



Flexibility is probably the single most valuable character trait for anyone heading to China.

Culture Shock

“Culture Shock” refers to the stress and sense of disorientation we experience when we leave our native country to spend time in another culture. It is experienced to varying degrees by everyone who goes overseas, though the intensity often depends on the length of time away from home. The grace of God and the understanding of ourselves and others that we gain from His Word are a tremendous help and strength, but most of us, nevertheless, will experience culture shock. Knowing what to expect and the reasons behind it can be very helpful.

Most writers describe five stages. Each stage may last from a few weeks to several months.

1. **Honeymoon** – Initial excitement and curiosity
2. **Culture Shock** – The excitement has worn off. You may experience frustration, disorientation, isolation, and anger.
3. **Initial Adjustment** – You begin to feel at home and are able to deal with everyday situations.
4. **Mental Isolation** – You realize the gap between your own attitudes and those of the host country.
5. **Acceptance and Assimilation** – You accept the culture and actually internalize many of the attitudes, operating easily within that framework.

Allow yourself to go through each of these phases and do not be discouraged if you feel you are not moving through the more difficult stages quickly enough.

There are several attitudes that are essential to making a good adjustment into a new culture. Though they have come from the experience of expatriates in many countries, we feel that they are especially appropriate for China:

1. **Willingness to Fail** – Those who go to work in another country are often very motivated, goal-oriented people who have been successful in their endeavors. However, the unfamiliarity of the new culture and the constraints of a new situation and new co-workers invariably make it impossible to meet all the goals you set for yourself. You will not be able to live up to your own performance expectations. It is not that failure is simply to be accepted, but just realize that your self-worth does not depend on your performance. Be patient, and do not be too hard on yourself.
2. **Sense of Humor** – Don't take yourself too seriously. Many circumstances will come up where it will be easy to become overwhelmed or discouraged. When those situations arise, look for a reason to laugh.
3. **Tolerance for Ambiguity** – We cannot underestimate the importance of this point. You will have a million unanswered questions and will often wonder what is going on around you. Relax: it will work out, even if you do not understand.
4. **Flexibility** – This is similar to the point above. Remain flexible in your habits, in your schedules, in your expectations, in everything! For example, the kids from foster homes may not turn up for class due to inclement weather, sickness etc, and you may not find out about this until moments before the class should have begun.

In order to make your cultural adjustment as smooth as possible, keep these additional suggestions in mind:

- Respect the people and the culture of China. Realize that there is a reason for the way things are done. Given the circumstances and values of the culture, their actions make sense.
- Avoid feelings of superiority or assuming that the American (or western) way is best. This can be very subtle, almost without conscious thought.
- Be patient and try to understand. If you find yourself genuinely upset about something, it is probably the result of a misunderstanding. You may feel you are being deliberately mistreated, when in reality there has simply been a miscommunication about instructions or expectations.
- Always remember where your true identity and citizenship lie. It is true that you are not Chinese, but you are not just an American (or other nationality) either. Keep all things in an eternal perspective.
- Keep your sense of purpose. Don't lose sight of your reasons for coming to China. Take the role of a servant and a learner.
- Don't give in to feelings of anxiety or isolation. Become involved with the people and the culture as much as possible.