

## Living in China

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Among my fondest memories of international travel are the trips where I lived among the residents of the area and had a role and purpose for being there. Such was the case for being in Guiyang, China in 1995 where I taught conversational English to young adults who had taken English classes but weren't able to speak it well. This English Language Institute was a cultural exchange between my university, Oakland University, and Guizhou University in southwest China. First and last days of the experience bookmark the four-week Institute.

**Day 1.** Up at 7:00 to figure out the bathroom plumbing for showering and working the "boiler" on the kitchen counter to make the tap water safe for drinking.

Our work day begins with a 9:00 meeting with the Education Commission. The conference room is furnished with big Naugahyde chairs with tea tables in front of them. Our group of ten is all present with a like number of Chinese. There are introductions and very formal translated welcomes to the foreign teachers (that's us) from the Chinese officials.

We walk to our noon banquet - an exotic meal with more skin than I've ever seen in one meal! Dishes include snake (!), chicken, squid, eels, boudze soup (large dumplings), litchi nuts, mung beans, cucumber, spinach, potatoes, carp, fatty pork, and turtle. We sit at round tables covered with orange cloths with a lazy susan in the center. In order to be polite to our hosts, my intent was to taste a little of each dish. I had to pass on the snake, however. As the lazy susan turned so that the soup tureen with the snake soup was in front of my bowl, the filmy broth revealed the outline of a whole cooked snake cut in one inch pieces like a sliced pepperoni. During this welcome meal, many toasts were offered with 140 proof Mao Tai - exceedingly strong stuff!

The afternoon is spent settling into the apartment. Still jet-lagged from the trip, the time allowed for a power nap. At 4:00 we're all 10 loaded into the same van to go - we're not sure where. There's no translator aboard. Another meeting. There were formal introductions again, as though we hadn't all been to the opening banquet! We're then ushered into a hotel lobby and find that we're waiting for the elevator to the top floor revolving restaurant where we have a beautiful view of the city. Dinner is once again a banquet - 15 dishes! Excellent food and more Mao Tai toasts. Then back to the

apartments where we debriefed the day. It was a gastrointestinal extravaganza!  
Exhaustion is at a peak.

**The Institute.** Four weeks of classes focused on interactive exercises and conversation - lots of stories, laughter and singing. We met our classes of 15-20 every morning, 9:00 to noon, and Monday, Wednesday and Friday afternoons.

In addition to providing our apartments, we were provided a cook for our noon and evening meals. In sharp contrast to our first day, food was sparse. No cheese, bread, or desserts. Meals were primarily vegetables and noodles followed by water melon. And yes, we all lost weight!

**Last day.** Closing ceremonies. Each of us is asked to say a few words. We all become quite emotional, which we didn't expect, but it's become real that this whirlwind of an intensive experience is coming to an end. The Chinese officials present us with stamps of our Chinese names and our students had prepared very touching performances. We give out diplomas by class and each student also gets a small gift we prepared for them. They have each brought gifts for us, a number of which were treasured objects in their families - a fan, a small vase and other Chinese memorabilia.

Outside our students encircle us. Another picture. Another gift. Another good-bye. Hugs and well wishes. No one wants to leave. We're ushered to the car, as we're due for the closing banquet. As our cars pull away, the students are waving and following, shouting things like "We'll meet again!" We ride off like rock stars leaving a concert.