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About T

I have been working in China for nearly five years now. I have traveled to more than 30 cities and towns, and have lived in 3 provinces. I am interested in issues concerning development in China and the rest of the world. I hope to provide a balanced look at some of the issues facing China as it continues its rise to power.

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[Personal Space - China doesn't have it](#)

Posted on [March 11, 2011](#) by [T](#)

Part two of a look at the cultural differences that lead to culture shock in China ([Part one here](#))

The total lack of personal space in China gets under an American's skin in a matter of seconds. Riding a bus designed for 40 people, with close to 100 crammed in it is a daily test of my cultural sensitivity. I could tell you stories, but until you have spent 45 minutes practically living in someone's armpit, in the middle of summer in one of China's hottest cities, you simply can't even imagine it.

This is another shock that we really should be braced for before arriving in China. After all, with a population of 1.4 billion people we know it's going to be more than a little crowded.

So how is it that Chinese people seem to be able to tolerate it?

What we don't realize is that this crowding is pervasive throughout China. Students in college live in 8-12 person dorm rooms (I once saw a dorm room with more than 20 boys at a rural Christian school in Henan Province, but this isn't typical). The classrooms I taught in often did not have enough chairs for the students, so they simply sat in each others' laps.

Being outside is often more private than being in their own rooms. It's no wonder that on college campuses throughout China students are caught making out on benches in the open. It's such a problem that some schools have a "flashlight patrol" to prevent such actions.

Family apartments often only have 2 bedrooms, so when Grandma and Grandpa move in things start to get cramped, and children often live with their parents until they marry. A common arrangement is women in one room, men in the other.

The living situation as explained by my Chinese friends, the "emic" view, is that Chinese families are much closer than American families. I wouldn't be surprised if this is true in some ways, sharing a few hundred square feet with 6 people would cause close relationships (or insanity). My Chinese co-worker sleeps in the same bed as her 5-year-old daughter, because it is hard to get good apartments near the good schools.

Although I don't think Chinese families would choose to live in such close

quarters, high property prices (also a result of a large population) keep families from spreading out like we do in the States.

I think this lack of personal space at home carries over into public spaces. The “need” for personal space doesn’t seem to have developed here. Which is why when you climb on to a Chinese bus, you are about to make friends with 100 strangers, and nobody but you is going to mind.