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Toner Learns to Count Differently in China

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Fred Toner and Don Adleta in China

By Fred Toner

Retired Associate Professor of [Modern Languages](#)

If I had to sum up in one word what I’ve most enjoyed since taking early retirement in 2016, I’d say “traveling.” Time in itself is a luxury, and I’ve been fortunate that my partner, Don Adleta, and I are on the same schedule and that we have been able to cobble out some memorable trips.

We traveled to China where Don taught a month-long workshop in Ningbo, and I worked on some writing projects. We witnessed firsthand the legendary hospitality of the Chinese, especially of some former students, and were feted as kings. I literally brought a part of China back with me (about 10 pounds) thanks to the many banquets in our honor. After the month in Ningbo, we traveled on our own to Shenzhen, Hong Kong, Hangzhou, Shanghai, Xi’an, and Beijing.

My experience teaching foreign languages may have helped me pick up a little Chinese, but I have to admit that Google Translate was very helpful in those hungry moments facing only Chinese characters. Highlights of our trip include the amazing Terracotta Army in Xi’an, the poetic West Lake area of Hangzhou, the Forbidden City in Beijing, and, of course, the Great Wall.

What did I learn in China? There were so many amazing sights and startling experiences that I hesitate to say, feeling more dazed than enlightened. It will take some time to digest what I saw and bring my thoughts into focus although there are some curious things that I can relate. For instance, many Chinese do not like the number four since the sound of that number is too close to the sound of the word “death.” We watched a Chinese friend of ours refuse a hotel room and insist on another because she had been assigned to the fourth floor. The hotel staff didn’t hesitate a minute before assigning another room and didn’t find her hesitation at all surprising.

Don and I have been changing the way we count as a result of what we learned: one, two, three, death, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten!

I also learned that there are no stop signs in China. There are stoplights, of course, but not one stop sign. None. Cars simply ease their way onto the busy streets and highways by edging the grill of their car into the mix and slowly and confidently squeezing into the flow (note to other foreigners: this is much harder done than said). Even so, I didn’t see a single automobile accident during my six-week stay. As is always the case after a long trip, it was very nice, indeed, to be back in tranquil Athens.

The trip to China was our second big “adventure.” To celebrate officially retiring last year, we took an around-the-world, nine-week trip to Qatar, India, Hong Kong, Australia, New Zealand, and French Polynesia. Tahiti and Moorea were highlights for me. Speaking French was not only a pleasure, but also made sightseeing easier and more interesting. Overall, our experience on both trips was wonderful.

Still, there were some obstacles to overcome.