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# DISORIENTATED

Alicia Kennedy

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Dedicated to Jin Ling, our ayi.

## My Arrival

‘How would you like to live in China for two years?’ boomed my husband’s enthusiastic voice down the phone. ‘There is no way I am taking my girls to China’, was my reflex response as I neatly hung up the phone. He rang back. ‘At least give me ten minutes of your time to discuss it’.

In hindsight it was at that moment that I subconsciously knew we would be uprooting our cosy Perth life and shifting our family to the unknown other side of the world. Home he came with the brochures, books and videos for the conversion process. That was step one. Step two was to visit Qingdao, a place I had never heard about, let alone know how to pronounce correctly (*ching dow*), and take a look.

Most people spend several months planning their first overseas trip. In less than ten days we had arranged passports, visas and holiday pet care and my husband, our three daughters (then aged 6 years, 4 years and 10 months) and I boarded a plane for China. I knew roughly where this country sat on the world map, but still spent time studying the atlas to see exactly where it lays. With my daughters we revisited the geography lessons of my youth and I started to remove my global blinkers.

Any sense of excitement however was rapidly extinguished by anxiety and anguish at the prospect of living so far away from our comfort zone. As we disembarked our plane in Qingdao we were overwhelmed by the ensuing attention that three blond-haired, wide-eyed Western girls attracted. This was simply a taste of things yet to come. Thankfully we were rescued by local company people, our first Qingdao friends, and received our inaugural dose of genuine Chinese hospitality. After our first banquet we were hooked.

We returned from our look and see visit on a high, accepted the position and entered the heady transition phase of packing up one life and entering a new one. Our belongings were organised, packed and sent in a multitude of directions. Some shipped to China, some to storage. The piano, pets and cars were assigned to friends and family. Somewhere in all that I packed my emotions away too as I focused on the task of preparing our finances, health care, wills and social affairs. I am grateful that it took an impending overseas move rather than a terminal illness to motivate me to get my life in order. As for the emotions box, that was unpacked the first night in our

new home when the tears flowed, after which time I felt refreshed and ready to face the greatest adventure of our lives.

Two years in to our assignment we have experienced the highs and lows of cultural change. Our comfort zones have been stretched, pushed and pulled in every direction as we have settled in to our new life. Just as we became totally engaged in this China life, we entered the final phase of our assignment. Today I carry a weight of sadness with me knowing that this extraordinary experience is drawing to a close. In many ways it will be a relief to leave some of the stresses of life here, but the impending sense of loss far outweighs this. There have been so many lessons learned, friendships made, joys shared and challenges met. I will return to our Western life a different girl.

### **My Challenges**

At first everyday life presents a challenge. Shopping, banking, posting mail, parenting, eating out, getting out and about, socialising, communicating, going to the doctor. The fact that everything is so darn different and you can't understand a word being said throws you off course and it takes a while to get yourself centred again. But with all the support of our domestic crew (our home helper, driver), friends, tutors and mentors these challenges have been met and overcome or perhaps we have just got used to it.

#### Get out of my bubble, please

Someone once told me that the Mandarin word equivalent for *privacy* did not exist until recent times when cross-cultural interaction with Western people has raised awareness of this phenomenon. How true this is I am not sure, but after living in China for a while I have come to understand that privacy in many ways seems to be a Western concern. Which is all well and good unless you happen to be a reserved Westerner who values her privacy and is trying to make her way in Qingdao.

Certainly the constant onlookers when it comes to parenting three daughters in public initially made me feel quite conspicuous, especially in a single child society. On several occasions I could think of nothing better to do than to retreat away in to some non-existent hiding hole, particularly when dealing with squabbling siblings or toddler tantrums. That and getting used to the persistent touching and feeling of our children, in spite of the fact that the children might have been sending clear signals at the time that this was not enjoyed.

Lack of privacy in the supermarket still has the potential to drive me nuts, depending on the day, my mood and no doubt my hormones. I have learned to accept the steady gaze of onlookers studying the contents of my trolley – from the fruit and veggies I select, to the toiletries and loo paper my family prefers, not to mention the snacks and abundant supply of wine. I wonder if my selection influences their choice,

particularly in the ladies section. I receive most stares in the dairy section when I load several cartons of milk, margarine, yoghurt and cheese from the seemingly dull and small selection available. Enormous celebration was the order of the day when low fat milk, cheese and yoghurt arrived on Qingdao's shores.

Now I am used to the stares and hot breath down my neck (not to mention the coughs and splutters behind me) when I visit the Bank, Post Office or smaller variety shops. In China people queue sideways along the counter so it can be rather disconcerting when my over the shoulder observers watch me withdraw our monthly sum of cash. The first time I went to the Post Office I had neatly wrapped my gifts to send, only to have them all unwrapped and studied by the attendant, not to mention the other customers huddled around me. Thank heavens the goods were worthy of public viewing.

Still totally out of bounds to me in the shopping arena is the underwear department. We leave that for our return visits to Australia when bulk buying is the order of the day. There is no way I could face an audience when selecting my underwear, and I doubt they have double D cups here anyway.

On the home scene we share our Qingdao life with a helper (maid, ayi) and a driver. Our driver, Pa Ping as he is known to our 2-year-old Little Empress, knows where I go, who I go with and how long I stay. There is no chance of any secret rendezvous here but I figure this is a small price to pay for the luxury of having a driver who doubles as a handyman around the house, errands man and entertainer of grizzly children. Again there is a sense of awkwardness if I need to touch up the hair and makeup before disembarking, but you soon get used to that. As for getting changed in the car – we have to leave that for the children and even then it is done behind the shield of a blanket.

No question either that the luxury of sharing our house with our helper, Jin Ling, more than compensates for the fact that she knows just about everything there is to know about us – warts and all, and the fact that I had to retrain myself to close the bathroom door.

The area where lack of privacy in China continues to daunt me is in the ladies change room at health clubs and swimming pools. As I huddle behind my towel attempting to discreetly do what needs to be done I am amazed by the parading of naked women about me who it seems leave the getting dressed bit to the very last moment before walking out. The hotel change rooms are so compact leaving nowhere to hide, but the experience to beat them all would have to be in the change rooms at the public aquatic centre. So many naked women doing so many naked things. My greatest challenge here lies in getting my three girls through with a well-intended audience observing their every move, not that our Little Empress cares at all as she

parades about in her nude glory to the delight of her audience. Fortunately some recently learned words enable me to politely request people not to look on the basis that the girls are shy. I am in awe of the apparent lack of body image issues in this culture compared to our “thin is beautiful” obsessed Western culture.

These days when I shop at our supermarket I muscle and shove my way to the fruit and vegetable weighing station just like everyone else. I am impressed by my progress in dealing with the up close and personal life of Chinese people. As a cultural way it reflects a history of mass collective culture and difficult times. (i.e. If you don't get to the front of the queue first you might miss out on your rice and go hungry.) Knowing this gives me an understanding. However I think my coping mechanism has been strengthened by an ability to laugh about it, shrug it off and most of all by adopting the approach of if you can't beat 'em, then join 'em!

### **Reinventing myself**

The first time I heard the term “*trailing spouse*” I balked at the prospect of carrying this label with me to China. The term conjures up images of a dog being dragged on a leash; a reluctant participant; unwelcome baggage; something or someone that just won't go away, like one of those cobwebs that sticks to your hands and follows you around no matter what you do. Not surprisingly the term went down like a lead balloon with me, a wife who prides herself on some independence, identity and a strong sense of self.

It was hence with great relief that I heard David Pollock (co-author ‘*Third Culture Kids*’, Intercultural Press, 2001) redefine my status as ‘*accompanying spouse*’. I came to China by choice. It meant leaving behind an active professional and community life but this was a small sacrifice to make in comparison to the adventure that has awaited us.

On a recent visit to Australia I became sensitive to a misunderstanding that people seem to have about the life of an expatriate wife. It seems at times that my loved ones back home (wherever that is!) think I have become a wealthy, lazy, self-indulgent woman with not enough stress in my life, who spends too much time doing lunch and not enough time in touch with reality (whatever that is). Perhaps an essence of this is true, so I am making the most of it while it lasts.

When they ask, ‘Just what do you do in China?’ I am left speechless as I frantically gather my thoughts in an attempt to present a convincing case that we accompanying spouses make valuable contributions to this world and that we have our share of stresses as we adjust to the pressures of cross-cultural living and raising a family within this environment. Simple day-to-day activities that we breeze through in our home country become marathon cultural adventures in our host country. In the process we discover hidden strengths not previously tapped in to or we become expert

at avoidance, which is why none of my letters ever seem to get posted (thank heavens for email).

Perhaps the greatest challenge of all is redefining our role in this new life given that many of us suspend our own interests and careers when embarking on an expatriate assignment. We come to our host country with a clean slate and have to start making a life for ourselves from scratch. This in itself is a wonderful opportunity. We can reinvent ourselves, taking what we like from the past life and adding to it in the new!

Sure we have more time available to us thanks to our helpers, but we fill this time with other enriching activities as we nourish and nurture our home lives, contribute to the expatriate and host country community, discover the local scene, learn the language and give back in whatever way we can. Not to mention finding time for the foot massages and shopping! I am just as busy in China as I used to be in Australia. The difference is I feel much less stressed thanks to the support of my domestic crew and the fact that I don't spend three hours of my day in the car. In China I don't need to be a modern superwoman juggling work and family while keeping a smile on my face, which comes as a great relief. Now my smile is genuine.

### **My Joys and My Losses**

An ironic twist in life seems to be the close connection between joy and sorrow. We discover things that we love, that bring us joy and then we grieve their loss as life moves through its inevitable changes. In my expatriate life this connection seems more intense. In my two years here I have made many and said goodbye to many friends, a fact of life in the revolving global community. Each friendship cherished; each departure mourned. The email lists just keep growing. We have such great fun here with such interesting people. I have enjoyed extraordinary events and experiences only to know that they will never happen again, only to be stored in my memory and relived through my amateurish photos and videos.

The contrasts I find between this life and that life can at times drag me down such as when we visited the local hospital complete with its grubby floors and blood soaked swabs littering the benches. Or when yet another locally purchased product falls apart. Relatively minor things on the major scale of life.

More often though these contrasts lift and inspire me, such as the day we travelled 12 hours there and back on a very bumpy road to visit Jin Ling's family, peasant farmers who work a patch of soil at the base of a mountain in the heart of Shandong province. Our worlds met across a knee-height splintery wooden table in a dank and dingy cement home while we ate a banquet consisting of stir fried bits and pieces of entrails, chicken feet and goodness knows what else. This family is poor. Poorer than anybody else I have ever met. And yet I was surprised by the lack of pity

welling up inside me. Instead I was inspired by the calm and peace that permeated the walls and a spiritual abundance beyond any joy that materialism can bring. This day was my happiest in China.

I sometimes wonder what thoughts our Jin Ling has as she floats between her world and ours. She is a gem. She comes in to my world each day and keeps it in order. She is a shoulder to cry on, a friend to us all and a domestic expert. Not a day goes by that I don't treasure her presence in my life. When I consider the joy and sorrow of my China life she tops the list. She has brought such joy and when we leave the loss will strike to the core. Our paths have crossed this once and we will continue on totally different journeys in life. Which is why I celebrate each day and make the most of every moment and every ironed shirt while it lasts.

### **My Lessons**

Apart from the obvious education of learning street survival Mandarin and understanding more about the depth of Chinese history and culture, this China experience has delivered personal lessons to me that no university could ever provide.

Through the Chinese and expatriate communities I have met people from all over the world and continue to discover more about our different cultural ways, our likes and dislikes, our history, our cuisine and our customs. It has been a global awakening as I have discovered that we share many common threads in this tapestry of cross-cultural community life. My family now celebrates and embraces the diversity of people in our world. I had to wait until I was 37 years old to discover that there is a world beyond Australia. That not everyone says "*G'day mate*" and grows up on Vegemite. I see it as a great gift that my daughters are discovering this now. They are being educated through living the sounds, sights and smells of international life, as opposed to reading about it in a book.

Personally I have discovered the adventurer within me. I had never seen myself as a traveller. I was quite content to stay at home. The world daunted me. Asia scared the hell out of me really. Proof of this was when we first laid foot in Hong Kong airport and I became a jittery, paranoid, germ phobic mother of three. I only survived because I had my husband to guide me and a packet of antiseptic wipes in my bag.

Now I am comfortable navigating the narrow, smelly, slimy cobbled alleys of Qingdao with the locals staring and laughing at me as I buy some fresh fruit and attempt to make conversation. The buzz this gives me almost equals the euphoria I felt after the birth of our first daughter minus the pain. If I can do this (and survive childbirth) then I can do anything. I feel empowered by my newly found strength of spirit, resilience and courage.

### **My Favourite Place**

The Sculpture Park is about a twenty-minute walk from our home. Nestled alongside a hill on Qingdao's scenic coast it is a new park, green and clean with its neatly trimmed hedges, wide paths, tailored gardens and contemporary outdoor sculptures. This park is a testimony to the new China. Modern, open, progressive, West meeting East. On an average day middle-classed Chinese folk meander around its paths admiring the art and taking endless rounds of photos. I almost feel obliged to drop my pace as I power walk my way through this tranquil retreat and so have recently opted to sit for a time on one of the park benches overlooking the Yellow Sea. This morning it was hot and humid. As I sat and closed my eyes I could feel the intense heat bursting through my pores, sweat pouring down my cheeks, and then a soft breeze tickling me with relief. I heard rolling waves, the chant of cicadas, the gentle chatter of Chinese, a bus humming past and somebody spitting. I didn't mind the spitting. It reminded that I was in China.

In this spontaneous meditation my mind wandered. In China I have found a country full of surprises and gifts. Personally I have found a place and a space where my soul has soured and my heart has exploded with the recognition that I love my world and my life. I can embrace change and feel happy wherever I am, as long as I have my family and our health. I will take this gift with me when I leave China and forever find comfort in my memories of this extraordinary experience.



Since 2001 **Alicia Kennedy** has been embracing cross-cultural life as an accompanying spouse and mother of three girls in Qingdao on China's North Eastern shores. In her pre-China life Alicia was a veterinarian, author ("A Dog in Your Family" Oxford University Press 1999) and a busy mum based in Perth. In Qingdao she is still a busy mum only now she has the luxury of domestic help allowing more time to explore her new country and indulge a passion for writing.