

## 1. Most Memorable Experience/Moment

Having never experienced anything remotely like SEP/TTP, I do not over-exaggerate when I say that everything was memorable: getting used to sticking out like a sore thumb everywhere I walked; the shocking foods sold as snacks (pickled chicken's feet, for one); the craziness of Chinese traffic; the astounding beauty of the countryside surrounding Hongbo and on our journey from Chengdu to Shangri La; eating rice for breakfast, lunch, and dinner; the toilets!; our students singing at the top of their lungs on the train ride from Chengdu to Kunming; the awe-inspiring Buddhist temple that we visited on my last day. But above all, it was my fellow volunteers and the students that stand out the most- the realization that, despite our cultural differences, common threads stitch patterns through all our lives: as students, we study and work hard to better ourselves and carve out our paths; as sons and daughters we are devoted to our families; as teenagers and young adults, we at times feel disaffected and confused about our place in the world; as members of a particular culture, we share and uphold the music, dances, and customs of our people while eagerly leaning about those of others; and as world citizens we remain hopeful for a future that will allow us operate our program without the hardships we had to contend with this summer. My journey began and ended, quite fittingly, with a circle: first, on that sports field in Chengdu, eager to learn everyone's name, and last, singing and dancing my heart out with dear friends in a Shangri La school. Like an unbroken circle, we are forever bound together by our collective struggle, resilience, and ultimate triumph in carrying out our mission this summer.

## 2. What did you expect?

I expected things to operate as had been described to me from past Cornell participants in SEP/TTP: that the program would be housed in Chengdu, in cooperating school facilities located near the hostel where we'd be staying. Classes would run throughout the day, and there would be activities at night and special trips to various sites throughout the city. I expected to be incredibly busy, get little sleep, but still have some time to skype home to my family and friends on occasion. I also expected to be blown away by the students: their dedication to learning English, their beautiful singing, their initial shyness and later confidence, and was told that I would fall in love with these incredible individuals, and that they would be the centerpiece of the entire experience.

## 3. Did the trip meet those expectations?

We had an extraordinarily trying summer, with Murphy's Law hovering over our shoulders most of the time. In most respects, there was no way that we could have been prepared for what happened, and we simply had to respond in the best way we could at the time. In terms of my initial preconceptions about program logistics: well, they flew out the window. None of what any of us had imagined actually happened. Upon hitting the ground in Chengdu, we learned that we wouldn't be staying in the city center, as thought, but that we'd be moving to the outskirts of the city to a vocational school far removed from the sites and surroundings that I had hoped to encounter during the summer. And then, quite unexpectedly, we had to move again, this time to Shangri La. So we were much more itinerant this summer than I thought we'd be, and we "roughed it" a lot more than I anticipated (no showers, restricted food, rustic living conditions, power outages, lack of internet, lack of working phones...).

Yet despite our hardships, I am truly grateful for them because they allowed us, as privileged outsiders, to have gain an authentic insight into what the realities of life are like in China. Having the chance to live humbly in the more impoverished areas of the country lent a legitimacy to our experience that I don't think otherwise would have been there. As I mentioned in my journal during this time:

The view outside of our room was breathtaking, and probably what anchored me and ultimately made me thankful for having this experience, no matter how difficult it was. Our open bathroom window looked out to vibrant green rice paddies, with trees lining the fields. Most mornings I would spot a lone farmer harvesting some of his crop, leaning over to pull at the plants and bunching them into his arms. On our last day there, I noticed two beautiful yellow flowers growing on the wall separating us and the paddies, and I thought "Huh, well that is just so beautiful. Nature still goes on, and there is beauty in every place if you look for it."

In terms of the students, everyone was right- they are the heart of this program. Their dedication, shy smiles, incredible stories, laughter and jokes...I quite honestly don't know how to properly describe their impact on me. All I can say is that when I left, and they walked us out to the taxi, helping to carry our

things and handing me a necklace and letters and crying, that I had never felt a sadness so profound in my entire life. *They* were this program's anchor- through all the trials we faced, we always could find solace in remembering that we were here for them, to help make their lives better in any way we could.

4. Were you surprised by anything that happened?

I was surprised by many, many things that happened during this summer's program, as we all were. The constant moving, the promises made and then backed out on by those we were cooperating with, the chaos of moving so many students from Hongbo to Shangri La, the every-day difficulties endured by these students, and their amazing resilience. I was also surprised by the fact that it took me rather a long time to internalize the gravity of this program, how it is unique, in the purest sense of the word (single, solitary, sole), with no other program in the world bringing together Americans, Canadians, Chinese, and Tibetans within China for humanitarian causes. It took until we were on the train heading from Chengdu to Kunming, seeing the odd looks from fellow passengers, that it struck me how ambitious it is, and how we simply could not be lulled into a sense of security- that what we were attempting to accomplish was inherently difficult, with trials to be expected.

B) Survey:

1. How to improve TTP?
2. Advice to future trip members?

Here's my list of general advice and constructive criticism for the program:

1. Require all volunteers to have cell phones that work in China. Better yet, coordinate this as a group: go into town and buy in bulk together, etc. Keeping track of people was so difficult without them, and in my case, I brought a phone with me that turned out not to work in China at all, so it would have been nice to have some guidance in this.
2. Encourage people to pack lightly- though this probably wouldn't have been an issue if we were based in one spot the whole time.
3. There has to be a contingency plan in place if communication breaks down- when we got to Hongbo and there was no working internet and then when we were told we were moving to Shangri La, I needed to get in touch with my parents and the airline to try to figure out my plans. The only way I was able to do this was by catching an early taxi into Chengdu. There has to be a way for volunteers to contact their families at all times.
4. Need to make it clearer that the end date is flexible, relatively (I would have booked a flight home a couple of days earlier because my graduate program started 1.5 days after arriving back in the states).
5. In general, I would have appreciated more open communication between Machik leaders and volunteers. We undoubtedly had a difficult summer and many issues were unforeseen, but in light of this, I felt left in the dark many times, especially in terms of BIG decisions, such as moving to Shangri La and the move to Hongbo. For example, no one actually sat down and explained why we were moving to Hongbo, all we had heard is that we would be moving there, and for the Cornell group, based on the expectations we had coming into the program, this was quite a shock, and I feel deserved more of an explanation. Further, the explanation eventually given to us when we arrived at Hongbo was not fully transparent or honest. Every volunteer gave up a lot to participate in this program, and deserved to know fully what was going on. In addition, communication was often very disorganized; we'd hear different things from each different staff member. There needs to be some chain of command that is more heavily enforced, so that we know that what we're hearing represents the latest decision. Again, this is where cell phones/texting would help.
6. Need to have some sort of contingency plan for volunteers to get back home safely. Due to my blot clotting concerns, I had a very difficult time coordinating how to get myself out of the country safely...and I actually thought that I would have been left behind for the remainder of the program once the decision was made to travel to Shangri La. None of the core staff helped us in figuring out the logistics of our moves, and I felt that they could have been more accommodating- it took me an entire frantic day to try to figure everything out, and it was a very scary process. Don't just assume that everyone can make the move without having to adjust their travel plans and get in contact with their families.
7. There were a lot of hidden fees: please try to enumerate more of these (vaccine costs are HUGE,

the mandatory physical and doctor's note that we had to get signed cost me \$150!, the cost of all the things we bought for Hongbo, flight switches, the VERY sudden program fee (and I was never quite clear on why the fee was charged in the first place- the explanation given us was essentially that we were all rich enough to afford it, which, as a graduate student supporting myself, simply wasn't true at all).

8. The program needs to be more realistic in the amount of preparation expected of teachers. Machik sent folders with lots of incredibly detailed lesson plans, which seemed to suggest that the students/facilities could handle such intricate lessons. Perhaps this was true in the past, but based on what actually happened, they were very misleading. I spent a ton of time preparing science lessons and only used a couple of them. It'd be nice to have a more realistic idea of what was actually taught in programs past.
9. On that note, take the time to collect lesson plans that volunteers actually used to better reflect the scope of the classes and capabilities of the students. Further, focus much of the preparation on English class. Chelsea, for example, is a wealth of knowledge, and has lots of books and lesson plans that are tailored to teaching Tibetan students English. Why not offer some of this material to volunteers ahead of time?
10. Try to give teachers a better idea of what supplies/classroom facilities will be available. Even sending a picture of a typical Chinese classroom would help.
11. I felt that many of the evening activities weren't the best use of volunteers' time. By the time things got translated through 2-3 languages, it took forever to get the point across. In some cases, things weren't translated into English at all. I think that time could be much better spent in lesson planning and such.
12. Advice for future volunteers:
  - a. BE FLEXIBLE!
  - b. Do not expect to get much sleep, and if you're a light sleeper, good luck.
  - c. Bring a phone that you can call home on reliably.
  - d. Don't bring much with you- carrying around lots of luggage is a nightmare