Week 6 and 7 in China

A Reflection of More Teaching at Zeng Jia Yan and Continuing Adventures in Chongqing

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Monday, April 17th, 2017:

My alarm sounded at six and I got up to have a piece of bread, a banana, and some orange juice for breakfast. I wasn’t feeling nauseous after it, so I decided that I would go to Zeng Jia Yan to teach as originally planned. After confirming my attendance with Ms. Wang via WeChat, I got ready, packed my things, and left the dorms at quarter to eight with Alaura and Michael.

I had never seen the pink line of the subway so packed before. Alaura managed to secure herself a seat, but Michael and I had to stand the entire time. Fortunately, a weekend of rest and medication allowed me to regain the strength to do so. The blue line, also to my astonishment, was much roomier today that I could actually see my own hands (not that I’m complaining or anything). The green line was jam-packed and I was thankful that we did not have to be on it for too long. Any longer cooped up in that humid contraption and another nausea episode would likely be triggered.

We spent our morning in the office, writing our weekly reflections for Dr. Xu and finalizing our lesson plans. We pretty much worked in silence until Michael left to teach his class. Alaura and I continued to do our work, exchanging a few words here and there. Eventually, we pulled away from our work to meet Michael for lunch (chicken, cabbage, cucumber salad, and rice). I ate smaller portions than usual because I did not want to push myself and risk having a vomit episode at school. However, I did feel up to getting another small serving of chicken, which Alaura was pleased to see as it meant that my appetite was slowly coming back.

After a group bathroom break at the hotel next door, we returned to our office to continue our work. Soon after, I left to teach my first section of Grade 2 students and it made me smile, for the first time today, when Alaura and Michael wished me good luck. The lesson on school supplies went well. I took Ms. Wang’s feedback and adjusted my lesson a bit, allotting time to spell some of the harder vocabulary on the board and helping students pronounce them properly, syllable by syllable. When it came time for the card-matching activity, I noticed that the students pronounced the vocabulary better than the students from Wednesday’s class did and I knew it was because of the lesson adjustment. Overall, the students learned something and had fun doing it, which means I did my job.

At the end of the lesson, I returned to the office to share my lesson tale with Alaura and Michael. We waited until Ms. Wang gave me the Grade 5 English workbook CD before we left to catch the subway back to Southwest University. Upon exiting Tiansheng station, we purchased some cold drinks (a lemonade for me, a coconut juice for Alaura, and a milk tea for Michael) and then caught a shuttle bus to the cafeteria nearest to our dorms for dinner (once again, I did not push it and just had rice with a dish of chicken and mushrooms).

Upon returning to our dorms, Michael went to speak to the manager who had offered to help him get his sweater that had fallen from the balcony where the washing machine is to the roof below. Alaura and I headed upstairs to retire for the night. Shortly after, Michael messaged me to tell me that the manager collected all of the clothes that had fallen to the roof below and brought them to the stairwell just next to the laundry balcony on the fourth floor and that I should go check it out to see if my skirt was one of them. Since I did not see the skirt on the roof where

Michael’s sweater fell, I doubted that I would find it, but decided to go anyway. Not only did I find my skirt and missing hanger, but I also found a black blouse that I had forgotten I had worn, washed, and hung on the balcony to dry. On the way back upstairs, I ran into Michael and thanked him profusely for his help. He found it funny that I had not noticed that I was also missing a blouse in addition to my skirt. Honestly, I thought the same thing. As I officially retired for the night, I cannot help but smile at how wonderful this Monday has been.

Tuesday, April 18th, 2017:

I rolled around in bed for about ten minutes after my alarm sounded before I decided to finally crawl out of it to have my usual breakfast of bread, juice, and a banana. Knowing how hot it was going to be today, I threw on a skirt of an appropriate length, a short-sleeve top, and a pair of black flats. After washing up, packing, and making sure that my makeup was on par, I left the dorms with Alaura and Michael for our usual commute to Zeng Jia Yan. Michael running five minutes late proved to be beneficial because we managed to secure seats on the pink line and still make it to Zeng Jia Yan at our usual arrival time of half past nine. As we settled down in our office, we all agreed to leave every morning at quarter to eight unless plans are in place at the school that require us to be there earlier.

Alaura, Michael, and I were all prepping for our classes when Ms. Qin walked in to ask us to observe a math class, which we agreed to do. Teachers from other schools, who formed part of a research team, were also observing how the teacher and Grade 1 students would alternate to teach the class about finding patterns in numbers. Personally, I like the approach because teachers let the students take responsibility for their own learning, as well as that of their peers, and it gives students a chance to show off what they know. For sure, the teacher trusts the students enough to use such an approach and I was pleased by this.

Shortly after returning to the office, Ms. Qin came to tell us to sit in on the meeting with the research team. When Alaura mentioned that the meeting conflicted with the classes that she and I were scheduled to teach, Ms. Qin told us that Principal Deng wanted us to go to the meeting. When I explained that Ms. Wang was counting on me to teach her Grade 5 English classes today in her absence, Ms. Qin insisted that someone would teach them and that I should go to the meeting. Knowing better than to argue with someone of a higher authority, I went to the meeting, which pretty much consisted of spirited discussions in Mandarin between a dozen teachers around shifted tables. As nice as it was to have witnessed the behind-the-scenes efforts of the research team, I do not feel that it was necessary for Alaura, Michael, and me to sit there during it for forty minutes, listening in on a discussion that we not only did not understand, but also could not participate in. Fortunately, Ms. Qin allowed us to leave with a few minutes to swing by our office, grab our teaching materials, and head off to our respective classrooms to teach.

For the first time since arriving at Zeng Jia Yan, I used the Grade 5 English textbook’s CD to teach the students. Today’s lesson was about the suffixes ‘-ng’ and ‘-nk’, which I had students first practise how to spell and how to sound out before I had them sort a series of words with the suffixes into two columns in their workbooks. In addition, I had them listen to a short conversation between two individuals and check off the scene in the workbook. I ended the lesson with having the students listen to a recording of a conversation between two students and simultaneously read it in their workbooks. They had an opportunity to pair up and practise reading the conversation and, simultaneously, practising pronouncing words that end in the suffixes. When the bell rang, I told the students to practise reading the conversation and that they would be presenting them to the class with their partners next week. I was very proud of myself for being able to teach two classes by myself in the absence of my associate teacher. I can definitely see the growth that I have experienced as a teacher and I hope that it continues.

After lunch with Alaura and Michael (pork, carrots, cauliflower, and rice), we returned to our office for a brief rest before Ms. Qin guided us to see a gallery of sketches near the school, which were pretty amazing to see. Then, we walked over to the Chongqing People’s Assembly Hall nearby to look at some cultural and historic relics of Chongqing. As interesting as some of the relics were to look at and read about, I could tell that some of the relics were fake (i.e. pixelated labels on the match boxes). Nevertheless, it was a good afternoon out.

Once we arrived at Niujaotuo station nearby and Ms. Qin treated us to McDonald’s cheesecake-flavoured ice cream (my new weakness!) and walked us to our platform, Alaura, Michael, and I took the subway back to Southwest University. Alaura and I bought some ice-cold lemonades outside of Tiansheng station before we caught a shuttle bus to the cafeteria nearest to our dorms for dinner (I ate tofu, green beans, and rice). We then returned to our dorms for the night where we began to construct new lesson plans for as long as our eyes stayed open.

Wednesday, April 19th, 2017:

Once my alarm sounded at six, I ate breakfast, got ready, packed, and met Alaura outside of our dorms at quarter to eight. Michael joined us shortly after and shared with us that he had been feeling feverish since last night, which concerned me greatly. Alaura, Michael, Altion, Victoria, and I are a family and we look out for each other here in China. In my opinion, I’m always looking out for the other four to make sure we travel in groups and that we are all well (it is the nurturing side of me, I suppose), so when one of us shows a hint of an illness, I go into full nurse mode, which sometimes has me rethinking my career choice as a teacher.

After the usual subway commute to Zeng Jia Yan, we went to our office to finalize our lesson plans for the day. At one point, Ms. Wang came in to tell me that I would be teaching the second section of my Grade 2 English students today during fourth period to make up for the class that I did not teach last Friday because the students were making balloon art. I agreed. Since I was unaware of this change until last minute, I was not able to plan ahead to bring my school supplies index cards with me, so I offered to teach both sections of Grade 2 English students about colours and postpone the school supplies lesson for my second section until next Friday. I say next Friday and not the upcoming one because Ms. Wang and Miss Song chose to inform us during this time that we will be on field trips tomorrow, Friday, and Monday, which means no teaching. As intrigued as I am by these field trips, they just mean cutting down my teaching days in China more. On top of that, my teaching schedule for all of my Grade 2 classes will be all over the place. Then again, if I learned anything about being a teacher, it’s to expect the unexpected.

Once we finished lunch (beef, potatoes, cabbage, and rice) and made a quick trip to the bathroom next door, Alaura, Michael, and I were surprised to run into Dr. Xu just outside of Principal Deng’s office. Although she still feels a bit ill, she has gotten her voice back, is smiling again, and her cheeks are full of colour once more. She has moved out of the hospital and into a hotel near Zeng Jia Yan where she can watch us in action in the classroom. She and Principal Deng met with us to tell us about the field trips that we would be going on and to make sure that our experience at the school so far has been good. To our good fortune, Dr. Xu and Principal Deng permitted Alaura, Michael, and me to extend our practicums at Zeng Jia Yan to the beginning of June since we had expressed our love for teaching there. I beamed upon hearing these good news because I love my students and I want to be able to teach them for as long as I can.

When we returned to our office, Michael packed up to head to the Chongqing Zhenggang Traditional Chinese Orthopedics Hospital with Dr. Xu (she learned about his lingering fever and invited him to try and get rid of it using traditional Chinese methods while she went in for another acupuncture treatment). Alaura and I continued to work; I wrote some of my weekly reflections while Alaura left to teach my third section of Grade 2s their second English lesson of the day. Upon her return, she told me that she finally understood why I tend to come back to the office with my hair all dishevelled after teaching a class of Grade 2s English. If I did not have her respect before this, I think I have it now.

With our classes done for today, Alaura and I took the subway back to Southwest University. When we stopped by our usual drink place outside Tiansheng station and ordered our lemonades, the lady behind the counter simply handed Alaura a glass of ice-cold lemonade before Alaura could even order it. We paid for our drinks and went to catch a shuttle bus to the cafeteria closest to our dorms for dinner, joking along the way about how the lemonade lady most likely knows Alaura as “that foreigner who loves lemonade”. During dinner, I helped myself to some pork, veggies, scrambled eggs with tomatoes, and a bowl of rice. As we ate, I could not help but note how odd it felt to be commuting, getting drinks, and having dinner without Michael. As fun as it was to have some girl time with Alaura, who is always good company, the dynamic is different when the Zeng Jia Yan family is not together. I guess that says a great deal about how much this experience in China has strengthened the bond between us.

After dinner, Alaura and I returned to our dorms to retire for the night. I took a quick shower and then continued writing my weekly reflections. A few hours later, Michael messaged us via WeChat to let us know that he had arrived home safely and that his massage very much loosened him up and made him feel a tad better, which alleviated a lot of my concerns regarding his health. When he admitted to getting his nurse’s WeChat information, I knew that Michael was indeed back to his old self and I rolled my eyes. Hopefully, he will feel well enough to join Alaura and me for our first of several upcoming field trips with Zeng Jia Yan. Who knows what tomorrow has in store for us?

Thursday, April 20th, 2017:

Despite a phone call waking me up at three in the morning, I managed to go back to sleep easily and still wake up at six when my alarm did sound. I ate a banana, got ready, packed, and was ready to leave the dorms with Alaura. Unfortunately, Michael was feeling weak and that, combined with his sinuses acting up, resulted in him bowing out of today’s field trip for a rest in his dorm. As much as I wanted him to join us, I know that his health takes priority.

After commuting to Zeng Jia Yan, Alaura and I went to our office to wait until a staff member alerted us to Dr. Xu’s arrival. Once she arrived, the staff member escorted us to a school a few blocks away that provides classes to further develop the practical skills of students from schools within the district. It was fun getting to participate in some of the classes with our school’s students; I made a red rose out of some sort of quick-dry clay and helped some Grade 3s make some shortbread cookies. Although the students whom I made clay art with were relatively quiet, the Grade 3s with whom I made cookies were so happy to have me around and often insisted that I use the cookie cutters to make the cookies while they flattened the dough and placed the cookies on the baking tray. As we worked, several students asked me where Michael was and I had to tell them that he was sick. It’s so sweet just how fond his students are of him and he was certainly missed. When Alaura and I were watching students engage in three dimensional design and printing, Dr. Xu took some photos to send to Michael who wished that he could be there. We made sure to pick him up a souvenir: a red lucky Chinese cat figurine (Alaura and I received heart-shaped rings).

After a delicious lunch with the school staff (roast pork with pickled veggies, chicken, cucumber salad, and rice), Alaura and I went to the teachers’ office with Dr. Xu to rest for a bit and to share with her our thoughts about our teaching experience at Zeng Jia Yan so far. One of the students whom I was baking with found us in the office to give us a few of the shortbread cookies that they had finished baking, which were full of sugary goodness!

Around two in the afternoon, a staff member escorted Alaura and I to the Chongqing Three Gorges Museum nearby here Ms. Wang was waiting for us (she, too, inquired about Michael’s absence). She then waited patiently on the main floor for two hours while Alaura and I explored the four floors of exhibits ranging from war artifacts to various works of art such as sketches and porcelain pots. One of my favourite exhibits was about the evolution of Chinese yuan over centuries (can you believe there was such a thing as a one hundred thousand yuan bill years ago?). It amazes me just how well many of the museum’s artifacts were preserved. I got a lot of enjoyment looking at all of them, especially the documents written in French. I did not realize just how much the Chinese culture was influenced by the French.

Once we returned to Zeng Jia Yan for some rest and a tasty dinner (beef, veggies, and rice), Alaura and I joined Dr. Xu, Principal Deng, Ms. Wang, and other staff and students for their Skype meeting with Prince Edward Public School in Windsor. Paula, a representative from the Greater Essex County District School Board, taught both schools of students about the First Nations history of the dreamcatcher and walked them through the process of making one. Alaura and I got to help them make some and they turned out to be beautiful. During the meeting, several Southwest University teacher candidates were in attendance and one had the nerve to tell me how to teach the students during the crafting process. I just smiled and nodded my head to acknowledge her remarks, but immediately shrugged them off. How dare she try to tell me, a teacher candidate, how to teach? She was out of place. Last time I checked, I have not been teaching her how to breathe.

After the Skype meeting concluded, Alaura and I were accompanied back to Southwest University by its teacher candidates. We arrived back so late that the shuttle buses to Gate 5 stopped running; however, the teacher candidates arranged for a bus bound for Gate 3 to drop Alaura and me off at the stop just down the street from our dorms. Upon arriving back at the dorms, I stopped by Michael’s dorm to give him his share of the stipend from Zeng Jia Yan that Minghua gave us this morning: a whopping three thousand, four hundred, and fifty yuan (roughly seven hundred dollars)! That seemed to contribute to his good mood in addition to his improving health. He has expressed his desire to join Alaura and me tomorrow on our field trip back to the practical skills school and, judging by the fact that he was feeling much better, it just might happen. Good thing too because, as I have already said, our adventures are not complete without Michael.

Friday, April 21st, 2017:

I woke up at six when my alarm sounded and managed to get up right away, which surprised me considering I went to bed exhausted the night before. Since Alaura and I opted to board the subway at Beibei station instead of Tiansheng station in hopes of securing seats to downtown Chongqing, we were ready to leave fifteen minutes earlier than usual, at seven thirty. Unfortunately, Michael felt that he was in no condition to survive a subway ride without a puke fest and opted to stay behind. Although I felt bad that he was not going to have a chance to see the practical skills school, I knew that he needed to rest in order to get better in time to return to teaching his students next week.

Arriving at Zeng Jia Yan at ten after nine made Alaura and me smile since it meant that leaving Beibei station at half past seven would allow us to get to Zeng Jia Yan around the same time we would arrive there if we left from Tiansheng station at quarter to eight. We agreed that it would be worth leaving earlier if it meant securing seats on the subway for the commute to downtown Chongqing. What did not make us smile, however, was the security guard at Zeng Jia Yan’s front gate who barked at us upon our arrival just like he did yesterday. Usually, he would greet us and Michael when we arrive every morning and even opens the gate for us with a smile, so he yelling at us in Mandarin is very foreign to us. Based on the three fingers that he was waving in our faces, we figured he was trying to tell that we, Michael included, should be going to the practical skills school. Fortunately, Director Yu saw us arrive, greeted us with a smile, and allowed Alaura to drop off her backpack in our office before we left. The grumpy security guard escorted us back to the practical skills school. Alaura and I chose to walk ahead of him for two reasons: I remembered how to get there and back from the day before and I did not want to see his cranky face.

After we arrived at the school and the security guard made sure that we were in good hands before he left, Alaura and I were escorted to the teachers’ office where we dropped off our jackets. We then were given the choice to observe Zeng Jia Yan students fashion designing or making sofas and we chose the former. We went to the classroom and observed students at separate tables collaborating on foam paper vests. I even had the opportunity to contribute to a group’s vest when they noticed me cutting hearts out of scrap and foam paper and asked me if I could cut out four of them to be used as buttons for the vest. The only girl of the group of four, I noted, was very bossy and easily delegated tasks to her team. She knew exactly what she wanted the group’s vest to look like and knew what to do to make it a reality, yet she listened to the suggestions of her team and even included some of them. In a way, she reminded me a lot of myself and she made me a ring out of purple foam paper, which I proudly wore.

After leaving the class and resting for a bit in the teachers’ office, we accompanied the staff to lunch: chicken, celery, rice, pork, and the best tasting tofu I have eaten thus far in China. We then returned to our office for an hour’s worth of rest before a staff member drove us back to Zeng Jia Yan, so Alaura could collect her backpack. We were also directed to Principal Deng’s office where she presented us with this week’s bag of bakery treats. After promising to share them with Michael and collecting his get well soon wishes from Miss Qin and Ms. Wang, we caught the subway back to Southwest University (again, switching trains on the pink line for one to get cleaned). Upon exiting Tiansheng station, we each picked up a cold lemonade and caught a shuttle bus to our dorms. We learned through WeChat that Michael was out with some Southwest University teacher candidates to check out the school’s sports meet. Since we arrived home earlier than usual, we decided to use the extra time to get some work done, so we divided the bag of treats between the three of us and returned to our dorms to get some work done. At one point, Ms. Wang messaged me to ask for our passport photo pages to purchase some insurance for us for Monday’s field trip to a farm.

When Michael did not return to the dorms by six, Alaura and I went to dinner without him at the cafeteria nearest to our dorms (I ate noodles, potatoes, and beef with cauliflower). Fortunately, Michael returned while I was still awake and I gave him his pastries. I was pleased to see that he was feeling better again.

Saturday, April 22nd, 2017:

My body woke me up before my alarm sounded at seven. After enjoying one of my pastries for breakfast and getting ready in the best formal wear that I could put together from the clothes in my dresser, I left the dorms with an equally well-groomed Alaura and Michael by quarter after eight. We met up with Ju, Dr. Xu’s former PhD student, whose colleague was also invited to meet François-Philippe Champagne, the Minister of International Trade of Canada, alongside Dr. Xu and offered to give us all a ride downtown. Unfortunately, she was late picking us up because of a fashion crisis (she had to change her attire after checking the weather forecast) and we hit major traffic on the way to the Intercontinental Hotel of Chongqing where the meeting would be held. Even though we had arrived fifteen minutes late, the Minister was not there yet, so we decided to chat with the guests in attendance. One of them was a social butterfly named Sean Cai, the International Programs Officer of the Faculty of Physical Education and Recreation at the University of Alberta. He looked like he was our age and I was surprised to learn that he was in his thirties.

Forty minutes after the meeting was supposed to begin, the Minister finally arrived and took the time to go around the room to shake the hands of all of the guests in attendance and to meet them. The meeting flew by with about ten researchers on various Canada-China partnership projects each presenting their projects for a few minutes each. It made me smile to hear that the Minister was incredibly impressed with Dr. Xu’s work concerning reciprocal learning in teacher education. It made me proud to be a part of the project and to see my professor’s hard work getting recognized. We also had the chance to have a group photo taken with him outside of the hotel in Jiefangbei. He seemed so keen to speak to Alaura, Michael, and me about our experience in China. It is such a shame that Altion and Victoria missed out on such a privilege.

After the Minister took his leave, we joined Dr. Xu, Ju, Sean, and other researchers for lunch at a nearby restaurant during which Ju’s colleague asked me to teach everyone a few French words. Michael chimed in with: « Voulez-vous coucher avec moi ce soir? », causing Sean and me, who speak French, to burst out laughing. When Ju’s colleague asked us to translate, we declined and explained that the phrase was inappropriate, but we hinted that it would be a question asked at a bar.

Once lunch was finished, we bid farewell to everyone and promised Sean that we would stay in touch. Ju’s colleague drove us back to our dorms during which I enjoyed a much-needed nap. Upon arriving at our dorms, Alaura, Michael, and I agreed to meet for dinner at seven since we had eaten lunch so late. I worked on my weekly reflections before I joined Alaura and Michael in checking out a burger joint down the first alley down the street from our dorms that Minghua had suggested. Not only was the food cheap (my crispy chicken sandwich and fries only cost me two dollars and sixty cents or thirteen and a half yuan), but it tasted delicious, like KFC almost. We agreed that it would be a good place to grab food if we ever arrive back to campus after seven in the evening and the cafeterias are closed.

The night concluded with Michael going out with a Southwest University teacher candidate and Alaura and I doing our weekly grocery shopping. Today was both a rewarding day and a memorable one and I thank the Lord for such a blessing!

Sunday, April 23rd, 2017:

It felt good to sleep in today, even for just a little bit. Although I had to be out the door by nine in the morning with Alaura and Michael to head downtown for a day of Jiefangbei fun, at least I was able to catch up on some sleep, even if it was just a little bit.

The three of us boarded the pink line at Beibei station and arrived at Xiaoshizi station at the interchange of the red line by half past ten. Since we were not scheduled to meet Altion, Victoria, and Minghua at the fifth exit of the station until eleven, Michael suggested that we explore the area and Alaura and I agreed to it. As we walked off in search of sunglasses for Alaura and Michael to wear during tomorrow’s field trip with Zeng Jia Yan students and staff, we came across a market similar to Cho Ben Thanh, a market in the heart of Ho Chi Minh City Vietnam. This market, Chongqing Chaotianmen Garment Wholesale Market, had many vendors for clothes, food, souvenirs, and more. We only had time to check out a few stores that sold sunglasses before we had to turn on our heels and return to the station to meet up with Altion, Victoria, and Minghua. It took half an hour of exploring the station before we came across Minghua by the fifth exit and then Altion and Victoria, who were unaware of the exact meeting location at Xiaoshizi station, outside the sixth exit. I presented Victoria with a Chinese birthday postcard adorned with an origami rose and a blossom hart and signed by Alaura, Michael, and me (her birthday was on the nineteenth of April), which I was pleased to learn that she loved.

Thanks to the human GPS that is Michael, we all made it to the Jinjiang Oriental Hotel in no time at all. We arrived at the hotel restaurant to find that the lunch was not only just with Dr. Xu, but also with Dr. Liu, a few staff members, and several graduate students from Southwest University. Although Dr. Xu told us beforehand to dress casually for the day, I felt very out of place in my cut-out shoulder blouse, knee-length shorts, and running shoes, especially given how glamorous the restaurant was and how well-dressed Dr. Liu, the staff, and the graduate students were. Despite this, the meal was delicious (I loved the deep fried potatoes and the veggie-filled buns) and the company was amazing. When Dr. Liu purchased beers for everyone, I firmly and politely declined once more. Like I said before, I’m not going to consume alcohol abroad and risk getting a severe allergic reaction.

After assuring Alaura, Michael, Altion, Victoria, and me that we would be well taken care of after Dr. Xu and Minghua leave China, Dr. Liu left with his staff and students for a meeting. We chatted briefly with Dr. Xu before we escorted her to the English conversation corner nearby and introduced her to Jim and some of the Bashu Primary School students in attendance. I casually munched on some French fries and chatted with some of the attendees. We did leave early though to revisit the Chongqing Chaotianmen Garment Wholesale Market. Altion and Victoria tagged along for the trip. Of course, Michael came across a music store on the way and just had to go inside and buy something (two albums actually).

When we arrived back at the market, we were astonished to look up and see that it was made up of multiple floors. Before we began exploring, we all made an agreement to meet back out front at seven should we all get separated. Altion and Victoria then took off while I accompanied Alaura and Michael to continue their search for sunglasses. Whenever they tried on a pair, I would give my honest and blunt opinions on it. Michael would know when a pair made him look silly because he would put it on, show me, and I would laugh before he could even ask me how he looked in them. Fortunately, they each found a pair for cheap prices. Alaura and I then looked around for scarves, but the ones we saw were either too loud in colour or overpriced. As we made our way to the second floor, we met up with Altion and Victoria again. We then came across a china shop selling the most beautiful tea sets I have ever seen. They were ceramic versions of the ones that we saw in the tea house in Beijing. When we realized that we could buy a set with a tea pot, six cups, and the tray for one hundred and thirty eight yuan (about twenty seven dollars), we knew that it would be foolish not to buy them now. Michael bought one for his mom, Alaura bought one for a wedding present for his sister, and I bought one for me to use at home. Altion and Victoria bought three smaller sets for forty yuan each (eight dollars each) and some extra cups.

Since the stores were closing, we all agreed to call it a day and revisit the market another day. We carried our carefully-packaged tea sets onto the subway, looking very much like tourists. Altion and Victoria boarded the red line while Alaura, Michael, and I caught the pink line back to Southwest University. Outside Tiansheng station, Alaura and Michael purchased drinks before we piled onto a shuttle bus and returned to our dorms for the night. A trip to the fast food joint in the alley nearest to our dorms for a chicken sandwich dinner ended my great day on an even greater note.

Monday, April 24th, 2017:

I surprised myself today by being able to crawl out of bed when my alarm sounded at five and eat, get ready, and be packed in time to leave at quarter after six with Alaura and Michael. Our associate teachers asked us to be at Zeng Jia Yan by ten after eight, which meant that we had to catch the first train out of Beibei station at half past six if we wanted to get there before ten after eight. Fortunately, we secured seats on the second train out of Beibei. Although the blue and green lines were packed as usual and we made a quick stop at Niujaotuo station for Michael to grab some steamed buns for breakfast, we made it to Zeng Jia Yan by five to eight. We went to our office for a brief rest before we split up to join our associate teachers in managing our assigned classes of students (I dealt with a class of Grade 1s). When the time came to leave, we guided the line of paired students out of the school and down the hill to the base of Zengjiayan station where tour buses pulled up to collect the students and staff. After getting the students sated and making sure their seat belts were buckled, we were off. The ride to the farm was only an hour long, but it was a long enough ride for me to take a quick nap.

When we arrived at the farm, I made sure that my mosquito-repelling fan was on and my umbrella was open (it was raining) before helping Ms. Wang guide the students to a bathroom to use the facilities and then to the greenhouse where they seated themselves at tables and snacked on the treats that they packed with them. It amazed me just how many snacks each student could cram into their mini backpacks, ranging from fruit to chips. They were also eager to share their snacks with each other and with Ms. Wang and me. I had an Oreo cookie, some chips (regular and cucumber-flavoured), and some fried potatoes, all which caused the rumbling in my stomach to cease immediately.

Unfortunately, the rainy weather did not let up, so the outdoor activities were cancelled and the students remained indoors for a complimentary lunch of rice, eggs, veggies, and tofu. We, teachers, left the students in the care of tour guides for the farm before we walked outside to a nearby farmhouse where we joined Principal Deng and Director Yu for our own lunch (rice, chicken, veggies, fish, and noodles), which was not too shabby. We learned that the field trip would be postponed to another day that would be more suitable for outdoor activities like cabbage picking and animal petting. After lunch, we waited for the tour guides to bring out the students before we ushered the students back onto the buses and returned to Zeng Jia Yan. Once the students were back in their classrooms and we took a brief rest, Alaura, Michael, and I bid farewell to the teachers and we caught the subway back to Southwest University. Unfortunately, the drive to and from the farm, coupled with the subway ride, did a real number on Alaura’s stomach, so she went to buy Sprite from the mega supermarket and then return to her dorm for the night. That left Michael and I to have dinner together in the cafeteria closest to our dorm (I had chicken, mushrooms, snow peas, tofu, and rice). Even Lisa dropped by to give us more one yuan coins for laundry purposes.

Once dinner was finished, Michael and I returned to our dorms to retire for the night. Although we incredibly dirtied our running shoes and the hems of our jeans during today’s field trip, we had a blast with the students and that is what matters most. As an added bonus, I did not receive a single mosquito bite today!

Tuesday, April 25th, 2017:

I woke up at six this morning feeling a tad congested, making it challenging to breathe and speak. Whether my change in health is due to the rainy weather, the close proximity to Ms. Wang during yesterday’s field trip when we shared my umbrella (she had a cold), or both, I hoped that it would not affect the manner in which I taught my Grade 5s today.

When I boarded the subway at Beibei station with Alaura and Michael, I could feel my throat getting clogged up. By the time we arrived at Zeng Jia Yan, my voice was half gone. Given how many students are in my class (between thirty and thirty-five), and how loudly I would have to project my voice to ensure that they all hear me, I contemplated telling Ms. Wang to teach the class for me, but I knew that she expected me to teach it and I did not want to let her down. When the time came to leave the office, I hoped that what remained of my voice would be enough to get me through the lesson. At first, I was doing fine when reviewing words with my Grade 5s until I noticed it fading after moving on the next activity. Ms. Wang chose that moment to arrive to the classroom and see me struggle to get words across. She kindly told me to go to the office and rest while she taught the rest of the lesson, which I was so grateful for. When I apologized for not being able to teach, she told me not to worry and to let me know next time if I was ever feeling ill. Although I find Ms. Wang to be the straightest forward out of all of the English language teachers at Zeng Jia Yan, I love that she is very understanding about me and any concerns that I have. It shows that she respects me and that, to me, means so much.

After a rest in the office and working on some lesson plans, I accompanied Alaura and Michael to lunch (cabbage, rice, and some sort of meat). Alaura and Michael claimed that the meat was the best one that they have eaten at Zeng Jia Yan thus far. I had to take their word for it as I could only taste half of the flavour. We then made a quick stop at the hotel next door for a bathroom break and then returned to the office to get some work done, with Michael leaving for forty minutes to teach a class. Around four in the afternoon, Sunny, a teacher candidate from Southwest University, arrived as she would be our escort to Ren He Jie Primary School for their monthly Skype meeting with Talbot Trail Public School in Windsor. She was kind enough to occupy herself with her cell phone for two hours while we diligently worked on our lesson plans. Dinner took place at a restaurant called CSC (Country-Style Cooking) where I feasted on crispy chicken filets, beef, veggies, and rice for only twenty-two yuan (about four dollars and forty cents).

A quick Uber ride took us to Ren He Jie Primary School whose layout and size resembled those of Chengdu Shishi High School. During the Skype meeting with Talbot Trail Public School, we learned from Ms. Edgar, a Grade 7 teacher, a compressed version of Three Act Math that broke down the problem-solving procedure into three parts: engaging students with a visual aid to propel them to derive from it a problem (Act 1), giving students the opportunity to determine the information that they would need to solve the problem and how to find this information (Act 2), and having the students present their solutions and problem-solving methods (Act 3). For example, students can derive from the video of a student eating sugar packets the question: “How many packets of sugar are in one can of pop?” Students would have to collect information from nutrition facts and do some math to figure out a solution. I like this strategy because deriving a question from a visual aid and not from words facilitates problem-solving skills in students and propels them to think about what they need to know, how and where to get what they need to know, and how to take what they learn to solve a problem. Furthermore, the strategy strengthens in students kills such as estimation, measurement, adapted reasoning, procedural fluency, and strategic competence. I’m glad that we attended this meeting because it was very informative.

Once the meeting was over, Sunny and the Southwest University students in attendance gave us a ride back to our dorms, which saved us time and a trip on the subway. I’m so thankful that today got better as time went on. It always does.

Wednesday, April 26th, 2017:

I woke up when my alarm sounded at six and rolled around for ten minutes before I actually got out of bed for breakfast. I was ready to go at twenty to eight with Alaura as planned. Michael, however, was running five minutes late.

Since we started boarding the pink line at Beibei station to head downtown, we have been able to sit during the whole ride to the blue line, which was not so packed today to the point that Michael was able to do something that I thought was not possible on the downtown segment of the blue line: secure a seat. Even the green line had so much wiggle room today. I could have done without my umbrella breaking, however, especially since it was raining.

I spent part of my morning in the office writing up my observations for our group’s second newsletter. As eleven in the morning fast approached, I left the office to go and teach my third section of Grade 2s about head, shoulders, knees, and toes. I had the following body parts and their corresponding images on PowerPoint slides. One by one, I would recite the body part and point to it on my body and the students standing would repeat after and imitate me. Every time they learned a new body part, I would have them repeat and point to the body parts that they learned before it to ensure maximum retention. To summarize what the students have learned, I played a ‘Head, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes’ music video twice and had the students sing along and point to the appropriate body parts. I concluded the lesson by having them play a Simon says version of a game called ‘Miss Aline Say’, but that did not pan out too well as the students did not seem to understand that they could only touch the body parts that I called out when I said, “Miss Aline says…”. As a result, I ended up changing the game a bit, so the objective of the game was to touch the body part that I called out as quickly as possible. The students would be eliminated if they pointed to the wrong body part or were the last to point to the correct body part. When only five or six students remained standing, I would instruct them to move to the front of the class where they would continue to compete in front of their eliminated peers until one student remained standing. That student would be declared the winner and be presented with a Canada pencil and a package of cookies. I had time to play the game with them twice and it appeared that they loved the lesson and the game. Naturally, Ms. Wang gave me constructive feedback; she loved the lesson, but suggested that if I were to play more than one round of the game, to have a student call out the orders for a change. Once again, a good idea for me to consider.

After a delicious lunch (beef with sweet potatoes, green beans, and rice) and a bathroom break in the hotel next door, we returned to the office to work on lesson plans and newsletter blurbs. Over the course of the early afternoon, Alaura and Michael would leave to teach their respective classes, leaving me to my work in the office.

It was raining heavily by the time we left Zeng Jia Yan to head back to Southwest University and it was still raining by the time we arrived at Tiansheng station. We stopped at our usual drink joint to pick up drinks (lemonades for Alaura and me and iced tea for Michael) before we took a shuttle bus to the cafeteria nearest to our dorms for dinner (I ate rice, veggies, and a huge scoop of tofu). I accompanied them back to our dorms where I dropped off my backpack, grabbed my shopping bag, borrowed Alaura’s umbrella, and went to the supermarket in search of a new umbrella. Lisa recommended a brand, which I found to be sturdy and strong and only cost fifty-eight yuan (just under twelve dollars). I ended up buying a green one for me (my favourite colour) and a purple one for my mom. I also picked up some more buns for breakfast. I used the umbrella en route to the dorms and I love how its huge size and curved structure kept me very dry.

My day ended on a funny note when I returned to my dorm and was stopped by the guard on duty as I was waiting for the elevator. He did not believe that I lived there and that I was not an international student. He ended up letting me go after I showed him my room key with my room number on it. Alaura and Michael were amused by me being, once again, mistaken for a Chinese person. Chances are this will not be the last time it happens.

Thursday, April 27th, 2017:

As usual, I was up and about when my alarm sounded at six and I had eaten and was ready to go at twenty to eight with Alaura. Michael, also as usual, was running five minutes late. I joked to them previously that the longer Michael’s hair grew during our time here in China, the longer it would take him to get ready in the morning.

When we arrived at Beibei station, there was a huge crowd of passengers who had already boarded the training that had arrived. Wanting seats for the long commute on the pink line, we waited five minutes for the next train on which I managed to get a brief period of shut-eye.

After the usual packed commute on the blue and green lines, we arrived at Zeng Jia Yan. We entered our office and barely got a chance to sit down and rest from all the stair-climbing when Miss Qin entered and told us that we would be observing another math class with the research team. After silently praising ourselves for such good timing, we grabbed our notebooks, pens, and cell phones, and followed Miss Qin to the designated classroom where the teacher was teaching students how to compare data in a chart (days in a month and temperatures in Celsius) to the same data on bar and line graphs. He also taught them how to look for trends in data and that the same data can be presented in different formats. Students had the opportunity to analyze data, graph it, and explain their work on the overhead projector in front of the class, including highlight declines and increases on line graphs. With regards to the teacher, I admired how he spoke very animatedly, like a TV host, and smiled throughout the lesson, which I found very encouraging and sparked interest in the lesson. He was also very attentive of students’ understanding of the topic, which Alaura says is also covered in the Grade 5 math curriculum in Ontario, because he checked their understanding by having them raise their hands. Overall, I was very pleased with how the lesson unfolded and I learned a lot from it in terms of learning and teaching.

Once we were done with our observations of the math lesson, we rested for a bit in our office and got some work done. We took a break, however, to grab some lunch (chicken, celery, cucumber salad, and rice) and run to the bathroom in the hotel next door. When we returned to the office, Miss Qin came in with Ms. Wang and Miss Song to tell us that they would be going to an English competition that some of their students were participating in. They felt awful, though, that they were unable to get us tickets to it and told us that we could leave early. Obviously, neither of us objected and we accompanied them to Zengjiayan station to board the green line; however, they stayed on while we exited at Niujaotuo station.

After exiting Tiansheng station and buying some lemonades, we returned to our dorms where I noticed water seeping through the roof and wall. Thinking the tenant living above me left the water running, I messaged Lisa and had her write a message in Mandarin that I needed help. I showed the message and a photo of the water damage to the staff at the front desk who filled out a report and told me to go back upstairs. When maintenance failed to arrive after several hours, Lisa stopped by to yell at the security guard on duty who went to my dorm to survey the damage. According to him, the damage is due to all of the rain and the poorly-constructed roof. He then said that he will have staff check it tomorrow while I’m at Zeng Jia Yan. If the damage continues, I will be losing Alaura and Michael as neighbours, which I do not want to have happen.

Friday, April 28th, 2017:

I was up and about after my alarm sounded at six and all three of us, even Michael, were ready to leave our dorms at twenty to eight. For the first time in a few days, it was not raining, so we were able to enjoy our morning walk to Beibei station. We arrived to find all of the seats on the train occupied. We simply smirked and let the train leave, knowing that we would be guaranteed seats on the next one arriving in five minutes. Aside from the close proximity to a passenger who reeked of liquor on the blue line, it was a pretty smooth commute to downtown Chongqing.

Upon arriving at Zeng Jia Yan, we went to our office to drop off our things, but we did not get a chance to sit down and rest because Ms. Wang entered and invited us to observe another music class with some researchers. We quickly grabbed our notebooks, pens, and cell phones and followed Ms. Wang to the music classroom in the basement where students learned about different instruments by listening to them. For every song, the teacher would first play it and have the students listen to it and indicate crescendos and decrescendos with hand movements. Then, she would have students sing the melody using the musical scale. Finally, she and the students would sing the melody and do the hand movements together. She even showed the students a video clip of an opera singer. During the lesson, I noted how the teacher never stopped smiling and always spoke with an air of gentleness and kindness. She also acknowledged students’ difficulties by having them point any out on the music score displayed on the overhead projector. It makes me smile to see the teachers in Zeng Jia Yan so dedicated to student learning and you can tell that they love what they do.

After returning to our office and getting more work done, we all went to lunch where we each feasted on a giant bowl of noodles, veggies, ground pork, and soup. Adding pepper, oil, green onions, and a spoonful of garlic and hot sauce only made the soup and noodles more flavourful; however, the whole dish was so heavy that neither of us could finish our bowls. We then made our usual post-lunch bathroom trip next door before we returned to our office to get some more work done.

When it came time to teach my second section of Grade 2 students, I learned that I would only be teaching for half of the class because the second half would be spent celebrating one of my students’ birthdays. So after a brief introductory lesson on school supplies, the mother of the birthday student walked in with a huge three-tier sponge cake with whipped cream and assorted fruits. Surrounded by his peers, the birthday student was sung to in Mandarin, he made a wish, and blew out the candles. I found it funny how he was so focused on the cake as though it was a university entrance exam. There was so much cake to go around, so much that all of the students could have seconds and Alaura, Michael, and I could have some too. I never ate tomatoes in a cake before, but it tasted really good. It was so sweet that two of my favourite students in the class offered to deliver cake to Alaura and Michael in the office and were so happy when they had accomplished their mission. I was even introduced to Ms. Wang’s funny side that I did not know existed when she laughed at all of the whipped cream on her face (she, like me, loves icing!).

After the birthday party, Ms. Wang invited me to a Grade 1 classroom where its students were baking cookies. Alaura and Michael joined shortly after I arrived and we were able to chat with the students and eat some of the tasty cookies (we stayed away from the cookies made by the student who I caught picking his nose). I joked to Alaura and Michael that we should just skip dinner tonight and go straight to the theatre to see a movie given how full we were feeling.

When the bell rang to signify the end of the day, Alaura, Michael, and I caught the subway back to Southwest University. We exited at Tiansheng station and caught a shuttle bus back to our dorms where I messaged Lisa and Ju to inform them of our return. By this point, the water stain on my wall had quadrupled in size from the night before and my room started smelling a tad musky. Minghua, who had heard about the issue from Lisa, told me that she had informed Mr. Deng about it and that he would look into finding another room for me. However, since he had left already for the long weekend, I probably will not be moving until after it. Minghua told me that she would return to Chongqing on Monday and would speak to the staff of our dorm building, so I can move out as soon as possible.

Fortunately, Ju and Lisa showed up for our planned dinner outing, which took my mind off of my dorm’s water issues. Joining us were two of Lisa’s friends from high school and an engineering student from Southwest University. We made our way over to a restaurant near Beibei station for some Mediterranean-Chinese fusion cuisine such as fried fish smothered in sweet and sour sauce; lamb-stuffed toasted buns; spicy lamb kebabs; Greek salad; toasted pita bread on steamed cabbage; mashed potatoes on a sweet orange base; beef and rice noodles; beef and rice; lab with pea pod leaves, mushrooms, and onions; and fried bread slices. Not only was it all delicious, but the environment was nice and cozy and the staff were incredibly friendly. Alaura, Michael, and I agreed that we would be coming back at least one more time before we leave China.

After Ju paid the bill, she escorted us to a nearby cinema to see a Chinese movie that had just been released the day before: This is Not What I Expected. At first, I was not feeling up to going due to fatigue, but I decided to go in the end because I’m a fan of romantic comedies. Although the film did not include English subtitles, we thoroughly enjoyed watching the corny love story unfold between a chef in a hotel restaurant and a picky and egotistical businessman who bond over their love for food despite their contrasting personalities. I’m a hopeless romantic, so I really loved the movie and hope to watch it again someday.

Once the movie finished, we exited the cinema and realized that we only had seven minutes before curfew hit. There was no way we would make it back to the dorms in time by walking, so we called for an Uber driver to take us back. We hung on for dear life as he erratically drove us back to our dorms in three minutes. Looks like it was another close call for the Zeng Jia Yan trio!

Saturday, April 29th, 2017:

With no pressing matters to deal with today, I slept in and stayed in bed for as long as I wanted to. Around nine in the morning, I got up to have some buns, a banana, and some juice for breakfast. Afterwards, I spent the rest of the morning working on my weekly reflections for Dr. Xu, so I would not feel too bad about spending a couple of hours downtown with Alaura later on.

Around half past noon, Alaura and I left the dorms to grab some lunch in the cafeteria nearby (I ate green peppers with chicken, ham and potatoes, and rice), but not without sending a message to Michael to have fun at a concert with Long Min and to message us when he returned to the dorms to let us know that he arrived home safely. Once lunch was finished, we made our way over to Beibei station to secure seats on the pink line. We got off at Xiaoshizi station where, to our great surprise, we ran into a buddy of ours from Southwest University. We exchanged a few words with him before he transferred over to the red line and Alaura and I headed for the exit nearest to Chongqing Chaotianmen Garment Wholesale Market.

It was easy for Alaura and me to kill three hours exploring the eight-floor market in search of goodies and souvenirs. I ended up purchasing two sundresses while Alaura bought one (the flamboyant salesman was incredibly funny as he modelled dressed with stretchy waistlines that we were fond of). We also came across mini ceramic tea sets on sale for twenty-five yuan each (five dollars). Knowing a good deal when we see one, Alaura bought five for gifts and one for herself while I bought a purple set as a gift for Dr. Salinitri. Overall, I only spent two hundred and sixty-nine yuan (about fifty-three dollars) on my purchases, a skirt included, and I had a nice afternoon out with Alaura.

After catching the pink line back to Southwest University, we bought iced teas outside of Tiansheng station before catching a shuttle bus back to our dorms to drop off our purchases and take a bathroom break. We passed Michael on the way in and out of the dorms (he was waiting for Long Min) and learned about his new purchase of a pair of running shoes for one hundred and eighty yuan (thirty-six dollars). Alaura and I then made a quick run to the grocery store and then picked up some chicken sandwiches with fries for dinner before returning to the dorms to do laundry and model our new clothes. Given how satisfied we are with our purchases, there is doubt that we will be returning to that market again sometime in May.

Sunday, April 30th, 2017:

An early morning Skype call from my mom around seven thirty woke me up from my sleep. My mom never calls me when I’m not online, so for her to do so, especially early on a weekend, told me that the news that she had to share were not good. She knows me so well; she knows that logging on to Facebook is the first thing that I do when I wake up and she did not want me to come across the news there first: my maternal grandmother from the Philippines had passed away. I immediately began shedding tears out of grief and homesickness. Both my mom and my brother were not taking the news well and I felt awful for not being home to be with them; however, I knew that my dad was home to take care of them, so that was reassuring a bit.

After promising to call back once she finalized the funeral arrangements, my mom ended the call. That was my cue to start bawling my eyes out. Although I had seen her passing coming given that she was hospitalized the day before and my mom had told her to finally rest, it not make the grief any easier to deal with. I’m glad that my mom called me to tell me the news before I found out via Facebook. She told me to post the photo of my brother and me with her with a heartfelt message to Grandma, but just looking at the smiling photo of her fuelled the waterworks, making it impossible for me to find the right words to express my love for her.

Needing to talk to someone, I messaged Alaura who came over immediately. She greeted me with a comforting hug and silently listened to me talk about Grandma’s passing and my fondest memories of her. As I openly wept and filled tissues with snot, Alaura, a Baptist, asked for my permission to pray, which I gave willingly. She placed a hand on my leg and prayed to God to be with me and my family, to give me strength, and to help us all deal with the passing. With one final hug to express my gratitude for the prayer, I slumped back onto the bed and Alaura decided to give me some space. She did message Dr. Xu and Michael to let them know what was going on. Not long after, Dr. Xu messaged me to offer her condolences and to inform me that she had pushed the due date of the second newsletter back a week to give me time to grieve, which I was so grateful for.

What unfolded next was a clear indication of just how close the Zeng Jia Yan family has become. I was lying in bed when there was a knock at the door. Thinking it was a staff member coming to question me about why my trash can is always needing to be emptied, I stormed over to the door and opened it only to be greeted by the smiling face of Michael who presented me with one of his favourite cakes and expressed his hope that I was feeling better. I was so touched by the thoughtful gesture unexpected of him and thanked him. I returned to my bed and barely got to resume my grieving when another knock at the door caused me to storm over in frustration. Outside my door was a bag of goodies: a chocolate bar, a bag of M&Ms, two bottles of my favourite orange juice, and a bag of spicy Lays potato chips. Accompanying the treats was a card from Alaura and Michael expressing their condolences, encouraging me to take time to grieve, and reminding me that they are there for me. I was so overwhelmed by their love and thoughtfulness that I started crying again. I always said that we are each other’s family here in China and that could not have been any more evident today. I’m grateful beyond measure to have Alaura and Michael to lean on during such a difficult time.

After finishing a popcorn chicken and fries lunch that I bought from my favourite alley joint near the dorms, I felt my head and eyes aching and they were heavy from all the crying, so I took a Tylenol and then a nap for two hours, knowing that the newsletter was no longer a pressing matter. When I woke up, I was feeling much better and felt like accompanying Alaura to the cafeteria nearest to our dorms for dinner around six. Michael opted to help Long Min with her Reciprocal Learning Program interview prep and then have dinner with her afterwards, so he declined to join us.

Once dinner was finished (I ate potatoes with ham, veggies, rice, and a fried egg), Alaura and I caught a shuttle bus to Gate 2 to purchase some drinks from our usual place outside of Tiansheng station (I bought an iced tea and Alaura bought a lemonade). We then took another shuttle bus back to our dorms where we retired for the night. My mom did call me back to confirm that funeral arrangements were in place. I was glad to hear that she managed to get some sleep despite the grief and I reassured her that I was okay and that Alaura and Michael made sure that I knew that I was not alone. I cannot imagine having to deal with my grief over Grandma’s passing without the support of Alaura and Michael. It is because of them that I will be okay and that I will get through this.