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My great leap forward

Four years ago I sat at my own funeral. It wasn't really, of course, but it felt like it. My close friends and family sat around my mother's living room staring into their drinks. I was leaving for Shanghai in a matter of days to start a year's contract at *China Daily*, China's national English language newspaper. I didn't know a single soul in Shanghai and as I looked around at how miserable I was making the people I loved the most I asked myself, "What the hell am I doing?"

I was secretly terrified about the course of events that I'd set in motion. I had tried to put my mind off it by stocking up on the things a friend said I would not be able to find in China, which boiled down to salt and vinegar crisps and tampons.

But now I was staring down the barrel of the gun. Could I really go through with this? And then a friend said, "How would you feel if it was all taken away from you now?" and I realised that however foolhardy it seemed, I really did want to give it a try.

Seven months prior to that I had been on the Great Wall of China in Gubeikou, north-east of Beijing, with three friends when the idea of finding a job in China hit me. We were doing one of those charity treks where most of the women are over 40 and decked out in matching T-shirts using all the latest hiking gear. The Sherpas meanwhile zoomed up and down the crumbling paths carrying their backpacks wearing simple canvas shoes. For most of the women, it was the "trip of a lifetime". It was billed that way, which seemed so depressing.

I wanted my lifetime to be a trip. It wasn't enough for me to see this kind of thing on holiday. I wanted to experience the unusual.

I didn't want to sign up for the middle-class

suburbia towards which I could see my life creeping. I wanted to be surprised by life. I was 27 and with no ties. The more I thought about it, the fewer reasons there were not to go.

And as it turned out, moving to China was the best decision I ever made. Expats live as if their time abroad could end tomorrow. We all know that we should live for the day but it's a lot harder to do when you're waiting for the South West trains service to Waterloo at Earsfield station at 8am on a cold, drizzly morning.

It's much easier to live to get through the day. But my time in China has been crammed with adventures, great opportunities and incredible experiences. Of course there have been lows too. That's only natural.

To begin with, my biggest challenge was suspending all the working practices to which I was accustomed. Not only was I working for a censored media now, but it was OK to roll into work after 10am, take two-hour lunch breaks and have a nap at your desk when you felt like it.

Stories of envelopes of cash being handed out at press conferences did little to make me feel good about editing the copy that resulted from these dirty liaisons.

Second to that, language difficulties made life a little scary to begin with. For the first few months, I didn't leave the house without a map, a phrase book and dozens of scraps of paper with new vocabulary and crucial addresses written in Chinese for taxi drivers.

One of the scraps read: "Please take this girl to 270 Wuxing Lu". I felt like Paddington Bear.

By the time I could pronounce it I had moved out. Above all, missing important moments in the lives of my friends and relations over my four years in China has been the most difficult part. You don't make

From language difficulties to testing the censors' limits with satire, **Josephine McDermott** looks back on an unforgettable four years in China



friends at university and dream about the day you'll miss their wedding.

And sometimes, when there is only one voice of reason that will make sense of a particular predicament you are in, the hours when you have to wait "for England to wake up" because of the time difference, can seem never-ending.

Whatever the downsides, though, it has been exponentially worth it to have experienced China from the inside at the most important time in its modern history.

For China's coming out party in 2008, the Olympics, I was there in Beijing working for the *China Daily* website.

For its World Exposition in 2010 I was there, in Shanghai, working for Shanghai Television. I've witnessed the emergence of a superpower close up.

Appearing (briefly) on *China's Got Talent* watched by 400 million people, playing sevens rugby in a barbarian side against China's national team and jumping out of an aeroplane in Tokyo count as outstanding moments.

Spending holidays on tropical paradise islands and touring Asian cities with the Shanghai Hairy Crabs rugby club were fantastic experiences I grew accustomed to. But above all, the surprise that I wanted from life I got every single day.

A day doesn't go by in Shanghai where you don't see something that mystifies you. Moments are filled with hundreds of questions.

You are left trying to work out why people are walking backwards in the park; what's so great about dog meat; just how many polystyrene boxes it is physically possible to fit on a scooter; why people are wearing pyjamas in the street; how people can fall asleep on concrete; how it can be acceptable to wear

high-high PVC boots to the office and over 1,000 *Telegraph Expat* blog posts' worth of similar queries.

I have found myself in many ridiculous situations. Some that come to mind include being forced to sing karaoke sober to my Chinese colleagues while eating duck's feet; lying on a beach in Gulangyu while the People's Liberation Army commando crawled past; teaching a reporter to say "Bullock" rather than "Bollock" before saying Sandra's name on live TV; watching as a baffled airport security man inspected my friend's bagpipes at Beijing Airport; miming the type of meat I was looking for at a supermarket complete with sheep noises; going for a Chinese Brazilian (it takes a brave woman); being asked to rewrite the English lyrics for the World Swimming Championships' theme tune five days before the event and using a sink in a shared holiday house where a Chinese family were planning to bleed a live chicken.

I had the chance to work at an English language television channel for two years. The channel has only been running for four years.

I started by correcting headlines and scripts and by the time I left had helped devise a one-of-a-kind satirical news segment shown on television six nights a week.

The brief called for the writing and presenting of something "edgy, topical, humorous and opinionated". But this had to be done within the confines of the state-run channel and the propaganda department. It sounds impossible, doesn't it?

Now, throw in the fact that the director can't speak English and so has no idea what you are saying or when to cut to pictures, and that the job camera being used is almost impossible for the series

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