me about those...

I hope that I have not discouraged you from going to China in any way, because it was truly a humbling experience...but whatever you do, do not overestimate yourself, and do not underestimate China. You don't want to have another series of unfortunate events...

Finally, I would like to thank Pat, the Executive Director at NZ China Council and the NZ Chinese Association for this opportunity to speak to you today, I wouldn't be here without their support. Thank you.