

The Experiences beyond The great wall

By HEATHER SANGSTER

York graduate and musician Brian Morgan spent the last 10 months teaching at the Sichuan Foreign Language Institute in Chongqing, China, as part of a Bethune College exchange programme with Toronto's sister city. Morgan taught English composition and speech to a select group who would travel abroad for a year of study.

Morgan saw what few tourists would. He observed the differences between Chinese and Canadian educational and political systems. He was occasionally victimized by the powerful bureaucracy. And since Morgan performed his music regularly, he had frequent contact with reporters and the arts community.

He observed the influence that the West has on the Chinese — dubbed Shirley Temple movies were all the rage when he was there. Morgan also saw the power of the Chinese authorities to manipulate Western influence for their own prosperity.

Excilibur's Heather Sangster recently talked with Morgan about his experiences in China.

Excilibur: What was it like to teach in China?

Brian Morgan: Well, most of the initial training that I had in Canada wasn't too helpful in China. The students are very much used to a great "teacher-focus" kind of teaching environment. The whole idea of the Canadian system — where you go to university, you discuss, argue, and learn the development of an argument and critical skills — is really frowned upon. Those are the skills that they don't really have.

The problem that I often had was trying to reach a middle ground of what I was used to and what my students were used to. Because my students were going abroad, I had to prepare them for that kind of learning experience and build on their expectations of the Western classroom. I had to sit down everyday and create lessons to teach them to argue, to abstract new material and bring it together, to develop deductive and inductive kinds of reasoning processes.

Excil: What are students' living standards like compared to Canada?

BM: They were pathetic. They were restricted to one hot shower per week and living five or six to one dorm with no air conditioning in the summer, no heating in the winter. But, at the same time, they had two satellite dishes. I mean, all you had to do was run a cable from the dish to the other buildings but, no, they had two buildings side by side with two dishes. This kind of incredible waste on expensive, technical goods goes on all the time while your basic student needs are not met.

Excil: Is there a lot of "visible money"?

BM: It is well hidden. It's still kept under the table because people are very careful. That's part of their political tradition. They have a saying: "Fame portends a man like fattening to the pig." People with money are acutely aware that today's sanction of prosperity may be tomorrow's heresy. It is quite possible that those people who are quite ostentatious about their money may be the first people that are going to catch it.

Excil: What are the actual school conditions like for students?

BM: Well, there are a lot of pedagogical differences. My students have a fixed curriculum. It's not like they can say, "Well, I'm going to take this course and this course." Everyone takes all the same courses. There's no catering to individual need in education. They also have a lot of class time, they work hard, and they are very determined. They are really nice, eager students. But they have so many things working against them, it's atrocious.

Excil: What does their curriculum contain?

BM: They've got something called Intensive Reading where they read excerpts from books and, essentially,

York's Brian Morgan talks about education in China

they just deal with syntax. They look at things like, "What does this word mean? And what is the grammar structure being used? Rarely did they ever sit down and discuss what they read.

They looked at "cloze exercises" where you've got a bunch of words and then a blank and you've got to fill in the blanks with the four options that they give you. It's never reading to stimulate thoughts or ideas.

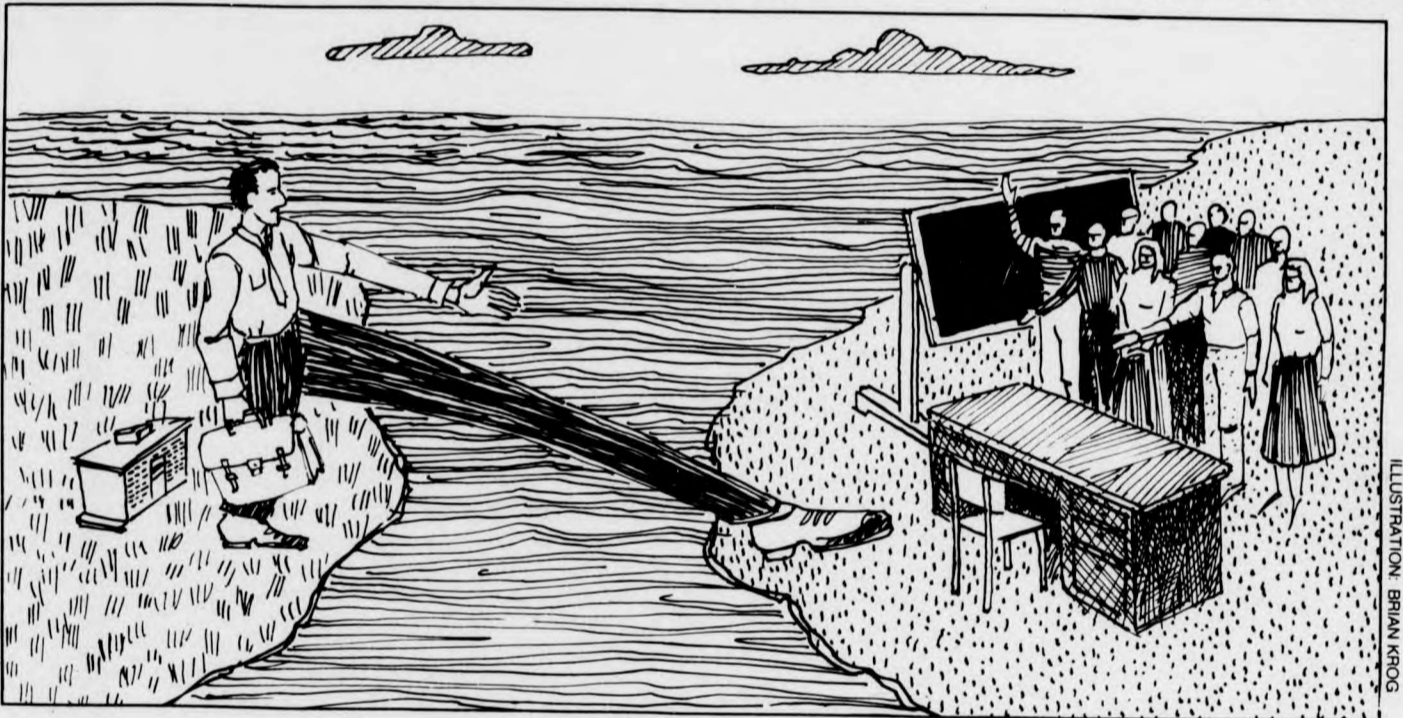
Listening is the same thing. It's not listening to stimulate or to abstract ideas and apply them to that situation, it's listening to check comprehension and vocabulary.

more important activities of your life is to maintain and enhance this public persona vis-à-vis other people. It's extremely complex. This whole notion of deception and lying, the evil lie, is not the same in that society as it is in Canada because often people are just following their code.

We put a lot of value on this notion of truthfulness, but that's just not the way it works in China. I got an essay from one of my students that was titled "When Chinese People Say No They Don't Mean It." The essay talked about the fact that Chinese people will say something that they don't mean and, in contrast, the student believed that foreigners do mean what they say. Other students have told me that they just want to be the gracious host and will say what you want to hear, even if they can't deliver. It's not much different here. This is one city where merit has little to do with status in this city.

Excil: Besides school, what else did you do?

BM: The Chinese are very interested in sports, so we put together a basketball team and we played the Chinese



Excil: How were you treated as a foreign teacher?

BM: We had a complex relationship with the Chinese teachers. The decision to hire us was met begrudgingly, and some people saw us as a waste of money. We were paid a lot of money compared to them and there was some animosity. Because our whole approach is different, some of the teachers were not confident in our ability to teach. I remember having a couple of incidents where foreign teachers often put us into tricky situations where we were made to look like donkeys. I remember, in particular, when a student came and told me they had raised the tuition in my class. What had happened was that the head of the department gave a speech to the students and said that the reason they had to raise tuition was because they had to pay foreign teachers — which is bullshit. Foreign experts, the highest teacher category in China, were all paid by the national government. So what that did was make us all scapegoats. An interesting incident happened to another teacher, and involves the fact that at that school, one couldn't fail. If you fail, you rewrite the exam until you pass. A teacher came to the head of the department and

and they loved it. We had huge crowds. We played soccer and volleyball too. We went downtown and to restaurants quite a bit, too, although there's not that much to do there. Very little is open to you. My song, "Lonely Room," describes what it's like to be a foreigner there. You have to be someone who can entertain yourself and be alone for a long time. We lost a lot of people. It's hard, especially if you are single. Your chance of a romantic liaison with a member of the community was very difficult. It is not encouraged at all. And there are various language and cultural differences that deter you. You lose that kind of intimacy and it's lonely.

In the last month that I was there they had just opened up a small café on campus. But, up until then, there was nowhere to go. If we were kind of lonely our Chinese friends would invite us over, but everytime we got together it was uncomfortable. I only had two friends that I could sit with and be comfortable. They could tell me what was on their mind and relax. Contact between the community and the foreign community was quite formal. I just think that it takes time.

I think that the Chinese are not like us, the way we try to force our relationships in terms of resolution between the sexes or friends — Are you my boy/girlfriend, friend, or what? The Chinese tend to start friendships slowly, and they endure a long time. For example, people go away to school for four years and then come back to their hometown and marry.

Excil: Are students influenced by Western culture?

BM: There are a lot of influences. Some from films. The movie *Break Dance* came to town and all of a sudden breakdancing was the latest craze. When something with a Western influence is in China, it's just embraced with a real fury. It's so unusual that, suddenly, they take it as their own. When they took a Shirley Temple movie and dubbed it in Chinese . . . Wow, it was a big hit. When they bring in Walt Disney once a week for a half hour, it becomes an icon of contemporary society. Donald Duck amplifiers and Mickey Mouse buttons everywhere.

So we were all ready to go on this Sunday afternoon. I brought a translator and a percussionist with me and we

"The whole idea of the
Canadian system . . . is
really frowned upon."

said "This girl never came to class and failed the test miserably. I'm failing her. If you want to pass her, that is your decision, but I want to fail her. It's up to you."

The head of the department said, "But you can't fail her. Give her another test."

This kind of catch-22 situation is what the Chinese call "face." "Face" is one of the most important psychological and social constituents of relationships between the Chinese. There is a public persona and a private one, and so much of that is a currency, a personal currency. The perception others have of you is your value. So one of the

ILLUSTRATION: BRIAN ARROS