



INTERNATIONAL EXCHANGE

NAME

NATHAN LIU

FROM

USA

TO

CHINA

PROGRAM

NSLI-Y



0123456789



Ready or Not, Here I Come!

His bags were packed, his passport and flight tickets were in hand, but three days before he was to fly into Beijing, Nathan Liu still didn't have a confirmed host family on his high school study abroad program. He hadn't considered that the delay could have something to do with his being blind until a friend raised the question:

“Are some countries more accessible than others?”

After months of getting ready for his language immersion experience in China, Nathan was taken aback by the possibility that perhaps China wasn't ready for him.

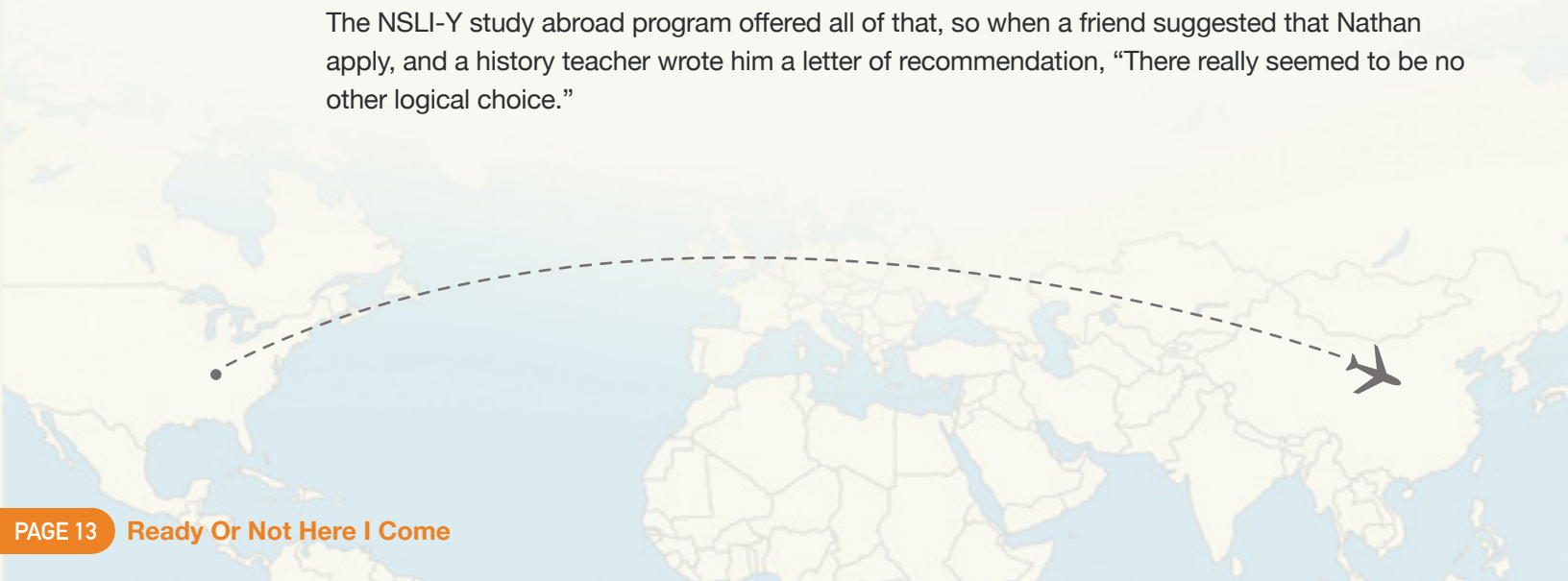
Having attended a mainstream high school in the United States, Nathan knew that, with a few accommodations in place, he was completely capable of taking on the same workload as his peers without disabilities. But in a country like China, where inclusive classrooms are less common and students with disabilities often study at specialized schools, Nathan's participation might have initially seemed intimidating to the high school in Changzhou, a city about 100 miles northwest of Shanghai.

Still, Nathan had come too far, having successfully passed the rigorous application process for the U.S. Department of State-funded National Security Language Initiative for Youth (NSLI-Y) program.

Nathan worked closely with the NSLI-Y staff to help them understand his specific needs and abilities. They, in turn, identified a host family - mom, dad and younger brother - to welcome Nathan into their home.

There was no going back now – not that he would want to! Nathan's childhood growing up in Germany had instilled in him a passion for international travel and cultures, while a desire to explore his family's Chinese-American heritage compelled him to seek out opportunities to be immersed in China.

The NSLI-Y study abroad program offered all of that, so when a friend suggested that Nathan apply, and a history teacher wrote him a letter of recommendation, “There really seemed to be no other logical choice.”





Although China did present challenges for someone with a disability, it also offered powerful opportunities.

“My mother, who is very passionate about disability rights, said this is a great opportunity to show people abroad what disabled people can do.”

Once in Changzhou, Nathan savored the experiences offered by his program and host culture and nurtured friendships with Chinese students who would later visit him in the United States.

While studying Mandarin at a high school in Changzhou, Nathan was teaching a lesson of his own. Since most of his teachers had never had a disabled student in their class before, they were initially uncertain about how to accommodate him.

With a few adjustments similar to those he uses in the United States, including large print worksheets and a magnifier, Nathan’s teachers eventually became more confident in their ability to instruct a classroom of students with and without disabilities.

“My teachers were very accommodating. They made sure I didn’t get lost, they situated me more towards the front of the classroom to make sure that I could see everything, and it was very helpful. Sure, I needed a little more help on certain assignments, but other than that, I could really do everything. I was just as engaged as the other kids.”

So are some countries more accessible than others?

If Nathan had known about China’s limited accessibility and cultural attitudes towards disability in advance, would he have chosen to study in a different country, one with a stellar reputation for inclusion?

It’s doubtful!

Living in China, and experiencing support from his Chinese teachers, host family, and new friends, taught Nathan that despite a country’s laws regarding disability access (or lack thereof), it’s ultimately the people in the country who have the power to be inclusive.

“Regardless of where they come from, I believe that human beings really just want to help each other.”

His best experience, as his mother predicted, was a chance to show people in the rest of the world what disabled people could do.

“The fact I was able to open their eyes to a certain extent was very gratifying.”

And Nathan wants more youth with disabilities to have the opportunity to go to other places, not just to China, but to Iran, Russia, Egypt or anywhere else and really get a chance to share their stories, make lifelong friends, and change the perceptions of others regarding disabled people.



Want to know more about Nathan? Play his video presentation about his study abroad trip, recorded during an #AccessTheWorld Virtual Meetup

www.youtube.com/watch?v=ipEVWqc7eSU