

## 662 Days in China: A Sampler of Memories

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“You should write a book about it.”

I have heard this many times since returning from a stint as a language teacher in China. The experience does make for a remarkable tale in many ways, though what my wife Satomi and I saw there in the late 1980s was what hundreds of other foreigners have also seen and published extensively about. Of those, however, perhaps none has ever lived in Nanning, Guangxi, a southern town so close to Vietnam you can almost throw a rock and hit it.

The exhausted tourist who slept through Guilin might end up in Nanning by accident. Guilin is Guangxi's prize, a fairyland of karst mountains jutting like emerald fingers along the banks of the Li River. Compared to Guilin, “the most beautiful spot on earth,” Nanning is a frowsy subtropical town of little note. Its main claim to fame is its status as the administrative and commercial hub of Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, the poor and unpolished western neighbor of modern, developing Guangdong. Guangxi only makes world news when it has a catastrophe of some kind, usually a flood or industrial accident – or when someone publishes a Cultural Revolution memoir that mentions the cannibalism that allegedly occurred there.

The Beijing trading company representative who helped me get my job could not think of much to say about the place other than the fact it had a variety of tasty tropical fruits. And that it had. There was no shortage of papaya, mango, lychee, loquats, watermelon, tangerines, pears, bananas, persimmons and coconuts. But life in Nanning was not all the cheer and color of a fruit salad. The shaded streets bustled with the sounds of a myriad of spurting engines that filled the air with dust and fumes. Pigs, cows and chickens wandered dumbly through the streets. A naked teenage boy, his body caked with months of grime, would actually sleep in the busy road, as oblivious to the danger around him as the townspeople were to the disturbing scene he created. We were told not to mind such things, and that it was best to stay away from town as much as possible anyway.

Fortunately, a cow college campus in China is often a self-sustaining community, even more so than in the United States. We didn't need to go into town frequently since just about all needs could be met with what was available in the campus stores and morning markets. That reduced the risk of our getting in some kind of mishap downtown - or seeing something we shouldn't - though curiosity has a wonderful way of drawing even the most cautious out into the open. Of course, we didn't stay in our quarters constantly, but campus life was never dull. Indeed, it was a microcosm of the whole society, with everything splendid and rotten about it rolled into a single *danwei*, or 'unit' - something to belong to the way an employee belongs to a company. Guangxi

Agricultural College was our unit.

Nominally, Guangxi is a minority area populated by the Zhuang people. It is, of course, well in the hands of the majority Han, and I never heard a single voice of protest. "Zhuang equals Han. Han equals Zhuang." So declared one of my better students in reply to my surprise at the apparent lack of racial friction. I detected a slight inferiority complex in all this, however, as the same person confided in me that he was self-conscious about his Zhuang accent all through school. The Zhuang dressed colorfully when they wanted to - and at least where we were, a town off the tourist's beaten track, they dressed to please themselves. Zhuang students did not wear traditional dress, however.

Ironically, where ethnic groups were concerned, we encountered something far more exotic than the Zhuang. It came as something of a shock to learn we would be sharing the dormitory compound with foreign students from Africa. Most were from West African French-speaking countries: Togo, Guinea, Niger and Benin. Had we come all this way and gone through all this bother to live among Africans? At first we were less than delighted with the situation.

In fact, there were Chinese living upstairs. They were my students - people who were not college age, but had been sent by their *danwei* to study English for a year under the tutelage of myself and several native Chinese teachers who were part of the program. Generally, they did not eat in the student cafeteria,

due in part to the cost, but mostly because it was, well, foreign to them.

The odor of mutton was the first thing one noticed when walking into the cafeteria. A typical item on the daily menu was rice with a tomato sauce and bits of mutton rather than pork which, of course, is forbidden by Moslem dietary law. For several weeks we were satisfied to eat among the foreign students, though eventually the menu became boring and we started experimenting with our own materials. Still, cooks were more than happy to please our palates the best they could, an attitude that they did not always express to the lowly Africans. On several occasions mealtime entailed witnessing arguments between the African students and the cooks. They were usually simple problems. Something ordered wasn't made. Another order was mistakenly prepared as something else. An item was too salty - or not salty enough. One poor fellow from Togo who stuttered had a hard enough time communicating in his own language, much less Mandarin. He ended up hurling his plate of fried rice against a wall one evening when he wasn't getting through to an unreceptive cook. The upsetting atmosphere was especially awkward for my wife and I since we tried to stay on good terms with everyone. The cook in question, fuming about the lack of self-respect that Africans supposedly suffered from, tried to get our sympathy, all the while cursing the name of a certain cook that had gotten along well with the Africans, but had recently been reassigned. The foreign student cafeteria did not always

lend itself to a pleasant dining mood.

We did not have our own kitchen since the building's designers assumed the cafeteria would be run as a cheery, happy place to eat. The electric wok was all there was, but it did the trick for simple items. Cooking for ourselves saved money in the long run and afforded the chance to toy around with various dishes.

Still, the cafeteria beckoned on numerous occasions, particularly when the foreign students had some event planned. Their functions were sometimes political, such as the slogan-fest commemorating the founding of the Organization of African Unity. Various local mucky-mucks would be invited to ooze a few choice platitudes against apartheid, an irony if there ever was one since foreign students were segregated from their Chinese classmates. These occasions were enormously comical for the high degree of phoniness they exhibited on both sides. Everyone wanted to be somewhere else. But we found the obligatory gesture toward Africa to be a living fossil handed down from the age of Mao as savior of the Third World; squirming here and writhing there, a photo opportunity at best, this hideous freak of protocol proved too ghastly for even seasoned officials who'd duck out before the variety show had started.

More spontaneous was the New Year's party that featured an inexhaustible supply of "Empress" Beer, a sweet, somewhat flat local brew - and the latest hits from Zaire set to the volume of a medium-high eardrum rattle. Happier events such as this were usually concluded with Bob Marley's "Buffalo Soldier," which

became something of an anthem for all those who shared in the experience of the foreigners' dormitory.

We were under the official watch of of the *waiban*, in English the "Office of Foreign Affairs," which took care of our various needs. They were of a mind that we would somehow dry up and vanish if left to our own devices, that we needed to have a wall around us for our own protection. The half-hearted attempts to scare us into staying put were in direct contrast to an equal desire to show off. It was never clear whether we were living in a college dormitory or a concentration camp.

Regrettably, I found few Chinese with the candor to admit that the real reason for keeping the foreign students together and separate from the natives was sex - pure and simple. By far the most frequently uttered excuse for caging up the Africans was that it was for their own good. The authorities seemed to think that 24-hour-a-day mixing would somehow impede their study progress, as if ordinary socializing would damage, rather than foster, the learning of Chinese. This song-and-dance failed to divert attention from their obvious fears that Chinese girls would sleep with the Africans - who were known in the pejorative sense as *heigui* ("black devils"). Perceived sexual curiosity among women and a deluxe-sized inferiority complex on the part of the men combined to create an atmosphere that was enormously tense. Uniformed guards monitored who came in and who came out of the compound. Fortunately their temperaments varied. Some were not terribly dedicated and seemed rather apologetic

about their work. Others saw themselves as performers of a noble task – the taming and civilizing of the wild African.

Another factor in keeping the Africans sealed off was economic. They paid their tuition and room and board in hard foreign currency, the lifeblood of a growing economy and, in poor Guangxi, this fact was even more poignant. The university needed them for the money they paid. Ironically, the African students had a good deal more money than their Chinese classmates. Some of it was scholarship money paid by their home countries. Some of them were from relatively well-off families. Having money did not mesh at all with the image of the African as emaciated and primitive, hungering for the know-how to lift his society from hunting-and-gathering to the planting-and-harvesting stage.

Higher ranking people in the *waiban* also tended to see themselves in an inflated and unabashedly ethnocentric role. Undoubtedly, the presence of the African students gave the Chinese a sense of mission and self-importance. It was a relief for them to think there were places poorer than China, a consolation all the more useful in the face of rich American and Japanese guests. "They were eating the leaves off trees," I was told by one. "Look, they don't even know enough to drink the boiled water," said another as we watched a student rinse his kettle out with tap water. The official evidently assumed the student was going to drink the water later and, as is so typical of the unenlightened African, come down with some dreaded tropical disease.

The Chinese students in the English program did try to be friendly at times with the foreign students. There was a good deal of fraternizing in the ping-pong room, but relations were cordial at best. An especially cheerful and easy-going Chinese student of mine had actually worked in West Africa as an engineering adviser. It was disheartening to see his sincere efforts at communicating were treated rather coolly by some of the foreign students who made fun of the way he spoke French. Another student erred in suggesting to a friend from Sierra Leone that the mosquitos there must be gargantuan, a remark that seemed innocent enough, yet the reply was scornful and bewildering. It was just another stereotype - and it was one too many for my friend on that particular day. This same Chinese had congratulated a student from Botswana on his fluent command of English, never realizing it was his native language. Ignorance about the 'Dark Continent' is hardly limited to the Chinese, and most of the students accepted silly remarks as having no intended ill will. Still, the airs of superiority put on by even the lowliest caretakers on the premises wore on the patience of many - and in one instance even led to violence.

A student from Benin had committed the cardinal sin of having a young female Chinese in his room several minutes past the eleven o'clock limit. According to the foreign students' version of the story, the guard was incensed by the brazen violation of the rules, and set out to follow the woman in question home on his bicycle. The student manhandled the guard to prevent him



from his pursuit. This was the ultimate in forgetfulness, of course, since it was not an understood feature of his particular 'place' to attempt such impudence. When the higher authorities heard the guard's complaint the following morning, they merely asked that the student not repeat his mistake. Yet his buddies could not help but talk about the episode, and not a few of them were angered by what the guard had attempted. As a group of the students left the television room one night a quarrel broke out between a student from Niger and one of the maintenance people. It turned out that some of the Chinese were still fuming as well, and this particular man, the son of a Communist official, couldn't resist asserting his pretended authority by holding the student from Niger up by the collar. The student, who had just been discharged from the Niger army, was of slight build but in better shape than his opponent. One belt to the jaw was all it took to put the maintenance man on his back. "Show's over," laughed the students as they walked away. Not quite.

For a town with such a small foreign population, the police could afford to go out of their way to be hospitable and diplomatic. In December they would personally deliver Christmas cards to our compound dressed in stylishly casual civilian attire. When they came in uniform, however, it meant trouble. Someone in the *waiban* had tried to get the student to apologize, and as penalty for his refusal to do so, this particular venal individual decided to involve the state. It was real-life drama as I had never seen it: a uniformed officer dourly reading charges against the accused,

smug 'insiders' and angry 'outsiders'. I couldn't resist photographing the scene, an act I was told was "not friendly." Not knowing exactly what was happening, and seeing the look of disgust on the faces of the students, we were expecting the worst. A riot perhaps? Maybe the student was going to be tortured! In the end, nothing of the sort occurred. After several hours the student returned, but the maintenance man was conspicuously absent for several days nursing his wound. Regrettably, it didn't take long for things to return to normal, things which included his calling me by the name "Hello" even though he knew my name. ("Hey, you. Hello. Here's a letter for ya.")

Months later I went to the police station on a visa matter and got the story from their side. They said their questioning of the student was conducted in a party atmosphere over peanuts and beer. Naturally, they were self-conscious about how they had handled the incident and worried about the image of China they were conveying to us rich and powerful foreigners. I found it hard to believe that the reconciliation was as jocular and slap-happy as all that, particularly when they changed the subject to the perennial bogeyman question that plagues the self-esteem of the Chinese male: "Do those Africans really have a lot of girlfriends, Mr. Graham?" They just didn't trust the foreign students, and the hint that I might make a great spy for them was as subtle as postprandial gas.

It was China we had counted on and Africa that we got. Call it disappointment if you will, for so very often the ugly and

unhappy encounters we witnessed on a daily basis were tiresome and depressing. Efforts to alleviate what was seen as the stress of homesickness – such as a trip to the ocean – were sincere enough. Yet there was always that nagging racism, so blatant and pathetic, that tinged so much of Chinese relations with their African guests. It was more than we bargained for to have been in the middle of it so much, and I would advise anyone interested in an English teaching job in China to avoid agricultural colleges, unless the real motivation is training for a diplomatic career! Then there's no place better.

When a friend from Benin visited us at our new quarters at Guangxi University, he remarked, "You'll have a better time here. There aren't any niggers." The absence of a single African student, while not exactly a cause for celebration, meant we would not have guards to contend with any longer in our immediate surroundings. At last we would have some taste of a 'pure' China experience.

During the Cultural Revolution Guangxi University was quite literally at war with the agricultural college, its immediate neighbor. I was told some of the buildings still bore the marks of artillery strikes, though the real wear and tear of the campus buildings was mostly due to aging and shoddy construction. The sparkling exception to this was the new foreign guest house. Here we had a veranda with a splendid view of a reservoir and groves of

luxuriant tropical trees. The interior had a real kitchen – and a bathroom with a shower and water heater that did not hiss, smolder or vomit flames and sparks (as the one at the agricultural college had).

Although we still did not have Chinese neighbors, we shared the building with foreigners who our hosts found more trustworthy. One was a young Japanese man whose grandfather was a native of the Guangxi area. He'd come to learn about his Chinese roots. The rest were 'Anglos' of various nationalities who taught English for the university in various capacities. I say 'the rest,' as they were outwardly Christian – with nary an agnostic in their midst. Despite China's severe ban on missionary activity, or perhaps because of it, they volunteered to be English teachers. Our relations with the 'Christians' were good – especially since my wife, a Japanese, is a Christian herself. Yet we did find it strange that the foreign Christians, outside some of the Africans, did not attend the Chinese Protestant church in town, even during Christian holidays.

I got the new job when my contract with the agricultural college had expired. As much as the job teaching professional people had its rewards, the arrangement was an outwardly profit-making venture, a year-long English camp comprised of participants with varying levels, varying needs. When it was over it was hard not to feel a sense of failure for not having magically transformed each and every student into a master of the English language. The job at Guangxi University was teaching university students –

and as such there were no naive expectations of what my 'program' was intended to achieve.

Just as in Japan, a person cannot get far in China without cultivating an influential circle of acquaintances. Every Friday, I was told, across the entire nation, 'political meetings' were held in which the latest nuances of official party line were discussed and approved. What these gatherings really were had more to do with securing special favors - a weekly orgy of backscratching. Curiously, the political meeting concept had something for everybody - all the way down to the cleaning lady. And on certain designated days, the university president would share in the drudgery of cleaning lady type labor, a moving attempt at achieving, if only in a trivial way, some semblance of classlessness.

Foreigners were naturally not a part of this circle. For a variety of reasons we were sought out - either because of our curiosity value, a genuine desire to show good will or, as was often the case, someone wanted something from us. Those wanting something were not necessarily unwelcome when that 'something' was simple companionship, conversation or stamps off our letters from abroad. One such gentleman whom I'd met by chance in downtown Nanning visited us for no other reason than to talk, never asking for anything but an attentive ear. Like so many Chinese we met, he was frustrated with his life (though not always, as we might expect, for political reasons). Other visitors we had were go-getters and saw a part for us in their quest for gain. The best instance of this was a man who

wore a perpetual smile, bearing a bag of roast beef in one hand and a stack of papers for proofreading in the other. The 'papers' were not part of a scholarly thesis, but dictations taken off the uncopyrighted Voice of America English conversation broadcasts. There was money to be made for any enterprising individual with the time and perseverance to copy them all down. Since Chinese *renminbi* could never make it worth my while, the man paid me with food, brought to us in little baggies or dished up in a sumptuous multi-course meal at his modest on-campus apartment. These transactions grew unpleasantly frequent, however, and the food-as-money dimension eventually gave way to a new proposal: I'd help him make tapes of the dialogs and he'd help me get a teaching job at Guangxi University. The agreement was never put precisely in those words (and I had no idea what kind of clout he carried there), but that was the message.

I got the job. Just how much this certain acquaintance pulled the strings for me I will never know, but the recording contract never came to pass. Later I was told by my employers that this man had nothing to do with my success in getting hired. Still, it appeared as if he had - just one illusion out of many for this innocent abroad, not only a foreigner in a foreign land, but a quaint irregularity whose fate was intertwined with the long history of grudges and obligations that comprised one vast community of educators.

Though the pure scholar's salary is low, the university student belongs to an elite, no matter what the school. To talk of Beijing University, therefore, is to talk of an elite within an elite. Guangxi University is a far more modest institution, yet compared with Bunkyo University it is much closer to the internationally accepted notion of what a 'university' is supposed to be. When I was there, there were 26 majors in 13 departments that spanned a wide range of engineering and science fields in addition to the humanities. Total enrollment of a little over 4,000 students were taught by 12 professors, 52 associate professors and 423 lecturers. In terms of area, the campus covered 66.4 hectares. It was yet another sprawling, self-contained city.

The most impressive aspect of the Foreign Languages Department was that it really did do what the university brochure claimed, i.e., send graduates to "offices of foreign affairs, units of foreign trade, travel services and institutes of science and technology to be interpreters and translators." In other words, students actually visualized themselves in jobs using English - and employers (who at that time were by and large government bureaus) actively sought those with language skills that would be useful to them. This created a lively atmosphere of learning, particularly when coupled with an almost childlike curiosity about the outside world in general. The effervescence of these students (especially in the first year) came as a delightful surprise after having taught a variety of others whose level of sparkle and motivation lagged (including Chinese adults). For an English teacher, these subjects

were in every way a dream come true.

Texts were pirated copies of popular materials well-known wherever English is taught as a foreign language. Ironically, one of the places in town where foreigners were off limits was the 'Foreign Book Store' where these books were sold. Any Caucasian or Negro in a masochistic mood could go there and have an iron door slammed in his or her face. The gatekeeper was a young and sneering woman whose only job seemed to be keeping what few foreigners ever appeared out of the store. She relished her work - always finding the right tones of scorn and cackle for eliciting indignation in her victims. For those customers whose foreignness was more challenging to detect - someone from Hong Kong or Japan - the gate was left open.

When texts were not in book form, they were articles from periodicals that I would type out on mimeograph paper - or they were exercises written out in chalk on the blackboard (always a daunting task). Photocopies were out of the question because they were prohibitively expensive for the students and a bureaucratic hassle for the teacher. The copy machine attendant, like the troll that tormented the billy goats, made a career out of collecting fees and keeping detailed accounts. My Chinese colleagues enjoyed pointing out how this demonstrated the population problem in China - and how difficult it was to find jobs for everyone. (Indeed, I recall the toilet paper vender ladies of Taiwan, indispensable fixtures in many public lavatories there.)

As a 'resource person' and something of a textbook in my own



right I was called upon to give several lectures on that wonderfully blurred and ambiguous topic: Western culture. I responded by doing what any responsible teacher would do – I talked about things I knew. My main source of subject matter was music since I had carried along some 70 music cassettes with me from Japan. The students were not used to so much music in a ‘lecture.’ Music’s value was as a means of learning language more than about culture. One student was disturbed by my playing the theme to “Popeye the Sailor,” dismissing it as a silly children’s song that had no place in a university class. Playful attempts at generating interest always ran the risk of insulting someone’s intelligence. Then there was the other extreme. Chinese poetry and western classical music are wed in the marvelous “Song of the Earth,” Gustav Mahler’s symphonic monument to the T’ang masters. After having them listen to a favorite passage (while supplying comparative text), a student sneered a one-word critique: “Bullshit.” Half the class missed this commentary as they were either dead asleep or engaged in more fulfilling private conversations. But these were exceptions to what was usually a highly attentive and animated group. The same impudent fellow who called Mahler “bullshit” loved Ray Charles and started scribbling “Whatchoo say!” on the classroom walls. Bette Midler’s “The Rose” was enormously well-liked. “Play it again” was a request I could count on – and many students dipped into their tight allowances for a blank tape to have it copied onto.

As is the case with the bulging numbers of Japanese learners

worldwide, those interested in English were not infrequently bored with topics related to culture. One student complained he had an English instructor once who liked to talk about the American Civil War. While dwelling on such a topic in a language class might have been a bad idea, the tone of the student's complaint suggested a subtle if arrogant satisfaction that China has enough civil wars to contend with of its own. Japanese, too, fail to rate very highly in the grand scheme of history and culture. The behavior of nations did occupy a great deal of casual conversation among students - to a far greater degree than I've encountered in Japan - but what history Japan or America has outside China's national experience rarely garnered interest (except for the all-time favorite horror of chattel slavery and other morsels communists have pumped for their propaganda value).

Besides scholarly obscurity, therefore, the study of language is a path to money, but only when the language is spoken by people with money. Cynics may turn up their noses, but next to divine inspiration, human experience has yet to produce a more compelling motivater than this. The glimmer of hope for a career in Hong Kong, Japan, the U.S. or Europe illuminated the dreams of those whose reality would be a satisfying, if unexciting, life as a tour guide or translator. Whatever window on those worlds we foreign teachers could provide was welcomed gladly - as long as it revealed the here-and-now. Even talking about vending machines or escalators managed to raise a ripple or two

of wonder – as did more persistent subjects of interest as income levels and living standards. For most Chinese students, these were the points that connected that all-important bottom line.

The urge to compare Chinese and Japanese university students is irresistible and, admittedly, unfair. China is growing a booming economy, if only in heavily publicized pockets, and the opportunities created from new demands will spawn active interest in providing supply. Nevertheless, unlike Japanese students whose dreams of international exchange often stop with a homestay or two, Chinese are potential economic refugees who are more than content to have their bones buried in a land where they can be happier than they could be at home. I do not want to risk stereotyping by saying that Japanese students are more satisfied with circumstances in their own country, but conditions here do leave far less to be desired from an economic, not to say political, standpoint. Similar to the Chinese government's 'iron rice bowl' promise of lifetime employment, Japanese companies have offered rosy promises to their young prospective employees – the major difference being that they do not place a high value on a liberal arts degree, much less one acquired with honors. Consequently, neither does the student, and four potentially productive years are squandered with socialization activities that should have taken place earlier in life.

China is different. To paraphrase an old Chinese saying: "There's gold in them thar books." Therefore, the library stayed open till midnight. Classrooms were open for students who

wished to escape dormitory distractions. Students studied. They even worried about their grades. One chemistry student, while I was there, became so overwhelmed by anxieties and stress about his poor performance that he took his frustrations out on the university president with a butcher knife. He attacked the president in his office and managed to slash several other unfortunates who were in his way, including a paper boy. Luckily, none of the wounded died, though I was told months later that the student had been executed by firing squad. (Hopefully not by the campus gun club!)

As goes insanity, so goes China, the most wonderful country I ever left.