

Foreigners In China

Every day, people from all over the world come to visit China for business, short-term mission, or simply as tourists having a good time. According to a survey from China National Tourism Administration, China's tourism income in 2007 reached 160 billion U.S. dollars, up 22.6 percent from the year 2006. An even greater increase in the number of 2008 is expected, especially since the Summer Olympic was held in Beijing. The demand of Chinese as foreign language in the universities has increased tremendously. Only in America, the number of college students taking Chinese was up more than 50% in the last five years.

Today's China is definitely not the same as the one that has been described in Peter Hessler's book "River Town". – In it, Peter wrote about his own experiences as an English teacher in 1996: Everywhere he went, he was followed and watched by the curious crowd since he and one other teacher were the only foreigners in the small town near the Yangtze River. Whether you stay at China for a long haul, or just short-term visit, may this letter find favor with you before your departure.

Chinese call the people from other countries "Lao-Wai 老外", which literally means "old foreigner." The word "foreigner" in English, I feel, has a somewhat negative undertone in America. Yet, Lao-Wai is a very neutral expression, used both in spoken and written Chinese. However, another term used on foreigner is "Yang-Gui-Zi 洋鬼子", meaning "Foreign Devil," which may have some negative connotation depending on the person who says it or the context. Nevertheless, close friends do not feel offended when being called "Foreign Devil"; it is more humorous than "Lao Wai" and has a warm sentiment, especially among young people -- sort of like "a fellow or a dude".

Most Chinese would probably be confused, if someone refers *me* as a "Lao Wai" in China, even though technically I am an American citizen; Lao Wai is not a term for someone who looks Chinese. On the contrary, an American is always regarded as a Lao Wai in the Chinese community, even in America. You may overhear this kind of conversation outside of our church congregation: "Have you heard of so-and-so sister is getting married in our church?" "Yes! I thought she would get married in an American church, her fiancé is a Lao Wai..."

Some people consider Chinese language as the biggest setback for Lao Wai living in China. I honestly disagree. Today, many Chinese people, especially young people in big cities, speak some English. Without knowing any Chinese, one can still find the way back to the hotel, if lost in the city. Too often, Lao Wai are stopped on the street by college students to practice English with, which has become a nuisance for some.

The popularity of Chinese people learning English also contributes to the lack of motivation of some Lao Wai to learn Chinese. Like in Shenzhen, a booming city in the south near Guangzhou, one of the few cities first opened to the West after the economic reform in 1978, there are many Lao Wai doing business there. Among them, some have survived for more than 10 years without knowing Chinese. So, it depends on where you are in China to determine whether or not Chinese language is the biggest problem for Lao Wai.

However, knowing Chinese language can certainly distinguish one apart from the crowd. Something about Lao Wai speaking our mother tongue appears very appealing to the Chinese people. I remember one of my husband's patient came to visit me before his business trip to China. He wanted to learn some Chinese to show his respect to the colleagues in China. Since he was scheduled to give a Keynote speech in the conference, I taught him to say his open line-- "Ladies & Gentlemen, Good Evening"-- in Chinese. He practiced and practiced till he memorized the greeting by heart, and that small part of his speech became a highlight of his trip. When he came back, with sparkle in his eyes, he told my husband how the audience went wild and applauded passionately for him! Little language skill can work a long way, it is often the beginning of a "beautiful friendship."

To survive China, I think, food is the biggest hitch a Lao Wai encounters. Chinese people love to eat, and Chinese people love only *Chinese* food more than many other cuisines in the world. To truly enjoy or immerse in China, one has to love, or learn to love, Chinese food. Especially for business, many deals are reached at the dinner table; for missionary, trust and friendship are established while sharing a meal together. Food is a vital part of Chinese culture. For Chinese people, it is not "eat to live", but "live to eat!" Something about sharing a meal brings relaxation and closeness; goals are reached, contracts are signed when people munch together. My church, Lexington Chinese Christian Church, the only one that I know of in the Lexington area, serves lunch after the service; and we call the Sunday lunch "love feast."

If you really crave for American food while in China, cooking at home is certainly an option; but there are American fast food available, such as McDonald, Kentucky Fry Chicken and Pizza Hut. Many Lao Wai friends told me that they miss hamburger helpers and cereals. When my children visited China with us, they yearned for macaroni cheese. My children had Chinese food at home, and their flavor buds were quite attuned to the Chinese taste before left for China. If my kids missed American food, imagining a Lao Wai in China! Eating Chinese food for weeks or months is not a small challenge.

The good news is more and more restaurants serving International cuisines at big cities, such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Hong Kong. And more and more Chinese people try and enjoy Western food. One of our friends in Shanghai told us that he enjoyed toast and jam for breakfast; and he preferred to have that every morning.

Not me! Living in Kentucky for these many years only enhances my craving for the authentic Chinese food. I especially miss the breakfast on the streets of China! As a routine, I had my meals planned out with the detailed breakfast menu—before I left for China. Summer of 2007, I visited Beijing, my home town. Imagine how excited I was when being invited for breakfast by the mother of my childhood friend! Picture in my mind the mouth-watering home-made Chinese breakfast! To my surprise, or should I say a "disappointment", she treated me with the toast of expensive multi-grain bread, topped with butter and imported Smucker's strawberry jam, accompanied with a cup of hot cow milk -- not the soy-bean milk I grew up with. I guess I did not fly thousands of miles to China to enjoy an American breakfast!

After bypassing the major food issue, the minor hurdles, such as bathrooms, can be easy to deal with, I hope. In the hotels of any big cities, the bathrooms are clean and some are noticeably modern. The problem is when you are out, on the road of sight-seeing. Some toilets are very primitive, one knows what I mean if one has been to the Yosemite National Park. Instead, my children preferred to hold until they went back to the hotel. Also remember to always bring your own toilet paper, even you don't mind

to pay for the toilet paper at the entrance, you may find that the toilet paper you purchase is not the soft, fluffy kind you expect.

The good news for a Lao Wai is the cheap labor in China. It is both widely available and affordable to hire someone by the hour, to clean, to do laundry, to cook. Chinese people call this kind of work “Zhong Dian Gong 钟点工”, which means “paid by the hour”. In big cities, it costs around ¥10 for an hour, which is less than \$2. Many of the Zhong Dian Gong workers are people from the nearby countryside, they come to the city to earn a living while not doing farm work. One can even teach his or her hirer to cook American food, which is indeed “killing two birds with one stone” – first, it solves the food-craving problem and secondly, it sharpens the Chinese language skill.

Travel is not expensive in China. Trains are still the most commonly used and affordable transportation, although the price can be quite different depending on your choices, ranging from hard chair, soft chair, hard bed and soft bed. Try to avoid travel during major holidays since that is also the time most Chinese people travel. Hotels are very hard to book, virtually no bargain. Even you can afford the high price, it is not pleasant when every tourist site is jammed by people. Everywhere you look confirms this is indeed the nation with the number one, or one-fifth, of the population in the world! And the whole nation is on the street all at once! Survey from China showed that 2.0 billion people traveled during the 40 day period around the Chinese New Year in 2006 – in a nation with 1.3 billion population!

If you decide to visit China, to enjoy your experience to its fullest, I strongly suggest you to do some homework; read some books, or go to a Chinese culture and language class. China is a huge country with enormous variety in history and culture. It is much more than just the Forbidden City, green hills with rice terraces, and still water with farmers fishing on a raft with cormorants... Just like Americans don't like to be compared to Canadians, Chinese would either laugh at your ignorance or take offense if you claim that Japan and China are basically the same.

Of course, you may have already formed a certain stereotype image of Chinese from the media or other resources; not all Chinese are Jacky Chan. Very soon after I came to America, I realized that America is NOT Hollywood. On the contrary, the American people I knew were quite moral and serious about relationship. So, all I can suggest to Lao Wai is to have an open mind, and get ready to be shocked or unshocked, and accept that you may be wrong. My children were dazed to see young people kissing at public on the street of Shanghai, because their parents had told them dating was forbidden even in college – true, more than two decades ago!

Even equipped with the cultural knowledge, I still suggest Lao Wai to be very patient in China. The system there works differently than ours. One time while we were in Guilin in China, we got into an unfortunate situation with our tour guide. Now, looking back, the argument was of us lack of tolerance and understanding. Being in this country for too long, subconsciously Americanized, we were customized to the America way and pace of doing things. Assuming everything would be laid on the table, we paid for the service, therefore, we were entitled to make decision...

Be careful when you purchase things. Be absolutely sure of your decision. Returning or exchanging merchant is not as easy as purchasing. You are not at Wal-Mart...

Let me reiterate one more time -- how happy a person is in China depends on his or her mind set. Too many angry Lao Wai in China feel trapped, can't wait to go back home. Depressed, they don't want to go back to China to "suffer". Daily, they depend on Pizza hut, or KFC, or McDonald. Often, there are the people who came unequipped with knowledge of Chinese culture, not even care to learn. I see similar things in the Chinese in America who came to America to "get rich" or earn money to pay bill back home in China. Years after years, they eat only Chinese food, knowing only survival English. These people make no effort to mingle with other cultures in America, they end up with only shallow and superficial relationship.

So, for all the Lao Wai, China has open wide a magic door, plunge in and embrace, you will have a memory of a life time!