

Hello everyone!

Now that I am situated in China and getting the jist of things, I thought that I would write to let you know how I'm doing!

After a total of 20 hours in a plane, I finally touched down in Kunming without incident. Customs was no problem at all – in fact, my bags were never even opened! I guess that is part of why NICS has us fly in via Bangkok. It's a little easier to enter the country, less hassle.

My first and most dominating impression of Kunming is my surprise that I do not see a lot of English. In Bangkok every sign was in Thai and English, but here, almost everything is in Chinese. Even taxi cab drivers and hotel clerks do not speak English. So, I've been hit pretty hard by the language barrier. As of now, my Chinese is coming slowly. I can say: hello, I'm sorry / excuse me, how much does it cost, thank you, yes, I don't understand, I see but I don't understand, and no.

Many people here ride bicycles. In fact, roads have one lane in either direction for cars, and one lane in either direction for bikes! But, there's really no "right of way" here. People pretty much just go where they want, and if you have a bigger vehicle, you get your way. That's also how fault is decided. Whoever has the biggest vehicle is at fault, even if it wasn't really that person's fault! If you are a foreigner, you are always at fault (after all, foreigners have money). Thus, if I were ever to get into an accident, I'm told that I stop just to make sure people are okay, maybe pay some money to cover damages, and then take off. While that seems contradictory to like minded people, it's a reality here. The longer a person stays at an accident, the bigger the crowd becomes, and the more money the foreigner has to pay, even hospital bills! That has happened here!

However, China has quick and severe laws to those who harm foreigners. So, people who don't live here are pretty safe. China wants to keep their tourism alive, their trade with the US, and the 2008 Olympics, so foreigners are well protected. I feel safe everywhere I go, though there is petty theft like pick pocketing.

The city itself is quite large – 3 million people. There are people everywhere! Lots of people own their own shops, which are run out of garages. Imagine blocks and blocks of self-storage lockers for cars. Then, place a store inside each one. You have Kunming. Granted, some stores are larger than others, and we even have a few department stores, though not many. For some strange reason, I have not been able to find a single post card. There are also lots of people on the streets selling fruit, vegetables, or cooking food for people to buy. Most things in China are very cheap. I can eat a dinner that makes me full for only 6 RMB, about 80 cents. I had lunch at a restaurant the other day for 4 RMB, about 50 cents. On my first day here I was taken to a restaurant where we ordered six dishes. The cost was 24 RMB, about \$3.00. I bought my bike, complete with basket and lock, for 140 RMB, about \$17.50. Not everything is cheap though, some products are actually the same price as in the USA. I also have my costs for services like health care which are billed from the USA in US amounts. There are also foreign food stores that sell American food. Those are expensive.

As for my project here, all is going well. School begins on Thursday, August 30. We've been preparing with a lot of communication to my Father and my Father's son. All but two employees at the school are like minded, which includes a few people who live here! It is very dangerous for people who live here to follow the teacher. While I have actually found that I am very free to communicate in public, go to a special place, read my book in public, and even talk about my way of life in public, the same is not true for those who live here. In fact, if I am seen doing project work with the people who live here, they are more at risk for jail than I am. That doesn't mean I can't have friends who are in the same culture as the country I am now in, it just means that I can't talk about my work with the project. The school is a totally safe environment for discussions and communication, but the phone and email are big no-no's for using non-appropriate language. I do see a big need for project people here ; I'm so glad my Father told me to come. I took some books with me when I came in, and I'm glad I had them on me, because my first box came today. I sent it May 30 from Anchorage, and both US and here customs opened my box.

Well, there's so much more I could write, but I can't write forever. Actually, I could, but I don't think you want to read that much. Please feel free to email me your questions, bearing in mind I'm still moving into my apartment and doing school/project stuff. (it might take me a while to write back) For those of you who decided to support me, thanks so much! As soon as I can find some stationery I plan to write! May . . . be with you all, as . . . is certainly present at KIA (Kunming International Academy).

Steven