

Take me out to the ball game, maybe there will be a crowd.
We ought to bring our own peanuts and crackers.
I really do care about the next time we get back to the air conditioning.
For it's one-two-full count-double to deep center at the Chinese ballgame!



Earlier this week, Jeremie was approached by a student and asked a bit of a random question. She just went up to him and asked if he played baseball. Maybe it had something to do with the fact he is white and she figured she's play her odds. Turns out she is the president of the baseball club on campus and is trying to recruit some people to play. Jeremie mentioned that I had brought a couple of gloves with me, and she invited us to play on Friday afternoon. When Friday came, Jeremie and I were excited to play, and then realized that our afternoon class ran about 90 minutes longer than we had thought it did. Regrettably, I emailed Jessica to let her know that we'd be unable to make it to the game. When she responded, she was obviously disappointed, but all was not lost. Again we were invited to a game, this time to play with the school's team, coached by a former professional baseball player in China.



On Saturday at 12:10 we met with Jessica to catch the metro over to the East campus. We also traveled with a couple other students from our campus who are in the club, Harry and P.Y. The photo above shows the five of us, left to right, Harry, P.Y. Jon, Jessica, and Jeremie.

It took about an hour to arrive at the field we were to play at. The metro ride lasted about 30 minutes, and was the last time we would feel air conditioning for the next 5 hours or so. It also happened to be one of the hottest and most humid days I have ever experienced, even by Thailand's hot-season standards. In talking with one of the locals, they say that as the pollution has increased over the years, the heat has risen here too. We'll, by the time we get to the field after about 30 minutes of walking and a quick snack, I have already sweated through most of my shirt.

The field was one of the schools running tracks, and we would be playing on the infield. Actual baseball fields are very few and far between in China. Soccer and tracks are at most schools, so they just make do with any available grass for the love of the game. We were tossing the ball around when the coach arrived. He informed us that we would have to move to a nearby soccer field because the field they normally played on was being replaced and not ready for use.

The field we moved to was an AstroTurf soccer field. Within a few minutes, about two-dozen students from the school had arrived, comprising the SYSU baseball team. No one was in anything resembling a uniform. It was too hot for most people to be wearing hats. Most just arrived in a t-shirt and shorts. There was a buzz in the air because three Japanese exchange students would also be playing that day.

After about 30 minutes of warm-ups, including stretching and a few players running some laps, and everyone tossing the ball around, it was time to scrimmage. Teams were divided. My team asked me what position I wanted to play, and wanting to be a good guest, I told them I would be happy wherever they wanted me. They asked if I would catch, and I obliged. I soon learned why this position is not favored in China and given to someone else. The heat and humidity is barely bearable to begin with.



Getting in catching gear is just over the top for most humans. This photograph shows me getting into the gear.

The catching equipment is the best example of how "pick-up" this team is, and that they really are playing for fun and the love of a game that is very new to them. The catcher's equipment was several years old with most of the straps on the leg guards were holding on with their last threads. The helmet and mask were 80s technology. And the glove, although the best they could come up with was a cheap model that made holding onto a ball hard for even the best of catchers.

Within just a few practice pitches, I learned a few things. First, their pitchers, although not having the strongest arms, could put some big movement on a curveball and slider. They throw some nasty off speed pitches as well, even with fastballs maxing out at no more than 80. Jamie Moyer would have been proud of these pitches! Second, trying to track a ball while wearing a mask like this for the first time, with a new type of glove, and a batter swinging in front of me, can make catching a ball a major league task. Third, keeping focused on the ball thrown on the inside part of the plate takes some a few pitches to figure out. Fifth, repeated squatting like a catcher does is simply not good on ones knees. Last, wearing all this equipment when it's in the upper 90s and 100% humidity is just not a good idea.



By this point I had hoped to simply complete the inning, and then switch positions. I only made it through 4 batters and one out! Holding on the ball, partially because of the newness of the task, and partially because of the glove, was pretty difficult. I feel better about this as all the catchers were having similar issues holding onto the ball. But I just couldn't focus because of the intense weather conditions I was facing, and I knew I would get sick if I stayed in much longer.

So after the fourth batter, I traded positions with the third baseman. All of the players were very encouraging so that I would not feel as though I was losing face by having to move elsewhere on the diamond.

I was glad I gave it the old college try. I had a new experience, and it was fun working with the pitcher to try to get the batters out. The pictures on this page show me in action for my brief stint as a collegiate catcher. The lower photo is a shot of me actually catching a swing and a miss. The batter is the coach, a former professional in China living in Guangzhou and helping with the team for the fun and love of the game. Later in the at-bat he would get his base hit.

In the field afterwards, I spent the rest of the first inning at third, the second inning in center field, the third inning at shortstop, and the fourth inning at second base. I fielded a couple of ground balls, once at shortstop and again at second. At second, we were

close to turning a double play, which would have been very exciting for this team to turn. Maybe next time!

I had three at bats in the game's four innings. For my first at bat, the pitcher was the coach. I was eager to prove that I could hit a ball off a professional. He was eager to prove how good he was against American competitions, and show the Americans how hard he could through a fastball and how nasty his change up could be. The first few pitches were fastballs. It took me a couple of pitches to adjust to his speed. I fouled the third pitch down the third baseline. With a one ball and two strikes count, and feeling confident from the foul ball, I was ready for another fastball. This time he threw his change up. I was miles ahead of the pitch. I tried holding up, but I had essentially finished my follow through before the pitch ever arrived. My swing essentially looked like an very awkward attempt at checking a swing but going way too far around. He threw a great pitch and fooled me. I was sure to praise him the pitch at the end of the inning.



For my second at bat, one of the Japanese players was the new pitcher. He wasn't overpowering, but very effective in changing his speeds. He even threw a curve ball. I fouled off three pitches, and then struck out on a fastball after several off speed pitches. I was close though! These two photos are from my second at bat.

My final at bat was in the 4th and final inning. Again, the Japanese player was pitching. This time the count turned full, and all I had done for my two strikes was swing and miss on a couple of balls I should have hit. The umpire gave me a great gift as well on the third ball, as I'll admit it should have been a strike. With the next pitch, I was offered a waste high fastball that I finally got my bat on, and sent a deep drive over the center fielder's head. Up to this point in the game, it was only the second fly ball of the game into the outfield as well. I raced to second base to the cheers of players on both teams for the best hit of the game. I was excited as well. It was a great hit; one of those that one almost forgets about running the bases while they watch the ball in flight.



Jeremie also had a nice hit in the game.

He was the first batter to hit the ball into the outfield on the fly, putting one over the second baseman's outreached glove in the second inning. This is the photograph of his

hit as he follows through. The pitcher can be seen looking up at the ball flying by him. Jeremie was able to reach second base on this hit with some hustle.

By 5:30, a few soccer teams were ready to take over the field. They had patiently kept to half of the field, but as 6 was approaching, they were ready to play on a full field. We had been out there for close to 4 hours, and everyone was tired and sweaty from the heat. The temperature had only cooled down a little as the evening approached.



To wrap up the team's practice, we did some cheers while we stretched out. While stretching, the coach would chant to four, and we would chant up to 8, all in Chinese. I was happy that it was a chant I could participate in! One of the more interesting stretches had two players facing one another, with their hands on the others shoulders. They would then massage each other's shoulders. This was quite weird for Jeremie and I, and the Chinese got a chuckle out of our skepticism on this one.

Following this, the coach asked all of us foreign players to say something to the players. After the three Japanese players, it was my turn. I thanked them for the opportunity to play with them, and complimented them for the love and passion they have for the game. Regardless of the heat and humidity, their respect for the game and having a good time was refreshing to see and experience.

We were invited back to play with the team each Saturday, a very tempting offer I would like to accept. My school schedule hits full stride this week, so I will know in just a few days if the workload will allow me to make such a commitment. It would be a lot of fun to keep playing with the SYSU baseball team!