

To the Far East—and Back

I'm standing in line for one of the dirty bathrooms at the back of a rock 'n' roll venue in Haidian, Beijing's student district. "Hey, I'm in a band," says a Chinese guy who looks like he's just stepped out of a Skid Row video: long feathered hair, black muscle shirt, bleached jeans, double belts (brown and black studded), and motorcycle boots. "You should come see us tomorrow."

That was October 2009. Flash forward a year later and that guy is Ricky Sixx, bassist for Beijing's finest hair metal-slash-glam band, Rustic, and a great friend of mine—I spent my last night in China at his birthday party.

But flash *back* two years from that day in 2009, and I'm sitting at a desk in New York, running a very successful website for a women's magazine. It was a *good* job and a nice life, but I had this feeling that I ought to do something a little more exciting and take advantage of the opportunity to get out of town while I could. I'd always wanted to live overseas and to spend enough time in a foreign country to know what life there is really like.

And so, with a teeny bit of night-class Mandarin and some emails traded with every friend-of-a-friend I could track down in Asia, I started making plans to move to Beijing. I arrived on March 1, 2008 with a sublet in a garish apartment complex well outside the city center (Rome, with golden pillars and statues of Caesar!) and a few vague promises of work.

Getting there was the easy part. Despite my studies, I found all but the most basic Chinese interactions difficult. The shop near my apartment stocked mysterious items—is that white stuff yogurt or milk? Sure, the English-language listings magazines were looking for writers, but it's hard to write about a city you barely know—I once spent an hour wandering around trying to locate a bar that's right between two landmarks, the Drum and Bell Towers.

As the months wore on, without me really trying, I found little bits of familiarity I could latch on to. Beijing's system of bridges, Ring Roads, and inner and outer streets became coherent. I could locate famous restaurants like Li Qun, Chuan Ban, and Dali Courtyard—all hidden down hutongs. I knew the clubs where expats and Chinese hipsters danced till dawn; developed opinions on Chinese indie rock.

I reported on a village in southern China where artists make reproductions of famous artworks and cheap oil paintings that are destined for hotel rooms around the world. I met the volunteers who flocked to Chengdu after the Sichuan earthquake. I published a few posts in *Newsweek's* China blogs, and eventually ended up as the web editor and music editor for *Time Out Beijing*.

I backpacked around the largely Muslim province of Xinjiang, shared yak hot pot with a Tibetan family, and marveled at the castles made of ice blocks in Harbin, up near the border with Russia. Somehow, the leap I took in going overseas turned out better than I could have ever imagined. My life in China didn't

necessarily turn out how I expected—I wanted to move into covering news, but found I kept getting drawn back into writing features—but I wouldn't trade any of it. Though my life overseas wasn't always easy, I did learn more about Chinese culture and language than I ever expected.

In a lot of ways, my recent return to New York has been more challenging than the move that took me to Beijing. People often ask, why did you come back? And it's a harder question to answer because there wasn't a clear-cut reason. I knew that eventually I wanted to return to center-of-the-universe, if-I-can-make-it-there-I-can-make-it-anywhere New York, and that I didn't want to be an expat forever.

But, even in a city as stimulating as New York, it's hard to match the novelty of living in Asia and constantly encountering new flavors, customs, and experiences. The hard part now—the thing I'm still working on—is keeping up the energy and adventure of my overseas life now that I'm back to living and working in New York.

When I went to Beijing, things worked out almost freakishly well. People said it was because I was doing the right thing, and you're rewarded for taking a risk. I'm not very New Agey, but the sentiment was hard to ignore.

These days, things aren't automatically falling into place. It's always been hard finding work in New York—but it's *hard* now. I've had to face the fact that—because rates have dipped and the market has become even more competitive—despite getting better assignments, I'm working as hard and making about the same money at 32 as when I was 22 and just starting out.

Last week, I went to a Mandarin Mondays event, a weekly dinner for people learning the language or Chinese people who want to converse in Mandarin. Back in the city I'd lived in for a decade before moving to Beijing, I marveled at the little Chinese characteristics I picked up on: everyone—including me—passed out business cards like they were candy and swooped in on communal plates of food with chopsticks. And it made me think that maybe, if I work hard enough, I can have the best of both worlds.