

ESCAPE FROM AMERICA

An Introspective Journey from America into China...

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On the surface, *Escape from America* is the story of an American aspiring to change his life and plan a future in China. Beneath the surface, however, this book features critical analysis of both countries in an effort to promote greater understanding.

China, in spite of its long history, is still a very “young” country where development is slow and unsteady. Sure, we from the “West” can say we’ve arrived—but have we really?

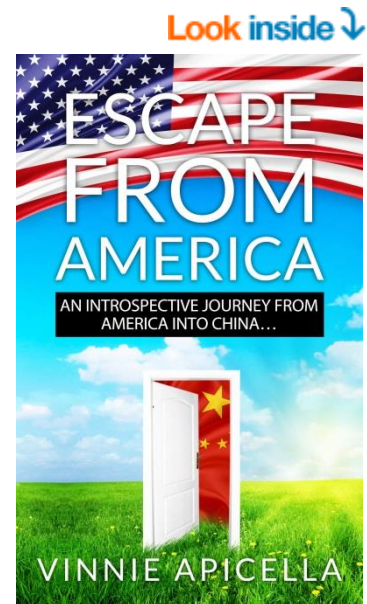
EFA is meant to educate and entertain readers who wish to truly “know” two of the world’s dominant superpowers, as well as provide powerful insight from someone approaching the subject from both a local and global perspective.

But that's not all...

I believe my “story within a story” can encourage you, whatever your background, to take a closer look at your life. Take everything into account and simply do a self-assessment. Am I happy? Is this what I envisioned? Or consequently, are things really as bad as I thought?

Broadly speaking, for anyone who is not satisfied with the status quo and feels there are better ways forward, this book will inspire you.

Do you think you know America? Do you think you know China? Think Again.



Below is a complimentary sample from my new book, *Escape from America*. If you like what you see, please feel free to share with others and consider purchasing the complete version. Enjoy!

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Perception of China (The Point of Entry)



We tend to do either of two things regarding matters we don't know about—become indifferent or develop a fear. Perhaps it's natural for us as human beings to fear the unknown. It makes us uncomfortable. Some may embrace it, but in general, unless we take the time to study or educate ourselves about a particular place or thing, we will dismiss it as irrelevant to us, or we avoid it fearing something bad.

As someone who'd previously known nothing of China and never envisioned visiting there in the first place, for a long time I was simply indifferent. I already had plenty of opportunities to travel throughout the world, plus I had several friends of different cultures. Living in New York

City certainly provides enough dining and entertainment to satisfy the curiosity of any would-be traveler to almost any place on earth. So my thought was: “Why would I care about China? Should I be interested in a full day of air travel to go to a place where everything is so completely foreign to me?”

Then something unexpected happened—I became enlightened through education. Non-coincidentally, this first occurred during my freshman year at Columbia. Soon I was interacting with more foreign students, many of them from China. I began to learn about expats who relocated there for business. Other students took summer getaways to study in local language schools or teach English. Before long, going to China seemed less like a ridiculous whim and more like a realistic option. Still, there were questions from friends and family about why I would want to go to China.

My answer: “Well, I don’t really know, but I expect it will be interesting to find out.”

And so it began...

In fact, it seems whenever I would speak to someone at work or school and discuss travel to the Far East, places like Japan and Hong Kong usually came up. Obviously Japan has been one of the world’s largest economies for many years and Tokyo has been a popular destination for tourists, business travelers, and global investors. The sport of baseball is highly popular there as in the U.S. and more and more Japanese players are entering the Major Leagues in recent times. Hong Kong as well, is a global metropolis and international financial center, and has a highly developed economy. With its unique blend of East and West, old and new, Hong Kong has become one of Asia's most popular tourist destinations.

So to my friends and me, those cities were viewed as more popular and accessible, all offering true international flavor—therefore more comfortable to Western visitors. Places in South Asia were also popular such as Singapore and Thailand with their tropical climate, exotic beaches, and scenery.

But China was a new topic of discussion for us, and beyond my campus, it was rare that I would meet anyone who knew much about the country or who had ever been there. Of course now with all of the changes taking place, China’s remarkable growth story, our closely linked governments in spite of some differences, and more tourism options, the mentioning of travel to China is no longer met with quizzical looks by people I know.

That said, China is still a great distance away from the States and a non-stop flight from the northeast takes more than 13 hours, so it's still a major undertaking for some travelers. But then so are places like Tokyo, Seoul, and Hong Kong, but that hasn't seemed to stop anyone from visiting. China has been both glamorized and scrutinized in the news for its impressive growth and individual successes as well as for certain questionable regulatory policies. But the fact is China is in the news on a regular basis—it deserves to be. It is a major player on the world stage and everyone knows it.

I. Another Time, Another Place

» *The allure of Asian culture and China's history*



As a child, I'd often wondered about Asia—the countries, the people, the culture. It looked so different from anything I'd known here at home. It was a world away and typically uncommon for young people to visit there. My first taste of China came through my passion for Bruce Lee's Kung Fu movies when I was a kid. Sure, I suppose many of the backgrounds were fake, but some of the outdoor scenes inspired me. Others would follow such as the many Jackie Chan films.

Through movie scenes and various literary materials I was struck by the scenic landscapes and age-old architecture that illustrated this different world, one that was fascinating to me. As I grew older, I studied in a course called *The History of Chinese Civilization* during college, which also helped build my interest. I marveled at one of my classmates who I noticed was writing notes in Chinese characters. This was not so long ago, maybe ten years, but to me, this was not common to see an American writing in Chinese. It was amazing yet something I felt far beyond my grasp. To this day I still cannot write a word in Chinese, but it's one of the many challenges I hope to overcome in the future.

So there I was in 1999, studying Chinese civilization and *Dynamics of American Politics*—how's that for diversity? And out of all of my courses, those two were among the most challenging. Yet as different as they appeared to be, both featured an impressive history with many twists and turns and lessons along the way. Upon their completion, I felt like I'd finally arrived, both academically and intellectually. Yet regarding China, my education was only just beginning.

We often wonder about decisions we've made in the past and "what if I had done this" or "what if I had done that," and feel if we knew then what we know now, we would have made different decisions. But of course we can't know the future and so we make the best decisions for our present situation. So a year later, I was required to enroll in a foreign language course. This was still a few years before I first visited China, so studying Chinese was not something I considered. Instead, I chose French. And no disrespect meant to my former teachers—I loved them both—but it was a colossal mistake that I wish I could take back!

As to why I chose French, it was among the most popular languages, and having visited France a few years earlier and enjoying its city life and cultural beauty, I planned to return in the future, maybe buy an apartment in Paris, or a home in the country. It was a place I could see myself returning to for future holidays—the disappointment of Euro Disney notwithstanding.

Feedback received from foreigners who've visited France was that even though people are friendly and the cities are lovely, perhaps the locals dislike Americans and may purposely avoid speaking English. People can speak English in most European countries as well as their local language. Fortunately, I did not have such an experience from the French locals, and since I planned to spend time there in the future, I should learn how to speak some French.

What an ill-conceived and simply dumb idea.

Unfortunately, I have not yet returned to Paris and aside from uttering a few broken phrases while visiting Montreal, today I can barely remember how to put a complete sentence together!

So dear readers the moral of the story is, if you're going to study French, have a greater sense of purpose than summer holidays, Parisian cafes, or "romance." Yes, in fact French is considered the language of romance and is very attractive compared to others, but it is not very widespread in America and I found out quickly after graduation that most of the time I spent learning it was wasted. For more practical usage, I should have studied Spanish, or here's an idea... Chinese!

We live and we learn... it just takes some of us longer than others I suppose.

But I digress. Getting back to my education about China and what appealed to me about it, I've always loved history. China offers plenty of it. I also love Chinese food but I should point out, the Chinese restaurants in America are very different than in China. This was just another example of my fondness for China and what appealed to me when I visited: the restaurants were much larger, more exotic, more decorative, and the menu featured greater selections and was much different than here; the dishes are served more quickly; and the waitresses wear these cute little traditional outfits—though few of them look very happy about it.

The Chinese restaurants in the States are typically small and usually only for take-out and delivery. They can be considered “fast food” for the most part, though there are some larger and more authentic Chinese restaurants to be found in such “Chinatowns” within the big cities. The small local restaurants are all typically the same thing—same menu, same prices, and usually a similar name with slight variation, for example “Golden Mushroom,” “Golden Wok,” “Golden Panda,” and of course the truly original “Oriental Kitchen,” etc.

I would often spend a great deal of time at Columbia's East Asian Library (pictured below) during off hours. It was peaceful and serene, and the perfect place to study or prepare for exams. There was also an aura about it that furthered my fascination about Asian culture. Entering the building seemed almost like stepping into a different place in time...



At this point, I had a few friends from the university and we would meet and converse, and sometimes go out for lunch—French food, of course. Even though many of them were from China originally, there were some that were not, having been born in America but of Chinese ancestry. So to add to my knowledge, I visited some China-based social sites where I would make friends, and learn a little more about their culture, their cities, the weather, travel, business... In return, I shared my experiences with them about the States, my school, government policies, '80's music, and pretty much anything else. I swear, if only I were a bit more intuitive, Foreigner, Journey, and Cheap Trick would be platinum-selling artists there long after their heyday in America!

It's funny but government always seems to come up in conversations with everyone I've met from other countries. I mean *every* foreign country, no matter that it's Italy, France, England, Hungary, or wherever, people just seem to have a greater consciousness about government activity. Luckily, I could speak more about it as I furthered my education, but earlier, I have to admit I was very ignorant and indifferent about my own government and how we as a people existed. Indeed, I was among the many "Americans" referenced in earlier chapters!

I chatted with female friends to learn more about the women of China, their likes and dislikes, their expectations, hopes for the future, and so forth. My intent wasn't to meet an online bride—as I suspect some others might, and sometimes for less than genuine reasons—but I really did want to better understand their views, so it was a good way for me to stay current and learn from others who, amazing to me, lived halfway around the world. This ongoing experience helped set the groundwork for my first venture into China shortly thereafter.

So it began with my schooling, then with classmates, and later my online friendships, all of which confirmed for me that China was an intriguing place that in spite of its long history and ancient traditions, sometimes archaic—well yes, fashions and acting—commonly depicted in movies, was really a dynamic country with forward-thinking people who had great interest in fraternizing with Americans. So by now, I convinced myself, this is a place I *should* visit.

Soon after, I'd have my first chance through my work in the university's East Asian Studies program...

II. My First Visit

» *No, I'm not famous, maybe a little unusual?*



In Columbia University there is a big concentration of foreign students; perhaps more so than most other universities within the States. The fact that it's located in New York and there are large communities of Asian people, Indians, Europeans, and so on, has lent to the cultural diversity within the city and our campus. On campus, there was the Department of East Asian Languages and Culture where I found myself spending a great deal of time.

It was also there that I began work as an office manager for the department responsible for the East Asian Studies program. This role was a great way for me to not only experience more about the Asian community, but also to contribute something positive within the program. Though I did serve mainly an administrative function, I had daily interaction with the professors and students. It was a rewarding experience and something that I'm proud of.

My first visit to China came in October of 2003 during the National Day holiday, as a representative for the program for which I was employed at the university. As I would discover later during future trips, this was an ideal time to experience the weather there. Similar to autumn season in my region of the States, in October, I found the weather in northeast China to be warm and comfortable during the day and cooler during the evening.

Our plane landed in Shanghai, which is probably the most appropriate city to arrive for first time visitors from New York because of its international character.

At that time I didn't know what to expect. I had previously received instructions from colleagues and suggestions from friends, plus local contacts to meet upon our arrival. I was traveling with a professor and two post-doc students, none of whom were Chinese. We had a fairly flexible itinerary, but the trip was brief, only five days, and my role was to meet with China-based representatives from corresponding programs from our university, attend events, meet prospective students, and exchange information about the program. Being there mainly for business purposes and less for tourism, there was no planned sightseeing schedule or city guide to show us cultural landmarks and famous districts.

Sometimes not knowing what to expect lends to the excitement of arriving in a new place, but in this case, I was a bit nervous in spite of my "entourage," but who were also consumed with their prep work and couldn't afford to be quite so concerned about trivial matters like logistics; then we met our local contact, Ms. Zheng, who'd been waiting on us for several hours due to a flight delay, and all was okay.

PuDong International Airport was very impressive and exceeded my expectations. In fact, I have visited several international airports and this one rivaled the best that I'd seen. I was attracted by the local style and traditional decorations—the Chinese restaurants and tea houses, the massage parlors, the rest areas for business travelers. So while I jokingly remarked to my colleagues about staying overnight in the airport earlier due to our late arrival, there was plenty to keep us occupied if we *did* need to spend more time there.

From the moment I left the airport, it was a whole new experience for me. You can read the books, watch the movies, and visit the websites, but there is nothing quite like being there in person. I was awestruck by these futuristic skyscrapers and flashing Chinese characters everywhere I looked—I don't mean the locals, but the language... though we did spot a few "characters" along the way who were only too happy to gawk at our unusual group.

Outside, I almost felt like a celebrity after receiving several looks from people in the street. I should also add, our professor and the post-docs were Japanese and Korean, so clearly not out of place—at least from a distance; but me, on the other hand, quite different. Granted this was still only the early 2000s and as the international community's familiarity with China had already since been established, this couldn't have been completely strange to the locals, seeing some sleep-deprived white guy walking through the city gazing curiously at everything.

Yet that's how it seemed to me at first.

If you've never traveled to New York or London or Paris, you probably can't relate to the similarities Shanghai is quickly developing to rival the likes of those global giants. Shanghai has rapidly become a true cosmopolitan city with a significant international climate. Based on what I've seen over the years, this has happened in a very short time. Had I not previously read the stories and known some recent news about China already, I would never have believed this city once originated as a local fishing village!

A few days later, we had to travel from Shanghai to its "little sister" city Wuxi, which we did by train. These were the only two cities where I would visit during this first trip. It was still a lot to take in. My goal here is not to bore you with detailed accounts of my job responsibilities during this visit, so I will concentrate mainly on my experience as a foreign visitor and how I perceived things—plus what I presume others may have perceived from *my* presence.

The Shanghai train station was overwhelming. I came from New York City, which is known as a very crowded place. At some times in the day, it can seem like the entire world population is concentrated right there within Times Square and seemingly every exit route out of the city from 14th through 42nd streets! The train stations and bus stations are typically as crowded. However, the Shanghai train station was like nothing I'd ever seen before. It was beyond crowded, noisy, hot, and I don't think one person there wouldn't have chosen to be somewhere else at that particular moment in time if they could. It was typical of most train stations or metropolitan transportation hubs, just to my experience, much busier!

Throughout Shanghai and later in Wuxi, there were plenty of international businesses, tourists, and taxis to go around, yet I'd still notice people's eyes gazing curiously at me—perhaps confusedly in some cases—but quite deliberately, on the sidewalks, restaurants, hotel lobbies, etc. Why not our 68-year-old professor or the two clean-cut fellows with neat collars and glasses?

Did I look like someone famous?

Probably not, but my appearance certainly didn't blend with our group, nor other well-tailored businesspeople that characterize many foreign visitors. Still, even if unsettling at first, it was also somewhat appealing to receive this extra degree of attention I never received back home.

I recall wondering what if I first traveled to China 20 years earlier, what sort of impression might I have made? Certainly there were fewer numbers of foreigners in the country and

foreign tourism was nowhere close to what it's grown to during the 2000s. But it was just strange... and unexpectedly pleasurable to the extent I almost wanted to strap on a guitar and start performing for everyone.

So clearly two things were occurring here:

The first was that a city like Wuxi, small by China standards, was not probably known to many foreign tourists. Though I would come to learn that JiangSu Province has much to offer visitors and such places as Wuxi, Suzhou, and Nanjing are well-respected throughout Chinese history, and worth a visit, they were still somewhat more obscure than the first tier cities that most foreigners are likely to frequent. I was a foreigner in *every* respect the moment I set foot in Wuxi, and apparently I was an unusual surprise to many of the locals.

Second, my appearance, while not sloppy, was casual. I did not need to dress formally outside of our meetings and program lectures; so I was comfortable in a t-shirt, jeans, and sneakers. My hair was a bit lengthy, tattoos, earrings. So in this regard, maybe I looked like some foreign pop star that somehow got misplaced outside the lobby of the Jinjiang Hotel. I will never really know for sure. But I must have been something out of the ordinary for that particular location and people simply wanted to get a better look at the guy from planet Weirdo!

By the way, Ms. Zheng later confirmed that, yeah, I was an uncommon sight—but minimal foreign presence also had something to do with it. So unfortunately, my likeness to a famous star was more a play within my own mind than rooted in reality.

Still, it was nice to receive a little extra attention however we can get it; after all, we are social beings at the core, aren't we?

III. Getting to Know the Land and its People

» *Starbucks? KFC? Pizza Hut? Where am I again?*



Prior to my arrival in China, I had this picture painted in my mind of this far off land filled with ancient splendor and wondrous architecture. And indeed this is the case in various locations there. I believe these are the many appealing factors to prospective tourists planning a visit where their goal is to see that which is unusual or unavailable closer to home.

But what I didn't expect, and I suppose what the tourist sites didn't prepare me for, were littler versions of NYC wrought with emerging skyscrapers and bustling streets, distinguishable by floods of neon-lit Chinese symbols. And then more so unexpectedly, there were the "golden arches" of McDonald's restaurant beaming in the distance along another busy street; not far from there, a red "KFC" sign. So it was clear above all else, China certainly was becoming a global nation and there was one of our American contributions to its eager society of growing spenders—fast food, compliments of a Clown and a Colonel!

Now this is a truism of many countries—the world is simply getting smaller. By that I mean the ability to travel internationally is more widely available today than in times past. The Internet has provided a variety of tourist sites that highlight travel locations and provide visitors with all

the information they need about a given place. We can actually “see” another country before we arrive there.

Communications methods have progressed to the point where international calling by phone and the Internet allow us to gain more experience about overseas destinations in real-time. Global business continues to grow and expand at unprecedented rates; everything from manufacturing, electronics, international fashions, transportation, dining and lodging, and more now crosses yesterday’s cultural boundaries into today’s world market.

Should I have been surprised to see a McDonald’s appear at every other corner of a major city in China? No. But what did surprise me were the long lines that formed outside of Pizza Hut during dinner time!

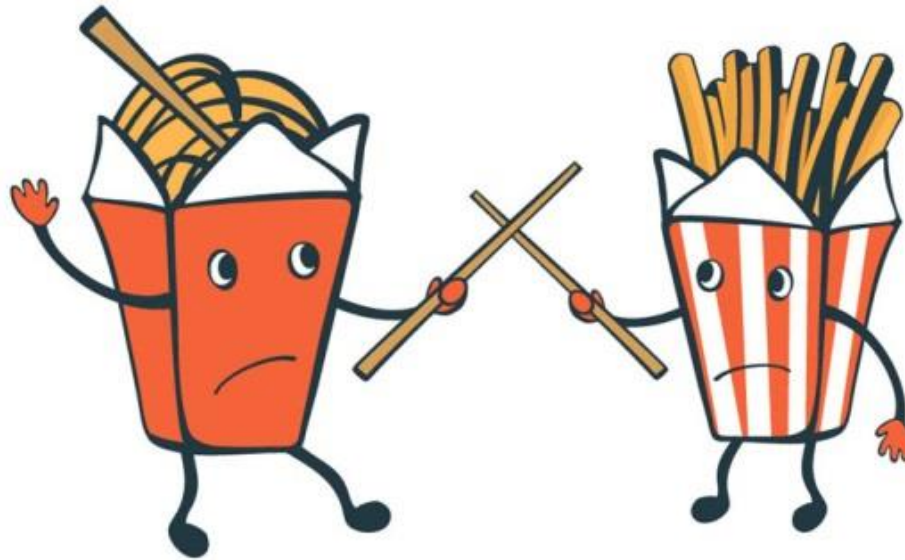
Pizza is widely popular in America. It originated in Italy and is available in various sizes, styles, and flavors. Pizza Hut is one of the many chains that has seen some success. But to be honest, there is much competition with other known brands such as Domino’s, Papa John’s, and Little Caesar’s; which one is more popular than the other is a subject for debate. But to be clear, these chains do not come close to matching the quality and taste of the authentic pizzerias that can be found at nearly every American city street corner or suburban shopping center.

What was all the fuss about?

The answer was quite clear: this was something new and different and the people wanted to experience it for the first time. Part of my perception about the Chinese and pizza was that since I rarely see Chinese occupying pizza shops here in the States, they just don’t like it. Sure, there are some, and many of my younger friends like pizza, but more often than not, they avoid fast food type restaurants and patronize the Asian restaurants.

So to see the popularity of Pizza Hut in China was surprising... *and* inspiring. It was quite impressive to see the locals enjoying something that was previously unknown to them and that we could deliver something unique and acceptable—no pun intended. But “acceptable” puts it mildly; these people were absolutely enamored with this stuff.

As for my experience at the Pizza Hut in Shanghai... aside from a few different menu items that were created to generate local appeal—there was a seafood pizza, for instance featuring squid rings and shrimp tails—the pizza looked, smelled, and tasted the same in every respect. So I guess the old saying is true after all:



“A Big Mac is a Big Mac,” here, there, or anywhere else in the world.

No Big Mac-themed gimmicky pizza items though, in case you were wondering, but plenty of rice bowls, pasta dishes, and beefsteak-based fare as part of Pizza Hut’s cross-cultural emergence into a new market ripe for a fresh “gourmet” dining experience!

Here’s a little side note I found on **Wikipedia** that was interesting... if not somewhat ridiculous:

With the expansion of McDonald's into many international markets, the company has become a symbol of globalization and the spread of the American way of life.

McDonald’s? A symbol of the American way of life? God help us!

I should admit, I enjoy eating at McDonald’s once in a while—it’s quick, convenient, and cheap. The food also tastes good. It’s also a fun place for the kids to play. But it’s also the kind of food that is high in fat and cholesterol and generally unhealthy if consumed frequently and in large quantities. As an American, I would like to think we can do better to help share the “American way of life” in other countries than by simply promoting poor health practices by way of family-friendly fast food joints!

Starbucks was also surprising for me to see in China. One of the highlights of my visit in Shanghai was to visit an actual Chinese tea house. Now of course these are not likely any unique attraction to locals as tea’s obviously been a consumer staple in China for ages. But for

me, this was a real “taste” of China that I’d expected and truly enjoyed. Starbucks, on the other hand, I could do without.

Coffee is a very popular drink in the States. Here, it’s the beverage of choice for many to start their day and for a late afternoon boost. Some seem to love the taste; others drink it for energy; still others may enjoy elements of both. For me, it’s bitter tasting and stomach turning and I have never liked it since I first tried it. So if there was one thing I thought would not be so likely to appear in China, it was Starbucks coffee.

And yet there it was.

The general opinions from some local friends about the appeal of coffee is that it’s not widely popular and that most of the locals will go there and drink tea or eat snacks rather than consume large quantities of coffee. Most of the time, these locales are frequented by foreigners anyway. True enough, the two Starbucks locations that we passed, one in Shanghai and another in Wuxi, were mainly inhabited by groups of foreigners getting fat on flavored coffees and discussing business.

This section was not meant to overanalyze the appearance and popularity of foreign fast food outlets and chain coffee shops, but since we’ve come this far, I may as well add KFC to the mix. Another surprise was to learn that KFC is *more* popular in China than McDonalds. This is the opposite of the U.S. Overall, McDonald’s, which has been in existence since 1940, has a broader appeal. In China, KFC was the first foreign fast-food chain to expand into the country back in 1987. More than 20 years later, based on information from the Yum! Brands website, there are nearly 2,800 KFC restaurants in China. McDonalds is approaching only a little more than 1,000.

So, while this topic of foreign restaurant brands is not so important in and of itself, it underscores the popularity of outside brands and how the influx of new business and new opportunities can offer local appeal in foreign markets. Frankly, even with all my research and interactions with Chinese, I could not conceive the level of popularity with these international brands in China.

What’s next, IKEA?

For me, as a first time visitor to China, I wanted no part of the typical American fare or comforts of home. I was there on business, but also had enough time to experience authentic Chinese meals and visit local shops, however, careful to avoid paying “foreign” markups to shopkeepers who were suspiciously friendly the moment I approached only to backup when Ms. Zheng

shadowed me. While I can understand the apprehension for some foreigners to delve too far away from their comfort zones and instead gravitate toward a McDonalds or Starbucks, stay in a five-star hotel or whatever may suit them, that's never been my forte as a foreign traveler.

China is becoming more global, there is no doubt. For as much as I applaud its people's willingness and ability to change and accept contributions from various other cultures, it is also my hope that China continues to allow its traditions to flourish amidst the sea of globalization; traditions that have made it such a cultural marvel to us onlookers from the outside world.

Advancement and change are necessary in all facets of life, but few countries around the world can boast the history and heritage of China.

[END]

I hope you enjoyed this complimentary chapter sample from my new book. For more information on *Escape from America* or to make a purchase, please visit our website:

<https://www.edgestudentsuccess.com/about/escape-from-america/>

Thank you for reading!

I believe we are bound only by those limits we place upon ourselves. However you define “freedom,” for it to truly exist and impact our lives for the better, we must first condition ourselves to believe we have it within us to change. Release your mind, reprogram your thinking, and recognize the possibilities.

Tomorrow starts today...



Vinnie Apicella