

From: Dodie Johnston [<mailto:dodieinchina@yahoo.com>]

Sent: Sat 01/10/2011 1:59 PM

To: Lene

Subject: 1st china letter

Editor: This is a collection of letters from China from an American teacher returning to teach at [Hwa Nan Women's College](#)¹ in Fuzhou, Fujian province, after having taught there in 2004. Here she writes to her friend in New Zealand of the changes she found in the few short years since her first tour of duty there. It is a pastiche of life in a large city in the years 2000 - 2011 and is a fascinating insight into daily life of both now and her previous visits, showing how much China is changing.

Dear Lene: Well, I have settled into my Chinese life much more willingly this time around, although it's not the Chinese life of former letters, so my correspondence may disappoint.. The endless stairs I used to climb have been replaced by elevators and escalators, small family-run shops spilling over with intriguing essentials of Chinese daily life have been replaced by glitzy malls full of copy-cat high fashion, and crossing the street is no longer a high risk sport due to the proliferation of traffic lights, crossing barriers and legions of traffic police.

In China, even these modernizations have their thrills: elevators get stuck mid-floor when the power goes off which is frequent, escalators become overloaded with recreational riders and flip into reverse, and the "glass curtain" architectural designs so popular in big city high-rises are becoming "glass rain" (a term coined to describe the failure of adhesives and fixatives securing huge sheets of exterior glass, causing the panels to fall in a deadly shower). I have to take two buses for an hour and a half back to my old neighborhood to buy the cotton pants and bamboo kitchen items I love....everything is plastic and aluminum and polyester in the malls.

In 2004 the Central Government conceived a plan to free up acres of potential commercial land in cities and concentrate the edgy energy of young students into one manageable area: they would build University Villages in the countryside and move students in urban colleges and universities to these Villages.

When I was here in 2008, peasants had been kicked off their ancestral lands and the cement trucks were on the move, pouring foundations for classroom buildings and dorms that would house the growing number of young people competing for higher education. Now I live in this Village, in the company of over 100,000 young adults enrolled in maybe 10 schools, and counting. It's a softer life: no more the patriotic march music blasting out of loud speakers at 6:00 a.m.; only an electronic bugle tune, rambling and apologetic, followed by silence. Then at 6:30 another gentle auditory reminder of morning in the form of a tinkling music box tune fills the air; gone are the barked exercise orders. We live in sparkling new rooms with motel-style furnishings instead of the old artfully decaying 19th century merchant's home. The shiny new bathroom, though, still utilizes that irritating design feature of all developing countries in which used water drains onto the floor creating a slippery swamp after every shower.

Do I miss my old neighborhood? You bet! But it lives only in my memory. Old Hwa Nan still stands along with most of Yanti park where I joined the morning exercise brigade, but the ancient buildings are falling steadily under the wreckers ball (or the swarms of migrant workers from the countryside, eager to find urban employment). As I walked down one of my favorite old streets, I could swivel my head left to see a futuristic

¹ The link takes you to the latest Hwa Nan Women College's website. Click [here](#) for a perhaps more informative (but older) website.

apartment complex of concrete and steel, each with its own TV and refrigerator. Then I could swivel right and see ancient wood and brick buildings, lopsided and crumbling in anticipation of their fate, with domestic and economic street life continuing as it had for eons. Old men sit in their underwear comparing caged birds and smoking water pipes while their wives played mahjong on a table set up in front of the family shop-by-day-home-by-night. An old woman with one remaining tooth grinned out at me from a stall in which stood a dental chair and overhead drill. The blind massage parlor was still in business, so Carol and I treated ourselves to a 30 quai hour-long pummelling (about \$5.00) and staggered out to try to keep our balance in both worlds.

In order to fill the newly built University Village, the entrance score required on the one-time exam that separates college-bound kids from laborers was lowered. This permitted more kids to go to university, which skimmed off the top level of Hwa Nan students. In order to keep enrolment stable, the entrance score required at Hwa Nan was then lowered. Consequently I will be trying to teach English to 96 eighteen-year-olds whose English is very poor. They are off marching around with toy guns for two weeks during their obligatory military training and I am enjoying the luxury of one class of 24 relatively sophisticated third year students 3 X a week. I am being paid twice as much as in the old days, but my work load is twice as many students. Never mind. A friend's 10 year old's 5th grade class has 60 students, another friend's child's kindergarten class 50. How can I complain?

I'm finding it just as easy to fool around and socialize and avoid writing here as I did at home, darn it. A previous employee of Hwa Nan's is very keen on the old history and is unearthing manuscripts and other documents I didn't know existed...she's a great inspiration. And I've met with some of the Old Ladies who were students at old Hwa Nan in the 1920's who then helped resurrect it in the 1980's, so data is being collected. But it's been mostly eat-and-greet-old-friends here for a month. Last week in a spicy fish restaurant a friend and I were served a huge metal basin...big enough to soak your feet in...with seaweed and other mysterious veggies on the bottom, then a layer of many fillets of white fish, covered all over with mounds of dried chili peppers, drenched in oil and simmered at the table. Yummy.

Next week is National Holiday celebrating the day Mao officially declared the People's Republic of China (as opposed to the Republic of China which was established 100 years ago when the Manchus were overthrown and is now celebrated only in Taiwan) and for the first time I'm not going on a big trip...the traveling throngs have just gotten too daunting, and the trains seem to be jumping their tracks a little too regularly.

I was invited to go with friends to a "villa" on Gold Lake in NE Fujian, but 6 days in the Chinese version of a villa, being smothered by togetherness and competed for by 4 Chinese families, eager for their children to speak English, is more "hospitality" than I can deal with. I'll do some nearer-by exploring with former students and foreign teachers. Actually, I find life in the "suburbs" very peaceful and pleasant. I can still get into town for a hectic day in the old neighborhood or elsewhere, but I'm usually glad to get back to my room overlooking the pond. Is that a function of age, do you suppose? Do write and tell me what you've been up to!

Dodie