

Being in Beijing

by Astrid Sindle

Beijing – big, bright, bustling – an assault on the senses. Besides that there are the bicycles, buses and the blistering summer heat. Why would ten South Africans give up three weeks to live in the sauna that is Beijing in summer?

We had come to learn Mandarin Chinese in Beijing. Not only did we attend a 3-week course at Capital University, but we also stayed with a Chinese host family. This gave us the opportunity to study and practice speaking Mandarin. Most of the group were third year Mandarin students at Stellenbosch University so we had already learned a fair amount of Chinese, but not surprisingly we had few opportunities to speak Chinese in Stellenbosch.

At the Capital University's International Culture Department we attended class Monday to Friday from 8 am to 12 pm, where we learned Mandarin conversation, reading, and listening comprehension. The teachers also endeavored to instill in us a love of Chinese culture - we spent a total of four hours a week on cultural activities such as calligraphy, Tai Chi and singing traditional Chinese songs.

After class, we often ate lunch in the university canteen, where one can buy a massive tray of food for about 4 yuan (about R4). Once we had cottoned on to the fact that we first had to get the food dished, then ask the price, after that buy a ticket at another counter, and finally return to the first counter to fetch the tray of food – a world of cheap and tasty food was available to us! I usually bought rice and two stir fried dishes such as tofu or chicken with vegetables and found it was enough to feed two people. On good days they also sold jiaozi, noodles and fresh fruit. You could get “green bean soup” which was actually a red-coloured sweet drink in a cup that reminded me of iced tea.

In the afternoons we did sight-seeing, shopping or emailing. Every weekend we also had group tours planned. We saw the “must-sees” such as the Great Wall at Badaling, Forbidden City, Summer Palace, and also slightly less well known places like Long Qing Xia (a stunning gorge outside Beijing) , the Old Summer Palace, Laoshe Teahouse, and the History Museum at Tiananmen Square. On these trips we ate the most amazing meals and spent ages discussing what we were going to order – being complicated by the fact that there were vegetarians, and non-pork eaters amongst us, and the menu being largely unintelligible. Since I had been to Beijing once before and done sightseeing, this time I was not so focused on the places we visited but more on the people and everyday life around me. I spent most evenings at home with my host family. (Trying to find nightlife besides karaoke in west Beijing is like trying to find Mrs Ball's chutney outside SA)

My host family were extremely hospitable and helpful. I stayed with Wan Lu Xia and her 13-year old daughter, Lai Yuan. Mrs Wan worked in management at a nuclear power institute down the road, while Lai Yuan was in primary school. On my first day there they made me Lai Yuan's favourite food “culiu tudousi” vinegar fried potato strips (quite different from chips). We also made jiaozi (pork dumplings), a

special new year's tradition. It was great having someone cook for me! Mrs Wan taught me how to make my favourite Chinese dish - peanut chilli chicken.

My host family enjoyed watching TV in the evenings. They would sit in the lounge which also functioned as a dining room and bedroom, and watch sport, TV dramas or Chinese Pop Idols. The apartment had the lounge, one bedroom, and a small kitchen, bathroom and balcony. Most Beijingers live in apartments, as there is a lot less space than in South Africa. I also stayed with another student, Baijingwen, in her single-storey hutong (alley) house for two days. Although the houses are a couple of hundred years old and are very basic, there is a nice sense of community there where people stroll around the alleys in the early mornings and chat to each other. Even in other places it was interesting to see that on the streets you could use gym equipment provided there or join in with people dancing on the pavement.

Chinese has many 4-character idioms, and the most memorable one I learnt in Beijing was “ren shan ren hai”, meaning “a sea of people” or translated directly “people mountain people sea”. It truly is an experience to be in a city that has a population almost half of that of our entire country. I immersed myself in the sea of people by chance. All I wanted to do was get back to the university after going shopping. Unfortunately it was rush hour. At last a bus stopped – but it was full. No matter, there is always space for one more. But not really for ten more... We all squeezed into the wall of people just inside the door of the bus, and the mass of commuters rippled slightly to let us in. Normally Chinese people hardly break a sweat, but there are always exceptions, and being squashed in a bus in 40 degree heat is one of them. After a few minutes in which I struggled to expand my chest to breathe, it was so tight in there, I wondered how I was going to reach the ticket seller in this grid-locked position. She was really skilled though, and streeetched her arm out to grasp my crumpled 1 yuan note. In the bus I could feel the sweat from all the passengers mingle into one river which stretched around everyone from the front to the back of the bus. This truly was cultural immersion!

My favourite new word, also 4 characters, was “taujiahuanjia” meaning to bargain. We went to Wantong market, a four-storey building bursting with shoes, belts, bags, clothes, cosmetics and over-eager traders. Mieke, Damon and I strolled around on the belt and shoe floor, and Damon issued Mieke and I with a challenge - he had seen a belt for 25 yuan around the corner, but wanted us to bargain the seller down to a maximum of 10 yuan for it. It seemed to work better to get other people to bargain for you, as being emotionally un-involved in the process led to better results. We found the belt in question but initial price we were told was 35 yuan! After a lot of “taujiahuanjia”-ing we got the price down to twelve yuan. We were chuffed with our skills, especially since we did it all in Chinese.

My experience in Beijing gave me the best of both worlds, being exposed to Chinese with my host family, but also seeing the familiar faces of my classmates everyday. Yes, Beijing is crowded and busy and the traffic is a story in itself, but there is one word I cannot use to describe Beijing -boring.

In closing I would like to say a Big thank you to Naspers and Stellenbosch University for sponsoring and supporting our trip to Beijing, and to our teacher Amy Yu for organizing it for us!