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By Nathan Kester

## First Day

November 20, 2001 8:00 am

It is a nice partly sunny day, though a bit windy, when I peek through the window blinds with my two fingers just after I woke up. I notice there is something different about the outside: the parking lot is empty. It isn't as full as it used to be. Then I realize something quickly. It is the first day of thanksgiving break and many students have gone home happily after the final exam week. I look around the room there is a big black duffel luggage, fully packed, on the floor and a blue backpack by the wall. Then, I realize I am not going home for thanksgiving as most students are. Instead, I am going to China and there are plane tickets on my desk, waiting to be picked up.

There are six of us who will be going on this trip to China. We are selected as the deaf ambassadors to represent NTID and this is made possible by the foundation named PEN International. The purpose of this trip is to make exchanges with the students we will be meeting in China, as well as the students from Japan who will be delegating too. By meeting each other, we can improve our cultural awareness and to expose ourselves in the future where technology plays an important role. We are joined in a unique network that is consisted of three colleges: Tianjin University of Technology (TUT) in China, Tsukuba College of Technology (TCT) in Japan, and National Technology Institute for the Deaf at RIT in New York. We are considered sister programs to each other because we share similar goals in exposing deaf students to higher education in technology.

Prior to this trip to China, our two faculty members hosted five different meetings with us where we would get acquainted with ourselves, our two interpreters and the faculty members who will be responsible for monitoring this trip. Also in the meetings we learned about the Chinese culture, history, and tips to make this trip as convenient as possible. We also had guest speakers who were enough to come by to offer extra perspectives to this trip and learned some little Chinese sign language we will be using to communicate with the Chinese students. We covered our roles and discussed what are the goals of this trip. On November 20, 2001, we will meet at the Rochester airport where our trip will begin.

At around 10:15 am, I slip my blue backpack around my back and roll out the black suitcase with my plane tickets in my green parka. I drive my black SUV to the K parking lot and walk to the front of Tower A building. There is a van waiting for us where we will be transported to the airport. I warmly greeted Rick Smith who will be our male interpreter for this trip and Justin Drawbaugh who will be my roommate. He and I are the only two male students who represent this group. Shortly after, there is a petite girl named Hillary Hannah coming out of this building. She is carrying a beverage that seems to be her last American beverage ever, at least for a week and half. We all get together in the van and drive to the airport.

After the van took off in front of us, we haul our luggage to the check-in ticket area and I see some familiar faces from our group who have already arrived there before us. I see our male faculty member, Robert Baker, who is already busy talking to the flight operator behind the ticket counter. He is requesting our seats to be changed because we are all assigned to one row of seats. Susan Fischer, another faculty member, is standing there in the line and she looks all ready to go. I remember in one of our meetings that she is a seasoned traveler, already been aboard to Japan a few times and is fluent in several languages. I figure that she will be helpful to us on this trip. Also standing in the line, I see two graduate students, Julie Stewart and Liz Ayers. Julie Stewart is carrying a nice expensive-looking digital camcorder, fastened on her right little palm hand. She will be doing some kind of journal; it could be written, photo, or video journal. Liz Ayers is carrying two kinds of camera in her black Samsung camera case. From the look of that case, she is doing a photo journal. I ask her what kind of camera she has in her black case, she says 5.5 megabits Sony digital camera with 10x zoom and point/shoot Canon camera. It suddenly occurs to me that we are quite equipped with nice technology except for me, I was only carrying disposable one-time camera and black/white composition book in my backpack. A written journal for me. Anyway, I realize they are saying good-byes to their boyfriends who are here too. Actually, Julie Stewart is already married and Liz Ayers is engaged. I wonder if that is the difference between us undergraduate students and them graduate students, of our marital status. I turn my eyes to the person with the most luggage, Aly Kent, and she tells me to be careful with her suitcases when I dump my suitcase next to hers. She said she has just bought those luggage. She is a NTID student majoring in graphic design. With all our luggage lined up, I realize everybody is here. There are six of us, two faculty members, and our two interpreters. We receive our plane tickets back with new seating assignments and board on flight number, NW 2963, departing at 12:30 pm and with a stop in Detroit, Michigan.

### **747-400 Boeing**

There is already a long line of people waiting to get in the airplane by the time we come to the hub after departing in Rochester, NY. We get in the line and have our U.S. blue passports ready. The reality seems to be taking shape as I realize we are really going to Beijing, China. The line is moving forward and a flight attendant glances at my passport, then tears off my boarding ticket, and soon I am boarding on the biggest passenger-carrying aircraft, the 747-400 Boeing. It is most recognizable by its humpback shape. It is capable of carrying up to 524 passengers and can fly without stopping for 8,000 miles. I take a seat in row 31, H, which is an aisle seat on the right side. As I firmly seat, I could see many Chinese people boarding and I wonder if some of them are flying to China for the first time since the revolution or to see their families that they haven't seen for a long time. It is also interesting to see people taking seats



and you could see in their eyes that they pray these empty seats wouldn't be taken so they could have more space to themselves. After a flight attendant announced that the door is officially closed, people either quickly change their seats or try to defend their territory. My brain flashed before me when I remember my old biology class when we watched a video of wolves which they would pee to mark their territory and defend. I guess we all need some kind of space especially if we are going to spend 15 hours straight in a plane.

As I sit, I look at the people who are on the plane with us and I notice that a lot of them are Asians or Chinese. It is my first time to see this many Chinese people on the same plane. It hits me that I also may look like Chinese because I am an Asian who was born in South Korea. I wonder if any one of them would come to me and speak Chinese with me. This is put into a confirmation when an old Chinese lady tap on my shoulder and speaks Chinese language at me. Though clueless what she is saying, I see that she is holding white declaration slip that we need to fill out before entering China. I try to make a clear gesture to her that I don't know any Chinese language and that I'm unable to help her. She moves to the next Chinese-looking person and luckily, that person knows Chinese and is able to help her.

From this experience, something flashes across my mind. I remember I was reading this book, *The Joy Luck Club*, written by Amy Tan. In the last chapter, one young lady was about to visit China for the first time in her life and her twin half-sisters were going to meet her. She was fulfilling a dream that her mother never had a chance to fulfill, which is to see her twin daughters she had to leave in China a long ago but she died. The young lady remembers something what her mother told her. "You are part of Chinese. You always will be Chinese" said her mother. The young daughter refused to succumb to what her mother said and feels she is not Chinese in any way. As an Asian myself, I wonder if I will feel like that when I'm in a place that I'll be like everybody else. Since I was adopted when I was very young, I've lived a large part of my life growing up as the only Asian in my area and I guess in that sense, I have always felt that I'm not an Asian in any way. I only look like one.

Fifteen hours and twenty minutes later, the plane finally decides to touch Earth again and I could feel a big sigh in this thick atmosphere of the plane. My flying experience with the Boeing 747 is over and it is time to enter the world, this time, in the other side of the world---China. I await the experience that is going to be revealed to me in next couple of weeks and I look forward to the experience.

Our first traveling crisis nearly happens when Liz Ayers forgets her U.S. passport and her flight ticket in the plane as we are standing in a customs checking line. We are showing our blue US passports to stoic-looking Chinese inspectors in military uniforms, Liz comes running back from the terminal and her expressions said she has found her passport and plane tickets. After she checks in, we resume our journey and there is a Chinese lady waiting to meet us at the baggage claims area and I find out that she will be our tourist leader that we are going to sightsee

Beijing for the few next days. Her name is Sherry. As soon as we get out of the airport, the first sign that we are really in China is the smell from the air. The smell is the pollution smell and the pollution looks worse than the smog in Los Angeles. If there are any doubts we aren't in China, this would be the first sign that we are in China. We wait for our bus to come pick us where we will be taken to our hotel. I should mention that the hotel we will be staying at is a western-style hotel and that means we'll have normal toilet seat and decent bath. After we get on the bus, I look outside and see all those billboards and of course, they all are in Chinese characters. Even though I don't know any Chinese, I try to make patterns out of the characters and guess what it could mean. We all are tired before we arrived at the hotel and I could see that the jet lag is getting on us and it's 14 hours difference between the United States and China. We have a short conference and agree that we'd meet at 8 am at the lobby for our first sightseeing tour.

### **Tiananmen Square and the Forbidden City**

Our first sightseeing tour is to the Tiananmen square and this is where the infamous event happened when college students decided to make a democracy revolution against the communist government and the soldiers started fire at them. I vaguely remember watching CNN news where they showed the footage of that. There were many people there and they all were screaming and running around. There was blood too. And now, here I am...standing on the largest gathering square in the world. I look out the concrete and its gray concrete gives a ghostly feeling to the square and there is a feeling of emptiness due to its vast area. We all spread around and our tourist leader told us to be back here in 15 minutes. We take pictures and we are fascinated by the Communist soldiers who are standing still behind the Chinese flag. There are four soldiers standing on each side. I try to make eye contact with one of the soldiers and he refuses to look back. There are also other soldiers standing still and they are guarding the government buildings. Our tourist leader told us that we are not allowed to take pictures of those standing soldiers and if we do, they will come to us and take the film out of our camera. As exciting as this seems to be, I couldn't resist but take a picture at one of the soldiers so I ask Liz if she doesn't mind taking a picture of me and the soldier. I stand in an angle that the soldier couldn't really see Liz holding a camera and Liz pretends to take a picture of me behind the memorial but she is actually taking a picture of me and the soldier. The picture is taken and I have this grand picture of the soldier. It was time to go back to the spot where our tourist leader is and then we'll go to the forbidden city.

Before we step inside the forbidden city, there is a famous huge picture of General Mao who led China to a cultural revolution in 1966, which its purpose is to destruct any foreign objects and to revolutionize China. I take a picture of that as well. I'd watch a lot of movies and sometimes, some of them would show the picture of General Mao and it never did cross my mind

that one day I'll be looking directly at the picture and be having private dialogue with Mao right there.

Anyway, we get inside the Forbidden City and it is a magnificent sight. There isn't a place like Forbidden City and I am really fascinated as how those people built the Forbidden City. The reason for that name is because common people are not allowed to be in the city. Only the emperor may live there and his servicemen. As we stroll through the place, I am distinguishing the difference between China and the western world's architecture. I find that Western architecture tends to be closed space, like with many rooms all in one place or under one single roof while in this Chinese architecture, the environment is open and there are separate rooms around. I thought that is the big difference between Chinese and the West. The best part about traveling to other places is being able to be there after you've heard so much about that particular place such as the Forbidden City.

## **The Great Wall**

On the way to the Great Wall, Sherry is telling us a little about the history of the Great Wall. It was built to prevent invaders, notably the Mongols, from entering China. I ask her if it was really worth the effort to build the wall because that wall seems easy to be climbed over. I was thinking of this movie where they show a person escaping from Alcatraz and if anyone could escape from Alcatraz, anyone could climb over this wall easily. The lady simply understands my point of the question and she answers that the land itself is very rugged and rocky. The Mongols would be already worn out by dragging themselves on those terrains and by the time they reach the wall, they'd be so worn out that they decided to turn back and go home. What she said actually makes sense and for me, it seems hard to believe and that's only because we are riding in a nice luxury bus, rolling on those smooth blacktop highway, on our way to the Great Wall. It is like taking the yellow brick road to the Emerald City in "Wizard of Oz".

The Great Wall is the only man-made architecture that can be seen from the outer space, as confirmed by astronauts. The wall is 4,600 miles long, 25 feet wide, and 20 to 30 feet tall. Those numbers may not seem that much important to you but when I get on top of the Great Wall, I couldn't even begin to describe the Great Wall. It's beyond than certain measurements and they don't justify the Great Wall fully. To me, the Great Wall looks infinite and the rolling wall never seems to stop. Its long line looks like the shape of snake. I keep looking at the Great Wall, and slowly it transforms to something else. I am reminded by what the tourist lady said, that thousands of Chinese workers have died from building this wall and to them, it was like a fatal construction to them as they knew that one little slip while carrying a large block of rock would mean death to them, however, they continued to build the wall and valiantly protect their nation, China.



Suddenly, it has come to me that this Great Wall actually represents the characteristics of what Chinese people are. I remember the blank expression on their faces when we arrived in the airport and that their expression would stay exactly the same. They know they have gone through so much and many countries have tried to invade China but never did succeed. Sherry took pride in telling this story about that. Their persistence to stay in the country has brought them to be the largest country population, with over one billion people and they have the second largest land area, next to Russia. If they have not built the Great Wall and let other foreigners come in, China would be broken into different boundaries and will be no longer the country we know today.

After the Chinese people built the Great Wall to keep the invaders away, later, the Great Wall was actually abandoned and ignored as Chinese people have internal problems and the Great Wall was slowly deteriorating and was not kept maintained. Ironically, It was told that the Great Wall would still remain in scatters if it was not for foreign tourists who want to see the Great Wall and the tourists keep visiting China to see the Great Wall. Because of this, China decided to form a project to renovate the Great Wall of China and made some parts of the Wall an area for tourists to view.

Before I reach the Great Wall, I imagine that most of the people who are visiting the Great Wall would be foreigners----white-looking people but I was wrong about that. There are actually many Chinese people visiting the Great Wall, far more than the foreigners. That's one of the things I learned upon my visit to the Great Wall. At noon, it is time to meet the tourist lady at the bus and as we all get into the bus, my eyes are kept fixed on the sight of the Great Wall and it slowly disappears in my eyes as the bus pulls away.

## **Tianjin University of Technology**

After the first five days of sightseeing in Beijing and learning the culture of China, it is time to switch our hats from ordinary foreign travelers to deaf ambassadors. Our ambassadorship begins when a group of Japanese students arrived at the hotel where the bus was. Time is getting short and we actually do introductions while we are in the bus. Some of us get energized by this fresh group as we are getting bored of each other for five days straight. There are two girls and one boy. They just have flown in from Japan.

Once we get out of Beijing, the sight before me completely changed. There are no longer skyscrapers or huge apartment buildings outside the bus windows nor there are many bicycles or

decade-old cars. It is a rural, plain-looking, farming land. Occasionally, there would be some old men standing next to mules with their eyes seemingly staring at us. However, in a few hours, the sight changes back similarly to Beijing but I could tell immediately that Tianjin isn't as big as Beijing.

Our noses are practically against on the bus windows when we are soon approaching the campus of Tianjin University of Technology. The campus looks small and somewhat isn't as clean as RIT campus is. The bus stops under the dim light pole and the engine is finally killed. We pick up our luggage and I think some of us actually hold our breaths when we get into the international building---knowing that we won't have the same luxury as we did at the western style hotel back in Beijing. Then we have a short orientation meeting and the guy who is working at the international house tells us that hot water will be only available between 7 am and 11 am. We'll have Chinese dishes three times a day: breakfast, lunch, and dinner. After the orientation is over, we go down to have dinner and the dinner is pretty much the same what we ate in Beijing. Then, we are told to go up to the conference room and when we get into the conference room, there are more than 10 Chinese students waiting behind the big table. We are all overwhelmed by this as we didn't expect to meet Chinese students there. The Vice President of TUT makes an announcement and right after he was finished with his announcement, we immediately move over to each other and begin communicating.

### **Three countries, three sign languages.**

I remember one time way back in my high school and we were learning about the deaf culture. One of the main issues in deaf culture is that whether ASL is a language itself. We read about this guy named William Stoke who was a linguist and he proved that ASL is a language since it meets the full criteria of linguistics phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics and use of language to be classified a fully developed language. I thought that was fascinating and it made me think more of our ASL language and how unique the language is. It wasn't until I was in China that I'm fully convinced that ASL is a language.

In the conference room, there are three different countries, three different cultures and three different sign languages. You can only imagine the frenzy that may cause. I begin to talk with two Chinese students and without thinking, we begin to sign our language---ASL and CSL. Of course, we couldn't understand each other and I think that is the first real proof that we're really from different countries with different languages. Then, we pause for a while and not really using ASL, I gesture if they have a paper and a pen. They did and I wrote if they know English language. Then two Chinese students nod their heads and say they know little English. We began to communicate in English---beginning with our names. After we've comfortably introduced ourselves, we re-focus on our sign language and try to learn. I teach them how to sign



“what is your name” and vice versa. We repeat that a few times, making sure we’ll remember because I’ll be asking other Chinese students for their names and they will do the same to my other ambassadors. Then we move on learning how to fingerspell in alphabets. CSL has different hand shapes than ASL does while JSL is similar to ASL since it borrows from ASL. Numbers are also different in hand signs and I didn’t realize how difficult it is able to learn CSL. With this new experience, I understood how hearing people or non-signers must feel when they’re learning ASL for the first time and I used to think I couldn’t believe how hard it can be for them to learn ASL since it’s so natural to me. So, I find myself in the same shoes when I begin to learn CSL and JSL too. I make an effort to learn CSL since I’m in China and it would make a nice gesture to the Chinese students that I am eager to learn CSL. I think in about three days later, I was beginning to pick up CSL nicely and the more I interact with Chinese students, the more I’m able to learn CSL. I learn that you do not need to know Chinese language itself in order to be able to sign CSL. In the past, I’ve thought that deaf people need to know English before they’re able to learn ASL. That explains that deaf people have a tendency to be weak in English since they can learn ASL without knowing English first. On the last night before it was time to go back to the United States, I could almost construct a full sentence in CSL without having asked them what’s the sign for that particular word. I feel if I was given more time, like maybe a month to two months of staying in China, I can sign more fully in CSL. It was a great experience learning two different sign languages.

### **Deaf Ambassador**

What I learned by being an ambassador is that you must be open-minded first. If you aren’t, you are blocking yourself from learning something from other countries. Secondly, I learned that patience is very important in this as we all have different communication and it can be very hard to communicate with them. Thirdly, is your attitude and how you present yourself to them. You have to remember how you want to project yourself---- as friendly, easy-going, or snob, hard-to-get as you are constantly making contact with them. One of the other things of being an ambassador is that you represent your country. People are going to look at you as a walking artifact for them---your manner, your tradition, your language and even your fashion.

At first, I was concerned about my role as deaf ambassador because I’m an Asian myself and I wonder if they’re going to look at me as an American or as an Asian who is like one of them. After a few days of interacting with the Chinese students and Japanese students, I become more convinced that I’m an American more than ever. English language was our bridge to each other since all of us know English and when we get stuck with what we want to say, we refer to English language and try to understand each other and once we’re acquired that meaning, we continue learning new sign language from each other. Liz Ayers may have the stereotype image of an American---ivory pale face, tall, and hair blonde. Chinese people practically flocked to her and

even asked her to take pictures with them. You have to understand that there are over 1 billion Chinese people and it's rare for them to see a white girl like that. Justin Drawbaugh was also the popular one since he's a white too and it's natural for Chinese students to flock him. I realize I have a question and I ask what is an American? What does it take to be an American? Is it where you live, how you look, how you act, or who you are? The first time I walked into the conference room, the Chinese students asked me if I'm an American.

On Thursday, November 19, it is our last day together after five days and we have gift ceremony. Chinese students give us very nice gifts and we exchange gifts with them. Soon, we are already busy scribbling down on our notepads for our mailing address and email address. I see two familiar-looking Chinese students and they are the ones who took me to visit their dorms last night which wasn't really part of our ambassador's schedule. I told them that I'd like to see where they lived and get an idea of where they live. They knew that they don't have the same luxury as we do but they understand that we're here as deaf ambassadors and wanted to learn about their cultures. When I entered their dorm, I found their dorm not that much different from ours. They have four bunk beds in each room and they even have a computer in their room. I saw some clothes hanging on a wire line and I realized that they don't have laundry machine and they had to wash their clothes with their own hands. While some of us may have a personal TV., a playstation, or stereo system, they have nothing but some textbooks and chess games. I learned something from that experience. It wasn't the matter of living condition we have between us, it was our personal luxury that set us apart. I told the Chinese students that they're more disciplined than we are and that they can do anything they want to be. They just need opportunities to prosper. They said they already know that and no need for me saying that.

As we continue to talk, we no longer looked at each other as Asians. They asked me questions what is it like to live in the United States and if we have same faculty. I saw in their eyes that they very much want to be successful but they knew it'd be hard because of the oppression they feel from the communist government. Our time was coming to an end and soon we'd have to say good-byes to each other. At our parting, we hugged each other and promised that we'd try to write letters to each other. At 7:00 am in the morning, it was time to leave Tinjiaun University of Technology and back to the airport in Beijing.

A couple of hours later, as 747-400 Boeing slowly climbed up to a little less than 50,000 feet up in the air with complete darkness outside, I looked at my group's tired faces with their expressions showing that they're ready to go back home and stuff their stomachs with American foods, I looked out the airplane's windows with a little smile on my face---knowing that I've found the greater part of myself. I'm an American who just visited China.