

Letter from Iris Brkic
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MY YEAR IN CHINA

I'm not so sure exactly where to start from, as there is no simple way of writing how my year in China went by. I could say it was hard, exciting, adventurous, interesting, remarkable, amazing, marvelous, moving, full of surprises, a journey of a lifetime, a learning experience... yes, that's all true, but there is still something that words themselves can't express properly. My experiences from China have changed me as a person and have giving me an insight to one of the most interesting and globally driven countries in the world. I hope that while reading my report you to will be able to share some of my most memorable and not so memorable experiences from 2006.

Well, I shall start with the person who kept me most grounded and who helped me most throughout my time in China, and that was my good friend, and now a member of the AFS team, Zhu. At the beginning of my exchange, she would come to my university on a 1-hour bus just so that she could pick me up. Every week I'd look forward to meeting up with her and exploring Beijing. We would have to pass her school almost every time we headed for the city, but once I gained some confidence of riding a Chinese bus all by myself, I did the 1-hour trip to her school myself. It was a big step for me to ride on the bus myself. Together we went to a few places around Beijing including the huge Tiananmen Square (we went there on May 1st which is International Labor Day, where we walked around squished to other Chinese visitors and foreigners like a tin of sardines!), the Hutong (small streets that weave themselves through Beijing), Qian men, shopping markets and many beautiful parks nearby. On our weekly travels we would usually conclude it by going back to her university to eat some cake using Chopsticks. It takes a longer time to eat it with Chopsticks than what it does with a spoon or a fork!! Later on in the year, as her studies and workload with AFS became more and more we saw each other less and less, but the times we did meet was for dinner or lunch where we would just relax talking and laughing. Whenever I saw her she would always make me smile, even if I had one of the toughest days! She was a real help. When she took me to the airport, I was so sad to go just as she was sad to see me leave! At that moment I realized what a good friend she was and just how much she helped me throughout this year.



Another person who was a real help was my Chinese tutor, or as I like to call him “fu dao”, which just translates to tutor. Zhu introduced him to me. He studies at the China Agricultural University and was very busy while I was there at the beginning of the year, not only with his school studies but also with his duties of being a part of the Student Union, but he was also very keen on learning English so was very persistent in meeting me twice a week. I helped him with his English while he helped me with my Chinese. It worked out really well especially since we got along really well. I was so sad when I had

to leave CAU and move universities, as I knew we would see less of each other, but even after moving universities we managed to keep in touch regularly and meet up for dinner every few weeks. He would order something different from the menu every time, something he thought I never tried before just to give me a feel of the many different foods around China. The one that he introduced and that I really fell in love while in Beijing was leek with egg Dumplings. They're not only his favorite flavor but they're now mine too!! As he will be graduating soon, he hopes to study abroad and is even thinking of coming to Perth, but has not yet made a decision. He also escorted me to the airport and was very sad to see me leave. I think that he learn a lot about foreigners in Beijing in general and gained a lot of confidence with his English just as I did with my Chinese. I was so happy to have found such a good friend and I would really love it if he came to Perth!



Eating Steamed Buns with Chinese Friends

Just then I mentioned that dumplings, especially the leek and egg flavored ones were my ultimate favorite dishes, but this wasn't the only food I ate all day everyday! Some of the other great food that I did eat included Beijing Duck, Egg and Tomato noodles, fried peanuts (the way my host dad made them), eggplant, roasted Chestnuts, cooked sweet potato, hot pot, spicy watermelon skin (my host mums specialty), spicy pork, Chinese

porridge especially pumpkin flavored, boiled cabbage, boiled vegetables especially the way they

like to cook them in the northern part of China and dog meat just to name a few I can properly translate into English. I know what you might be thinking, she tried dog meat?!? But to tell you the truth it tastes a lot better than Pork, but having said that it did cost a whole lot more than pork. I ate dog meat while I was in Guilin, which is a popular tourist destination in the south of China. It was a type of AFS camp that I went on at the end of November. One night, while strolling the streets of Yanshou, a near by village, looking for a place to eat dinner we came across a restaurant that had a pretty large poster at the front that said you could eat dog meat. We weren't planning on eating it but thought we might as well give dog meat a try. The restaurant itself wasn't very big (being home to only around 12 round tables which were able to seat 6 people at each table), moreover, the furniture wasn't very new and the place wasn't extremely spotless but we still had to wait outside a little while before we could grab a seat. We only ordered a small portion, as it was quiet expensive for Chinese standards costing ¥40 (around \$7) for one portion. We were all also a little bit scared that it might not taste that good but boy were we surprised! When I got back to Beijing and mum and dad gave me a call to see how it was, they were very surprised when I told them that I ate dog meat, as were most of my friends! I think that they were also very shocked! But I think if I had another opportunity to eat dog meat again I wouldn't think twice!

On the topic of Chinese food, let me also mention that the food in China is extremely different in various parts of the country. China being so large in size and home to 52 ethnic groups that are spread all over the country, it is easy to see why this is the case.

Along with this, every province and almost all major cities have their own local specialties. For example people in the north eat a lot more steamed buns with their meals while people from the south eat more rice and stir fry dishes. People from the east eat a lot of fish while people from the west especially those from Sichuan like to eat very hot a spicy food and noodles. While in China I've also learnt that the people from all over the country take great pride in cooking their local specialties. This was especially obvious when I went to visit Zhu at her home or even while I stayed with my host family. They always managed to cook something new and different that was a part of the local specialty. During the summer for example, while staying with my host family, we would eat watermelon almost everyday after dinner. It was very cheap and very easily accessible. The men who sold it would be all over the street, standing next to their 3-wheeled trucks waiting for customers. I'm not sure if I've mentioned this but 1kg was sold for as little as ¥0.30, which comes to about \$0.05! Now that's cheap! Anyway, my host mum thought it was a waste to throw the skin out, so she came up with a recipe a few years ago to make spicy watermelon skin. Now you probably think that's weird, but let me tell you after the skin has been cooked for a while it becomes pretty soft and in the process it absorbs the spicy flavors that just compliment it beautifully. You just want to eat more and more of it! But my host mum wasn't the only one that was able to pull tricks out of the hat. My host dad always cooked something new and different and always cooked noodles ('hui mian') from scratch. 'Hui mian' are the local specialty from He Nan province, which is where I stayed. They're very simple to make, I sometimes even make them myself!

While living with my host family I learnt a lot about Chinese people and their customs and traditions. They were also very helpful, even after I went back to Beijing to continue with my studies. We would constantly keep messaging each other. After the summer break I went to see them on 2 occasions. Once was while I was passing through Zheng Zhou on my way to Guilin, and the second time was just before Christmas when I went to say goodbye. My last visit to Zheng Zhou was very sad as I not only knew I wasn't a 6-hour train ride away but I also started to realized that I was leaving China and going back home, so I tried to make the most of it. I spent a whole day with my host sister and a whole day with my grandparents. They said that they will come to Australia to see me once Wei Wei, my host sister graduates from high school. School is very important to a Chinese family. Due to the one child policy, parents are continuously putting pressure on their children to strive for excellence. Even during her day off from school, Wei Wei still had to attend study classes for Math and English, just so that she could bring her grade up a little higher. It is very hard to get into a good university such as Beijing University or Qing Hua University or even the university I studied at during the second part of the year, Beijing University of Posts and Telecommunications, as there are just so many students who are striving for the same goal. It really makes me appreciate the schools back here in Australia.



As I just mentioned above, the second part of my studies was at Beijing University of Posts and Telecommunications. I think that the university was a lot more accessible to

public transport, as it was a lot closer to the city centre. It really cut traveling time on a bus by a half and saved me a lot of money on transport. Once again there weren't a lot of exchange students but there was a bigger diversity. There were students from all over the world including students from Hungary, Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines, Cameroon, Russia, Kazakhstan, Japan and Korea just to name a few. I was also very lucky to be placed in with such a great group of teachers who always managed to organize some sort of event, whether it was a dinner party, or a 5-hour walk through the Hutong! It not only got us, the exchange students to get to know each other a little better but it also allowed us to discretely try and find out what was going to be in our upcoming exams! These excursions were a lot of fun and we were almost always dead tired once we got back to our dorms. The school also organized a few evening performances that not only exchange students took part in but Chinese students too. I made many friends through this as I was usually offered to be the host for the night. It also boosted my popularity around the campus, as there was always someone that would ask me "Was that you the other day who was the host of some particular event?" The classes here were also very good. They weren't crowded, but they were still very well structured and to make it even better, we had no afternoon classes! Since we had no afternoon classes it gave us a lot more freedom to explore the city of Beijing. Although after the October holidays the teachers gave us the option of taking part in some extra curricular activities. The two I took part in included learning Tai Chi and learning how to paint traditional Chinese paintings. I think that both of these classes were not only relaxing but I also learnt a lot from them. I am very surprised how hard Tai Chi is, and I'm very grateful that I have found a new hobby in Chinese painting that is able to help me relax and clear my head. They were all a lot of fun and very educational.

We also had the choice of taking a class that was to prepare us for the HSK exam. The HSK exam is supposed to give you an indication of your level of Chinese. It tests your listening, reading, writing of Chinese characters and grammar in a 3-hour time frame. There are a total of 3 times when you can take the exam throughout the year. I didn't take part in the classes that were offered to us at the school, but I did take part in the December HSK exam. I was relatively pleased with my results and I was extremely pleased with my listening section of the exam as I almost scored a perfect result! It really proved to me that my listening drastically improved while I was in China. I think that the environment of being in China and the situations that I was involved in really helped me to excel in my speaking and listening. I have probably said this many times, but such things can only be properly learnt in China!

I think that my time spent in China helped me get an even clearer view about what my future holds for me. I'm very ambitious in finding a job that will allow me to work in China. I want to take this opportunity now to thank you very, very, VERY much for allowing me to experience everything that I have while I was there. I now have two places that I call home- Australia and China!!

Iris Brkic

China 2006