



😊 Lessons Taught...Lessons Learned!

Shanghai Xu Bo Art and Culture Exchange



French Day, One World Project in the kindergarten, Shanghai

July, 2010

Volunteer Time

Lessons Taught... Lessons Learned!



If you asked me to describe my volunteer experience in one word, I would, without a doubt, say “unforgettable.”

My placement consisted of a total of eight weeks teaching English in Mianyang, Sichuan province, with the first four weeks at Mianyang Experimental Kindergarten and the last four at Mianyang Children's Palace.

After spending a busy weekend getting to know the wonderful volunteers and staff of T2T/Xubo in Shanghai, I was a little nervous about being transported to what I thought would be the Middle of Nowhere, China, and having to live on my own for two months—especially since this was my first time alone in a foreign country. I knew it would be a challenge, but I also knew it would allow me to grow as a person and expand my understanding of Chinese culture.

When I arrived at the Mianyang airport, two of the kindergarten teachers were already there, waiting to welcome me with a vivid, colorful “Christine Pao!” sign. After settling in to my room at a small hotel near the school, I was whisked away to dinner, where I met some of the kindergarten teachers and administrators I would be working with for the next few weeks.



Now, I can't lie and say I didn't feel waves of mild panic surge through my veins when, during my first foray into the school, hundreds of kindergarteners exploded from the classrooms and began bouncing off the walls. It was shocking. Their energy levels were through the roof. But for the first few days, I was given a thorough introduction to the school, which included sitting in on several lessons for all age groups and getting to know some of the students. I grew to love their

youthful vivacity and enthusiasm for learning.

Aside from familiarizing myself with the schoolgrounds, I also had the chance to grow accustomed to the educational differences. In China, the kindergarten system is very distinct from that of America; kids begin going to kindergarten when they are 2-3 years old, and there are four separate grades, including a “preschool” grade for 5-6 year-olds who are about to start primary school. Fortunate enough to have the chance to observe lessons in all four age groups, I was able to pick up on subtle differences in learning and memory capabilities between the kids in the different grades, thus allowing me to tailor my lessons according to the needs of each class.

Nevertheless, my first few lessons were borderline pathetic. I was anxious about teaching, seeing as I have no experience in the field, and it definitely showed. But the teachers were very understanding about my limited—or should I say nonexistent?—teaching background, giving me access to numerous materials and guiding me all along the way. As I taught more and more classes, I learned how to perfect my lessons, making them fun and interactive for the students, who were really a joy to teach: at such a young age, they know no inhibitions and welcome you with open arms (and hugs and kisses, and random little gifts). I quickly realized that my goal was not to teach the kids proper English, but rather to encourage their interest in the English language and introduce some American songs and games to enrich their everyday curriculum. Another way of looking at it, according to a certain Xubo webmaster, is that I was there to serve as an ambassador, or a role model of sorts, for the children; it's not often in Mianyang that they get to interact with foreigners, so it's something they'll remember for a long time to come.



After my four weeks at the kindergarten were up, I bid fond farewell to the teachers and children, and made a short journey a couple of

blocks away to a new school, Mianyang Children's Palace, where I taught kids from ages 5 to 15. Children's Palace, normally a kindergarten during the regular school year, offers dozens of summer classes, including Latin dance, painting, Taekwondo, and, of course, English, for those kids who want to get a leg up on their language skills outside of school (or who are forced into it by their parents).



Upon arrival at Children's Palace, I was welcomed at yet another dinner with the teachers I would soon be working with, and ushered into my new accommodation on the eighth floor of the school building. It wasn't difficult adjusting to the new environment at all, especially since the teachers actively made sure I was comfortable and had everything I needed.

At Children's Palace, I rotated through a great majority of the English classes, of which there are over 100. Since I didn't know beforehand which classes I would visit on any given day, I was given very loose guidelines regarding my lessons for each of the classes. Consequently I decided to base my lessons around free questions and answers, raising the skill level of my questions slightly for the older classes and lowering them for the younger classes. Essentially, I deliberately structured each lesson to give the students a practical opportunity to boost their confidence in listening and speaking skills, while allowing them plenty of time to ask questions about American culture. In general, the students were receptive. Though some of the older classes were problematic in that the students were too shy to ask and answer questions, for the most part, I was surprised how quickly and easily an entire class period would pass by, based simply on this question and answer format (and a bit of improvisation). Sometimes the teachers asked me to teach a lesson out of the textbook. I found that this wasn't difficult to maneuver either, after I learned to copy some of the teachers' cues to keep the students focused and on track.

Aside from my regular class schedule, I also piloted the weekly English Corner, which is a special variable-topic evening class for some of the most outstanding students to practice their English in a fun and active environment. Highlights of English Corner included making a gigantic communal fruit salad, showing off



my kung fu skills after watching “Kung Fu Panda,” and teaching the kids how to sing “Hey Jude.” I looked forward to English Corner every week, because the students always had a great time and it was a blast to teach.



Although the majority of my time in Mianyang went by smoothly, I did face a few personal stumbling blocks along the way, the largest of which were the language barrier and culture shock. Being an ABC (American-Born Chinese), I was raised in a Chinese-speaking household and brought up with basic Chinese customs, but this did little to prepare me for my transition to the Chinese lifestyle. I thought I would have a huge language advantage compared to other

volunteers—I can speak basic Mandarin Chinese—yet I couldn't understand a word of Sichuanese, the language that dominates in Mianyang. Communication was a constant issue. Plus, my ethnicity elicited plenty of talk among the students, who would sometimes accuse me of only pretending to be foreign. It was a constant hassle having to explain why I looked Chinese but was actually American. It was also embarrassing when the kids would ask me questions in Chinese that I could only half understand, only to see that the teachers weren't paying attention to class and couldn't translate because they took for granted that I understood Chinese. In the very end, however, I think my stay in Mianyang did wonders to improve my Chinese speaking skills (my English skills, on the other hand, might have deteriorated a bit).

On my days off, some of my favorite activities were exploring the city and going out to eat with the teachers. My favorite was hotpot, a Sichuan specialty, which is numbingly spicy and, of course, delicious and flavorful. Since both of my schools were located in the city center, I was always within close walking distance to supermarkets, parks and plazas, restaurants, and convenience stores; it was rare that I had to take a taxi to get anywhere. During one long weekend, I took a tour to Emei Mountain and Leshan Giant Buddha. Another weekend I went for a walk on Fuleshan. But I think my most memorable trip was an afternoon spent in Beichuan, a town tucked away in the mountains about an hour out from the city. During the earthquake in 2008, Beichuan was completely devastated, and it currently remains a monument for those who lost their lives during that tragic incident. Being able to walk among the deserted streets, which I had heard were once so lively and bustling, reminded me of why I chose to



volunteer in Mianyang in the first place.



My initial fears about being the only volunteer in the city seem so trivial now that I can look back upon my experience as a whole. I went to Mianyang to teach—but in the end, I think I learned the most out of the thousands of students I had the pleasure of interacting with. I don't regret spending my summer volunteering in Mianyang at all. It was one of the most memorable, worthwhile, and invaluable experiences I think I will ever have. Like I said in the beginning, I'll never forget my

time there.

My advice to anyone considering volunteering in Mianyang? Keep an open mind, and you won't be disappointed. Give fully of yourself. You'll return a better person.

Christine Pao, Travel to Teach, June & July, 2010