

## Chapter Zero

Apparently people don't read introductions these days. You should read this one.

This book had simple beginnings. I went to teach in China with my friends Brian Avesta and his wife Jennifer, who had been in Wuhan, central China, for a year, and told me that there was a job going at their university. Having just finished postgraduate studies, but having never taught before (but the uni didn't seem to care), I said yeah OK, it's just a year, so I went for it. This "just a year" turned into eight and a half. Oblivious to this eventuality, I arrived in China on Saturday, August twenty-sixth, 2006, and began writing emails for my family and friends back in Australia. These emails started small, but became behemoths once I started seeing more of this incredibly different and often gorgeous country. My family and friends, encouragingly, told me that my scribblings were entertaining. So I just kept writing.

Eight and a half years later, when I put all the writings together for the first time, it totalled 327,000 words – the average novel is 80,000 – so I had a wee bit of editing to do. That took an extra few years, but, well, the culmination of over thirteen years of writing and editing is now in your hands. I think this book will prove valuable if you come to China with teaching, working, travelling, or trading in mind (and I'm sure it'll give you a few laughs). Let me tell you the reasons for this, because they may be why you choose this book instead of the one sitting next to it on the shelf (believe me, you don't want that one).

One – I knew *absolutely nothing* about China before going there, so, while reading this book, you'll discover the country with me, as I did, as I confronted culture shock, dealt with daily life, learned the language, recognised local customs, explored different cities, ingested the culture (old, new and in between), and devoured my way across an new culinary landscape. Something to instantly note

is that most of what you know about China is *probably completely wrong*. Everything I thought was.

Two – I’m a pretty average Aussie, which means I have DNA from all over Europe, I came from a blue-collar family, had a decent, if unfocussed, education. Also, I’m a great lover of Australian slang and the dry Australian sense of humour, and they’re spattered throughout these pages – so this book is an average Australian’s reaction to street-level life in China.

Three – I didn’t go straight to Beijing or Shanghai. In fact, in terms of a foreigner-friendly city, I arguably began my life in China at the opposite end of the spectrum – Wuhan, in Hubei province. This means that I have a more rounded perspective in terms of accurately describing life here...everyone who just went to Beijing for the Olympics in 2008 saw *nothing* of the “real” China. Me, on the other hand, have seen everything from Hilton-style hotels to communal toilets which are just holes in the ground behind a wall; everything from international cities like Shanghai and Hangzhou, to tiny rural towns with a single dirt street and locals who welcome you as warmly as any family member. I also actively tried as much of the local food wherever I travelled (many foreigners here just run to McDonalds), so this book is useful for more adventurous readers.

And the last reason, a *major* reason, is what might be called *footnotes*, which are all within brackets that look like this “[ ]”, and are in *italics*. Therefore, whenever you see a comment that [*looks like this*], this is a *footnote*. This is *my more experienced reactions to what I wrote earlier*. More specifically, I began writing these writings from 2006, and I started trying to seriously edit them around 2010 or 11. When I reread the originals, I saw that I got a *lot* of things wrong, so these retrospective footnotes have become a real bonus, because you get both my initial reaction *and* time-given retrospect; they’re often *wildly* different.

Divisions between sections alternately look like this - | 鸡 | and | 鸭 |. These are the characters for chicken (*ji*) and duck (*ya*) respectively. Considering the name of this book, I thought this was a nicely appropriate addition to the layout of the book.

In these pages, you'll find China, and also my own story. My plan was to be here for just one year, which reminds me of the quote in the book *The Hitch-Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, "I went for a week, got stuck for fifteen years". This happens to *many* people here, and for a myriad of reasons. China altered my destiny, and, in return, I helped change the destinies, even in small ways, of dozens of my students, which is a wonderful feeling. I hope this book changes the destiny of some people out there. Maybe even yours.