

What if you hate it here?

Surviving China

By Anns Hooft

So here you are. You thought you had come to China prepared since you followed the rules: you found the perfect home in the right neighborhood, enrolled the children in a reputable international school and signed up for a comprehensive course dealing with Chinese language and culture. Yet you are stressed and absolutely miserable in your new environment.

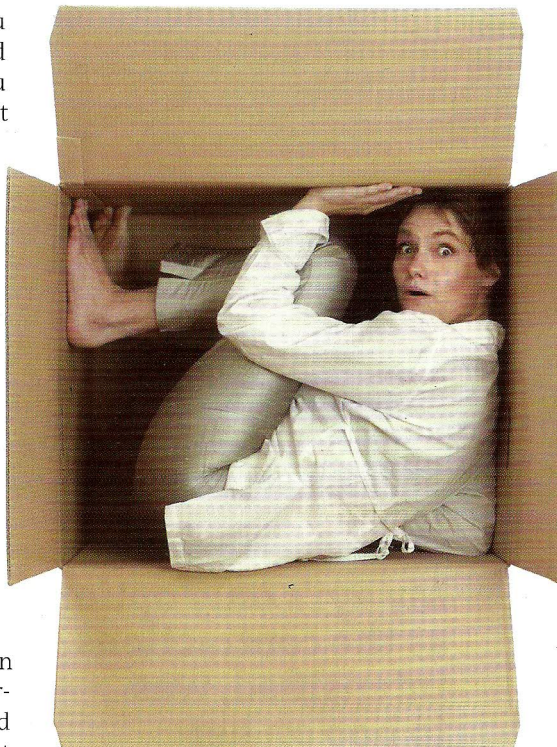
Why? You find communication to be difficult in China – people either smile politely without understanding what you have said, or misunderstand you and become offended. And daily life seems to be even more complicated – you cannot find your favorite products or the right office to deal with your residency registration. And even when you try to adapt to local tastes by ordering a local dish in a restaurant, you find it to be inedible. You ask yourself what on earth you are doing here.

Moving house and country

Moving from one house to another is considered to be one of the most stressful events in a person's life and of course, this stress is magnified when coupled with a move to a new country. Each time we move from one country to another we are obliged to bid adieu to friends, and then create a social network in our new environment. It is natural then, that a move can be accompanied by a number of disconcerting sentiments: a sense of emptiness, a loss of control and even depression. The good news is that it gets easier with time. Well, usually.

Stress

According to experts, stress is not caused by an actual event but rather, it is the result of your reaction to a said event. Some people become extremely upset in the face of a problem, however small, whereas others remain calm because of the way they process their thoughts. For example, you may think it must be like this, it should not be like this, this is a disaster, or I cannot bear this. However, if you



does not fit into our created culture, we might find him to be strange or out of place. But wait, when we arrive in China not only are our norms challenged, but we are now the person who is out of place! Apparently there are different norms and unwritten rules in this part of the world, and that can be a shocking revelation. If you find it important to look each other in the eyes, you can find it very disturbing to have conversations with people who don't look at you. If you believe we should all stick by the traffic rules, you can get upset by a car that nearly runs you over when you are on a zebra crossing. If you come from a very specific and outspoken culture, the use of we can try and maybe can give you an ulcer. And if you come from a culture where people don't touch each other and keep a certain space between them, travelling by metro in the rush hour can be invasive. But who is right and who is wrong, and who has the right to judge?

can challenge these thoughts and see that they are not constructive, you can reframe them to help you feel better.

Culture shock

Many expatriates argue that the culture shock and associated negative thoughts in China can be quite powerful. It is not always easy getting used to a new life in China, especially if you are a person who not only has a strict set of norms of how things should be done but also wants to control how things are done. It is clear that if you feel out of control you will feel stressed. And yes, you are definitely out of control here but take a deep breath and listen – getting angry or frustrated will only make things spiral out of control.

Our (mostly) Western set of norms is acquired throughout our life – from our parents, school, friends and environment – and by the time we reach adulthood we are fairly set in our ways. We often believe that things are supposed to be a certain way and we develop laws and rules to protect our beliefs. When an outsider

The answer to this question lies in your perspective and this process of understanding can be very interesting. Another different perspective has to do with the hierarchy of decision-making. In my second week in China, my landline phone broke, literally. I asked my compound's management office to send someone from the telephone company to fix it. In my mind this was simple but instead, they sent two men from the management office to see what was wrong. These men confirmed that the line was broken and that the telephone company should be contacted. Hadn't I told them that? A bit later, a man from the telephone company came to the house to look at the problem. He established that the line was broken, and that a technician should be contacted. At this point I was furious! An hour later a different man from the telephone company arrived, looked at the broken line, collected his tools and fixed the line. In my Western mind-set, I could not understand why this problem could not have been resolved in one step, but for each of these men, making the correct decision within their clearly defined scope of responsibilities was fundamental