

# Echoes from a Diary

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**Abstract:** In a series of journal-styled entries, Xin Fan documents her educational journey beginning with her 10-year-old literary-inspired dreams to see the world beyond her small Chinese village to her eventual admission into a doctoral program at Durham University. Her narrative reveals certain challenges facing international students in pursuit of their higher education dreams, while highlighting the qualities of resilience, persistence, intellectual drive, and imagination that contribute to first-gen student success.

## **Feb 2006, Jinzhong, China**

Guess what, I'm 10 today! When we were all hanging out at the family get-together, someone asked me what I wanna' be when I grow up. And you know what I said super quick? "Peking University!" That's like the biggest, most awesome dream ever! Ever since I visited Beijing two years ago, I have been dreaming about going there again for university. Beijing is so different from the small town I am in now. That would be so cool!

## **July 2010, Jinzhong, China**

So, today I came across this super interesting book. It's packed with stories from students who went overseas for Uni, sharing all about their first-year experiences and how they see education in the USA or UK. As I got lost in the book, I started to wonder: "What's this TOEFL and SAT stuff?" and "Why don't they need to take college entrance exams like us?" I felt a sort of awe and maybe a bit of jealousy; it's like these guys in the book are living in a different world, where they can follow their passions and travel globally while I'm stuck here cramming for tests.

And speaking of travelling the world, my mind's always been captured by the stunning castles and cool landscapes in *Harry Potter*, but it feels more like a dream than reality. Not many people I know in real life have the means or the chance to explore abroad or even study or work in different countries. Yet, the allure of the unknown is really strong. I often find myself pouring over the illustrations in books like *Little Women* and *Jane Eyre*, just wondering what it would be like to be in such fantastic places, but it always felt unreachable, like a dream I couldn't quite touch.

But who knows what the future holds, right? Seems like English is a key subject if I ever want to step outside my town. Guess I'll need to put my nose to the grindstone and really get cracking with my English. Just gotta' be prepared for whatever comes next!

## **Sept 2015, Nanjing, China**

I was fortunate to secure a place at Nanjing University, a prestigious institution respected in its own capacity. However, on my first day there, a local student casually commented that NJU wasn't such a significant achievement, as the cream of the crop from Nanjing had already ventured to the UK and USA for their studies.

As I explored the university's various clubs and societies, I was astounded by certain peers who spoke impeccable British English. Their mastery of the language was a stark contrast to my own skills, which felt inadequate in comparison within the university environment.

The sense of being overwhelmed grew stronger as many of my classmates began planning for postgraduate studies abroad and paid large amounts of money for consultants and agencies. The dream of overseas education, once distant, seemed even further from my reach.

### **Mar 2017, Nanjing, China**

Today feels like a fairytale, except it's real! As a student from the Japanese Department at Nanjing University, I've been gifted with a unique opportunity that feels like a dream come true.

I am so lucky to study something I actually enjoy. I fell in love with the Japanese language. Since I set foot on the Uni, most of the free time I've had has been spent reading my textbooks, replaying recordings over and over until I could practically hear them in my sleep, and reciting text after text until I knew them by heart. Whether I was walking to class, heading to the canteen, or just taking a stroll, I always had my earphones in, listening and learning.

All of this hard work, all of these hours of relentless study, they've truly paid off. I've consistently found myself at the top of my class and, the best part is I've just received news that I've been awarded a full government scholarship to spend two semesters at Tokyo University!

I can't even begin to express how excited I am. This is the ultimate opportunity for anyone studying Japanese—to be fully immersed in the language and culture every single day. The prospect of practising Japanese with locals, of using the language in real-life situations...it's all I've ever dreamed of. This will also be my first ever international experience. I'm beyond excited to experience Tokyo, to make new friends, to immerse myself in the local culture.

My heart is filled with joy, and yet, there's this flutter of nerves I can't seem to shake off. I mean, I've always dreamed of studying in Japan, but now that it's actually happening, it feels...so surreal, and honestly, kind of scary.

This will be my first time living abroad alone, away from the comforts of my home, my friends, and my family. There's a whirlwind of questions swirling in my head. Will my Japanese be good enough to get by day-to-day? Will the locals be friendly and welcoming? Can I really manage everything by myself? And it's not just about the big stuff. Even the little things are keeping me up at night. Like, can I actually cook for myself?

Despite these worries, though, I know that I'm ready for this adventure. Yes, there are uncertainties, but that's part of the experience, right? I've been working towards this for so long, and I refuse to let my fears get the better of me. This is an opportunity of a lifetime, and I am going to make the most of it!

So, here's to taking that leap of faith. To navigating the unknown, to making mistakes and learning from them, to stepping out of my comfort zone. Wish me luck!

Tokyo, here I come!

### **Oct 2017, Tokyo, Japan**

What a day it has been. Here I am, studying at Tokyo on a scholarship—it feels like I'm living a dream. When I share photos of this beautiful foreign land with my friends back home, they're utterly amazed. There's a sense of pride in me, yet tinged with a little sadness too. I can't help but feel incredibly privileged and fortunate.

An unexpected moment happened today. I sat eating alone in the school canteen when suddenly a Japanese grandmother at the table opposite stood up with difficulty, leaned over to me and asked: "Do you know the way to the xx building, please?" Now, as a newcomer to the city, I've felt like a stranger at every turn. I certainly didn't expect to be asked for directions like I was a local. I froze for a moment and just had to muster up the courage to say in my still unskilled Japanese, "Sorry, I'm new to Japan too, so I don't know."

A look of surprise washed over the woman's face. When she learnt I was from China, her eyebrows rose even higher. The grandmother asked me if I was getting used to life in Japan. Something about her kind eyes encouraged me to open up. I spoke about my fears, my feelings of helplessness, and my loneliness. Throughout the conversation, she listened attentively, her eyes holding a heartfelt warmth. As we parted, she timidly presented me with a bouquet of wildflowers, freshly picked. "I have nothing nice to give you," she said, "These are just some wildflowers I found today. They may not be luxurious, but they're fresh. I want you to have them."

Those flowers now sit on my desk, and each time I glance at them, I'm reminded of the kindness of strangers and the blessing of God that has brought me to Japan. Life here is teaching me so much already.

### **Oct 2021, Shanghai, China**

How can you be yourself without getting caught up in all sorts of competitions? It's so hard to apply for a PhD. I keep putting it off and don't know where to start. Will I really get a scholarship? What do I do if I don't?

I took several self-tests yesterday and they all said I have moderate to severe depression. I hope I can adjust quickly and not get drowned in it.

### **Jan 2022, Jinzhong, China**

Today was one of those days when the weight of reality came crashing down on me. Though having secured an offer, the chances of obtaining funding for my Ph.D. programme seemed bleak. It was a harsh realization that not everyone has the privilege to afford a Ph.D. in the UK. I felt helpless and couldn't help but shed tears. I can't believe I cried at the dinner table, when everyone else is around. It is embarrassing but I can't help it. I am so sure doing sociological research is my calling in life, but it seems too much of a luxury.

### **April 2022, Beijing, China**

Sometimes I feel like I'm floating through a beautiful dream. Truth be told, there were moments when I was filled with self-doubt. I questioned whether I stood a chance of securing the scholarship. The odds felt stacked against me, as only 30% of the scholarship quota is allocated to international students like me. However, I've been blessed with so many friends who continuously

encourage me and a supervisor who has been so supportive throughout my scholarship application process. With their help, I pushed to the end.

And then, it happened. After four months of waiting, the good news finally came that I had been accepted! You'd think I'd have a full-on, dramatic reaction, like bursting into tears or screaming out loud. But it wasn't like that. Instead, I was enveloped by a profound sense of calm and gratitude.

Life, over the years, has taught me some precious lessons. I'm not as easily excited as I used to be. But that doesn't mean I'm not thrilled. Quite the opposite. However, I've learned to appreciate things differently. God has been with me through all my ups and downs, and so have my loved ones. Their support, their faith in me, has been a constant. And knowing that they are there for me, no matter what, that's priceless.

Securing this studentship opens up the world of research to me in a way I've only dreamed of. It allows me to delve deep into the things I am passionate about. I am incredibly happy, even if my happiness isn't expressed in loud, overt expressions of joy. This chance is something I will cherish. I'm excited about what's to come, and I'm ready to give it my all.

### **Nov 2022, Durham, UK**

Here I am, studying at Durham University, one of the best universities in the UK. I find myself walking the same halls as the characters from the *Harry Potter* films, a series that has always held a special place in my heart. Nature is so rich in Durham. I love spotting hares and squirrels on my way to the class.

### **Dec 2023, Durham UK**

Today, I tried to share my thoughts in a seminar, but the words just didn't come out right. I had ideas, but my struggles with English became apparent. I recall being the student who excelled in English back home, and now I'm the one struggling to articulate my thoughts. The irony is not lost on me.

### **April 2023, Durham, UK**

I presented my research at a conference today. A room of scholars from all around the world, and I was one of them. A surreal moment.

Despite the hurdles and the bouts of self-doubt, I keep reminding myself of how far I've come. From a small town where dreams of studying abroad were deemed too ambitious, to Nanjing, Tokyo, and now, Durham University—I've come a long way.

This journey, filled with its fair share of struggles and triumphs, has shaped me, given me a perspective that few have, and most importantly, it's made me appreciate my roots and the gifts from life. My journey has also been a testament to my parents' continuous support and their belief in my potential. They nurtured my love for reading and language learning, which became my window to the world, my escape from reality, and, eventually, my stepping stone towards a new life. Their willingness to invest in my education, despite our circumstances, has made this entire journey possible. I am grateful, for the path behind me and the journey that lies ahead.