

A Taste of Tongren Peace Corps Transcript

[FOREIGN LANGUAGE] Hi my name is Amy. I served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Guangdong province of southwestern China. During my time in Peace Corps I taught English to University students studying to become teachers. This is the view of my city, Tongren. With a population of about 350,000, it's considered a very small city, especially when you compare it to places like Shanghai, which has a population of about 17 million and Beijing, which is near 13 million.

Over the two years I spent in China, I learned a lot about Chinese culture. And I found that many of my most memorable experiences related in some way to food. As I try new types of cuisine, explored marketplaces and prepared and shared meals with my students and new friends.

This is Tom, one of the first people I met when I began teaching in China. He owns a restaurant near the campus where I taught and I sometimes ate his cooking two or three times a day. Over the course of two years he helped me practice my language skills and learn the names of many vegetables unique to China.

My students were excited to share their cooking skills with me. These are four of my freshman students Candy, Neva, Kiran and Chim. They will likely become middle school English teachers in rural towns after they graduate from the teacher's University. They are the first in their families to attend University and feel a great responsibility to get good jobs so they can take care of their parents. I have never been surrounded by so many young people who viewed caring for their parents as such an important goal in their lives.

As you can see from the dishes we prepared together, food is always eating family style, which means that everyone around the table shares the same dishes. You can take as much or as little of each dish as you like. This is another famous type of meal in China, [FOREIGN LANGUAGE] literally translated it is fire pot. In English we say hot pot. The outer ring is a spicy and oily soup. The inside is more like chicken broth. Around the table you can see all of the ingredients we will add to the soup. The meats are thinly sliced so they cook quickly when dropped into the soup.

This probably looks a lot different from the Chinese food you are used to eating in America. Generally, the Chinese food we eat in America is the Cantonese style, sweet and sour sauce with stewed vegetables and large chunks of meat. The food where I lived in China was much different. Actually food across China is quite diverse. The food in my region was considered Citron style, which is some of the spiciest food in China.

Chinese people in this region like to joke by saying [FOREIGN LANGUAGE], which literally means Grego people aren't afraid of spice. This is my favorite Chinese dish [FOREIGN LANGUAGE] means fish-like and [FOREIGN LANGUAGE] is eggplant. The fish-like means that they cut the skin of the eggplant to look like the gills of a fish. The eggplant is fried with pork and tomatoes. Here I am enjoying a type of candy or tongue made from a thick melted sugar. Outside of schools there are often vendors selling treats like this to the students.

This is what a typical market looks like. Vegetables are lined up on shelves and laid in baskets on the street so people can easily see what is for sale. The available vegetables change constantly

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depending on what is in season. Vegetables are always weighed on the scale like the blue one on the right. They're measured in the unit Chi, which is equal to 500 grams or a little more than one pound.

People often finish a meal by eating fruit. I bought fruit from the same family for almost two years. Here is the baby girl I watched grow up while buying my oranges. There are markets on every block similar to farmers markets we have in the US. So people shop once or twice a day to buy vegetables and meat for meals. People shop often because it's very convenient. The vegetables are all fresh and many families have limited refrigeration space in their homes.

Let's take a walk through a few of the markets in Tongeren to see the variety of things you can buy. Here a butcher displays smoked meat for his customers. The pieces on the left taste like bacon and the pieces on the right are like sausage. In China, fish are a symbol of prosperity. They're served whole, including the head to symbolize the unity of the family.

During banquets when all the meat has been eaten from one side of the fish, it is the special privilege of the host to flip the fish over to eat the meat from the second side. It is traditional for a supervisor or someone in a higher position to eat one of the lips of the fish and the employee or the lower, level person to eat the other lip. Fish is typically eaten on special occasions with honored guests.

In this section of the market you can buy bulk products like seeds and grains. Sunflower seeds are also a popular snack that people often enjoy eating before meals. In some markets you can find people making different types of food from scratch like tofu, which requires a lot of soaking the soybeans pressing and draining. Tofu is a cheap source of protein that is sustained many Chinese people through times of scarcity. This is what the tofu looks like once it's fried and ready to eat. While their parents were busy making tofu I was greeted by this group of children they were very shy but very curious.

Eating noodles is more popular in the North of China than the South. It's a tradition to eat extremely long noodles called [FOREIGN LANGUAGE] on your birthday. The length of the lamens symbolizes long life. Noodles are traditionally thought to be popular in northern regions apparently because they are wheat based and wheat grows easier at Northern latitudes. The South is traditionally dominated by Rice and rice noodles.

Here you can see the process of making [FOREIGN LANGUAGE]. A popular food that loosely translates to dumpling. This is the most popular way of cooking [FOREIGN LANGUAGE]. They are placed in a steamer until the dough and the filling are cooked all the way through.

The markets of Tongeren we're close enough to the countryside that farmers could walk into town each morning with their produce to sell at the market. These were some of the agricultural lands just outside of Tongeren. This photo was taken in the spring so you can see the bright yellow flowers of the rapeseed growing.

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And here is what China is famous for, rice. Rice is the most popular food in China and its production has played an important role in China's history, economy and culture. Often rice and other types of produce are grown on terraced fields like this one. Because in many areas of China are mountainous terracing allows farmers to grow on steep slopes.

It is important that Chinese farmers make efficient use of their land. China must feed 20% of the world's population, and only 10% of the world's arable land. By meeting farmers and growers in the markets of Tongren and enjoying many meals with my new neighbors and friends, I learned a lot about the people and culture of China.

I'll never forget my [FOREIGN LANGUAGE], a little milk tea friend who had run over to me every time I bought a milk tea drink. Or my [FOREIGN LANGUAGE] which means grandma. [FOREIGN LANGUAGE] and I would leave packages of fruit and seasonal treats on each other's doorsteps. I love the food culture landscape and lifestyle I was able to live in China, but most of all, I love the people I met while I was there.
