Week 2 in China

A Reflection of My First Week in Chongqing

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Monday March 20th, 2017: Day 3 in Chongqing

 This morning, I came across some rice noodles during breakfast this morning that were identical to the ones that I eat back home in Canada from the local Dragon’s Inn Restaurant on Wyandotte Street West. Not only were these breakfast noodles not spicy (a rarity in Chongqing whose cuisine is known for its Sichuan spices), but they were very delicious. The only regret that I had from this breakfast was not going back to the serving table for a second plate of noodles.

 After a quick run back to my hotel room to change clothes (I did not know that business causal was the appropriate attire for classes as a student at Southwest University), I met back up with Alaura, Michael, Altion, Victoria, and several Southwest University teacher candidates and we caught a shuttle bus to the teacher education building on campus for our first lesson of the trip: Chinese Traditional Music. During the lesson, I learned that the twelve-tone equal temperament was founded earlier than it was in Western countries. In addition, I learned about the classification of Chinese traditional music and how each genre serves a different purpose. Palace music, for example, belonged to nobles and was played by multiple musicians during parties. Literati music and religious music, on the other hand, belonged to the middle class and the religious music was based on the religion and beliefs of people. Folk music, meanwhile, belonged to the lower class and includes ballads and operas that are related to the real lives of people. Beijing opera and zither are the most popular types in this genre and, like other types in this genre, contain really active music and evoke emotions in listeners. Fifty-six ethnic minorities exist in China and each have its own kind of music.

With regards to Chinese traditional opera, there are three hundred different types in China today and the stage setting for them all is simple, but the acting and emotions of the actors are most important in a performance. Aspiring performers must master the art of Aria, spoken word, performance skills, and instrumental performance in order to become performers of Chinese traditional opera. Kunqu opera, on the other hand, is quieter than Beijing opera and involves fewer spoken words. The colourful emotions are evoked by the actor’s face. Quyi, meanwhile, combines spoken words and scenes. Another opera type, Jingyun Dagu, combines drum performance with singing.

In addition to learning about opera, I also learned about the bamboo flute, the national instrument of China which consists of six holes. Furthermore, I learned about the four main fixtures of Chinese traditional music: melody, timber, artistic conception, and ethnic flavour and the importance of imagining the beauty of the sound of music being played.

What I enjoyed most about the lesson was learning about the Chinese zither, which originated in the Qing dynasty and, thus, has a history of about twenty five hundred years. Twenty-one strings and five tones make up the zither and are played with four fake nails (there is not a fake nail for the pinky finger) made out of turtle shell. I was thoroughly entertained watching and listening to the zither performer play her zither and enjoyed picturing the lofty mountains flowing in my mind as depicted by the music that she played. At first, I was apprehensive about trying to play the zither myself as I did not wish to look foolish in front of my colleagues and the Southwest University students and staff. However, Victoria encouraged me to give it a try, pointing out that I would probably never get a chance to try playing it again. Realizing that she was correct, I seated myself behind the zither and began plucking at a few strings to begin with and then gradually running my fingers throughout the twenty-one strings, eliciting a melody that was surprisingly pleasant to hear. I then realized that it was not so scary trying to play the zither. In fact, it was quite fun and I’m glad that I got the chance to play it.

Overall, I learned three important things about Chinese traditional music. Firstly, its natural philosophy revolves around the relationship between human and nature. Secondly, its primary function is to help us to become better people. Finally, its special meaning is derived from appreciating the beauty of its spiritual music.

After another delicious lunch at one of the on-campus cafeterias (pork, green peppers, and onions with a side of button mushrooms and fried rice), I returned to the hotel with my colleagues for some rest. I paused outside momentarily, however, as the weather was beautiful enough for me to film a video of myself to send to the Education Society members, wishing them the best of luck during their third practicum and expressing how much I was missing them.

A seminar followed the brief period of rest. I sat in my seat for two hours listening to Southwest teacher candidates, who had the opportunity to visit the University of British Columbia over the course of the Chinese New Year holiday, present their observations. It pleased me to hear that many of them appreciate the student-centered approach to teaching and value critical thinking. Michael was even confident enough to step forward on behalf of the Reciprocal Learning Program family and elaborate on different types of assessments as well as his student-centered approach to teaching. His sense of humour fused with his professionalism makes it evident that he was born to be a teacher.

After the seminar, I joined my colleagues and some Southwest University teacher candidates for a game of volleyball on one of the campus’ many courts. Alaura and I opted to remain on the sidelines as cheerleaders and camerawomen since we were not comfortable getting active in our business casual attire. Altion, Victoria, and Michael engaged in a game. Altion, not to my surprise, came prepared by wearing athletic attire underneath his business casual attire. Eventually, another group of Southwest University students challenged the group to a game. It was no surprise to me that this group of players was skilled in volleyball given that they have daily access to the campus courts and were most likely taking advantage of that whenever possible. However, I was astonished at how kind they were despite playing against students with less experience on the volleyball courts. Sometimes, Altion, Victoria, and Michael would mess up a serve and they would be given second chances by the other team. It appeared to me that they are such good sports and really enjoyed the company of Canadians. As I watched the groups play volleyball, I had an ideal view of the track and soccer field nearby, both which were occupied by many Southwest University students. Once again, I was amazed by the manner in which Chinese students spend their time; they appear to get so much enjoyment out of playing sports outdoors than remaining indoors with technology as many Canadian students tend to do.

Eventually, Altion was able to pull himself away from the volleyball court and we all went out to dinner at a restaurant nearby. Since the menu was writing out in Chinese characters and I’m not a picky eater, I was open to letting the Southwest University teacher candidates call the shots when it came to ordering dishes. They ended up ordering around ten dishes of food, ranging from soup to chicken, mild to spicy. After much nagging, Altion tried pig feet, as did Michael and Alaura, and all three of them liked it. Altion even tried a local Chongqing beer. What I found funny was that he tried to say, “Cheers” using the Mandarin word that Dr. Xu taught us; however, one of the Southwest University teacher candidates said that Altion told them to down the whole bottle of beer at once.

As predicted, our days in Chongqing appeared to be getting better the longer that we were here. We were learning so much and have been meeting some incredible people along the way. I wondered what the next day would bring.

Tuesday, March 21st, 2017: Day 4 in Chongqing

 Day four in Chongqing began with breakfast in the hotel’s restaurant with my colleagues. I could not believe that they served tiger cake for breakfast there, just like the tiger cake that I purchase from the local oriental store in Windsor on a weekly basis (it is called tiger cake because the skin of the cake resembles that of a tiger). Naturally, I helped myself. I was also thrilled to discover a chef present who was frying eggs, but since he did not understand a word of English and I was not entirely sure how to request a fried egg in Mandarin, I ended up having an eggless breakfast.

 After breakfast, I sat through a class about understanding Chinese history. I learned that China’s philosophy revolved around the strength of unity as opposed to Canada whose philosophy revolved around the strength of diversity. What was most notable was that a majority of emperors wished to unify China and solidify their reigns. Emperor Qin, first of all, conquered states by military means to create a unified China (the name “China” was derived from the pronunciation of Qin (“Chin”)). Not only did he unify Chinese characters in writing, but he also wished to unify the thoughts of the people by burning a majority of books in China (books about medicine and agriculture were exempt from this wish) and silenced over four hundred Confucian scholars by burying them alive. Wudi the Great of the Han dynasty, from where the modern Chinese language originated (Han language), tried to consolidate his empire by removing the kings (his family members) of every state from power and further dividing the states and giving them to his grandsons. In doing so, he was trying to prevent his family members from challenging his rule. Like Emperor Qin, Wudi wished to unify the thoughts of his people, but through education and one philosophy/ideology rather than through military means and, as a result, supressed hundreds of schools of thought, leaving behind only schools that respected Confucianism. Emperor Li Shimin of the Tang dynasty, on the other hand, abolished the post of prime minister and established three councils and six ministries in its place. Emperor Zhao Kuangyin of the Song dynasty, during his reign, deprived the local military governors and generals of power with a cup of liquor. In an effort to consolidate his rule, Emperor Zhu Yuanzhang of the Ming dynasty dressed guards in embroidered coats.

Eventually, a concept called “The Great Lesson” was established, meaning that only through consolidating central power and promoting one orthodox state ideology can a strong and prosperous China be built. Naturally, the tradition has been challenged by the imported democracy, the New Cultural Movement of the early twentieth century, the May 4th Movement of 1919 (China turned away from the Western liberal democratic model to other political tools to resolve many of the nation’s issues because the model was young, imported, and could not compete with the deeply-rooted Chinese tradition). In the end, it was agreed that Marxism and Leninism’s proletarian dictatorship suited China better.

Overall, I found the lesson to be very interesting and I was intrigued learning about the importance of Chinese history and its impact on China’s education system today.

Since the lesson ended early, my colleagues and I decided not to go to lunch and returned to the hotel instead for some rest. I finished off the bag of hickory sticks that my mom packed for my flight to China before I curled up for a much-needed nap.

The afternoon brought with it a martial arts lesson outdoors. My colleagues and I were given the choice of learning either tai chi or kung fu (Victoria picked the latter and we agreed with her). The instructor walked us through the five-step boxing technique and, honestly, it was more difficult to do that it appeared to be. There was a lot of stretching and squatting involved and I expected to feel the effects of both actions the following day. On a brighter note, the instructor praised my flexibility and sense of balance. It pleased me greatly to have learned that my daily yoga sessions have been paying off. I hope to practise the routine daily to improve, but also to not forget it. What I will also not forget were the amused faces of the several Southwest University students and Chongqing locals watching five Canadians wobble during an outdoor martial arts lesson (I wondered if they did not have anywhere else to be at the time).

After dinner at one of the on-campus cafeterias (spicy chicken and celery with rice), a Southwest University teacher candidate gave us a tour of the parts of campus that we had yet to visit. During the walk, however, I could not help but feel incredibly disengaged from the group’s conversations. Michael was in a deep conversation with the Southwest University teacher candidate, no doubt wanting to learn more about the campus. Altion and Victoria, being the loving couple that they are, kept to themselves for the most part. Occasionally, Alaura would get pulled into their conversation, leaving me to stare at the greenery around me. Eventually, I could not stand the isolation and trailed behind the group. I turned on some music on my cell phone, placed one earbud in, and proceeded to mentally choreography routines to the songs that played. For the first time since I arrived in China, I started shedding tears. A lot was going through my mind at the time: our schedule for the week constantly changing, the pressure to keep up with my work for Dr. Xu, the feeling of isolation that had been lingering recently, a sense of embarrassment towards my questionable ability to adapt to the Chinese culture as quickly as possible, and my frustration towards the vice president of the Education Society at the University of Windsor who has yet to return any of my e-mails. Even Alaura remarked that I was unusually silent to which I assured her that I was fine when I really wanted to return to the hotel and have a good cry, something that I got to do once the walk was over. Fortunately, Beibei was out and I could cry in the privacy of our hotel room. I felt like there was no one I could talk to about what was going through my mind without being judged or accused for killing the mood of our experience in China. Although that day ended on a rather gloomy note for me, I could only pray that the next day would be better.

Wednesday, March 22nd, 2017: Day 5 in Chongqing

 Breakfast today was the best one yet since arriving in Chongqing. In addition to watermelon and baby potatoes, I got to eat two fried eggs. Today’s chef on duty fried the eggs and just left them on the counter for hotel guests to take, one of them being me.

 A lesson about Chinese landscape painting followed breakfast, a painting style that is one of the oldest continuous artistic traditions in the world. I learned that it consists of four arts: poetry, calligraphy, painting, and seal-engraving. While Western painting revolves around a dichotomy view (one dividing into two), Chinese painting revolves around a holistic view (two combining into one). While Western paintings have one focus, Chinese paintings have different foci. I also learned that harmonious energy is needed in order to paint and connect human and nature and that the blending of yin and yang results in this harmony. In addition, I learned about Chinese circularity and idioms; heaven and man interact with each other, flowers smile during a happy occasion, and birds sing with the joyful congregation. In addition, there are a lot of clouds in Chinese paintings because artists admire the gods and wish to feel connected and go to heaven. Mountains are also common features in Chinese paintings because they exemplify the idealistic life of living in nature and away from troubles. Overall, I found many of the paintings very intriguing and it was interesting to see how paintings differed between dynasties and how Western influences fused with the traditional style. The professor was even kind enough to take us to his art studio not too far from the campus where children would go on weekends to learn how to make Chinese paper art, carve wood, shape steel, paint, and so much more.

 Upon returning to the campus, Altion, Victoria, Alaura, and I went to eat lunch at one of the cafeterias while Michael went to watch a basketball game between the Faculty of Education and the Faculty of Economics. While Altion and Victoria headed to the third floor of the cafeteria, Alaura and I simply ate on the first floor. I ate some mushrooms with rice and three meatballs. I was not entirely sure what kind of meat made up those meatballs, but I wasn’t going to look into it and would rather just accept that they were delicious.

 After lunch, Lisa (one of the Southwest University teacher candidates) took Alaura and I to get our clothes washed on campus. It cost me seventy-eight yuan (a little over fifteen dollars) to get the larger items washed, but I opted to wash my underwear and socks in my hotel room’s bathroom rather than cough up six yuan (a little over a dollar) a piece. Fortunately, it would be ready for pickup on Friday.

 Once our laundry was dropped off, Alaura and I joined Altion, Victoria, and Sunny (another Southwest University teacher candidate) on a trip to the small supermarket nearby to pick up more supplies. I ended buying two more bottles of my favourite orange juice for six yuan in total.

 After meeting up with Michael at the hotel and dropping off our purchases in our rooms, we took a shuttle bus to our afternoon class during which we actually learned how to do Chinese traditional painting. The lesson was taught by the wife of the professor from the morning lesson and she was very talented and patient with us. Once I learned about the five different types of paint strokes, how to properly hold the brush, and practised, I proceeded to paint two paintings: one of bamboo and one of peonies (the national flower of China). While I’m pleased with how my peonies turned out, I can’t help but think that my bamboo leaves look more like sperm than leaves. Overall, I thoroughly enjoyed the class and I got to take home my paintings and two paintbrushes as souvenirs.

 Alaura, Michael, and I made a smart decision to eat dinner after class ended (I ate some veggies and crispy meat with rice in the same cafeteria as the one we went to for lunch) because the traditional tea ceremony that took place an hour and a half later ended up lasting longer than planned. Firstly, the ceremony started thirty-five minutes later than scheduled. Secondly. It was so long that Altion and Victoria left halfway through it to have dinner. Finally, the zither player who taught us how to play during our Chinese traditional music class earlier in the week insisted that we stick around for forty-five extra minutes to listen to eighteen excerpts of Chinese zither music and complete a questionnaire regarding our emotions felt during the playing of each excerpt. The questionnaires were for her research project. To say I was irked by all of this would be an understatement. On a brighter note, the bamboo flute player who entertained us prior to the start of the tea ceremony was very talented. He took my mind off of the disappointment of learning that I would not get to drink any actual tea during the ceremony.

 I always try to end every day on a positive note and I would say Alaura, Michael, and I being able to find our way from the tea ceremony back to our hotel through a dimly-lit campus would be today’s.

Thursday, March 23rd, 2017: Day 6 in Chongqing

 Due to a lack of gas, there was no cooked breakfast in the hotel restaurant this morning, so bags of cakes, milk, and fruit were delivered to our hotel rooms the night before. Rather than get up to eat it, I decided to sleep in.

 Everyone met up in the hotel lobby for the only event of the morning: another debriefing. Once again, we discussed what we liked about our experience in China thus far and what we were not fond of and could be changed for future participants in the Reciprocal Learning Program/ I was in agreement with my colleagues that we loved the people and how kind they are. Of course, this was also the perfect opportunity to vent about the research questionnaire that Alaura, Michael, and I were roped into completing the night before. It was reassuring to learn that Dr. Xu would be willing to assist us around the clock even after she returns to Canada ahead of us and leaves us to our teaching endeavours. It had calmed my nerves a bit.

 After the debriefing, Alaura, Michael, Altion, and Victoria headed back to their rooms while I headed out with Lisa to exchange money at the nearest branch of the Bank of China. We used the Chinese version of an Uber service to get there, which Lisa paid for with her WeChat account connected to her credit card (it amazes me what can be done through WeChat and QR codes). After twenty minutes of completing forms and verifying identities, I managed to exchange a few hundred dollars into more yuan.

 Lisa was so helpful to me, so I treated her to lunch. She suggested McDonald’s and I agreed since I was interested to learn about how the McDonald’s menu in China differed from the one in Canada. A lot of the menu items, such as the Big Mac and McChicken, were present on both menus; however, there were also some menu items that were obviously sold exclusively in China. One item that stood out to me were the fries drizzled with a spicy orange sauce and a white creamy sauce. To my surprise, I liked it.

 During lunch, Lisa and I talked about our families, studies, and travel aspirations and I learned that we have a lot in common. For one thing, she is the oldest on her father’s side of the family and one of the youngest on her mother’s side. She, like me, has a younger brother and wishes to travel to Europe one day. She was so kind as to gift me a jar of jam, which I can mix a spoonful of with water if I ever feel sick again during my time here in China. I have only known her for a week and Lisa is quickly becoming somewhat of a younger sister to me. In a way, she reminds me of a lot of myself: fiercely independent.

 After Lisa escorted me back to the hotel and a bit of a rest, it was time to catch a shuttle bus to our afternoon class about education in China from 1949 to now. In addition to learning that October 1st, 1949 was the birth date of the People’s Republic of China, I learned that 1950 was the year that the nine-year obligatory schooling was established and that 1951 was when the first educational system was established after liberation. Furthermore, I learned that the Chinese educations system was heavily influenced by the Soviet Union in 1953; Russian experts and scholars established industries in China and trained its teachers, Russian textbooks were translated into Chinese, a graduate education system was established, and a lot of emphasis was put on doing things collectively. Trees were cut down to run furnaces to make steel between 1958 to 1960, which explains why there are not any trees a hundred years or older. In 1970, during the Cultural Revolution, the college entrance exam was abolished, schools were closed, and middle school students were re-educated in factories, farms, and armies. China joined the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 1971 and schools and universities reopened in 1975. In addition, the first teacher’s day in China occurred on September 10th, 1985, the lifelong education system was established in 1998, and the free normal education policy was established in 2007. With regards to China’s free normal education system, I learned that it consists of free tuition for four years, free accommodation, a contract in which the students promise to teach in schools of their hometown, primarily in rural areas, for ten years. I also learned that students are only allowed to attend schools within a short distance to their homes and that Chinese parents are very selective about where their children study. Some teachers even play the role of caregivers to students who are deemed as “left behind”, whose parents leave to find work to support the family and leave the grandparents to care for the children. This made me reflect on the Canadian education system; a high degree of professionalism is expected of Canadian teachers that we are not allowed to express how much we care about our students or else we could face a lawsuit regarding our questionable professionalism. It is the complete opposite of Chinese teachers who are allowed to openly care about their students without judgements from parents.

 Once the lesson ended, we returned to the hotel to meet up with Mr. Deng (a Southwest University grad student in education) who took us to his family’s apartment near the campus for dinner. I may have indulged in about thirteen steamed pork and spinach dumplings. I also ate what I thought was fishy eggplant, but turned out to be eel. Shockingly, it was pretty tasty. On top of that, the view of Beibei district and the mountains in the distance from the rooftop garden was absolutely breathtaking, almost like something from a landscape painting.

 After the walk back to the hotel, we sat in the lobby to finalize our decision about whether or not we would go to Chengdu for a few days to see the pandas and visit some schools. What initially held me back were the extra costs as well as not having enough time to plan lessons for my placement at Zeng Jia Yan Primary School. After chatting with my mom via Skype, she encouraged me to go, to not worry about money, and to make the most of my experience in China with no regrets. Alaura, Michael, and Victoria also plan to go, but Altion was on the fence about it. After nearly two weeks in his company, it is easy to tell when he is fighting the urge to vent. He ended up leaving the discussion and heading up to his room. I could only hope that he was alright.

Friday, March 24th, 2017: Day 7 in Chongqing

 After breakfast, I got to sit through a Chinese calligraphy class, which was something that I was very much looking forward to since arriving at Southwest University. After remembering how to properly hold the paintbrush, I practised writing numbers in Chinese characters and doing abstract. The instructor gave each of us a large paper fan on which we could paint Chinese characters that can read either “lifelong learner” or “ambitious” and other words along the lines of that. I decided to write “lifelong learner”, but practised it on scrap paper first. I held my breath while writing each character, being extremely careful not to use too much ink or smudge my work. In the end, my fan turned out nicely and the instructor was kind enough to write my name in Chinese characters on my fan and stamp it.

 After the calligraphy class ended, we went with Minghua to purchase our train tickets to Chengdu. I, like the rest of my colleagues, decided that it would be worth it for us to go visit some schools and see the pandas. Once we finished, Alaura, Altion, and Victoria opted to return to campus for lunch, but Michael and I decided to take a little detour and accompany Minghua to a bakery where we purchased some treats for ourselves and our friends. Michael bought himself a crème brûlée while I helped myself to something cheesy. I even picked up a bag of the sugary milk bars that Alaura fell in love with during our tour of the Southwest University campus. Then, we caught a taxi back to campus where we met up with Chengkai and Beibei for lunch at one of the many vendors’ establishments near the music school. I probably ate more tofu in China than I have eaten in Canada during my twenty-three years alive.

 I had about an hour to rest in the hotel before I joined my colleagues in our afternoon class about the systems and policies for teacher education in China. It was interesting to engage in conversation with the Southwest University teacher candidates in attendance about the similarities and differences between Chinese and Canadian education. While Chinese teachers have strong relationships with their students, Canadian teacher-student relationships are not as strong and that has to do with the taboos surrounding the profession and how something as innocent as a pat on the back could potentially lead to a lawsuit. It is unfortunate that I, as a Canadian teacher, cannot fully express how much I care for my students without jeopardizing my professionalism. Furthermore, Chinese education students who major in psychology are qualified to teach psychology in schools whereas psychology, in Ontario, falls under the social sciences teachable and Michael, whose social science background is political science, is allowed to teach it in high school. I can’t help but shake my head at how flawed the Canadian education system is.

 Since Professor Gong offered to take us and some Southwest University teacher candidates out to dinner right after our afternoon class finished, Alaura and I arranged for Lisa to pick up our laundry and leave it with the staff in the hotel lobby. Professor Gong took us to a restaurant called the Lucky Fish Restaurant. I was not too fond of sitting at a table that faced the kitchen where I could see all of the fish being removed from water, weighed, and slaughtered. Out of sight, out of mind, was something that I preferred during this time, especially considering that I own pet fish. However, the food was delicious; I ate plenty of crispy wonton wrappers and fell in love with deep fried bananas.

 I headed back to campus early with Dr. Xu as she had to be at a Skype meeting with her teams from both China and Canada to discuss the Reciprocal Learning Program with regards to science in schools. She invited us to be part of the meeting to say hi to Dr. Salinitri, the Associate Dean for pre-service teacher candidates at the University of Windsor, and to tell her what we have been up to in China so far. As the new president of the Education Society, I will be working alongside Dr. Salinitri a lot during my final year of teacher’s college, so I figured that it would be best if I attended the meeting to represent my Reciprocal Learning Program family and t make myself known to her. Turns out she recognized me, which makes me feel good.

Saturday, March 25th, 2017: Day 8 in Chongqing

 Since I had to be dressed and present in the hotel lobby by eight in the morning, I refused to get up early just so I could have breakfast in the hotel restaurant. Instead, I slept in and when I did wake up, I scarfed down the cheesy pastry that I had purchased from a bakery the day before as a substitute breakfast. (I was thrilled to find several pieces of hot dog inside it).

 After an hour-long drive, I arrived back in downtown Chongqing with my colleagues, Dr. Xu, and a few Southwest University teacher candidates. Our first stop was Ci Qi Kou, a protected cultural site known as the Porcelain Village. Alaura and I accompanied Long Min (one of the Southwest University teacher candidates) around, sampling snack foods and searching for souvenirs, stopping every now and then to take photos and selfies of ourselves. I purchased some beautiful postcards that I feel will make great gifts for the Education Society.

 Once everyone boarded the bus again, we headed to our next stop: Hongya Cave, its architectural design making it appear more like a building than a cave. I joined my colleagues in browsing the souvenirs on the first three floors before we sampled some authentic Chongqing noodles in one of the restaurants on the snack street on the fourth floor. It was incredibly spicy, but also delicious enough to tolerate the spiciness. I even recorded a video of the chef repeatedly tossing the dough used to make the noodles into the air and catching it every time. Apparently, the restaurant owners were so fascinated by the Canadians slurping their noodles that they took photos of us while we were not looking.

 After climbing to the eleventh floor and taking beautiful photos with my colleagues and the Chongqing city skyline and bridges, we walked off to visit the monument built to remember World War II. I noticed that the clock on the monument was a Rolex, which reflected the high-end stories surrounding the monument. Again, we all split up to explore the area. Long Min took Alaura and me to a snack street where we purchased lemonades and sticks of meat coated in Sichuan peppers. If the Chongqing noodles burned my mouth, then my stick of meat annihilated it. No amount of lemonade could soothe that fiery sensation that lingered in my mouth. I ended up passing off the meat that was left on my stick when we all regrouped again (Altion has quite the spice tolerance).

 Once we returned to the hotel for a brief rest, we met up with Dr. Liu for a welcome dinner at a nearby hot pot restaurant. The name of the restaurant, Spicy Dictionary, made me fear for what was left of my mouth, but the hot pot’s spiciness was tolerable and delicious. I sat next to Dr. Liu during the dinner. As we feasted on dumplings, lamb, beef, sausages, deep fried squid, mushrooms, veggies, and ox tripe (yes, you read that right), I was able to learn a lot more about the education system in China from him and he learned a lot about the education system in Canada from me. On top of that, he said that I speak Mandarin very well, which was pleasant to hear him say.

Sunday, March 26th, 2017: Day 9 in Chongqing

 Since there was not anything scheduled for the morning, I took the opportunity to sleep in for once and did not bother getting up for breakfast. When I did wake up, however, I continued to work on my weekly reflection.

 Eventually, Alaura and I took a break from writing to have lunch in the cafeteria near our hotel (I had mushrooms, scrambled eggs, and tomatoes with a side of rice). Afterwards, we decided to enjoy the beautiful weather and take a walk around campus. We also visited the small market near the campus to buy some snacks and stopped by a nearby bakery to buy some pastries for ourselves, but also for Altion, Victoria, and Michael. We then returned to the hotel where I managed to finish my blurbs for the first newsletter.

 When it came time to meet up for dinner with Dr. Xu and Reciprocal Learning Program alumni from Southwest University, I was excited because I was looking forward to meeting them and learning about their experiences in the Reciprocal Learning Program and how much the experience impacted their teaching careers. It amazed me to learn that many of them credited the Reciprocal Learning Program for being the experience that helped them find employment, but also shape them into the teachers that they are today. I am very much looking forward to visiting some of their high school classrooms during the last two weeks of my experience here in China to observe their teaching practises and strategies. The teachers, like most Chinese whom I’ve met thus far, are very modest and do not like talking about their achievements. One teacher blushed when Dr. Xu asked him to talk about the first place prize that he won in a competition. With regards to the dinner, the food was incredibly delicious; I ate a lot of fried potatoes. This dinner was also remarkable in the sense that it was my first time eating rabbit. I like to think of myself as an adventurous eater; I’m always willing to try something new before I decide whether or not I like to eat it.