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A Survival Guide to Customs and Etiquette

The *CultureShock!* series is a dynamic and indispensable range of guides for those travellers who are looking to truly understand the countries they are visiting. Each title explains the customs, traditions, social and business etiquette in a lively and informative style.

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- advice on adapting into the local environment
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- how to get the most out of your travel experience

CultureShock! Shanghai is the complete guide to China's glittering crown jewel, a city that is at once both charmingly ancient and stunningly ultra modern. Can you tell your *xiaolongbao* from your *xiaolongxia*? Is being called *laowai* a pejorative? What is this nebulous concept called *guan xi*? Boasting some of the world's tallest buildings, largest businesses, longest bridges, fastest trains and elevators, and finest restaurants, Shanghai is a megacity and world-class financial centre that may well be the world's first cashless society, yet also has cosy streets filled with napping bicyclists, dancers in full costume and retirees with bird cages. With impressive light shows, backlit freeways and luminous skylines, Shanghai is truly a city of light. Get the most out of your stay with this guide to the Asian metropolis par excellence.

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CULTURE SHOCK!
SHANGHAI

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CULTURE SHOCK!

A Survival Guide to Customs and Etiquette

SHANGHAI



Sharol Gauthier

For Review only

CULTURE **SHOCK!**

A Survival Guide to Customs and Etiquette

SHANGHAI

Sharol Gauthier

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Culture shock is a state of disorientation that can come over anyone who has been thrust into unknown surroundings, away from one's comfort zone. *CultureShock!* is a series of trusted and reputed guides which has, for decades, been helping expatriates and long-term visitors to cushion the impact of culture shock whenever they move to a new country.

Written by people who have lived in the country and experienced culture shock themselves, the authors share all the information necessary for anyone to cope with these feelings of disorientation more effectively. The guides are written in a style that is easy to read and covers a range of topics that will arm readers with enough advice, hints and tips to make their lives as normal as possible again.

Each book is structured in the same manner. It begins with the first impressions that visitors will have of that city or country. To understand a culture, one must first understand the people—where they came from, who they are, the values and traditions they live by, as well as their customs and etiquette. This is covered in the first half of the book.

Then on with the practical aspects—how to settle in with the greatest of ease. Authors walk readers through how to find accommodation, get the utilities and telecommunications up and running, enrol the children in school and keep in the pink of health. But that's not all. Once the essentials are out of the way, venture out and try the food, enjoy more of the culture and travel to other areas. Then be immersed in the language of the country before discovering more about the business side of things.

To round off, snippets of information are offered before readers are 'tested' on customs and etiquette. Useful words and phrases, a comprehensive resource guide and list of books for further research are also included for easy reference.

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Construction began on the glamorous Pudong skyline a mere 30 years ago.

For Review only **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I have to admit in hindsight that one of my first thoughts about Shanghai was that it wasn't a very livable city. What did I know, then? Not much, it turns out. At that point, I hardly knew the city at all! Five years later, I see Shanghai through a very different lens. Clearly, I had culture shock. The truth is, Shanghai is a spectacular city. Better than that, it is a fascinating and exciting place to live.

During some of my time in Shanghai, I wrote a blog about China, which forced me to look closely at the city, its people, its culture, and our lives there. From the kernels of those observations, this book grew into something tangible and (I hope) helpful. Working on this project raised many questions, and I want to acknowledge the people who helped me find answers.

Thank you to Tracy Lesh of *Shanghai and Beyond* for answering language questions as well as food questions, and for being such a fantastic guide on a trip to Longmen Village. Thank you also to Allen Tan, not only for treating me to a delicious Chinese (and Malaysian) meal in Singapore, but also for helping parse the particulars of Chinese culture and language. My gratitude also goes out to Shanghai's most interesting expat, Betty Barr, who granted me time for an interview. What a pleasure it was to learn the fascinating story of Betty and her Shanghaiese husband, George Wang, who were both born and raised in Shanghai during the 1920s and 30s.

Many friends at Shanghai American School were generous with answers as well. Sandy Hong and Serena Lu, members of the school's dedicated Chinese staff, offered helpful tips

about Chinese culture. Serena also provided me with a long list of her favorite Shanghainese dishes. Iman Syah, whom I first met during a trip to the Lhagang (*Tagong*) Monastery—in the hinterland of the Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture—shared photos for the book and his thoughts on Shanghai's nightlife. Tiffany Kelley, colleague and good friend, was a regular go-to person whenever I needed help remembering details. Xiao Lin, our driver, deserves a shout out as well. He was always up for long conversations with me about our two countries; Xiao Lin taught me more about China and what it means to be Chinese than anyone else I know.

A hearty thank you goes out to my editor She-reen Wong at Marshall Cavendish International (Asia), who had the crazy idea, after reading my blog, that I should write a book. And I would not have finished *CultureShock! Shanghai* without the help of my mother, Harol Marshall, also a writer. Thank you for being my first set of eyes, and more importantly, for your encouragement in the very beginning, when reaching the end seemed far away.

Last, but definitely not least, thank you to my two daughters, Sophie and Colette, for offering perceptive insights into their own culture shock experiences in China. And finally, thanks to Marcel Gauthier for taking us all to Shanghai in the first place.

“If you want to get more out of life . . . you must lose your inclination for monotonous security and adopt a helter-skelter style of life that will at first appear to you to be crazy.”

— Chris McCandless,
from Jon Krakauer's *Into the Wild*

In the 19th century, Great Britain, along with France and the United States, invaded a series of Chinese cities that included Shanghai. Nicknaming Shanghai “The Paris of the East”—as much for the city's decadent reputation as for its proliferation of art, music, and entertainment—Westerners cordoned off the city and established their own outpost. They controlled it for nearly a century. During this era, Shanghai grew into a center of finance with an international reputation for extravagance. When the city finally fell to the Communists in 1949, it stepped away from the world stage and entered a state of hibernation and retreat from international affairs that lasted decades.

Enter the twenty-first century: Shanghai has finally resumed its position as the rising dragon of the East. Always something of a rebel, the city is once again China's crown jewel—one of the best examples of the country's successful and rapid modernization. As of this writing, Shanghai continues to hold title as the world's most densely populated urban metropolis. In just one-third of the physical space of Beijing, Shanghai



A close-up, vertiginous view of the iconic Oriental Pearl Tower

is home to nearly 4 million more people. Its lofty cityscape rivals those of other modern cities. Shanghai has re-emerged as one of the 21st century's world-class financial centers. In 2017, CNN hailed Shanghai as “the greatest city in the world.”

Shanghai's popular river promenade, the Bund, glitters with technological confidence as the city continues to improve and expand its stunning landscape. In 2019, the Centre Pompidou, a dazzling new branch of the esteemed French museum of contemporary and modern art, opened its doors on the Bund. Shanghai boasts some of the world's tallest buildings, largest businesses, longest bridges, fastest trains and elevators, and best restaurants. With abundant new wealth, it is now routine to see Porsches and Audis zipping down the Yan'an Elevated, shuttling young Chinese children to their weekend activities.

The city's prodigious metro system was built with stunning efficiency, and new metro lines pop up in the suburbs



The famous Bund glitters and captivates by night in one of the world's most glamorous cities.

at breakneck speed. At night, Shanghai's impressive network of freeways is backlit with blue lights, and the abundant skyscrapers play host to light shows beaming both Chinese and English advertisements to the crowds. The famous Pudong skyline is luminous, centered as it is around the neon Pearl Tower and a triumvirate of the world's tallest skyscrapers.

Contemporary Shanghai still resonates with visitors as something reminiscent of Paris. It is the world's newest City of Lights. In short, there is much to recommend Shanghai to foreigners, and more than 200,000 of them call this city home. As international expat populations go, it's a minuscule number, representing less than one-half of one percent of Shanghai's 24 million residents. Compare that to New York, where more than 37 percent of the population was born in a foreign country.

It's easy for new arrivals to be distracted by the outward glamour of the city. But settling in offers unique challenges. Some expats may find themselves ensconced miles away from the trendiest areas of the city, and those with families will likely be living in outer suburbs or in residential compounds. Our first apartment, provided by our employer, was an hour by car from downtown. We had hoped for glitzy urban life. We found something more subdued and more challenging, surrounded as we were by a semi-rural and suburban population that seemed to rarely appreciate the presence of foreign faces.

Underneath its sparkly couture, the reality is that this megacity is home to millions of average Chinese citizens, many of whom are migrants from rural areas and other Chinese provinces, seeking access to Shanghai's bustling job market. English is still not widely spoken or understood



Shanghai is a popular destination for domestic as well as international tourists.

in most of China, and in much of Shanghai. To make matters more complex, foreign visitors and long-term expats who lack language skills and cultural understanding can quickly find themselves faced with an impenetrable bureaucracy and confusing cultural norms. Navigating China's myriad bureaucratic quirks adds another layer of frustration and before long that dizzy feeling of dislocation, known commonly as culture shock, sets in.

I wrote this guidebook to help minimize the culture shock of arriving cold turkey in Shanghai. I've tried to include humorous and realistic descriptions of the culture shock my own family experienced, and I hope I've offered strategies for

dealing with aspects of life in Shanghai which can frustrate and even infuriate new arrivals (Internet access, I'm talking about you). In general, I've approached this guide as a map to life in Shanghai, rather than as an introduction to broader Chinese culture.

Perhaps more importantly, China and the Chinese people are complex and far too diverse for a foreigner of a few years to ever fully elucidate. As with any large country, values and cultural practices vary widely from region to region, between rural and urban areas, and among social classes. China is home to more than 55 recognized minority groups, and many have unique customs and traditions. But Shanghai is its own city, and its atmosphere is wildly different in tone and context from cities like Beijing, Hangzhou, and Chengdu. Every inch of Shanghai is uniquely Shanghainese, and I've tried to highlight the spirit of the city that many foreigners may find both difficult to navigate and yet keenly exciting and attractive.

When I was living in China, I often relied on humor as the best way to approach curious or unexpected situations. When you are lost by a conversation in Mandarin, just smile. It's a universally recognized form of communication, although you may not find your smile is returned. When you are sent back and forth between offices—*you must have your passport to pay the bill; no, you must pay the bill before we return your passport*—find the humor in the situation (and practice pantomime). Be polite, even when you think the Chinese are not. Understand that when people use the phrase, East meets West, they really *are* referring to an entirely different way of understanding and experiencing the world. Learn the customs of the people. Recognize that you are a guest in the country and be thankful the officials have

allowed you in! Try to take off your Western lenses and learn to see the world the way the Chinese do.

Relative to the Western world, China has remained somewhat removed. Chinese culture is conservative by nature, and it can feel introverted, especially compared to open Western cultures. Likewise, Shanghai has some of the characteristics of all big cities and can feel cold and distant to foreigners who arrive starry-eyed and naive. Not unlike your introverted friend or relative, once the Chinese know you and trust you, they will respond on the same human level as all people—with warmth (or not).

In Shanghai, my teenage daughter experienced the kindness of an old woman who offered to share an umbrella in a rainstorm. She has had Chinese men on the subway offer her their seat. Chinese citizens have helped direct my family when we were lost, and they've translated for us when we could not understand what the heck was happening. Our driver, Xiao Lin, was a lifesaver to my family, in more ways than one—quite literally, he once saved my husband's life during an attack of anaphylaxis. Chinese merchants, who love a regular customer, often picked out a better piece of fruit for my basket, rounded down my price, or showed me a quicker way to pay with WeChat. Complete strangers on the metro have regaled me with the universal language of baby photos, even without a more traditional dialogue.

In moments when I was frustrated by something in Shanghai or chastened by a local on the street for my foreign ways, I reminded myself of these deeply human interactions—all the times I've shared a joke without sharing the language. I cannot guarantee that you will never ask yourself, "What have I done by coming here?" But I can guarantee that if you choose adventure, you will find one in Shanghai.

MAP OF CHINA

For Review only



CITY MAP



For Review only

CHAPTER 1

FIRST IMPRESSIONS



“If you live in a Chinese city, there’s one feeling you never shake off: What a lot of people there are!”

— Yu Hua, *China in Ten Words*

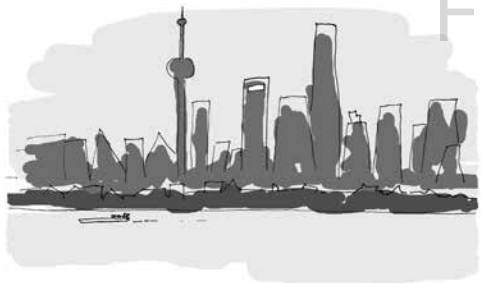
CITY OF CONTRASTS

Nearly everyone who experiences Shanghai for the very first time will say that the city feels irreconcilable. While China is generally a country of great contrast, in Shanghai, the juxtapositions feel more conspicuous. On the one hand, the city is decidedly futuristic—chock-full of modern skyscrapers, Michelin star restaurants, illuminated highways, bullet trains, and billionaires. On the other hand, many Shanghai streets are still packed with riders of rickshaws or rickety bicycle carts, hauling towers of cardboard and selling cabbages or flowers. Mobile payment technology is endemic, yet the sidewalks are still hand swept with brooms made of bamboo leaves.

Substantially more people live in Shanghai than in New York, or Paris, or Singapore, so the Chinese seem to physically occupy more of the surrounding space. No one, for example, steps aside when the sidewalk narrows. Certainly, your first impression might be of busy people, bustling streets, and rare or fleeting eye contact. Depending on your location in the city, you may experience conspicuous stares or be utterly ignored. I’m a naturally jovial person, and it took me a long time to acclimate to China, which can be a very serious place indeed. I’ve taken crowd photos on the Bund and on East Nanjing Road in which no one makes eye contact with anyone else. Expats can find themselves feeling very alone in the midst of these very big crowds.

Ancient and postmodern architecture coexist happily in Shanghai.





For Review only



Personal space takes on a new meaning in Shanghai where crowds can become overwhelming at times.

I remember one day in People's Square, a Chinese woman passed by me with her skirt hitched up into the top of her underwear, exposing her entire backside. I hurried over to her (with my too wide American smile) and reached out to help fix her skirt. She leapt away from me as if I were wielding a machete. When she realized my intent, she thanked me, but she also looked stunned that a stranger—and a foreigner at that—would make such a gesture. In my ignorance of Chinese culture, perhaps I did not realize that the concept of face would compel many Chinese to simply avoid calling attention to the situation.

My daughters like to point out that Westerners encounter a completely different sense of personal space in China. On the one hand, there is very little of it, which people accept. On the other, intruding into those small spaces in unfamiliar

ways (especially if you are a stranger) can send shock waves through the recipient. Expats in Shanghai can behave in the same way. Since there are very few Westerners, you might expect a knowing nod every now and then. But I sometimes think expats who *live* in Shanghai show they *belong* in Shanghai by also avoiding eye contact with strangers. Some of this may just be a function of big city life. Traveling in China's rural provinces often revealed a completely different sense of space. People smiled more.

Although China is loath to admit it (and it is still a rare sight) homelessness does occur in Shanghai. Social division accounts for much of the incongruity of the city. The same class distinctions on display in San Francisco, Paris, or Bangkok are apparent in Shanghai too. Extreme wealth and dire poverty co-exist, even inside Communist China. In places



Crowds swarm through the Yu Garden Bazaar during the holiday season.

frequented by foreigners, beggars are more common than in Chinese residential areas. Sometimes disabled children or adults are placed conspicuously on sidewalks by family members. Immigration from rural provinces contributes further to the sense that Shanghai is a city where a traditional culture abuts the postmodern. So much of China's poverty is still agriculturally based and subsists in the rural provinces making up the bulk of China's Western geography. While social mobility has increased exponentially in recent years, it does not touch everyone. Social class, as well as a compelling sense of limited opportunity, drives much of the competition in current Chinese society.

While the well-heeled shuttle their children to school in BMWs, Chinese workers who pick up the daily litter (left behind in a culture that does not spurn littering) wear brightly colored uniforms that mark their place in the world like spike tape on a theater stage. Shanghai has an entire municipal workforce dedicated to a sole performance—hand sweeping



A more laid-back, charming side of the city lies behind all that jazz that foreigners usually see.

its sidewalks. The blue uniforms these employees wear serve very much as social markers. Those who sweep the streets for a living in Shanghai are likely to perform that singular job for a very long time. Crossing paths daily with these laborers are swanky corporate CEOs, managers of high-tech firms, and the many young Shanghainese who now fill offices in the city's high-rise buildings. Income inequality visits its vagaries on communist and capitalist alike.

There are days, visually, when Shanghai streets can feel like the streets of Paris, until you catch a glance at the people milling around. The city sometimes feels at odds with itself, and I have had wildly contrasting emotional experiences living there: entrapment and freedom, simplicity and complexity,



A man unloads his cabbages to prepare for business.

sublime and profane, and finally, the artful and the ordinary, which every city boasts. Decide for yourself what is what. Contrast—that is life in Shanghai.

FIRST NIGHT IN SHANGHAI

In the summer of 2014, much to our trepidation and surprise, my family of four was boarding a plane in Seattle, destined for Shanghai, China. Surely, we had some inkling that we were flying headlong into the greatest culture shock of our lives—but that didn't protect us from the effects. My husband and I had visited Shanghai for a scant three days the previous autumn for his executive interview at a large international school.

Like many potential executive hires in Shanghai, we were billeted in a fancy five-star hotel, chauffeured around by drivers, wined and dined at expensive restaurants, and shown townhouses and apartments in expat compounds. We were awed by the dazzling nighttime skyline of Pudong, and thrilled by the lights of its soaring towers, their tops obscured by low autumn clouds. In the whirlwind of the recruitment trip, everything felt like an adventure, but the brevity of the visit offered little time for us to imagine what family life in Shanghai would realistically entail.

At least we had some idea of what to expect. Our two teenage daughters, ages 13 and 16 at the time, did not. When my husband accepted the position, our transition, difficult as it was, was made easier with the knowledge that our daughters had a guaranteed spot in his school, where I would also teach English. For him, the move was a logical next step in a long educational career; for the girls and I, more like a leap of faith. I wish I could report that our adventure was an unflagging success at every turn, but that would be

untrue. My youngest daughter told me later she had once considered running away! The People's Republic of China can be a challenging country for naive foreigners, doubly so for those with older children in tow.

I can still vividly recall that first sweltering July evening when we arrived in Shanghai. We were shuttled from the airport to a townhouse furnished with the bare essentials. We looked around our new home, hoisted our three bags of luggage apiece up an endless staircase, and breathed a sigh of exhaustion. Our daughters quickly retreated to their new bedrooms while my husband and I sat on the sofa somewhat stunned by our situation. Our personal belongings wouldn't arrive for another three months—the shipments of all foreigners will fall victim to the procedural red tape otherwise known as Chinese customs.

A heartbreaking basket of moldy dragon fruit and rotten nashi pears, along with a note that said “Welcome,” sat front and center on the kitchen table. The air conditioning was broken. The appliances bore labels with indecipherable Chinese characters. We were without cell phone service or Internet access. We each had one blanket and one pillow, hard beds, and no idea where to buy food or how to stock the refrigerator. I'm not exaggerating when I say we wondered on that first night whether we'd made a terrible mistake.

Shortly after our arrival in Shanghai, one colleague, an international educator who had lived all over the world before moving to Shanghai, asked how we were faring with our transition. “Wow,” was my one-word reply. He gave me a knowing smile. “China is one of the most challenging places I've ever lived. It's culturally so *different* from any place I've experienced,” he said. It was not an understatement.

Foreigners, especially Westerners—with families or

without—frequently arrive in Shanghai unprepared to navigate China's restrictive Internet policies, impenetrable bureaucracy, and a transactional culture in which the concept of face determines how much or how little is communicated at any given moment. For all the talk of China's budding openness of the past thirty years, the PRC remains one of the most regulated and authoritarian countries in the world. To top things off, Mandarin, with its 50,000 unique characters and four tonal inflections, is ranked as one of the world's most difficult languages to learn.

One result of culture shock is that foreigners can become too easily ensconced in an “expat bubble,” sidestepping the general hubbub and occasional chaos of life in Shanghai altogether. Avoid that path at all costs! Once you peek underneath the hood and beyond the surface frustrations, you'll find life in Shanghai offers a rich window into a five-thousand-year-old culture that is trying to shape the future at full throttle. Vexing as it sometimes feels, Shanghai is also a thrilling cosmopolitan city that offers a wealth of authentic cultural experiences for families and singletons alike.

About a month before we boarded that plane for Shanghai, a colleague in the States invited us to dinner to meet an old friend of hers—Shanghai's outgoing Consulate General, Robert Griffiths. The dinner provided us a rare opportunity to ask questions about life in the city, and our naivete must have seemed a bit humorous to him at the time. Every now and then, he tempered our impractical expectations with subtle hints of what kind of culture shock we should expect. Among his many comments now etched in my memory is one that still stands out: “Your thirteen-year-old is blonde?” he asked. “Oh, *she* will be an object of curiosity.” We soon learned exactly what he meant.



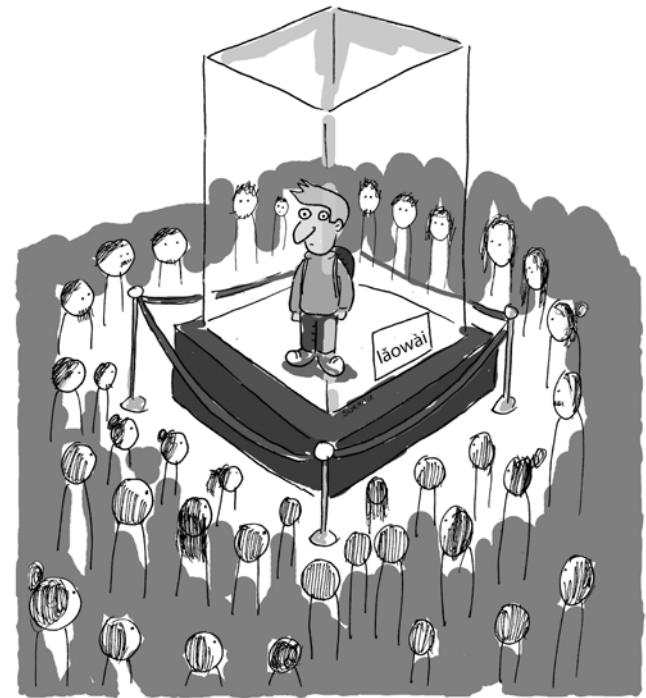
The Chinese frequently make requests to take photographs with Westerners, who are still a relative novelty in present-day Shanghai.

WELCOME TO THE ZOO

"I feel like a zoo animal!"

Needless to say, our towheaded youngest daughter took some time to grow accustomed to the blatant stares, frequent requests to pose for photos with complete strangers, and once, while traveling in rural Yangshuo, multiple requests for her autograph. Those three incisive words we'd heard a few months earlier, "object of curiosity," weren't enough to fully prepare us for the disconcerting feeling that comes from such attention, even in a city as cosmopolitan as Shanghai. Indeed, staring is one of the more notable Chinese habits that turns off many foreigners.

Unlike Vietnam or Thailand, which have aggressively sought tourism and have had regular interactions with foreign travelers for many years, China still experiences the consequences of the Communist retreat after the Cultural Revolution. A surprising number of Chinese citizens have never seen a foreigner. Even in Shanghai—rebel city, Pearl of the Orient, trendy beacon of postmodernism—the foreign community remains enough of a novelty in some areas that you will find yourself stretched in remarkable ways. If you are of Caucasian or African descent, in particular, expect to be the object of intense scrutiny at times. Foreigners of Asian ancestry can expect the shock to begin once they start speaking English or Korean (or whatever their native language might be).



The question to ask isn't whether or not staring is rude in Chinese culture; there is no clear-cut answer to the question. Faces of Caucasian and African ancestry are still unusual for many Chinese, and the first time a Chinese person sees those faces, curiosity prevails. Unlike Western cultures, which attach a stigma of rudeness or malice to staring, Chinese culture sees through a different lens. By Western standards, such behavior is considered insensitive. It's imperative not to apply Western standards to everything in Shanghai. People in China also will stare at anything that seems interesting on the street, including public arguments, which often attract large crowds of onlookers. Allowing a Western lens to guide assumptions about social situations in China only leads to confusion. Enjoy your newfound rock star status for the cultural experience it is, instead of choosing to feel like an outsider.

During that first year, our daughters were stopped on the street to handle photo requests so often that after a while we barely registered the occurrence. Once, on the Bund, a young couple asked to pose individually with each of the girls, and a minute later another couple asked to pose with my daughters sandwiched between them. My kids have posed for photos while shopping for clothing, eating dinner, and strolling down the sidewalk. People in China will often take surreptitious photos of foreigners as well (and foreigners in China should take heed when they, too, take surreptitious photos of the Chinese). Don't be surprised to see cell phones pointed in your direction. For a young honeymooning couple from another province, a photo of you is the evidence they will show to their families that proves they experienced the worldly sophistication and openness of Shanghai.

The best approach to Chinese staring is humor. I've had young children stop and laugh when they see me,

occasionally making circles over their eyes with their thumb and index finger (indicating a round eye). On the Bund and East Nanjing Road, which are popular tourist destinations for Chinese nationals, teachers frequently task groups of visiting school children with finding a foreigner with whom to practice their English. After the first two or three words, typically, "Where are you from," your conversation will likely end. Be generous. Pose for photos with school groups and make a V sign with your fingers for Victory (or peace)—it's a gesture commonly made by young people in China. Another good response is to ask kids to practice counting in English. Demonstrate by showing them that you can count in Mandarin. In short, the best way to react to all this new attention is to offer the universal symbol of friendship: smile and say, "Ni hao!"

THE ASIAN SQUAT

One of the most surprising culture-shock experiences for many Western visitors to China is the prevalence of public squat toilets, many of which lack stall walls and completely eschew privacy. Perhaps it's become less shocking in



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sharol Gauthier has worked as a teacher and writer for a nonprofit organization. In 2014, she moved with her family to Shanghai, where she taught high school English at Shanghai American School, Puxi. While in Shanghai, Sharol created the blog *China Incidentals* where she explored life as an expat in China. In 2019, she returned to the U.S. where she teaches English, podcasting, and Chinese-American literature at an independent school in the greater Seattle area. She continues to travel back to Shanghai regularly.