

## **A morning of mime and nuance**

By its very nature, independent travel overseas is bound to invite memorable encounters with the locals. This was certainly our experience as westerners travelling in China. In just one morning we learnt about the effectiveness of mime and the nonchalance of the police. And we discovered that the strangled written word doesn't always mean that the writer can't grasp the nuances of the English language and use metaphor to poignant effect.

Shilin is a small village in an extraordinary geological setting known as the Stone Forest, situated in Yunnan Province. Heading out from our State-run hotel in search of breakfast one morning, we were drawn toward the mouth-watering aromas emanating from a shabby eatery. Previous travel in China had thoroughly neutralised our earlier worries about appearance, cleanliness, and the absence of a menu written in English. We'd become accustomed to ordering meals by leading the waitress around as we pointed to other customers' plates, or by following the waitress into the kitchen in search of our preferred foods. The result was always amusement for the staff, and recognisable food for us.

This particular morning's breakfast was already flavoured with anticipation, because I had my heart set on eggs. We sat down and were presented with a Chinese menu. Looking around with dismay, there were no other customers to whose meals I could point to ensure my craving was satisfied. The primitive stone kitchen looked gloomy and unwelcoming from our table. Its centrepiece was a solid tree stump into which an enormous meat cleaver had been lodged. The steel blade glinted in memory of unleashing its power on the head of many an unsuspecting chook. I was not going in there! We were going to have to resort to mime.

Perhaps encouraged by the absence of other patrons, my husband rose courageously from the table and beckoned to the waitress. Tucking his fists into his armpits, he flapped his elbows up and down whilst letting out a high-pitched B—W—A—A—R—K Bwark Bwark Bwark. To our mutual astonishment he then turned his back to the waitress and made a popping sound as he extracted an imaginary egg from the backside of his jeans. Almost collapsing with laughter the waitress dashed into the kitchen, returning with an egg to confirm her competency at charades.

Attracted by the commotion, a young policeman detoured from his casual patrol of the street and sauntered toward us. His faded and unironed green cotton uniform hung loosely on his lanky frame. On the right sleeve, the stitching around a patch bearing the Chinese police insignia had started to come undone. The top of the patch drooped over to reveal a uniform that had once been many shades darker than its current colour. This was an opportunity too good to pass up.

Diving into my daypack I pulled out a couple of Queensland Police Service patches, and a note on which a Chinese friend had written *“Hello, we are from Australia. We have a friend who is a policeman and he collects patches. Do you have any patches to swap?”* I passed the note and the patches to the policeman and looked expectantly at him. Frowning with bewilderment, he examined the Queensland Police Service patches and again perused the note. He fingered the partly detached patch on his sleeve and read the note once more, his face lighting up with comprehension. He smiled and nodded, and we nodded vigorously in return whilst using our hands to mimic a swapping motion.

Newly acquired patch in hand, the policeman's attention now turned to the removal of the one on his sleeve. He appeared quite nonchalant about the potential repercussions of returning to the station minus a vital part of his uniform. Grasping the top of the patch, my husband mimicked a sawing motion through what remained of the stitching. The policeman summonsed the waitress and there was a rapid exchange in Chinese. She read the note, examined the patches and efficiently took charge of the situation. She ushered us into the open kitchen, and in a display of strength that belied her tiny frame she swiftly extracted the meat cleaver from the stump. Handing it to my husband she then held the top of the patch out as he carefully carved through the remaining threads. Our quarry captured at last, there was much smiling, nodding and shaking of hands. The policeman wandered off with a spring in his step, stopping only briefly to exhibit his acquisition to a well-dressed gentleman standing in the doorway of an adjacent office.

The gentleman wandered over from his office and greeted us in English. He explained that he worked in a travel agency responsible for promoting Shilin and the Stone Forest, including the State-run hotel in which we were staying. He invited us in and asked if we would check his English on a promotional brochure that was currently in draft form. The office was spartan, the hospitality warm, and the tea hot.

Sipping our tea, we read through the brochure. "WELCOME YOU, GUESTS COMING FROM AFAR" it began. A description of the hotel followed.

*"It was renovated and rated as a two-star hotel recently."* A very generous rating quite frankly.

*“...surrounded by green trees, perfuming flowers and singing birds with seven wings and 120 rooms of varied classes.”* Evidently the Stone Forest is not the only unique sight in this region!

*“As home for tourists, the hotel’s soul principle is ‘guests above everything else and service comes first’.”* As guests in the hotel we had experienced first-hand the total absence of ‘soul’ within its sparse interior!

After many cups of delicious Yunnan tea, the brochure was rewritten to the delight of our good-natured host. We exchanged names and addresses. Reading our names out aloud, our host pondered a moment on my husband’s surname. “Porter”, he murmured, “Porter.....like one who carries bags?!” Yes, we exclaimed, laughing along with him. Suddenly concerned that he may have caused offence, he gathered his thoughts. And in a surprising demonstration of his understanding of nuance and metaphor, he said, “Porter.....this is a very good name. You carry peace and friendship from your country to mine.”