

## A Teacher's Experience in China

by James B. Goode

When I was approached in the spring of 2006 by the China Partnership Program at Bluegrass Community and Technical College to teach a full-credit course in American Literature at Changsha University in Hunan Province, China, I was filled with great trepidation. After all, what I knew of the Communist government of the People's Republic of China was somewhat grounded in the events surrounding the



*Figure 1: James B. Goode/Great Wall/Badaling*

Tiananmen Square protests where a series of demonstrations led by students, intellectuals and labor activists led to several hundred deaths and thousands of injuries between April 15 and June 4, 1989. The challenge of traveling deep into the interior of southern China to teach about the social, political, and religious rebels in early American literary history certainly gave me some pause to imagine myself in some dank Chinese prison while folks back home desperately negotiated through the U. S. Embassy for my release.

My wife, who was to accompany me and teach a much more benign freshman English composition course, did not help matters. "Aren't you afraid? Shouldn't you teach something less controversial?" She asked as I reviewed my syllabus with her. "If you get locked up, don't expect me to come to your rescue. It's every person for herself . . . I've got the grandkids to think of," she declared.

Being the usually hardheaded person that I am, I proceeded with my plans, working feverishly to put the entire course on CD and burn copies for my 40 prospective students from the Changsha University English Department. The course was to include Native American selections, H.W. Longfellow, J. Edwards, C. Mather, N. Hawthorne,

F. Douglass, H. B. Stowe, H. D. Thoreau, R. W. Emerson, T. Jefferson, T. Paine, and M. Fuller. My biggest worries were “Civil Disobedience,” *Common Sense*, and *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*. Promoting the idea of civil unrest and encouraging women to assert themselves as equals would not bode well in this environment, I thought.

Our introduction to the classroom building where we were to teach began with a visit to an intimidating monitoring station located on the first floor. State-of-the-art flat-screen digital monitors covered an entire wall opposite an imposing NASA-like console where technicians had access to every movement and sound coming from the various classrooms in the building. My heart fell to my ankles. Because classes were to begin the next morning, I had to think quickly. My solution came from the unlikely source—the Chinese dinner table. Upon our arrival, President Liu had treated us to a couple of meals at five-star hotels. These were elegant affairs, with dozens of courses placed on a lazy Susan that covered most of a massive round table. The table was set in motion and as the steamed chicken feet or braised eel passed, one was supposed to bring the mechanism to a halt, remove what he desired and then allow it to continue to the next person.

What I had was a smorgasbord of literature to offer these students. If I did not proselytize, but allowed them a choice of the “food” they wished to eat, maybe I would escape the water torture or the bamboo shoots under the fingernails. I began my first presentation by explaining this concept to my eager students. They understood it perfectly and even applauded as I finished my description of how the course was to be structured. I nodded, cast a smile toward the surveillance camera mounted in the corner, and started the lazy Susan spinning.

Because of my life-long interest in documentary photography, I carried a camera everywhere I went on my trip to China. The camera was of great interest to the Chinese; they loved viewing the just-recorded photographs on the digital screen. I shot well over a thousand images on this trip. As a poet, I also wrote several poems inspired by the trip.

#### *How Photographs Relate to the Essay and Poems:*

*The following photographs represent many of the images found in four of the poems I wrote. The picture of me on the Great Wall of China at Badaling near Beijing represents one of the highlights of my trip (Figure 1). The picture of me in my classroom at Changsha University depicts a typical day of instruction with eager Chinese students. 5,000 applied for 120 positions in our three classes. I taught the top 40 students from the English Department (Figure 4). The beggar shown in front of Kaifu Temple in downtown Changsha is only one of two we saw in Changsha. He asked our guides, Connie and Lotus, for a small amount of change (Figure 3). The boys on the bamboo raft on the Li River targeted our moving boat, attached themselves to the side, and sold trinkets to the tourists (Figure 6). One of the cruise boats navigates the spectacular Li River, where limestone karsts rise hundreds of feet high along the banks (Figure 7). Because we are farmers, we asked to spend a day with a Chinese farmer. Our hosts obliged with an unforgettable trip to a small village of Taizimiao in northern Hunan Province. We ate with Liang Song Zhi and his family. Until we arrived, none of the people in the village had ever seen a foreigner (Figure 8). The family served a five course meal complete with green tea and Chinese beer. The villagers surrounded the house and peered in the open windows as we ate our meal (Figures 9 & 10). The two-string Chinese violin called an Er Hu produced one of the most haunting sounds I have ever heard. When I played a song for my five-year-old grandson, he broke into tears. One Er Hu player I encountered played in Martyr's Park one Sunday; the other I found in a tunnel crossing under a busy street in Beijing (Figures 2 & 5).*

*Er Hu At Kaifu Temple  
Changsha City, China*

A blind street musician  
dressed in a red shou shirt  
plays his Er Hu  
sawing two  
strings  
in the hollow echo  
of the underpass  
mournful sounds  
pour out of the entrance and exit  
above his head  
past the street sweeper with a bamboo broom  
cars cascade across the glassy pavement  
a man  
carving a spiral pineapple  
tilts an ear  
a woman in the market  
squats  
outside the door  
cleaning shrimp  
paying no attention  
hunger  
has made her deaf  
nearby cucumber and long bean vines  
wind around  
the cut brush  
soon  
these will be  
sizzling in sesame oil  
and scattered on sticky rice  
a beggar at the gates of Kaifu Temple  
leans upon his crudely carved crutch  
his left leg bent like a long bow  
he cannot smell the meal  
In China  
the greeting  
“Have you had your meal?”  
pre-empt all others.



*Figure 2: Blind Er Hu Player/Beijing*



*Figure 3: Beggar at Kaifu Temple/  
Changsha/Hunan Province*

## *Changsha International Ballet Company*

A choreographed ballet  
of traffic dances across  
the Changsha theater stage  
gliding forward in the hissing passages  
jumping in bold strokes  
legs extended  
arms stretched outward  
the dancers move  
the story unfolds  
like a fast paced video game  
straight ahead  
an old man in a straw hat  
on his ancient bicycle  
struggles under the burden  
of his mountain of bags  
perched like a hot air balloon  
horns blowing  
a black Mercedes blows by  
exit stage left  
a child in a blue school uniform  
runs like a combat soldier  
darting between  
the rattling 901 bus  
and the bright green Volkswagen taxi  
speeding toward the Huatian Hotel  
horns blowing  
eyes looking like the victim  
of a great bird of prey  
exit stage right  
the motorcycle carrying mother, father, & baby  
or girl friend in a blue skirt and white hosiery  
or a wife clutching tightly to a greasy shirt  
or a suave young woman perched in perfect posture  
swings out into the path  
a sharp turn of the steering wheel  
exit straight up  
horns blowing  
careening around the street vendor  
with his portable wok  
pedaling stubbornly  
at the edge  
crowds of people crossing without looking  
some unspoken rules  
no rules  
you're supposed to know what I'm thinking  
we went over this in rehearsal  
you should know your lines



*Figure 4: James B. Goode In Classroom/  
Changsha University/Changsha/ Hunan Province*



*Figure 5: Eru Hu Player/  
Marytr's Park/Changsha/  
Hunan Province*

hit your marks  
horns blowing  
make the right entrances and exits  
horns blowing  
horns blowing  
horns blowing  
if your fellow actor doesn't know his lines  
prompt him  
give him the first few words  
then give him room  
the dancers move in a glissando  
they move like seaweed  
dancing in rocking water  
and bow to a great applause.



*Figure 6: Boys On Bamboo Raft/Li River/Near Guilin*



*Figure 7: Cruise Boat & Mountains/Li River/Near Guilin*

*Traveling The Lijiang River  
Guangxi Province  
Guilin, China*

Guangxi Province rose out of the ocean  
Earth shaking the water free  
from its folds and fractures  
like a giant dragon,  
rainwater running down the edges  
of a thousand swords  
honing them to  
limestone karst fingers rising  
through ghostly swirls  
over the limpid river.  
Now, far below,  
Water buffalo slug forward in the rice paddies,  
bamboo rafts slice  
the ripples  
where two young boys  
dig poles in deep.  
At Qifeng  
the sun rises over the water  
like a colossal orange Cyclops  
and then dies at Ban Bian Du  
where the path disappears into  
moonlight sprinkling over the water.  
Verdant bamboo groves  
pierce the seven peaks  
where fairy girls came from the heaven  
to take their baths  
slashing the water over their  
raven hair  
and letting it trickle down their brown breasts  
and bellies  
dripping like pearls  
to the pools below.  
They loved this place enough to stay  
and become the peaks  
near  
Yangshuo.

**TAIZIMIAO**  
*(Northern Hunan, China)*

In the village of Taizimiao  
the farmer  
Liang Song Zhi  
opens his house  
like a full bloomed chrysanthemum  
fragrant  
and sweet  
full with subtle color  
a tinted blush of pride . . .  
he has never seen a foreigner  
but in his house today  
they sit on his small, rough chairs  
eating his duck  
and chicken  
and pig  
his peppers soaked with the sun from over his fields  
they smack their lips  
and delicately hold his beans  
and peas between his bamboo chopsticks  
they pull his water spinach  
through their teeth  
smacking their pale lips  
his tanned face is lined with his smile  
as his family  
is busy with the crockery pots  
bubbling like volcanoes on his dark table  
everyone drinks this day  
drawing it deeply inside  
like the perfume  
of a good flower tea.



*Figure 8: Family and Friends of Lian Song Zhi/Taizimiao/Northern Hunan*



*Figure 9: Farmer Lian Song Zhi's Meal/  
Taizimiao/Hunan Province*



*Figure 10: Wife of Farmer Lian Song Zhi/Taizimiao/Hunan Province*