

Freedom as a Surprise

Written by Vivian Bikulege



Many people... want to move the mountain in one week. We have to move it bit by bit and start with ourselves. ☐☐ - Chen Guangcheng, Chinese Civil Rights Activist

I am a different American today than I was three weeks ago because I visited Asia. What changed? I have a new appreciation for my freedom.

Originally, I planned to go to China on business for one week at the end of March. I thought it would be fairly simple, like going to Mexico, or even Europe. I began to make travel arrangements in late February. I contacted corporate travel and sought management approvals. I would squeeze in three days between two 15-20 hour flights to meet with colleagues and make sales calls on a global account in my efforts to understand and improve work relationships. I was naive to think I could pull all of this together in one month. Traveling to Asia is not that simple, and understanding others is the goal of a lifetime.

By the time I came to my senses, I postponed my plans until June and decided to optimize my time by visiting three countries. I needed three visas – one for China, one for Vietnam, and one for Thailand. All are time bound. China requires the exact dates of entry and exit. My trip included planes, trains, hotels, taxis, car service, and of course, customer appointments. None of this would have been possible without my American and Asian co-workers. Global business takes time, money, thought, and consideration.

I am lucky. I have a longtime friend from my high school days who is an expatriate living in Hong Kong. I was able to spend my first day with Cathy getting acclimated to changes in time and culture. Her mom was completing a visit with her daughter, and the three of us chummed around on Saturday taking subways and ferries all around a city that my brother Stan has dubbed “the New York of Asia,” and he is correct. The city is a mountain range of skyscrapers. It has its own “Times Square.” There are parks, restaurants, and shopping, and shopping, and shopping. There is even a Hong Kong “Avenue of the Stars” mimicking Hollywood’s Walk of Fame with hand prints of Chinese stars and starlets! The city is crowded, busy, and a reflection of the West but with black hair, almond eyes, and a vocabulary of Mandarin and Cantonese illustrated in a distinct and complex five thousand character alphabet.

But Hong Kong is not representative of greater China, and I did not visit the rural provinces. Instead, I took a train to Guangzhou and met Nelson, a young chemical engineer and colleague who manages our business in that city. I believe I was as curious about Nelson as he was about me and he asked tons of questions. I strove to be courteous and considerate, careful to maintain a professional demeanor, but consistent in my goal to be warm and open. After some time, he shared his perception that America considered itself to be the center of the world, and I sensed that, instead, Nelson believed China was the center. I countered his comments with my own belief that one should not make a single judgment about an entire nation, and that his characterization of either country, as global center, was arrogant.

Freedom as a Surprise

Written by Vivian Bikulege

During dinner, I asked Nelson his thoughts on the controversy between our countries over the blind Chinese dissident, Chen Guangcheng. During May, Guangcheng caused quite a stir in U.S. and Chinese relations when he escaped house arrest and sought asylum at the U.S. Embassy. Nelson did not recognize the name and was vague about details of the incident. The next day, as we reviewed a customer presentation, I Googled Guangcheng to help jog Nelson's memory. In fact, Nelson had heard of the story but when he made the same search, he could not access the content. Weeks later, while listening to an episode of *This American Life* on NPR entitled, "Americans in China," I learned that this censoring is referred to as "Internet Management." At home, this is considered a violation of our First Amendment Rights.

When a Chinese citizen told me that he could not gain access to a search for information because his government, his leadership, would not allow it, I learned firsthand a truth that had before only been a tale. I was confronted with my naivete. I met control. I tasted the antithesis of democracy and I did not like it. In a split second, the precious realities of our American freedoms were impressed upon me. I can access an entire world of information. I can write whatever I want. I can read what is published. I can speak, and worship, and assemble. I understand why the defense of all freedom matters.

These revelations stayed with me as I traveled next to Vietnam. I went there cloaked in guilt-ridden memories of the sixties and seventies, of peace signs and Kent State, Kim Phuc and Richard Nixon. Vietnam has an "American War" museum with the spoils of another era, and Ho Chi Minh is framed in a gargantuan portrait in the post office. Banners with messages I could not read drape iron fences along the sidewalks, but the pictures illustrate the Vietcong flag beside raised machine guns with machetes. Just down the street from the Reunification Palace, the site of the Fall of Saigon and the end of the Vietnam War, I sat in a Catholic cathedral considering God and war, while a small gathering of women sang hymns. "Joe," my cab driver, told me he "wished the Americans would come back."

Thailand is a constitutional monarchy led by King Rama IX and governed by a Prime Minister. Busy and growing, Bangkok is a city blending western consumption with Buddhist tradition. Suwanna, my co-worker, explained that in the past, kings traded land to avoid war and maintain freedom explaining a bit of the country's odd shape. Plagued by flooding and riots in the recent past, the Thai atmosphere was a bit lighter as long boats sped along the brown Chao Phraya River skirting past high-rises, restaurants, churches, and temples.

On my first night in Asia, when I sat down in my hotel room to eat a bowl of soup, my spoon made an unexpected sound like glass hitting porcelain, startling me as I scooped below the surface of the cloudy liquid. I was surprised by the spoonful of seashells emerging from my dinner bowl and laughed at myself for jumping in my chair. But that surprise was different from the feelings I would later experience. I felt another kind of surprise, an awakening to something I had taken for granted for too, too long – the surprise and delight of freedom. When I left Nelson, I kissed his cheeks like a European, hugged him like an American, and told him I would meet him in the United States. I know he wants to do this. He is young and smart, and he wants to see things for himself, just like I do. It just isn't that simple or easy, and there is a risk, that surprise, of the taste of freedom that once sampled can become an addiction with no cure.

On this Fourth of July, this Independence Day, during this election year, in these United States, I am more aware of the gift and privilege to write, speak, and pray as I choose, and I am more grateful for the men and women in uniform defending my rights. I had to travel halfway across the world to rekindle my appreciation and gratitude for my freedoms, and I am joyful for the opportunity to celebrate my surprise.

[Read more Whatever](#)