Ten years after directing an IU exchange program at Hangzhou University in China, David N. Silk (Education, IUPUI) returned to China this March by joining a local delegation to Shenzhen just across the border from Hong Kong. The delegation was put together by Pike Township’s New Augusta Academy in Marion County, which has a “sister-school” relationship with the Shenzhen Foreign Language School. After the Pike Township group returned to the United States, Silk traveled to the city of Ningbo, on the East China coast, where he visited with the students and faculty of the Ningbo Education College. Below, Silk describes his impressions of China a decade after his first visit there.

The contrast between Shenzhen and Ningbo is striking and a dramatic illustration of the differences between the China of ten years ago and an emerging “New China” characterized by modernization and economic reform. Shenzhen is in a “special economic zone” that includes Guangzhou (formerly Canton). It is the nearest city in China to Hong Kong and exempt from many of the economic restrictions typical of most China. Free enterprise and private ownership are permitted in these “special economic zones,” whereas in most of China all commerce is owned and regulated by the state.

The school we visited in Shenzhen was different from most American secondary schools but quite adequate. The students were intensely interested in the subculture of American students. Their questions tended to focus on topics like favorite foods and pastimes of American students, dating, and marriage. I did my best to convey ideas like “pizza” and “rap-music,” but found it difficult to characterize music without a melody, and cheese-pie to students who have never known dairy products. These students had never heard of either pizza or rap-music. They heard of Michael Jordan, and several students asked questions about sports. America clearly serves as a shining example to these students, but not of what I personally take to be the best of our culture.

Internet access is new to China and appears to be restricted to government agencies and businesses. I saw no individual users. The Shenzhen school had gotten their Internet connection the day before we arrived. Most of the faculty and administration had never seen a demonstration of the “Web,” so I gave one in their computer classroom.

I then connected to my own web-site, on which I have music files, and downloaded the song “Back Home in Indiana” played by me on guitar. This too astounded the Shenzhen students and faculty. I was surprised to find that my connection was about as fast as modem access from my home in Indianapolis.

Ningbo was quite the opposite of Shenzhen. Although the downtown section of Ningbo was somewhat modern, the area around Ningbo Education College was less developed. It reminded me of Hangzhou ten years ago.

Several of the college faculty for dinner invited me to their apartments for dinner. Their apartments are very small. In one I visited, five family members were sharing a single room, which served as kitchen, bedroom, and family room. At night, they take down the folding table at which they eat and put a bed in its place. They spent two hours cooking an impressive array of traditional Chinese dishes for me. The food bore no resemblance whatsoever to the typical offerings of an American Chinese restaurant.

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The dormitory in which I stayed was Spartan at best, my room having no hot water or shower. A heating unit in the window was turned on for my benefit, but for students there is no heat. Temperatures were in the forties Fahrenheit, both inside and outside the building. However, the hospitality of my Chinese hosts made the accommodations unimportant to me. I was escorted by one of their English language teachers wherever I wanted to go in the city and was even loaned a bicycle which I peddled five miles to downtown Ningbo.

In the evenings, I had as many as 12 students in my room, anxious to practice their English and absolutely fascinated by American culture and lifestyle. They asked no questions about American political and social issues, which may be the result of the unavailability of Western news media. Their only source of outside news is The China Daily, an English language publication that appears to be an official organ of the government.

All things considered, the most significant aspect of the trip for me was the educational potential I saw in these exchanges. There is so much to be learned from study abroad, not only about other cultures, but about our own, because of the way in which living in a foreign culture affects our perceptions of our own culture by providing contrasts.

For example, I questioned several faculty and students about China's one child per family policy. Their response in all cases was that it is an essential and reasonable policy for a country with over a billion people and because of the severe population pressure this puts on China's resources. (China has one-seventh of the arable land America has, with a population more than four times as large.) I sensed no resentment or bitterness toward the one-child policy. For me, it made our own failure to confront the problem of population control seem backward and irresponsible by comparison.

We have a lot to learn from one another through these exchanges. I look forward to a time when study abroad is available to all American students.

—David N. Silk