

FAMOUS FOR FOOD AND BEAUTIFUL GIRLS

- from Ferry van Mansum and Aukje Both

The first lesson with a new group of students always starts with introductions. We tell something about ourselves and where we come from and then we ask the students to do the same. Most students describe their home town as being famous for some kind of food ... and beautiful girls. I guess you know about Beijing's signature dish, Peking duck, but smaller places have their own local cuisine too. Zhangye is well-known for its fresh hand-pulled noodles, Lanzhou is famous for its beef noodles and you can't go to Xining without tasting its cooked mutton, or leave Chongqing without having sampled its famous hotpot. Just about every kind of food seems to have a place where it tastes best.



Any student will be dead serious when they tell you their home town is famous for its potatoes, onions, corn or tea. Whenever we tell Chinese friends that we have traveled somewhere, they always ask if we have tried the local dishes. Sometimes we have, but it is not our main mission as it is for many Chinese. We love the atmosphere of the food stalls and night markets, but are still careful about eating food from street stalls. We have only once felt the effects of a meal gone wrong in the almost two years that we have been in China, and that was from the breakfast bar of a hotel we stayed at before embarking on a nineteen hour trip on a sleeper bus to Chengdu. The narrow sleeping bunks and the unscheduled emergency stops made it a trip to remember and a reminder to be extra careful with what we eat.



Here in the Hexi Corridor, even with the desert all around us, there is an abundance of fruit and vegetables that look fantastic and are sold fresh from the farm. However, juicy red strawberries, artistically peeled pineapples and pre-cut pieces of melon are best to be avoided. If it is not washed with bottled or boiled water, peeled by yourself, boiled or fried you take a risk.



Still, we had mouthwatering lamb kebabs in Kashgar, barbequed over hot coals, munched happily on enormous round flat breads still hot from the oven and sampled some delicious filled pancakes that were made while we watched and took photos of the



process, but a lot that is edible looks more photogenic than appetizing. Scorpion skewers, creatively spiraled intestines or sheep heads baring their teeth at prospective consumers do not find their way to our stomachs.

Another favourite Chinese snack is chicken feet. The pale, shrink-wrapped delicacy is especially popular on long train journeys. We have seen many fellow travelers dig out a few from their large bags of food for the journey and make us front row spectators as they savour this treat, sometimes offering us one, maybe feeling guilty they are eating and we are not. "No, thanks."

In a lesson about food and eating culture differences between China and western countries we showed an on-line flyer of one of the New Zealand supermarkets. Our students were surprised that the chicken in the picture came without head and feet. They wanted to know what we do with those delicious bits. I'm not sure, maybe we send them to China, because there seem to be a whole lot more feet for sale than other bits of the bird. They are more expensive than breast too. They also wondered how we can be certain if the chicken we buy is fresh.





In China it is easy, you buy them alive, get them weighed, killed and plucked while you wait. Then they are ready to go in the Dapanji, a tasty stew from this part of China with vegetables, potatoes, noodles and chopped up chicken - a bit awkward to eat with chopsticks though, as apart from avoiding fishing out the head and feet, just about every bit of chicken still has bones in it. A dinner table after a shared Dapanji meal resembles a battlefield, with bones scattered all around.

And the beautiful girls? We saw them in every city in China we visited. There is just less to tell about them compared to the food that keeps us nourished, surprised and entertained.

