Dating China

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This book is autobiographical. Names have been changed or altered to protect the privacy of the people in this book.

YouTube: Nihaomatilda and Shanghai Singles
For more information go to www.nihaomatilda.com
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第一部分：好时光
PART ONE: Good Times

第一章

Chapter 1: First Impressions

They were waving at me enthusiastically with a laminated sheet of paper that had my name on it, all caps: MATILDA! The two then strangers to me, named Cathy Chen and Norman Ma, had come to Shanghai Pudong Airport's arrivals hall to pick me up on behalf of the school I would work for. Together with the rest of the masses and their suitcases I veered towards the left, past the fence, feeling simultaneously like a VIP and like cattle. After an exhausting flight of 11 long hours I suddenly felt wide awake. I greeted Cathy, who had been sending me various selfies over WeChat so that I would recognize her, with a cheerful *nihao* and shook Norman's hand. Norman predominantly worked for the school as driver and handyman, whereas Cathy was the principal's assistant and did a little bit of everything. Cathy grabbed my arm and pushed my suitcase towards Norman, who dutifully dragged it behind him to his car.

Cathy was a round-faced young woman who had what I later learned would qualify as a dark complexion. She had long, sleek, slightly greasy hair with a fringe that tended to half-cover her face and sometimes got caught in her lip gloss. She wore gray sandals through which only the pinky toe was visible, an ivory white shirt with long, wide sleeves. Cathy carried a sunbrella with her, also ivory white. She opened my car door for me with a joyful smile and then quickly hopped into the front seat next to Norman.

"How was your flight?" asked Cathy once the car got moving. She was munching away on something as we chatted.

"It was okay," I said, wondering what else to say about it. Cathy looked at me expectantly via the rear-view mirror. "They gave me a slip to fill out. *Entry for Aliens*, it said!" I laughed, but Cathy scratched her head with her sticky fingers. No reaction. I tried a different approach.

"On the flight I felt I was abroad already because I was one of only a dozen other *laowai* on board." I said to her, using the Chinese, slightly derogatory term for white-faced foreigners. Cathy laughed out loud and repeated my words back to Norman.

"She said *laowai*!" she said to him excitedly, and to me, "You know this word!"

She seemed impressed. Norman was smiling also and this encouraged me to tell them a little more about the other *laowai* on my flight.

"There was this old, big and sweaty Dutch man sitting next to me and he asked the stewardesses for complementary whisky about every five minutes. By the end of the flight he was sweating whisky!" Cathy seemed confused at this but smiled politely, and I continued to say more, determined to impress Cathy and Norman further.

"It's beautiful here." I said, looking out the car window. Cathy nodded and popped something into her mouth from a plastic bag under her seat. It was a candy, a toffee of some sort, and Cathy chewed away happily with her mouth wide open. In Norman's large white vehicle I felt glamorous. Looking out the car window, I marveled at the bright blue sky that I had expected to be more gray, and gawked at the seemingly infinite rows of identical-looking skyscrapers ahead of us.

"Is that Shanghai's famous TV tower in the distance?" I asked. Cathy grunted in agreement. "Are you from Shanghai, Cathy?"

"Noooo," she answered, surprised at the question, "you know most people in Shanghai are not from Shanghai!" Both Cathy and Norman were from Jiangxi province, she explained. I had no idea where that was and felt ill-prepared, in spite of me having read most of our local library's books about China and having watched hours of China-related shows and documentaries in the months prior to my departure. I had even taken a Chinese course at the University of Twente and taken great care to learn certain phrases by heart, dreaming of being a good immigrant. But now I felt silly because I did not know the names of any of the provinces.

"*Meiwenti*," said Cathy, no problem.

"You'll have to show me on a map sometime," I continued. "Anyway, the Dutch guy said he had a Chinese wife in a different province too. Shanxi? Shaanxi? I forget. He showed me a picture of a lady wearing a red wedding dress. He said that she had never been abroad and that she did not speak English. And then the man disclosed that he does not speak a word of Chinese because it is too difficult to learn."

Cathy finished chewing and shook her head. "Many *laowai* men like that," she almost shouted, "you will see, Matilda."

I asked Cathy what she meant. Meeting the whisky-sweating Dutch man had only made me more resolved to learn Chinese and to counter the stereotypical ideas that Chinese people had of white foreigners. However, I was not quite sure yet what the stereotype was exactly, nor did I know how people like Cathy and Norman felt about people like me, coming from a faraway land for a temporary job, just trying China out for a change. Cathy revealed a bit of this to me.

"*Laowai* man is very popular," she stated, "so so popular. No need to learn Chinese."

"Well, okay. But I am going to try," I replied.

"Okay. You are a special one." Cathy had turned in her seat and looked at me directly as she said this, twice. "You are a special one."

Before we got to my hotel we stopped at a bank, to see if I could open an account. Norman dabbed at his sweaty forehead with a napkin, and went inside on his own, leaving Cathy and myself outside in the blazing sun. An abundance of cars was parked outside the Bank of China, all glistening brightly in the sunlight. On the other side of the six-lane road, which I would learn to carelessly cross on my Mobike only one month later, I saw sky-high apartment buildings with large shopping malls situated behind them. I wondered how far off from the city center we were. We'd been driving for almost one hour and the rows of buildings had only seemed to grow denser. Cathy offered me a candy while we waited – a White Rabbit candy, I saw – a milky yet plasticky toffee.

"Very traditional," ensured Cathy, nodding at me, and so I could not decline the White Rabbits. My mouth was dry and I had a hard time swallowing the candy. Meanwhile Cathy was having a hard time opening her sunbrella, and once she finally managed she gave me a long, silent stare. Then Cathy grabbed my arm. She began to stroke my lower arm with her hands like my arm was a pet, and I could not help but notice her dirty fingernails.

"Your skin is beautiful," she said in a serious tone, and added, "white."

Then, Norman emerged from the bank's entrance with two bottles of water in hand, ending the awkward moment for me. He said we had received free water, but no further luck. I would only be able to open a Chinese bank account once I had a Chinese phone number.

"*Meibanfa*," said Norman, shrugging his shoulders. No solution.

Later, when I was on a mission with Cathy to get a Chinese phone and number, opening a bank account for the *laowai* appeared to be quite the catch-22: as a foreigner, I was not allowed to purchase a phone with a plan if I had no Chinese bank account. But as a foreigner, I could not open a bank account without first having a Chinese phone number. There was a lot of heated debate in Chinese about my situation, that I did not understand except for the occasional *meibanfa.* Nobody explained what was going on.

"Don't worry," Cathy kept saying to me inside the phone shop, but she shouted at the staff so much that I was definitely getting worried. Finally, I handed Cathy all of my personal details and she pretended to pay for my phone for me as a gift, and I found myself indebted to her. There was no way I could have done this without help. On top of that, I felt like she knew everything about me, and I knew nothing about her. Not even her Chinese name.

Selfies and Scams

Upon arrival at my hotel, Wujiaochang's Holiday Inn, I felt free. Norman and Cathy had left me alone for the rest of the day and I felt I could finally breathe. I was planning to run some errands on my own and explore the area. I grabbed a bag and took my passport and some cash money with me and left the air-conditioned hotel lobby in a giddy rush.

Outside, I was hit in the face by a wall of heat. It was not sunny but terribly hot and humid, typical for Shanghai's August, also known as typhoon season. The hotel was surrounded by large and busy roads full of traffic, traffic police, and street cleaners wearing blue coveralls. The exhaust fumes made me cough. There was honking, talking, and shouting, and even the traffic lights spoke Chinese. A robot voice

told people, “Red light, don’t cross!” Many people jaywalked, especially on the smaller streets. People ignored the traffic lights and police and strolled in front of each other’s feet. Bikes and scooters stopped in the middle of the road. An elderly lady was selling popcorn at a street corner, smiling a toothless smile. A taxi driver shouted something at her, loudly cleared his throat, and spat out his window.

I walked my sandaled feet towards the nearest metro station, Guoquan Road. The pavement was not well-maintained and I had to mind my every step. I passed fruit sellers and tobacco shops and at least two Family Marts. The pavement was filled with yellow and orange shared bikes: Ofo bikes and Mobikes, their competitors. I passed the happy popcorn lady without teeth. I passed various small restaurants where people were queuing up for an early dinner or a snack. Fried dough sticks and dumplings and buns with meat-filling were advertised and the smells made my mouth water. I passed a fruit store that was loudly playing *Linkin Park*, and I crossed the street when the light was green. Then I went down some escalators to the metro station, where I bought a purple plastic travel card that I could top up again later. Before I got to the metro I had to put myself and my bag through separate security scanners. Ahead of me, a Chinese couple with a child kept on walking, ignoring the lady next to the scanning machine who angrily yelled something after them. I smiled at this lady and said *nihao*, and was met with a suspicious stare.

Downstairs, the metro arrived in a matter of seconds. To my surprise it was not crowded inside and I could sit down on the shiny plastic bench. People did not stare at me but at their phones. Some people wore black face masks, which I had not seen before, and others wore hats with glitter and studs. Perhaps I felt a little alien after all. I studied the

people and also the various metro stops of line 10, and decided to get off at Yu Gardens. The closer we got to the city center, the more crowded the metro became. There were no more seats now so that the majority of the people had to stand. Arriving at Yu Gardens, a bunch of people pushed themselves into the metro carriage before I could get a chance to move past them and get off. I managed to squeeze through and exit just in time, pushing a young woman who was engrossed in her phone out of my way. I thought I might have been rude and said sorry, but noticed that she did not even look up from her screen.

Upstairs and outside, I could clearly see the television tower from Yu Gardens, as well as the famous Shanghai Tower. However, I did not understand how to get to the gardens and did not have a Chinese phone yet with GPS or even internet. Instead, I decided to just walk towards the famous waterside with its skyline of glorious towers, known as *the Bund*. I walked alongside the Huangpu River, past an old couple sitting calmly on a bench. They stared into nothingness together and did not seem to notice my presence. They were locals, used to seeing *laowai*. But the closer I got to the Bund, the more tourists I came across. On the riverside, Chinese families walked hand in hand. Small children were holding on to their parents as well as to numerous colorful balloons. Some carried sausages on sticks. A woman wearing a large, red wedding dress posed in front of the skyline. Family members were moving her veil up and down, to make it look like the wind, while the newlywed groom smoked his cigarette behind the photographer. I felt myself staring at them and blushed.

I took some pictures of the buildings on the other side of the water that formed the business district called Lujiazui. I recognized a building that resembled a bottle opener, which contained a fancy

hotel and several restaurants on its top floors. I admired a globe-like building, and fell in love with the glittering pink television tower. I was determined to take the ferry, about which I had seen a YouTube video, to the other side of the water to examine it up close. I leaned back to take a selfie with the skyline and suddenly felt a hand on my shoulder. I looked up, surprised to see a young Chinese woman wearing a long white sleeved shirt underneath her denim dress.

"Shall I take your photo?" she offered. She was alone and did not seem dangerous, so I handed her my phone.

"*Xiexie*," I said, taking a step back and posing with a hand on my hip.

"Waa, your Chinese is so good!" the woman said. She snapped a couple of pictures and, when she handed me my phone back, asked whether I wanted to go have tea with her.

"I know a nice teahouse nearby, is for tourists." Her red lips smiled nervously, and I politely declined.

"Are you sure?" she asked. "We are both alone, we can have fun." I shook my head and started to walk away. I suspected that I had prevented myself from getting *teahouse-scammed*. I'd seen videos about this, too, on YouTube, but was surprised to find that foreign women like myself made for potential victims also. I had assumed that only white men with *Yellow Fever* were lured into tea houses. This 'fever' is not a disease, but refers to an obsession with Asian ladies. That many white guys suffer from *Yellow Fever* is apparently no secret to the Chinese, which is why Chinese women are often used as bait for a scam.

I half-heartedly waved goodbye at the woman, but she did not wave back and turned around quickly. I glanced over my shoulder one last time and saw that she had already moved on to approach a white male with a manbun. I felt pretty clever, feeling certain I had escaped the teahouse scam, which typically goes

as follows: a Chinese woman anywhere from twenty to forty years old walks around a touristy area of town. In Beijing this could be the Forbidden City, and in Shanghai this would be Yu Gardens or the Bund. The Chinese woman, who pretends to also be a tourist, then walks up to a *laowai* who is clearly on his own. She addresses him in English and asks a bunch of questions, such as how long he has been in China, and if he has not been in China for long, then bingo. He's now her prey. She asks the *laowai* what he is doing in China. The answer does not matter, for she reacts to everything with equal enthusiasm. *Waa, English teacher! Waa, America!* She showers the *laowai* with compliments and says his Chinese is so good when he manages a meager *nihao*. She asks about his plans and if he is not busy, suggests they go to a teahouse. She knows a nice teahouse for tourists, but would rather not go alone. The lady convinces the *laowai* to come with her to the teahouse, where her partners in crime are brewing. The partners give the woman and the *laowai* various teas to drink, and chat and laugh along until it is time to leave. Then, the bill arrives. When the *laowai* resorts to paying the bill, this appears to be extremely high. Depending on the scammers, it could be that the *laowai* is threatened and may not leave before he has paid. Sometimes the door is locked. Sometimes the lady plays along and panics, saying she has no money. Although usually no violence is used, this story often ends with a rather broke *laowai*.

When I met my teahouse lady, I had just handed Cathy almost all of my money for future housing and for a phone. I had already put all of my trust and funds into a woman of whom I only knew her made-up first name. The only difference was that Cathy worked for my school. I felt relatively safe trusting her, though simultaneously like I did not have much of a choice. My encounter with the teahouse

lady had made me realize that I could be prey, too. With this on my mind, feeling somewhat financially vulnerable, I stepped onto the ferry to go to the other side of the river, which thankfully cost me only 2 yuan.

House Hunting

Cathy and Norman had promised to help me find a house. This was part of the service provided by the high school that had hired me to come teach English language and literature. They duo picked me up and drove me through the area of Yangpu to check out apartments together.

The first place they showed me was a small apartment in a ramshackle complex. Beige underpants hung from the tree outside it, and an old neighbor eyed us suspiciously through his rusty fence. The living quarters and sleeping quarters were one and the same.

"The last resident was Korean," said Cathy, by means of an explanation. I did not compute, but nodded nevertheless. Back in the car, driving towards apartment number two, Cathy chatted heartily.

"Apartment two must be better. Yes, the first one not so good! I can tell you don't like it!" I was afraid to say anything because I did not know whether what I would see next would be better or worse. I looked out the car window, hoping to recognize anything. Men in blue coveralls were situated at every street corner, gesticulating wildly at pedestrians, cyclists and scooters. The traffic lights, called *hongludeng*, red-green-lights in Chinese, were in service. Yet, people were hired to supervise these crossroads.

"They have government jobs," explained Cathy, who had seen me looking at them in wonder. We were

stuck in traffic half the time, but finally arrived at appartement number two.

"Apartment two is a little farther from school," explained Norman. It would be a half an hour walk, and there was no metro stop nearby. However, Huangxing Park was right there and according to Norman there was a lot of fun to be had around this area. To confirm this story, he pointed out a group of dancing ladies on the square in front of the apartment complex. Music blared from a portable speaker and the ladies, who were all wearing red scarves, danced to it in sync as if they had been practicing for years. Inside apartment number two we met the previous owner, who resembled the ladies outside in age as well as in attire: she wore a colorful scarf around her neck, too. She held a dust cloth in her hand.

"She just clean," explained Cathy. This apartment was even smaller than the first, and strongly resembled a hotel room. There was no living room and no kitchen, only a separate bathroom, and there was a small balcony facing the square with the dancing ladies. The furniture looked brand new. I could move in right away. Yet I was hoping that Cathy and Norman could maybe show me someplace else.

"You did not like it," stated Cathy once we were back in the car.

"Yes, the second one not so good. Too small, right?" I was hesitant to reply. I looked out the car window and suddenly recognized my hotel and the Family Mart next to it. We stopped so that Cathy could buy a snack there, and she returned with a steamed bun with meat inside it wrapped in plastic foil. We crossed the road to a building on the other side.

We walked into a large apartment complex which had a shiny, golden number 66 on its outside wall. Inside we were met by two young estate agents who wanted to take it from here. Apparently this had been arranged. Stepping into the cool lobby, I said in

my best Chinese that it was *bloody hot* out. The young real estate agents clapped for me. The youngest of the two did not seem a day older than fifteen. The older agent was perhaps twenty. They started a conversation with Cathy, who was scrumptiously eating her bun, and I followed them all into the elevator.

We stopped at the fourth floor, where a man with a lit cigarette in his hand pushed himself inside before we could get out, reminding me of my first metro experience. I also remembered that number four is an unlucky number in China, like number thirteen in the West, because the pronunciation of four in Chinese sounds like death. I hoped that this might mean that I could get a discount. We walked towards a wooden door, which was decorated with red and golden roosters for Chinese New Year. That had been seven months ago.

"Year of the rooster," mumbled Cathy as the door opened. We were greeted by a young lady who wore short hair and an even shorter skirt. Behind her was a golden retriever, baking in the sun on a rooftop terrace. The apartment smelled of dogs. The television was on, showing a Chinese dating show. The apartment had a kitchen, a bathroom, a bedroom, and that roof terrace. I felt like I had won the lottery, but I also felt like the current resident was not about to move. The place was littered with books, bottles, pillows, and laundry. After some awkward smiling and trying to hear what was being said about me over the noise produced by *If You Are The One* we left in what seemed like a rush.

"This is the one right? I can tell you like it!" beamed Cathy once we were outside.

"Indeed, nice place," I muttered, and asked when I could possibly move in.

"Tomorrow we sign, the day after you move in," said Norman. He had been talking to the younger real estate agent.

"*Feichang hao*," I said, extremely good.

"You have the best disposition," said Norman, smiling as they dropped me off. That evening Cathy sent me a WeChat message right before bed.

"I love you!" it said, which took me by surprise. I thought it was all rather dramatic and wondered if I had perhaps come across as very different from my foreign colleagues.

The next day I was picked up by Cathy to come sign the contract. She walked past the Family Mart and got herself a breakfast of pork dim sum, which she shamelessly snacked on during our meeting with the real estate agency. We were seated in a large white room, at a white oval-shaped table. There were five people involved: the landlord, the current resident, a real estate agent, Cathy, and myself. The current resident sat directly opposite me and had put on cat ears for the occasion. She spent most of the meeting fervently typing away on her phone, not looking anyone in the eye. Cathy was on my right, loudly chewing with her mouth open and scribbling down notes with a pencil. Every now and then she showed me a price. Did I want the television? The washing machine? The refrigerator? Yes, yes to everything. There was lots of talking in Chinese and I felt completely excluded from the conversation. At the end, Cathy showed me a number: 30,000 yuan. Almost 4,000 euros. I was shocked.

"You pay for three months each time, and you pay the furniture now, and also deposit," explained Cathy, still chewing. I wanted to pay less, especially because I had no bank account yet, nor a working phone number, but there was no other way.

The agency wanted the sum in cash, the same day. I panicked as the conversation continued without

me understanding a word. Cathy offered to arrange something with the school: they could deduct some of my salary for the next couple of months so that I could pay the 30k now. Feeling like I had no choice whatsoever, I agreed and proceeded by taking out all of my money from a nearby ATM, which luckily accepted my Dutch bank card. Apart from a few 100 yuan notes that I tucked away in my bra, I handed the agency all of my money in thick red wads. I had never seen this much money in my life before and felt a little like I had become part of some dodgy drug deal. The school indeed deduced money from my salary those first few months, and that was that. No fourth floor discount for me.

I was not sure whether I was scammed by the real estate agency, the landlord, or Cathy, or all of the above. I did find out that within the next few weeks, Cathy had lost my copy of the rental agreement, as well as an American colleague's labor contract. Cathy was fired before my probation time was over.

Guoshun Lu 66

One day before my first classes I got to move into my new place otherwise known as Guoshun Lu 66, fourth floor, apartment number two. The room was left dirtier than I had hoped: the doorknobs were sticky, there was cat litter everywhere plus dog hair and dog smell. Especially the pinkish couch, which the landlord would not allow me to replace, reeked of dog. The warmer the apartment, the stinkier the stench coming out of the couch. However, after a thorough clean and a spiritual cleanse with sandalwood incense stolen from a restaurant's bathroom, the place finally started to feel like my own. I bought plants, pillows, a purple kettle and put photos on the walls. I turned the television on in hopes of learning some Chinese from it. I got extra

blankets for my extremely hard bed and bought cat supplies because I intended to adopt some cats.

I did not mind the fourth floor at all because I was one of the few residents with a roof terrace that was just for me. Initially, I felt blessed. However, I appeared to be the only *laowai* living in the complex, and my previous gut feeling about the money situation turned out to be correct. I appeared to be paying twice the rent as the locals. I got *Shanghaied*. My foreign colleagues laughed at me when they heard my story, but I was not unhappy. The Americans all lived near the city center, paid similar amounts of money, and had to share their space with other *laowai*. The only housemates I wanted to have were cats. And none of my colleagues had their own rooftop terrace.

The rooftop terrace turned out to be a curse in disguise. It was nice to be on it during the night, to stare at all the glistening city lights and the towers of Fudan University in the distance. But my neighbors, none of whom seemed to own curtains, could all easily see me from their windows. And I could hear them. Oftentimes, people would leave their windows wide open, and they would shout at each other rather than talk. And I soon found that people dropped things from their windows, also. My upstairs neighbors, for example, clipped their nails outside the window. My first few times outside on the terrace I had to sweep up their thick yellow fingernails. Upon further inspection I saw that there were toenails among the clippings also. They just threw them out the window and I prayed that I would never get those on my head whilst standing outside.

One neighbor, or maybe more than one, threw cigarette butts out their window. Initially, I cleaned those up too, but it happened so frequently that eventually I just brushed them into the corner with a

broom, out of sight. I looked up at the open windows frequently, but I never caught the perpetrator.

Outside the windows, laundry was hung. Laundry that sometimes fell down onto the terrace. In my first few weeks in my Guoshun Lu appartement, I had to pick up lots of laundry that had accidentally tumbled down. Neighbors came a-knocking because their socks had fallen. Neighbors came to collect their dropped towels. Neighbors came to ask if I had seen an undergarment. A woman knocked on my door to ask for her blanket back, and before I could ask her what it looked like, she had stormed into my house and out to the back door to go look for it herself. She sprinted to get it and then took a moment to observe my cat's litter box before she headed back out. One time, a neighbor came knocking at 11pm, and I did not want to answer the door. It was a work night and I was in bed. But the knocking would not stop and got louder and louder, and I finally yanked open the door.

"*Ni zai gansenme*?!" I asked aggressively. What are you doing?! Looking down, I found myself face to face with a quivering old lady.

"*Wo de yifu*," she said, startled. My clothes. I still did not comprehend why this matter could not have waited until the next day, but the lady insisted she come get her bathing suit from my terrace. She seemed disappointed when I told her I'd get it for her, and curiously peeked around the corner into my living room, where I had hung my own laundry to dry. She frowned at my clothing rack and I sensed some disapproval, but there was simply no way I was going to put my laundry outside to dry and have it catch nail clippings in the process.

Later that same week I encountered something that spooked me. There was a large, silvery fish on my balcony, its watery eye staring helplessly at the sky. It was positioned right in front of my balcony door and I almost accidentally stepped on it. It must have been

lying there for some days because it had begun to smell. I had to get rid of the corpse and fast. I wondered whether this strange fish had come from a bird flying over or from a neighbor upstairs. If it had been from a neighbor, how could the fish out the window have been an accident? Was this a bad omen, were the neighbors wishing me ill? Immediately I Google searched whether throwing a fish on a balcony was an effective way of cursing someone in China, but I only learned that you can curse someone by giving them a watch, foreshadowing that their time is up. I was left to wonder, what did throwing garbage onto your local *laowai's* balcony mean?

My *Zhongxue* - my High School

I'd come to Shanghai to be adventurous, to learn more about China and to learn more Chinese, to travel, to eat, and to meet new people. But on paper I had come to Shanghai for the sole purpose of teaching high school English. Before this teaching position, I had taught in the east of the Netherlands as well as in the far north of Canada. In Canada one of my favorite colleagues had been Zhao, a maths teacher. Together with her husband she was one of the very few Asians in the small Canadian town. She had once told me, when we were both helping out with a home economics class, that she did not miss China much – except for the students. I said that I thought the Canadian kids were plenty polite, especially compared to their Dutch counterparts. Zhao laughed heartily at this.

"Oh no," she said, "you should go teach in China if you ever get the chance. You have not experienced good students yet."

Two years later, just as I was contemplating signing up for a Chinese course for fun, Zhao messaged me on Facebook.

“So when are you going to teach in China?” she demanded to know. “You’d love it!”

Coincidentally, that same day I saw teaching positions in China advertised on a Dutch website for education, and I decided to give it a try. Right away I was invited to come in for an interview.

In Amstelveen I met the wife of my future boss, Amanda Cao, who conducted interviews with potential new teachers. I presented my background in education and explained how I thought I would be able to contribute to broadening the horizons of Chinese high school students. After this, I had to take an English test of which the questions contained several mistakes, which I circled with my pen. Amanda Cao never mentioned the circles, but I got the job.

My first week of teaching I walked to school each day, as I had not figured out yet how to operate the shared bikes. It was a zig-zaggy and sweaty walk of about twenty minutes, and I came past lots of street vendors and restaurants on the way, as well as many other schools. The school opposite mine held a ceremony every Monday where they would raise the flag to communist songs coming from speakers all over the soccer field. Whenever I peeked through the bushes I could see hundreds of teenagers dressed in uniform, dutifully standing side by side in rows. My high school did not partake in such rituals, as it was advertised as an international school. No student of mine held a foreign passport, however. My school was called international because the students that went there all had the ambition to go to universities abroad after graduation, which meant that they got to follow a different curriculum and different rules than the regular high schools in Shanghai.

My school building had five floors and contained three competing schools. We were situated on the fourth floor. I wondered if my school got a

discount for that. All three schools inside the building made similar promises to the parents of the students that went there: their children would be able to go to prestigious universities after graduation. Therefore, many schools charged astronomically high tuition fees.

In front of the building we had a basketball court. The outside of the building was ugly: it was a square concrete block with paint peeling off from all sides. There was a large fence around the school that would open if you waved at the *baoan*. The *baoan* were the guards, two older Chinese men who were usually smiling, nodding, and smoking a lot. Some *laowai* teachers would sneakily smoke or vape behind the building, out of sight, where heaps of black trash bags were stacked by the cleaning ladies in their blue coveralls. Alongside our school's fence, an elderly man walked backwards every morning. He was meticulous and punctual and I could tell exactly by where in the schoolyard I encountered him in the morning whether I was early, on time, or late. Often, vice principal Crystal Li stood outside the school fence, ready to bark at students and teachers who were late.

"Don't be late! Late again!" she would yell after them. The students wore their gray and blue uniforms and ran up and down the stairs in packs. They were all afraid of her. These students were in grade 11 students, teenagers of about 17 years of age, because our grade 12 was housed in a building nearby where the dormitories were. Our grade 10 stayed all the way out in Qingpu, a suburb of Shanghai.

Because our grade 11 was confined to the fourth floor and we only had five classrooms available, every class had their own room. The classrooms contained sticky plastic chairs and tables that were far too small for teenage bodies. The walls of the classrooms had been decorated by the students themselves. The students always sat in the same room

and the teachers would come by to teach them. Each class was named after a prestigious American university to remind the students of where they were headed. We had classes KENT, MIT, Lincoln, Northwestern and Johns Hopkins, respectively. I would be teaching English to all five.

Together with the other foreign teachers I shared one office space. We were eight teachers altogether, and the office next to ours was shared by eleven Chinese teachers. I had brought enough *stroopwafels* for everyone. When I comradely sought to hand my Chinese colleagues some packets of Dutch cookies, one Chinese colleague called Frank Feng stopped me in my tracks.

"This is not your office, next time you knock," he hissed at me. I took a step back and apologized. A female Chinese colleague came towards me to say something.

"You look like Renée Zellweger," she whispered, grabbing cookies out of my hand. To this day I wonder whether this was meant as a compliment or an insult.

I shared my office with seven foreign men. Men who mostly came from the United States and who, I would soon learn, held interesting beliefs about China and Chinese women. There was no coffee and no canteen to flee to: all we had was our one room, and a hot water machine at the end of the hallway. We had to clock in with our fingerprints and were not allowed to leave the premises until after 5pm. Now that I was discouraged from sitting with the Chinese teachers, I was sentenced to sit with the Americans whenever I was not teaching. Most had completed a bachelor's degree in the subject that they now taught. There was one other English teacher, Nathan Bartley from Boston, who soon became my ally. He invited me to see live music and to join kombucha workshops. He

loved literature and he loved China. On my first day, I handed him some *stroopwafels*.

"Be careful of the *teahouse scam*," he warned me, "when I was new to Shanghai they tricked me into coming with them to a teahouse. They totally took advantage of me not speaking Chinese and it cost me a lot of *qian*, a lot of money. Don't fall for it."

I tried to earnestly frown on the outside while laughing on the inside as I promised Nathan that I would not. I had already escaped one. I had come prepared, I thought to myself smugly.

Nathan's desk was in front of mine, and behind me sat a teacher of psychology named Richard Crowe, from Ohio. After a round of introduction he turned towards me.

"Last year we had an issue with our English teacher, and she just… left. Sorry, there is no curriculum for you," he said apologetically. I swallowed hard but took it as a challenge and, with the help of Nathan, started on a new curriculum.

"Luckily, there is time," Richard assured me, "because the students are not yet at school."

"Really? Do they have a long holiday?"

"No, they have been sent to military camp," Nathan explained, "which is commonplace for Chinese youth to take part in at the beginning of the school year, something from which our so-called international students are not exempt." My jaw dropped as he showed me pictures on his WeChat, forwarded to him by one of the head teachers. Chinese teens in camouflage collectively doing push-ups. No one smiled in the photos. It felt unreal.

On the bright side, vice principal Crystal Li allowed me to order lots of new books, and I told her we needed *Lord of the Flies*, *The Great Gatsby*, and *The Handmaid's Tale*. I could order whichever book I wanted. There seemed to be no censorship, and I somehow felt like I had so much freedom in this

country whereas my future students at military camp seemed to be having the opposite. I was surprised at the amount of trust I got and went ahead with my curriculum, excited for the teaching ahead.

My first classes took place in a dilapidated white shack next to our ugly main building. The Internet did not always function there, nor did the projector. The money that parents spent on this school clearly did not go to teaching materials and appliances.

For the English classes, the groups of students were divided in half, and Nathan would teach one half inside the main building while I would be outside in the shabby building with the other half. I did not mind this, but the students sure did. They felt that heading out towards the white building was reserved for second-class students, especially because they also seemed to suspect that my classes would be of lesser quality than my Bostonian colleague's. On the very first day of school, a student from class Johns Hopkins named Catharina handed me a note from her mother. It said that she wished her daughter to be in the other class, with the American teacher. I was taken aback by this because I had a master's degree proving that I was qualified to teach, unlike any of my American colleagues. But the parents would not take no for an answer. Many Shanghai schools are quick to agree to parents' demands because the parents are customers and the customer is always right. So vice principal Crystal Li immediately saw to it that Catharina was moved to the other class. To my shock and dismay, three other students disappeared from my classes during the first week. More students requested this move, but Nathan's classes were soon pronounced full.

It became clear to me that I had to prove myself as a Dutchwoman teaching English at this school. I devoted myself to creating cool, interactive

literature and grammar classes. I would show them. The very first week of class I had not wanted to give the students any homework, but a student from class KENT complained that Nathan's class *had* gotten homework.

"Won't the other students be way ahead of us soon?" he asked. My jaw dropped to the floor. This was definitely not my usual crowd.

After that first week I always gave my students homework, plus stuff to prepare on the weekends, and I strictly checked that they did it. I quickly learned all of the students' names by heart and never called any student by the wrong name. I would throw in advanced vocabulary on purpose, which in the Netherlands I had learned to avoid. Eagerly the students wrote their new vocabulary down, and I would see it return in their essays, too. I gave them creative group projects to do and would take them outside for a class on the basketball court whenever the projector would not function and the weather was good.

Because Trump was president, I sometimes made fun of the United States in class. I figured that the students and I had in common that we could say what we wanted about Americans. The students loved this and I had them laugh out loud. Searching for more common ground, I would talk to the students during our breaks, about their families, types of tea they enjoyed, and about foods from different provinces.

For fun I once asked what my students' Chinese zodiac sign was. I myself am from the year of the snake, and I was met with another commonality. Almost all of my students were exactly twelve years younger than me, and therefore snakes, also. Only Raffaello from class Northwestern had not raised his hand when I asked who else is a snake. He looked frightened, and I asked him what was up.

"I'm a rabbit!" he exclaimed in a high-pitched voice. Snakes are dangerous and eat rabbits. The entire class burst out laughing.

When in my second month I asked class Johns Hopkins if anyone still wanted to change classes, they shook their heads. In classes KENT and MIT I even magically gained two students. I felt like a winner. *Winner winner, chicken dinner*, as my students would say. This *laowai* was in it to win it.

Pubs and People

The people who lived in my neighborhood, *Yangpu*, came across as curious and not shy at all. They did not shy away from talking to me on my way to school. My neighbors not only regularly knocked on my apartment door asking for things that they had dropped, but also asked me all sorts of questions.

"Are you American?" asked a neighbor in the elevator.

"Do you understand me? See, she does not understand me," yelled a woman carrying a basket with laundry.

"You are a beautiful Russian girl!" a man yelled at me as we accidentally locked eyes when getting our mail. Taxi drivers, too, loved to have a chat, especially after I turned out *not* to be an American. I thought China was amazing and said this out loud, to the taxi drivers' delight. They talked to me about the weather, soccer, and often asked me personal questions.

"Do you have a boyfriend?" and "do you want a Chinese boyfriend?" It seemed that boyfriends and girlfriends were the number one favorite topic. I could practice my Chinese with the drivers, but could also pretend to not speak any when I did not feel like talking about my singledom.

Naturally I wanted to meet new people in Shanghai, but not to date them, per se. Not initially,

anyway. However, because most of my colleagues were white American dudes, and also because it did not seem healthy to me to hang with said colleagues after hours all the time, I went to explore my options of things to do. In my first month in Shanghai I signed up for several *meetups*, independently organized events promoted by a website and an app. Later I would use WeChat to find events, but at first I was only able to use the censored Chinese interwebs, also known as the *Chinese Firewall*.

Soon I came across an interesting event, organized by a woman called Erin Hudie. Drinking beers with Shanghai newcomers in the French concession area. Excited, I got ready to join this event on my first day off that year of the rooster, on the national holiday of October first.

It was still hot and humid out, and my flowery dress stuck to my legs. I had bought this dress the day before at a large shopping mall, where the shop assistant had entered my changing room repeatedly to toss larger sized pieces at me. This annoyed me. The dress I had chosen to try on fit me just right, but the shop assistant begged to differ. I kept the curtain closed with my hands, but the lady insisted and kept tirelessly throwing oversized dresses over the curtain. I wasn't too fond of flower prints, but I was even less fond of ladies uninvitedly entering my changing room. I quickly went and bought the flowery dress, perhaps to prove to the assistant that it did, indeed, fit.

Because flowery was not my usual style and because of the sticky weather, I did not feel particularly charming that day. Tugging at the dress I walked through unknown streets near Jing'an Temple. I could not see the temple anywhere, but I did spot a Dunkin Donuts with a large park behind it. A Chinese man with two dalmatians proudly pranced ahead of me. I noticed how many foreigners there

were in this part of town. I heard French and spotted a man with a baguette under his arm. There were pizza places. There was a German restaurant. Two Russian ladies wearing high heels sat smoking outside it. White men passed me with Chinese women by their sides. Pubs advertised Heineken and Bud light, and restaurants sold hamburgers to citizens of the world. This was clearly a very different part of the city than Wujiaochang, where I lived.

For the first time since my arrival, I entered a bar in Shanghai. Shanghai Beer House, it said outside. Outside there was nobody. It was still early in the day, but inside the bar seemed crowded.

"Are you here for the meetup?" I asked two Chinese women that were standing near the doorway, chatting.

"Yes," said the one with trendy glasses, "what's your name?" Immediately I struck up a conversation with Sera Song, a lawyer who had recently graduated. She was standing upright and was almost a head taller than me. She was holding a drink in one hand and a fancy-looking red purse in the other. She said she was waiting for a seat to free up.

"I'll keep my eyes on the benches, you go get a drink," she suggested. I smiled and went towards the bar, which was located in the back of the room. I walked past people speaking Chinese and people speaking English, but did not see too many blatantly obvious *laowai*. I liked that, I thought maybe I could practice my Chinese later. The bar did not smell like a bar at all, but like an IKEA. Everything seemed new and fresh, including the people present.

I was trying to remember how to order beer in Chinese when a young man came to stand between me and the bar. He wanted to order before me, but his backpack somehow got stuck to my dress. I coughed my teacher's cough.