

# How to Cope with Culture Shock in China

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Trouble writes "My TESOL book contained all of two pages on culture shock. All it did was detail out the stages of culture shock, and reminded the reader that it gets really bad at three months. Since they didn't really dwell on it, I didn't really dwell on it either, which is why I was completely unprepared for the breakdown I had two weeks after coming to China.

Reading about culture shock is fine and dandy, but what you really need to do is talk to someone who's experienced it. I lucked out that I met someone my second day in China who had gone through culture shock before and has helped me deal with the affects. What I really regret is that I didn't talk to anyone about it before I left.

These are some tips and hints that I think will help you deal. Some of them are things you can do before you leave, and others aren't really relevant until you get here.

## 1. Pack things that make your house a home.

When my friend Mark went to Japan, he packed up a bunch of his posters from home. As soon as he got to his new apartment, he spent a day putting them up on the walls. This really helped him feel more at home in his place.

Sadly, I didn't talk to Mark before I left, so I came with a few books and photographs. Within two days I was ready to start banging my head against the pure white concrete walls that made up my apartment.

Maybe for you, home is a stuffed animal, some knick-knacks, or a few movie posters. Whatever it is, make the space and pack it. You won't regret it when you're faced with four white walls to spend your evenings in.

**2. Really think about why you've decided to go to a foreign country.** The advice I got from Paul, my buddy who's been helping me cope, was to remember why I had left Canada in the first place. There has to be a specific reason you've decided to leave your home country to pursue a dream overseas. Make sure you know that reason, and accept it.

Mark's advice about this was a bit more to the point: "Don't leave home to escape your problems. They' come with you.' If you want to leave because you're mad at your best friend, you're sick of college, or to find a Chinese girlfriend, you're coming for the wrong reasons. You don't have to go so far as to write down your reasons, but I do recommend that you talk to a close friend about your reasons for going well before you leave.

I often get asked, 'Why did you come to China?'" One of the reasons I came was because I have my history degree, but I went to a college where there was no chance to learn Asian history. I only got a taste of it when I went in for my after-degree, and wanted to know more. I decided I could best understand the history and culture by coming here. One of my dreams is to go home and teach history, and I found that the teachers who had been overseas were more interesting and better prepared for class.

**3. Don't be afraid to ask for help.** I've always been afraid to admit ignorance. I've also been afraid to pester people. This caused me no end of problems my first few weeks in China. Lily would ask me if I needed help with shopping, and I'd laugh. How hard could shopping be?

I learned very quickly: Shopping in China is completely different. I had my first serious breakdown after attempting to buy something to eat at the grocery store. I suddenly could not handle that everything around me was in Chinese. I couldn't figure out how to buy fruit, and couldn't tell what type of meat was in anything. I grabbed a bottle of coke and hurried out of the store. By the time I got back to my apartment, I was shaking and crying.

You won't understand what it's like until it happens to you.

The next day I forced myself to tell Lily that I needed help at the store. She found a wonderful teacher at the school who took me around the store, pointed out where everything was, and helped me buy everything on my list. After that first time, I was okay. Later on, I had another teacher help me buy clothes for the first time, and a third one helped me the first time I bought a bus ticket.

There's nothing wrong with admitting that you don't know what you're doing. If you go to a bigger school or a college that has more than one English teacher, there will likely be someone assigned specifically to help you with these things. If not, draft one of your co-workers. They understand that

you're not used to things here, and will be happy to help you.

**4. Accept that your body needs to adjust.** The first week I was in China, I slept like a dead thing almost every night. The second week I was in China, I caught a nasty cold. When I talked to my parents, my mother thought I was my brother. I spent that second week sleeping even more than the first week, and trying to drink water as much as possible.

Your body is adjusting to the new environment. You're going to get sick. Bring cold medicine. You're going to be tired, so don't make any plans. Just let your body do what it needs to do.

This means that you have to remember to eat on a regular basis, and drink plenty of fluids. Sleep as much as you want to. Paul didn't teach for the first week that he was in Rudong, so he had plenty of time to adjust. For me, I just ended up going to bed at 7:00 p.m. almost every night for the first month, and getting up a little less than 12 hours later.

**5. Find yourself a community.** I was very lucky that I met Paul in Beijing. There are no other foreigners in either one of the cities that we ended up in. It's very isolating. We call each other every night to compare stories and talk. It's helpful.

If you can, try to find other foreigners either in your school or in the area. Make friends with them so that you have someone to talk to about your experiences. You can also look for communities on-line. Search out people that are in the same situation you're in, either through communities like Living in China, or through personal webpages. You'll be surprised at how much you can find that way.

If that doesn't work for you, try talking to your fellow teachers. I told one of my co-workers how lonely I felt, letting her know that I just had all this free time that I didn't know what to do with. As soon as I talked to her, she offered to help me find a Chinese teacher, and set me up with a martial arts instructor.

I was also told that every other time they'd had a foreign teacher at my school, it had always been a pair of them, so they could understand why I felt so lonely. They were more than willing to help me deal with that. All I had to do was ask.

The only other thing I'll suggest is don't be afraid to talk to other teachers in China before you go.

Everyone's experience with culture shock is unique, and everyone you talk to will be able to give you a story about how they learned to deal with it.

I hope that you'll find a way that works well enough that you'll make it over the 'three month hump', instead of becoming another foreign teacher who disappeared into the night. "