

Experience Abroad  
Personal Essay

My sister collects snow globes, my cousin collects stickers and my mom collects buffalo nickels. But not me. I collect things that make me giggle, wonder, and even cringe. I collect words. *Pumpnickel. Poikilotherm. Infrastructure.* Whether stealing from a cereal box, my favorite cartoon, or even the news, I grasp onto words that let my mind wrap around fresh sounds: the silkiness of the word tranquil, the crunch of the word crisp, the romance of the word *laundromat*. My shelves may be empty, my stickers books bare, my pockets light, but my head bubbles with crazy combinations of vowels and consonants. Some people simply assemble words into sentences and paragraphs, but my love of words has defined much of my life's journey and helps me further appreciate the world we live in.

I began my most recent word collecting adventure on the bustling streets of a Beijing hutong. The moment I stepped out of the comfortable climate controlled van into the teeming alleyways of this traditional Chinese neighborhood, I was assaulted by blaring bicycle horns and staccato mandarin chatter. *Zuo ba. Xie ni. Zai jian.* The sweltering heat of the Chinese summer and the lack of affordable air-conditioning forces Hutong residents to live their lives outside, visible and audible to anyone who wanders through. As I made my way down the street for the first time, avoiding the growling stray dogs and sizzling woks, I watched shirtless old men crouching in the alleys, screaming at each other over an aggressive game of chess and vendors barking out prices on everything from ancient tea pots to dentures. Navigating the crush of the crowd, I tried to listen to every voice that bombarded me from what seemed to be every direction at once. *Bao zi. Luo ma. Bing hong cha.* My collection grew by the second.

Later that night, as we walked back through the grittiness of the hutong, the smog above us turned dark, and drops began to fall. In a matter of seconds, the clouds unleashed a downpour and we raced through the alley trying to make it back to our hostel before we had to swim there. But, as soon as the rain had reached ankle level, it was obvious that the storm drains had overflowed and our walking path became the sewage's path as well. So on this first night in China, our weary group of students trudged through a filthy soup in the heart of Beijing.

Overcome by dirt and exhaustion, we happily collapsed onto the dingy sofas back at the home of our host mother. She welcomed us with a warm smile, freshly brewed green tea, and the familiar greeting, "*Ni hao ma?*" At first, I was too busy greedily downing my tea to offer any kind of answer. Then, as I tried to arrange the right words in my head, I paused. It was strange, because this wasn't a new phrase to me; in fact, it was the first thing I was ever asked in Chinese, how are you? And from my first days in class I had been captivated by the sound of the answers: *hen hao, bu hao* or *ma ma hu hu*. But in that moment, these three phrases that were once so simple, seemed to take on greater meaning. I looked through the window into the hutong where I'd be living for the next few weeks, at my host's smiling eyes, and down at the brown goo streaming through the perforated holes of my sneakers. Although I was muddy and tired, I wouldn't have wanted to be standing there any other way: ready to take on the challenges that lay ahead, excited to be living in this world which seemed so alien to me, and surprisingly okay with getting dirty.

That night I added the question to my ever-growing collection of words; words that were now about so much more than just sounds. They were about what sprouted from them: the differences in culture I was able to observe, the experiences I learned from and the relationships I formed along the way. They are my souvenirs, memories I can carry with me wherever I go.

I have often been told that so much of life is fleeting, yet I still catch myself smiling every time I say *pumpernickel*. Perhaps what I've been told is true, and the reason I really, deeply love collecting words is that on some level I believe they have the power to connect me with a world outside myself – even if that world offers nothing grander than a sincere, “How are you?”