



# Nick Zoa

Xibeigongye Daxue  
Xi'an, Shaanxi, China  
Summer 2012

I spent the summer of 2012 in China – a country that I initially found hard to penetrate and understand. I visited the palaces of Beijing, the Great Wall, the mountains near Tibet, and the minority cultures of the southwest. Like most Westerners, I felt as though all the Chinese were the same. It wasn't until I learned to speak some Mandarin that I began to make friends and to know people as individuals. I learned Chinese two ways. I attended language school and I taught for the University of Maryland.

First, I signed up for a two-week immersion course at the Omeida Chinese Academy in Yángshuò, Guǎngxī province, southern China. My school taught English to Chinese and Chinese to foreigners. Although I was the only foreigner enrolled in the school, I was offered a room in the all-Chinese dormitory across the street from the school. I said “yes!” and found myself on the third floor of a five story building packed with students from all over China. They all wanted to practice their English. I wanted to practice my Mandarin. It was a perfect fit. On weeknights, we sat in the hallways doing our homework together. On weekends, we bicycled around the countryside and found fun places to eat and drink. This Chinese immersion program prepared me for what came next.



Bicycling in the countryside around Yángshuò with my fellow students

In July, thanks to a recommendation from Joe Arden, I reported to Xibeigongye Daxue (Northwestern Polytechnical University) in Xi'an, Shaanxi province, to teach

conversational English. This Maryland overseas program began in 1982 when Ben Massey received a proposition from the Chinese government: Would UMUC be interested in teaching conversational English in Xi'an? Ben Massey and Julian Jones went to Xi'an and worked out a plan for UMUC faculty, primarily from the Asian Division, to teach during the summer or occasionally for a semester.

My thirty 22-year-old polytechnic students were exceptional. In their spare time, they did things like build drones and play classical music. They knew how to read and write English, but they'd never been taught how to speak English. As a native English speaker, that was my job.

In some ways, my students were like the soldiers that I taught for UMUC on US military bases. They were punctual, respectful and motivated. But unlike American soldiers, they were extremely shy. As students, they'd always been in teacher-centered classrooms. They were accustomed to teachers who stood at the front of the classroom, explained things, corrected homework, proctored tests and assigned grades. My students had rarely been called upon to speak in class. My first challenge was to get my students to talk.



My students at Xibei Gongye Daxue

Getting the students to introduce themselves on our first day was difficult. Fortunately, my students had one universal character trait that made my job easy: They were obedient. They were also attentive to detail. On the blackboard, I wrote "Name, hometown, interests, favorite food." Understanding what was expected, each student stood up, performed exactly as directed, and then sat down.

On the second day of class, the class monitor – who was the most socially adept member of the class – asked me if there might be an opportunity for the students to meet with me one-on-one to practice their English. I flippantly suggested that I'd be happy to meet anyone for dinner any time. In three minutes, the class monitor

organized the class into fifteen pairs of students, and scheduled them on his mobile phone's calendar. For the duration of my teaching assignment, I had dinner every weeknight with a different pair of students.

Every night, I was taken to a different restaurant in Xi'an and exposed to foods that I would never have found on my own as a tourist. The following day before class, I would overhear the students conferring with one another as to which restaurant I was taken to the night before, what I ate and whether or not I liked the food. Although my Mandarin is very limited, I overheard lively discussions that sounded like "You took him THERE?! He ate THAT?!" This led to a competition of sorts to see who could take me to the most unusual or exotic place for dinner.

Part of our semester occurred during Ramadan. Two of my students were Uighur. For their dinner date with me, they took me by bus far out of town to a tall apartment building. We rode an elevator to the 9<sup>th</sup> floor. There was no indication of a restaurant, but I followed willingly knowing that I was probably in for a treat. We entered a private apartment. On the walls were photographs of various mosques around the world, including the Kaba in Mecca. We sat on the floor, ate with our hands, and had a wonderful meal, of course.

My students and I were in class together five days a week for six hours every day. Through the next few weeks, I gradually broke down their inhibitions. I realized quickly that they were comfortable with karaoke. So, one assignment was to learn and to sing a song in English. There was some discomfort in singing solo, so I allowed them to sing in pairs, which went quite well. It was delightful to hear their Chinese-accented renditions of "Home on the Range" and "Yellow Submarine."

Another of the assignments required each student to stand up in front of class and tell a joke in English. The first time I tried this, I got quite a few one-liners which had been copied directly from the internet and read aloud from a 3x5 card. From then on, I was more creative and specific with my assignments. The second time we had joke day, the joke had to last for at least one minute. Also, rather than being read from a 3x5 card, it had to be memorized – and if no one in the class laughed, explained.

As the students overcame their shyness, I was able to give more creative assignments. I asked each student to give a five-minute talk about what his or her life would be like at the age of 40. This was an assignment that couldn't be copied from the internet. I was surprised by the responses I got. Many of the students envisioned a future in which they were married with two children, that they were entrepreneurs running their own companies, and that they lived in an environment without air or water pollution.

At one point, I tried a spelling bee. This was an amusing mistake on my part and a good learning experience for me. My students had been very well trained in reading and writing English. After an hour, no one had missed a single word. My students had no problem spelling words like misspell, pharaoh, weird, pronunciation or even gobbledegook.

One of our most successful in-class exercises was a day of improvisational theatre. In my class of 30 students, there were 26 boys and 4 girls. Every day, the four girls sat quietly in the back corner of the room together. There was never much interaction between the girls and the boys. Nevertheless, the girls were clearly good students.

For our improvisational theatre exercise, I created four scenarios:

1. You are watching TV with your family. Everyone wants to watch something different on TV, and so an argument begins. Grandfather wants to watch an historical, cultural show about the Ming dynasty. Father wants to watch business news. Mother wants to watch her favorite soap opera. You want to watch an exciting and sexy adventure movie. There will be much debating about which TV show to watch.
2. You must go to the dentist for a serious tooth problem. Your father is there to make sure that the dentist does a good job. Unfortunately, the dentist is cruel and he doesn't like you. The dentist has a cute assistant who has a crush on you. The people waiting in the waiting room are impatient and angry that you are spending too much time with the dentist. Eventually, the tooth will have to be pulled out. It will be painful!
3. You and your friends are driving in a car. Suddenly, you see a police car with its lights flashing and its sirens blasting. The policeman orders you to stop your car and show your driver's license. The policeman explains what you were doing wrong. Everyone in the car makes excuses and tries to get the policeman to be nice to you, and not to take your license or give you an expensive traffic fine. However, the policeman is not easily convinced.
4. Three construction workers are hard at work at the site of a new building. They are working with shovels when they accidentally find a valuable, ancient buried treasure! Although the treasure should be given to their boss, the three workers want to keep it for themselves. There is much discussion about how much the treasure is worth and how they will divide it. In the middle of this discussion, the boss arrives and asks "What's going on!" The boss is suspicious.

For this assignment, the class would need to have four directors, one for each of the scenarios. The directors would then choose which students were to perform in which play. My students were stunned when I assigned the four girls to be the directors. The boys gasped. The girls smiled. The boys had to "try out" for the different acting roles. It was liberating to watch the four girls take charge, organize their casts and assign roles. As teams, the students wrote their scripts in English. It was a fascinating exercise to overturn the class's hierarchy by putting the girls in charge. The plays were a huge success. They were videotaped by everyone not in the plays. They were also absolutely hilarious.

One thing the students all wanted my personal help with was choosing a western name for themselves. They were aware that names like Zhang Wei and Wang Xiu Ying are not easy for westerners to spell, pronounce or remember. Consequently, most youths in China adopt western nicknames. It was an honor and a big responsibility to give each of my students western names that they would feel proud of and which would suit them.

This UMUC program in Xi'an continued until 2017 as a faculty effort staffed by volunteers. Although Xibei Gongye Daxue was certainly not the typical UMUC assignment, it was one of my favorites. I'm still in touch with several of my Chinese students. I thank Maryland for providing me with this unforgettable experience.