

**Food Memories of China**  
**By Judith C. Rodriguez**  
**April 17, 2006**

**On the way to China**

We are introduced to Chinese food on the plane, where one of the meals is a noodle soup in a bowl. The bowl is brought to us, who have to open it and have the hostess add hot water. The soup has to stand for a few minutes and then we have to eat the noodles using the wooden chop sticks. Many of us bring snack foods, such as crackers, granola, or energy bars. Judy brought three bags of home made trail mix that she kept trying to encourage others to eat.

**Breakfasts:**

Among the items offered for breakfast at either of the hotels in Beijing or Jinan were:

- bacon, small sausages, pork, jellied bean curd, cold cuts
- sliced cheese, yogurt
- scrambled eggs, boiled eggs, omelets made to order,
- steamed buns, plain or with fig paste,
- breads, pastries, fried dough, French toast with jelly,
- Cheerios, Cocoa Krispies, Froot Loops, Rice Krispies,
- congee (rice cereal), millet, oatmeal, vermicelli, noodles, fried rice made with scrambled eggs, leaf stuffed with rice,
- pineapple, strawberries, watermelon slices, pears, apples in mayonnaise, canned fruits, raisins
- julienne style vegetables, kelp with spring onions, spinach with bean thread,
- preserved veggies, cut green beans, kelp with spring garlic, bamboo mustard greens, squid cabbage, sautéed kale, sautéed lettuce leaves, haw (looked like large olives), tomatoes, cucumbers,
- coffee, tea, soy milk, sour milk, orange juice, apple juice

There were many choices designed to cater to a range of Asian as well as American and European tastes. The breads were French style or sliced white bread, plain, poppy or sesame rolls, braided breads, sweet buns with fig paste, or breads with pieces of ham. The yogurt was thin and some people drank it from a straw. JoAnn considered breakfasts the best meal of the day and said the fried rice was a great complement to the scrambled eggs. Brent enjoyed the fried rice with egg everywhere we went and for Kerry; breakfast was by far the meal in which she ate the most -- eggs rice, veggies, bread, canned fruits, raisins. Liz ate Froot Loops with her chopsticks and drank the milk in her bowl. Breakfast Froot Loops were her favorite item for practicing the use of chop sticks. Maryann and Debbie said "Where is the American wall of food?... Eggs, toast, dim sum, orange juice, coffee, rice. This is good." They were amazed at the type and amount of food consumed by the people and smiled knowing they were so content. Judy really liked the hot milk, which she used to make Café au lait/Spanish style coffee, and also liked the soy milk, which was mild tasting and slightly sweet.

**Sunday**

For our first dinner in China the tour guide, took us to dinner at a restaurant near a park. We were taken into, and served in, a room with two large round tables meant to serve large groups. Mark

pointed out by that the general seating area with tables by the entrance of the restaurant was for “locals.” Kerry and Rob recalled that we were very tired, but Kerry thought it was nice to get out. Rob said, “This was our first Chinese meal!” He remembers we could have one glass of beer. Brent thought the restaurant had beautiful scenes. Rob and Brent remembered that inside the restaurant we walked over a little bridge over water and fountains. Judy remembers that the female wait staff wore beautiful long Chinese style dresses and that there were several also hung out for display. As it turns out, at most of the fancy Chinese restaurants they the female wait staff greeted us in those beautiful...usually red or yellow...dresses, and at other restaurants, they wore a pretty Chinese top). George remembered that we had egg drop soup (with corn), rice, and breaded and fried fish cartilage. JoAnn said that this was an introduction to the Lazy Susan meal delivery system and that what we ate was referred to, by Mark, as the “common people’s” food. Kerry said she was excited but tentative about trying the food and thought the setting was nice, that the chicken and pork were good, and that we were surprised by the fact that the rice came almost last (a practice, we learned later, that was common at restaurants ..... but most of us wanted it early, *with* our meal). According to Kerry, service there was a sign of what we could expect at future meals. Liz was practicing use of her chop sticks. Maryann & Debbie thought dinner was interesting.....and were asking, and thinking, “What is this? What is that? All these dishes.... A Lazy Susan system.... Oops too fast..... Open minded curiosity.... Able to eat some things....” It is likely we were all thinking what Maryann & Debbie said about the foods: “For some let’s try, and for others, no way.” Among the items we were served were: pork, cauliflower and broccoli, fried pumpkin (the favorite for a few of us). Some of us asked for the local Beijing beer, which was mild tasting. We thought it was comparable to a US *light* beer. Mei often had to take time out to answer our questions about dishes, their ingredients, or protocols, but was quite patient about it all.

### **Monday**

We all started with our favorite meal, breakfast, and Liz ate her Froot Loops with chopsticks. After seeing Tiananmen Square and the Forbidden City, we took taxis to the Silk Market. We decided to eat first, and chose an Italian restaurant by the entrance to the market. Brent remembers that we paid for lunch before they brought it out. This is where he first smelled cigarette smoke and realized how nice FL law is. Rob was disappointed that they did not have spaghetti so he got the lasagna, a Coke, and water. The student hosts ate at Rob’s table. Mark ordered curry chicken and rice. He did not like it very much. Rob wanted to go to the Subway restaurant next door. The wrong pizzas were developed to a few of us...veggie instead of plain, etc. but were good nevertheless. Even though it was an Italian restaurant, it offered a range of hot teas, which takers stated tasted very good. George had seafood lasagna and Judy got a cheese pizza with veggies (even though she thought she had ordered a plain cheese pizza). JoAnn and Kerry shared a pizza with vegetables and ordered Cokes and water. It was a very dry day and they were trying to stay hydrated. Kerry commented on the fact that our first lunch in China was at an Italian restaurant. Truth be told, we were all anxious to go shopping and that was the restaurant right by the market.

For Monday dinner we again ate at a Chinese restaurant at tables that also had a Lazy Susan. Upon entering the restaurant, we took a glass elevator to the 4<sup>th</sup> floor and were directed so a private room, being told again, the first floor was for locals. The room had beautiful wall to floor silk screens on the walls and sliding doors. According to Rob, we went to eat in a room, the food

was good, and as always, only one glass of either Coke or beer. He ordered beer – one glass. He remembers that at the first floor, the restaurant had aquariums with lobsters and that we were served fruit for dessert. George recalls the hot and sour soup at dinnertime, since that is one of his favorites at American Chinese restaurants. JoAnn felt (and the rest of us) that her dinner was similar to the previous night's and we were getting better with the chopsticks. She also commented on the fact that we only got one glass of Coke or Sprite or beer, but she found herself drinking 5-6 cups of tea with each meal. Kerry thought that dinner was the same as first night, and the food was good, but she was still absorbing the culture and thought that she was in China eating with chopsticks. Liz was getting better at using her chopsticks. Lynn and Jeff, again, were offered the beer and tea, but opted for other beverages as they did not like or drink either. Maryann and Debbie were still amazed that there are so many kinds of Chinese dishes. "Plant? Food? Animal? What is so good about this? Amazing to see Chinese culture eating as if there were a feast." They, like us, found dinner was exciting... "Maybe there's Chinese food I know I like. Here we go again. Don't like that. Don't touch that. Oh, this is good...." We all enjoyed asking Mei about foods and watching her enjoy eating and using the chopsticks with expertise. Many of us agreed that the cut green beans and fruit salad with apples and pineapple in a mayonnaise type sauce were among our favorite dishes.

### **Tuesday**

Brent recalled that for lunch we ate at the Jade store and there were many servers waiting for anything we needed. He sat with Mei's parents and brother. Rob thought that lunch at the Jade store was a big meal... maybe because they wanted us to buy expensive jade. He remembers that they asked for a bowl of rice. But what JoAnn remembered was that at the Jade restaurant, it was only one drink again! But she thought the mandarin oranges and apples were great! At lunch time Kerry felt like she was still on a high from the Great Wall and that the food now was as expected. She stayed away from the spicy foods. Maryann & Debbie liked the selection of food compared to previous restaurants, but were aware that is this how everyone eats. They both felt they were getting better with the chopsticks. We all had trouble remembering the dishes we were served that day. Maybe because it was about in the middle of our trip and was at this point food and process were becoming somewhat familiar to what we had been eating and doing the previous days. It was always good to be with Mei, who was patient and kind through all our questions about foods...."What is this?...What is that?" Amazing that she had time to eat.

Dinner was "on our own" so we split up into various groups. Jeff, Lynn, and Liz went to do some exploring, shopping, and dinner. They ended up walking back from the Silk Market, a walk we were told, of about one mile. Rob and Brent went shopping locally. Brent recalls that they ate at a Subway that was exactly like a Subway in the US. Rob commented that he "Bought so much – two Armani suits and an Armani jacket...and poor Brent... went shopping with me." Rob remembers that he only had a Coke and that a guy wanted them to buy DVDs. George ate too much for lunch and did not eat dinner. JoAnn could not really remember dinner ....but I remember that she only had tea and accompanied Kerry and me to the "seafood and meat" buffet in the hotel restaurant. Kerry recalls that some of us wanted KFC but she ended up with a pot that ate her noodles. She doesn't know how so it was a learning experience. And it was...Maryann, Debbie, JoAnn, Kerry and Judy met at the hotel lobby and decided to walk over to KFC. But it was very crowded with young persons, and the menu was in Chinese. We decided to forgo KFC and try the Dairy Queen. Once we found it, and went inside, we found that the

menu was also in Chinese...for Chinese fast food, and that there was a small counter to the right of the eatery where one could order milkshakes and ice cream. We left and decided to try the hotel restaurant, where rumor had it there was a seafood and meat buffet, along with beer. Once we got to the restaurant at the hotel, Maryann and Debbie opted to go have ice cream with homemade granola in their hotel room. Kerry and Judy decided to try the buffet...seafood for Judy, and meat for Kerry. Joann stayed with them at the restaurant but decided to have only tea. After Kerry and Judy placed the order, the waitress proceeded to light two sternos that were under a pot – one for Kerry and one for Judy. The waitress then added a cloudy broth in the pot. Kerry and Judy stared at the pot, then each other. In that they were obviously looking confused, the waitress signaled to the large table in the middle of the room. She indicated to Kerry and Judy that they needed to get their own food from the center of the table, then put it in the pot so it could get cooked. Kerry and Judy marveled at the different types of foods...a variety of clams, fish, muscle and organ meat cuts (such as haggis), vegetables, bean noodles and vermicelli. We mostly chose the known... noodles and vegetables, came back, and placed them in our pots, where we proceeded to overcook everything. We went to a side table that had a variety of sauces, seasonings, and spices. We made small mixtures in our bowls. Judy thought the broth in the pot was rather bland and was hoping to dump all the spices into the pot, but the waitress came running over and stopped her, indicating that the sauces were for dipping the food, once cooked. Judy did just that, but when no one (she thought) was looking (Kerry saw her), Judy did put some of the dipping sauce in the pot in the hopes of making the broth a bit tastier. Kerry and Judy -- but especially Kerry – let her noodles cook so long they disintegrated and she barely got anything to eat. Judy ate a bit of the fish that has not fallen apart from overcooking and had trouble removing the slippery bean noodles from the pot with the chopsticks so her meal was rather meager, too. There were desserts.... about 1” by 2” pieces of white cake with frosting, chocolate cake, and custard in small cups, on a side table. Still hungry, Kerry and Judy had each had several desserts. Probably something rude...but it helped fill us up. The fun part was that there were very small horn shaped pastries filled with cream and topped with a Froot Loop! The next day at breakfast, we made it a point to tell Liz, who had now just about mastered eating her morning Froot Loop cereal with her chopsticks.

### **Wednesday**

Today we went to the airport to travel to Jinan and meet Pearl, the Shandong University student who was our guide. She and the van driver took us to the hotel and then we walked to a restaurant, where we met her professor (Mei's friend) and had lunch. The restaurant's front seating was as usual – tables, but in the middle of the room some of the tables had swings instead of chairs. To the back of the room there were large tables divided by a low wall, of about 4 feet. We were split up into two groups, each seated at a large table. The first experience there was the bowl of soup that was brought to us: a milky looking liquid that was soy milk. They passed around sugar in case one wanted to put it in the soup. Most of us did not like it (Brent thought it tasted like smoked cardboard), so it was left, but we were highly impressed by Mei who enjoyed drinking it and proclaimed it to be one of her favorite foods. Judy, thinking it might be like the hot soy milk served at breakfast in the restaurant in Beijing, tried the soy soup, but it really was not sweet, so she did not like it. Rob thought the soup was a huge never ending bowl and that the food kept coming and coming. He reminded us that is where we met Mei's friend, who was very nice and welcoming. Rob mentioned that Mei looked happy and that is where we ate water lily root, which he (and many of us thought) was not bad. However, he still did not do well with

chopsticks. What George remembers most is the soy milk, tofu in a red sauce (which had pieces of hot pepper), the water lily stem, and a fungus that we thought was seaweed, as it was small, soft, curly, dark and somewhat gelatinous. (Mei explained what it was to us – a fungus that grows at the base of trees). JoAnn mentioned how we got special seating and great service but again, the rice came late in the meal. She recalls that large bowls of soy milk were placed at each seat and at our table, and that Judy was the only taker. Kerry remembers most the soy soup, too, but also the water lily (stem), and chicken. She thought it was fun to be in a new place, which was part of the switch we made from playing to working. The restaurant was not as fancy, but everyone still tried hard to please us. The water lily stem was the new food most liked by several of us. At lunch Maryann & Debbie were thinking “This is Chinese? Ok I’ll try. Oops this isn’t going to do it for me. The sour milk? What is that? Peanuts yeah! This yam (the water lily stem) is good. I can do some of the pork. Look at Pearl eat that whole fish with eyes!” We liked the water lily stem, which tasted like sweet potato with rice in the center, and we liked the peanuts so the next day that was one of the items we chose at the restaurant at lunch.

This dinner is the most memorable, interesting, shocking, and challenging of all meals. George remembered that among the foods were mullet with eyes, a leafy roll with sticky rice, white rice, and peanuts but we also had 2 types of squid, octopus, scorpion over crisped rice, prawns, starfish (the cooked body, which looked like scrambled egg whites and legs at the outer edge of the plate, placed as a decoration), shrimp soup, round disk like pieces of bread with stir-fry, pineapple, tomatoes and tangerine, pork and peppers and onion, crab with shell, white fish with a “yellow thing from a tree.” We enjoyed the drinking, talking, and trying new foods...it was so much fun... at a very fancy room on the third floor of the Shandong University school cafeteria. Unsure of protocols, we took to Mei, Pearl, and others for the lead. Rob said that the Dean placed one leech on his plate and he ate it (without knowing what it was). The scorpions were unusual – and looked crunchy. He mentions the different kinds of octopi and how he was doing much better with his chopsticks but they still gave him a fork, anyway! Rob recalls that the Dean toasted with beer but he did not drink it because he was allergic to it. George remembered most the starfish, leeches, fried scorpion, fish, squid. JoAnn also ate leeches that the Dean served her and believes that this ought to be a line on her CV. Kerry decided to stick to basics – chicken, pork, veggies, shellfish. She found out that the scorpions cost \$6 per person. She felt like the food kept coming and coming. Maryann and Debbie’s stated that their thought was “Dinner: Oh my! Thank goodness for Judy --- the guinea pig to the truth before sampling. How can I get through this without offending the Chinese representation?” But most of us were likely thinking the same thing. But Debbie, Brent and Liz were the truly daring ones, as they tasted the scorpions. Liz, Brent also tasted the leeches. Forget the Great Wall heroes.....they were the day’s heroes!

### **Thursday**

JoAnn slept through part of the day, so she missed breakfast and lunch, which was another culinary experience. Pearl took us to a fancy Chinese restaurant and pointed out that that the restaurant’s specialty is chicken. However, when one entered the restaurant the most interesting view were all the fish tanks with many types of fish and other sea life, such as turtles. In addition, to the left of the room, around the walls, were many food dishes, covered with plastic wrap and a sign indicating the price. We were told that the procedure was to select what you want (a waitress follows you around and takes your order) and then the food is prepared and

brought to the table. Brent thought the layout seemed like a food market, uncooked food on display to pick which plate they would cook for you. Liz ordered peanuts and various types of sushi, which many of us liked and ate. After ordering, we went back to the table and sat down. Some of us hung our purses or other items on the back of the seat, which promoted the waitress to come over to our seats and put a cover over the back of the chair, to cover the item hanging over it. Rob remembered that we had wet wash cloths and did not know when to use them...and were told that the napkins cost extra. "Oh, my gosh!" Kerry recalls the tofu, shrimp, spicy rolls, and veggies and stated that it was like a slaughterhouse cafeteria – live scorpions, living turtles – all she wanted to eat was something that did not have to be killed! We had peanuts. Pearl's favorites, which she ordered, were egg custard, and a chicken with its head and legs still attached. As usual, although much of the food was unknown to us, and some was, such as the fried shrimp, Kerry was right...we ate a lot, so she was happy lunch was over! George also recalls that in addition to the tofu with scallions, tofu with veggies, peanuts, rice, chicken, an egg dish, we also had sticky buns and spring rolls. Maryann & Debbie stated that they had met their maximum with Chinese and could not do anymore, so they had mostly white rice and tea. The chicken head in the chicken dish that Pearl ordered freaked them out. (We noticed there were feet there, too, which we mentioned, seemed only natural, if the head was there.) Before entering the restaurant some of us commented that we were not very hungry, but in line with previous days, despite lack of knowledge about some of the dishes and comments about too much food, we did a pretty good job of eating most of the food.

For dinner, Mei, Judy and George ate with the Dean and some of the faculty from the School of Public Health at Shandong University, who took them to a restaurant (with the usual private room). But this one was even fancier than previous ones in that there was first an entrance room before the dining room. Again, the first floor had tables and the subsequent higher floors had private rooms. We were led to the third floor and to a private dining area in which there was an entrance room with wait staff and a bar with a variety of liquors. George had one local Jinan beer. The hosts pointed out the regional competition between Beijing and Jinan beer, and that Jinan beer, of course, tastes better, but Beijing beer has achieved more familiarity because of commercialism and larger scale production. Among the many dishes we were served were whole fish, breaded flounder, small snails, larger snails, tiny octopi, sea cucumber (served to each person on a separate dish, with rice), pig's feet, potato like tuber/veggie, pumpkin cut in squares in a sauce, thin cut celery with pork strips, whole shrimp, shrimp soup, kelp cut into thin strips, small fried fish, a clear white Chinese liquor, likely a rice alcohol. For dessert we were served cucumber and celery sticks, and tomatoes, then watermelon and orange wedges. Judy was served the fish eye along with a piece of fish but did not eat the eye. She did, however, try the varieties of snail, octopi, sea cucumber, pig's feet, a potato like tuber, pumpkin, and pork with celery. She especially liked the potato like tuber, the pumpkin, the celery, and the tomatoes, which were so sweet, it seemed natural they would serve them as part of the end of the meal. Mostly, Judy and George were impressed with Mei's familiarity and enjoyment of many of the foods and were grateful for her ability to explain some of the culinary dishes and etiquette...as well as saving Judy by being Momma Mei --- Mei provided cues to Judy and George to indicate when it was their time to make a toast. Mei always said, "Judy you don't have to if you don't want to." every time a "bottoms up" toast was made, and helped Judy save face whenever she took just a sip of the liquor after a "bottoms up" toast.

The others did different things for dinner. Some went to McDonald's, where Brent said it was very busy but the employees found them seats and gave a picture menu so they could point and order. Ron was excited about the McDonald's Happy Meals – two toys! Donald Duck and Pluto!! Best hamburgers in the world!! JoAnn was happy nothing looked like a critter. Hooray! and Kerry, who also had a McDonalds Happy meal dinner thought it never tasted so so so good! Milkshake, burger, and fries. Then she got the hot apple pie. She says she never eats at McDonalds, but this was delicious!

### **Friday**

Today we started getting ready for the return home by eating at the local Pizza Hut and McDonalds. Brent, along with several others, commented that the Pizza Hut where we went for lunch seemed a lot nicer than any Pizza Hut in the US. We were seated at three tables that were within view of each other, about 4-5 per table. Judy ordered a frozen cappuccino, which was just delicious...like a milkshake, and drank it so fast she had to order a second one. Rob, who ate with Pearl and Joe, thought the supreme pizza was wonderful, greasy, and the best pizza he ever had! He was glad that the Pepsi was in a pitcher with three lemons. We asked the student from Shandong University if she had ever eaten at Pizza Hut and she said no. When asked why, she indicated that she could not afford to eat there. She seemed shy about taking her portions, so we prompted her to take her food and enjoy. George remembered that at his table, which included the student, Judy, Brent, JoAnn, and Kerry, that we ordered the thin veggie pizza, the thick meat lover's pizza, and the thick cheese pizza (and he had an orange soda). Again, we thought it was too much food but ended eating it all. Kerry thought it was really good pizza, and she liked the veggie one most. JoAnn stated that this was the most beautiful Pizza Hut she had ever seen, and the pizza and company were great.

For dinner we decided to go to the local market and buy foods to eat. However, we ended up buying lots of things to bring back home and nothing to eat, so several of us went to McDonald's. Earlier that day Rob went and got four Happy Meals to get the toys -- Dumbo, Snow White, Simba, Buzz Light Year. Liz ate one Happy Meal, and he gave Joe, our tour guide two of the meals and kept the toys. Yeah! Joe loved the fries and the Cokes. Again, when we got there, it was very busy at the McDonald's and there were many employees seating customers and clearing tables when finished. George had a McDonald's Big Mac, fries and a Coke. Judy had the fish sandwich, but just ate half of the bread, and also ate a yogurt she had bought at the food market. George, Kerry, JoAnn, Judy talked about the taro root pie on the menu. JoAnn just had a milkshake at McD's. Kerry said Yeah!!... She was ready for plain food. Hamburgers, fries, medium Coke (regular, no diet available in most eateries). Maryann & Debbie did not come to dinner, instead ate crackers from home in their hotel room.

### **Saturday**

At the airport we saw a Starbucks on the way to the gate. Once all our bags were put down by the gate we worked our way back to the Starbucks, and eventually almost all of us ran into each other at the Starbucks (poor Mei got stuck watching our bags!). Some of us had Frapuccinos (the vanilla crème, based on Liz's recommendation) and some also had pastries. Liz bought a Starbucks mug with the Beijing 2008 Olympics logo...for only \$3 USD. Once on the plane, we were then taken back to the harsh reality of airplane food. Some of us ate the noodle soup, others preferred to forgo it. We were looking forward to eating at home, but happy about the great food

experiences. Judy was still trying to get rid of her trail mix, but there were no takers. She is still probably carrying it around.

What will be our memories of food in China? Many of our conversations centered on the variety of foods that were culturally available. This struck some of us as a positive approach to feeding a large population, but more importantly, maximizing the relationship between human need and supporting ecological diversity. What would we feed our Chinese guests in the US? Steak? A fancy or more expensive steak? Potatoes? A fancy potato? Salad? We could not come up with nearly as interesting or varied a list of foods.

Definitely, we will recall the introduction to foods previously unfamiliar to us. But food conversations with other trip members indicate that more importantly, we will remember: that we grew by testing and pushing our own limits; that our hosts used food as a vehicle for welcoming us and demonstrating friendliness; that food habits, as well as food likes, are learned; and that social protocols vary, but that eating is a universal vehicle for sharing good times, making friends, and creating lasting memories.