

# 10 Do's & Don'ts

for Teaching English  
in China

Revised  
for  
2023-24



# About this eBook

If you're thinking about teaching English in China, this eBook is for you.

Covering topics from clever planning to avoiding the cheapest airfare, it tells you what to do and what not to do.

Inside, you'll also find plenty of advice and practical tips to ensure that your teaching experience in China is enjoyable and stress-free.

If you find this eBook useful, please pass it on to anyone thinking about teaching abroad.

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# 1

## Do plan before you go

Planning the kind of teaching experience you want in China is critical. Three initial questions to consider are:

- What type of school do you want to work in?
- What part of China do you want to work in?
- What salary and working conditions are you prepared to accept?

Although you may not have any particular preferences, you should at least have a think about all three questions as they will ultimately shape the kind of experience you will have in China.

### Type of school


Of the following types of schools, which would suit you best?

Choose a...	If you like working with...
Kindergarten	young kids and have lots of patience
Primary school	kids, playing games and having some two-way interaction
High school	teenagers, playing games and having two-way interaction
University	adults and discussing a range of topics
Private center	all age groups (age/level depends on school)

This is a general guide only – some adults like playing games too! Your age, experience and education will also help determine your suitability.

You will have different challenges depending on the age of your students. Younger students are very active and often noisy, so a lot of your time will be spent on behavior management and controlling the class. On the other hand, older students in China are usually passive and quiet, and your challenge will be to actually get them to talk!

Students at private centers could range from three-year-old kids with no knowledge of English to adults with advanced Business English capability. At private centers, classes are often held at night and on the weekend, and the workload may be greater. However, teachers generally receive higher rates of remuneration at private centers.



**“Choose a primary school if you like working with kids”**



## Teaching location

China is a big country. Geographically, it is the third largest in the world and covers multiple temperature zones. Its people are as diverse as the landscape, and provincial cultures, customs and dialects prevail.

This means that someone teaching in remote Inner Mongolia would have a much different experience to someone teaching in downtown Shanghai.

Some questions to think about regarding the location you choose include:

- What kind of climate do you want to work in?
- Do you want to work in a small or big city?
- What kind of Chinese food do you like?
- What language do the locals speak – standard Mandarin or a dialect?

As climate, infrastructure, food and language vary greatly across China, it's best to do your homework before you sign a contract.

## Salary and working conditions

For some people, working in China is a short-term 'gap year' adventure, while for others it's more serious and long term. No matter how long you intend on staying, you need to be comfortable with the salary and working conditions being offered by the host school.

Before you start your job search, you should identify what matters most to you. This will narrow down your search, making it easier to find your dream job.

Some of the most important questions to consider are:

- Given your experience, what salary are you prepared to work for?
- How many contact hours do you want to work per week?
- What kind of housing would you be comfortable living in?

Teaching salaries in China are low by Western standards. On the flipside, the cost of living is lower, particularly outside the big cities like Shanghai and Beijing.

While you'll earn enough money to live comfortably anywhere in mainland China and travel domestically during holidays, any money you save in China will be worth less when you exchange it in your home country.

Remember, most people choose to teach English in China for the experience of a lifetime, not to make lots of money.

## TEFL certificate

Along with a degree, you'll need a TEFL certificate to be able to teach in China. You can choose a TEFL course here: [thehelpfulpanda.teflsource.com](http://thehelpfulpanda.teflsource.com)

**“Do you want to work in a remote town or big city?”**





# 2 Do read your teaching contract carefully

You have to sign a contract to formally accept a teaching position in China. Before you do this though, you must read and understand it.

Generally, a contract is made up of two parts – English and Mandarin (the Mandarin section is a replica of the English section). You should sign and date both sections once you are happy with the terms and conditions.

## Contract must-haves

Your contract must include:

- Your personal details, such as your first name and last name
- The school's contact details
- Title of the job to be performed
- Start and end date of employment
- Number of contact hours or classes you must teach
- Salary
- Medical insurance details
- Termination details.

If a contract doesn't have this key information, ask for it to be included or consider alternative employment.

Most contracts should also include reference to housing or a housing allowance.

## Contract extras

You should consider the following additional factors, which may or may not appear in a contract:

### Teaching

- What will you be required to teach (e.g. oral English or specific subjects)?
- Will you be teaching at just one location or multiple locations?

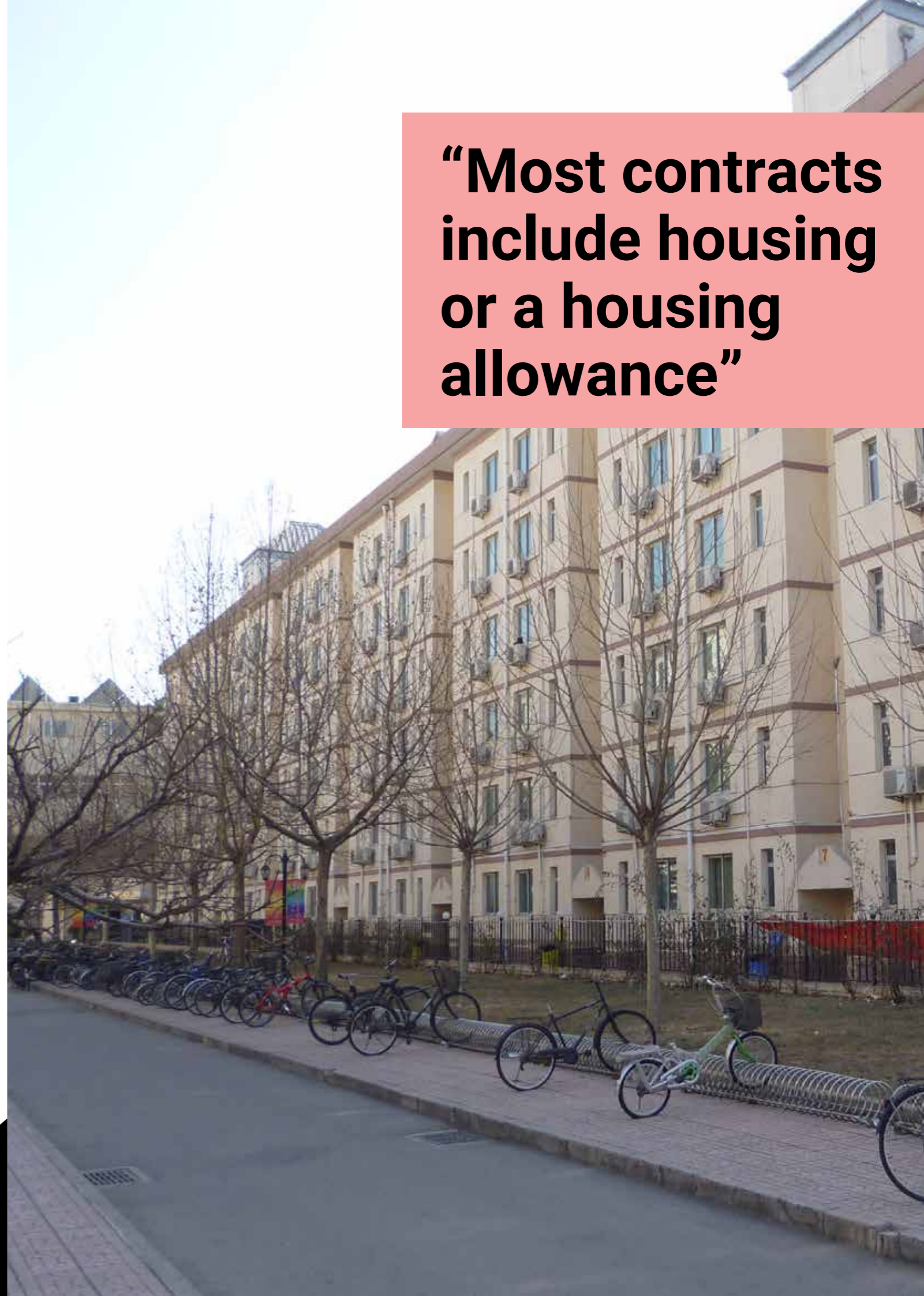
### Housing

- Is housing fully included or is there an allowance or subsidy?
- What is the housing like?
- What specific items will be included, e.g. fridge, sofa, etc?
- Who is liable for any damage or missing items?

### Services

- Is internet access included?
- Are electricity and water bills included?
- Are Mandarin language lessons included?

**“Most contracts include housing or a housing allowance”**



## Salary

- What are the tax rates, and is the salary before or after tax?
- When is the salary paid?
- Can the salary be paid to any bank account?
- Can any of the salary be converted to foreign currency?
- Are there bonuses, and if so, how do they work?

## Leave and holidays

- How much paid sick leave is there and how does it work?
- What are the paid holidays?
- Is there any paid leave for Western holidays like Christmas?

## Allowances

- What is the maximum airfare reimbursement?
- Is there a food allowance or access to a canteen?
- Is there a travel allowance?

## Expenses

- Who pays for any medical examination fees?
- Are there any other expenses?

## Training and probation

- Is there any paid training?
- Is there a probation period?

## Support

- Will a teaching assistant be available, and if so, for all classes?
- Is there a dedicated coordinator or mentor?
- Will there be performance reviews, and if so how will they be conducted?

## Disputes

- Is there a dispute resolution process?
- What happens if the contract is breached?
- Is there a notice period?

## Other terms

- Are there overtime rates?
- Is overtime compulsory?
- Can you take up paid work outside the contract?
- Can the contract be renewed?

Your contract is very important because it sets out the agreement between you and the school. Ask your recruiter if you are unsure about anything.

Remember, China is a developing country and you should not expect to receive the same benefits as you would in your own country.

## Who pays for the visa?

Your contract is very important because it sets out the agreement between you and the school. Ask your recruiter if you are unsure about anything.

Remember, China is a developing country and you should not expect to receive the same benefits as you would in your own country.



# 3

## Do arrive in China organized

There will be a lot to take in when you arrive in China, so getting off on the right foot by being prepared is vital.

### Long-haul flight

You may feel a little disoriented when you arrive after a long-haul flight, even if you've taken precautions like familiarizing yourself with the airport you'll be arriving at.

Many schools arrange for a member of staff, or approved person, to meet you at the airport and drive you to your new home. Make sure you confirm this with the school beforehand as it will help take a lot of the stress away.

### Language

Like most Westerners who come to China, chances are you don't know how to speak Mandarin. That's ok.

As more and more Chinese people are learning English, it's increasingly easier to get around China with no knowledge of the language, particularly in the bigger cities. Having said that, Chinese people are generally quite shy, so politeness and courtesy will go a long way.

Although you will make a lot of Chinese friends who will be happy to help you get by, having a translation app installed on your phone or tablet will make ordering food and giving directions to a taxi driver a whole lot easier.

Remember to bring the necessary travel adapter for your device.

### Money

You may not be paid your salary until four to six weeks after your first class due to the school's pay cycle, so it's critical you have enough money to survive on when you first get to China.


You need to factor in food and living expenses, which may be a little higher than normal in your first month while you settle in and find the right places to eat. If you packed light in anticipation that you would buy heavy items (e.g. snow boots) once you arrive, factor this in too.

If housing isn't included in your contract you will need to have rent money upfront.

**"You will make a lot of Chinese friends"**





A man with a beard, wearing a white t-shirt and light blue trousers, is sitting on wide stone steps. He is looking down and to the side with a thoughtful expression. His blue flip-flops are on the steps in front of him. In the background, there is a cityscape with modern buildings and a bridge with cables. The sky is overcast.

**“It can take some time to adjust to your new surroundings”**

## Teaching materials

Some schools will have a structured syllabus and accompanying text book, while others will be more flexible and allow you to create your own syllabus.

As this may be unclear until you arrive at your school, it's best to come prepared with at least a week's worth of lesson plans.

Avoid bringing any heavy text books – you probably won't use them. Instead, your curious students will be much more interested in authentic things relating to your country and culture like:

- Money (notes and coins)
- Photos of your family and friends
- Food products and/or labels
- Restaurant menus
- Magazines, pictures and posters
- Videos
- Music (electronic files or even a small instrument).

You can build your lessons around these things to create an interesting and engaging classroom environment.

## Adjusting to your new surroundings

It can take some time to adjust to your new surroundings.

Rather than fighting any culture shock, acknowledge that you are in a new environment and allow yourself to adjust at a 'normal' speed. By accepting that things will be different in China and adjusting to the changes will take time, the initial arrival period should be less overwhelming.

Once you've settled into your accommodation, ask your school contact for a timetable and directions to (or personal tour of) the classrooms and how to use any multimedia equipment like computers and overhead projectors. Equipment will vary greatly between schools, so ask to be shown how to use it before your first class.



# 4 Do respect your host school

Although your contract will have been sorted out long before you arrive in China, there may be some initial teething problems at your school that you will need to address.

Always be mindful that your school has gone to great efforts to sponsor your visa and invite you to come and work with them.

## Clear communication is key

Most schools with an established English teaching department have had experience employing Western teachers and will be sympathetic of your needs. However, due to language or cultural differences they may misunderstand some things you say which may leave you feeling frustrated or confused.

It's important to be patient and stay calm. Whilst you're expected to pronounce words the way you normally would, avoid slang and try to speak a little slower than usual. Often rephrasing a sentence or providing a clear example will help the listener understand. Effective body language goes a long way, too.

If your school contact/coordinator prefers you ask questions by email or text message, then do that. Chinese people generally have more confidence in understanding written English than spoken English and may be fearful of making a mistake in public. You will get a good idea of how your school contact/coordinator wishes to communicate once you meet them.

No matter how you communicate, good manners are about respect and are essential for your dealings with the school. They help make a good impression and will make your life in China more enjoyable and less stressful.

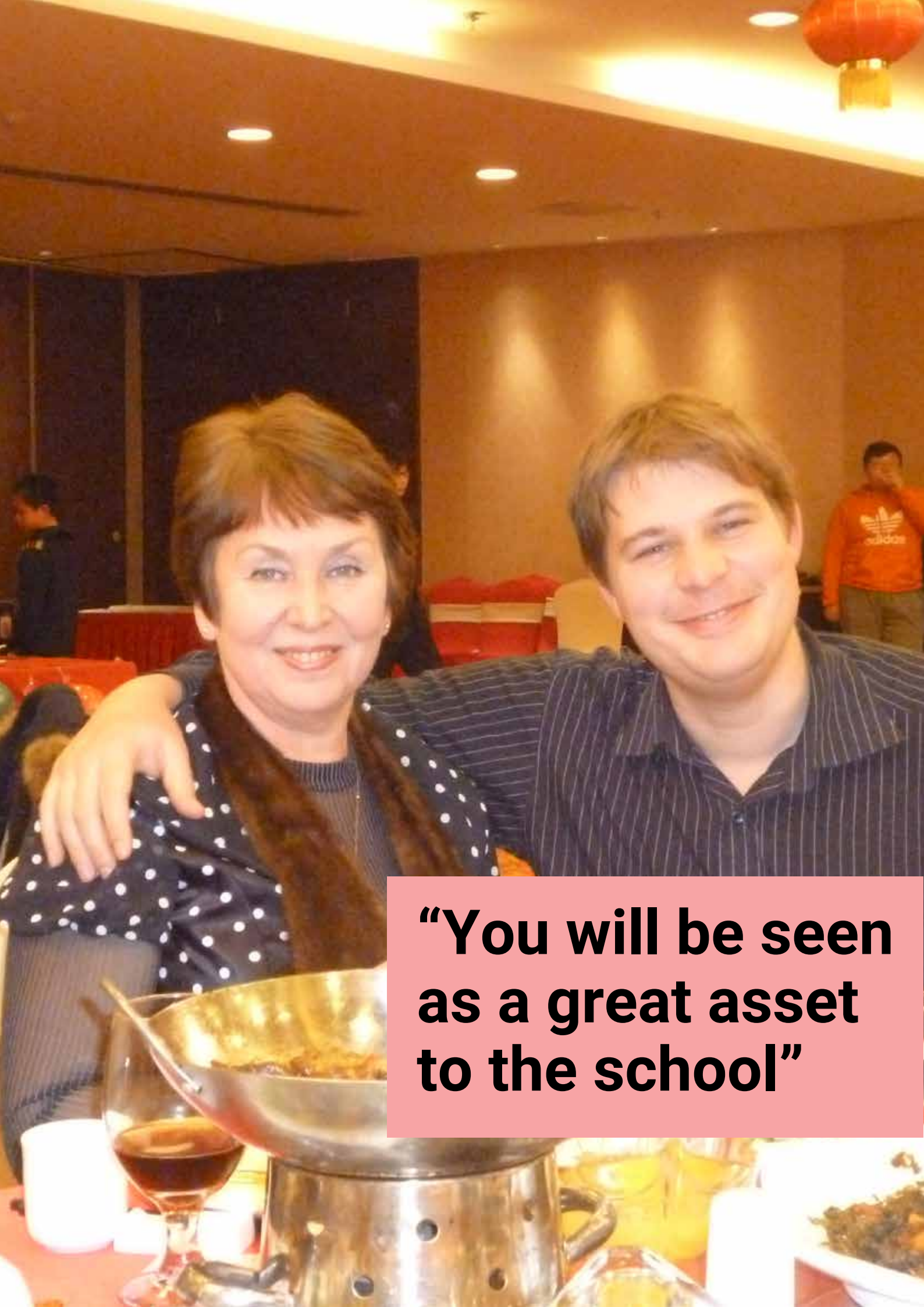
## Don't openly criticize

Like a guest in someone's home, never openly criticize your host school. This will damage your relationship with the school. Any problems should be discussed in a professional, private and courteous way. Mutual agreement, and a spirit of friendly cooperation, should always be maintained.

If you're dissatisfied or unsure about the outcome, chat with other Western teachers at your school and see if they've experienced the same problem or if they can give you any advice.

## Act the part

Schools that hire foreign teachers are regarded highly in China and you will be seen as a great asset to the school.

A photograph of a woman and a man sitting at a restaurant table. The woman is on the left, wearing a dark blue polka-dot top, and the man is on the right, wearing a dark blue striped shirt. They are both smiling. In front of them is a large metal hot pot on a table. The background shows a restaurant interior with other tables and a red lantern hanging from the ceiling.

**“You will be seen as a great asset to the school”**



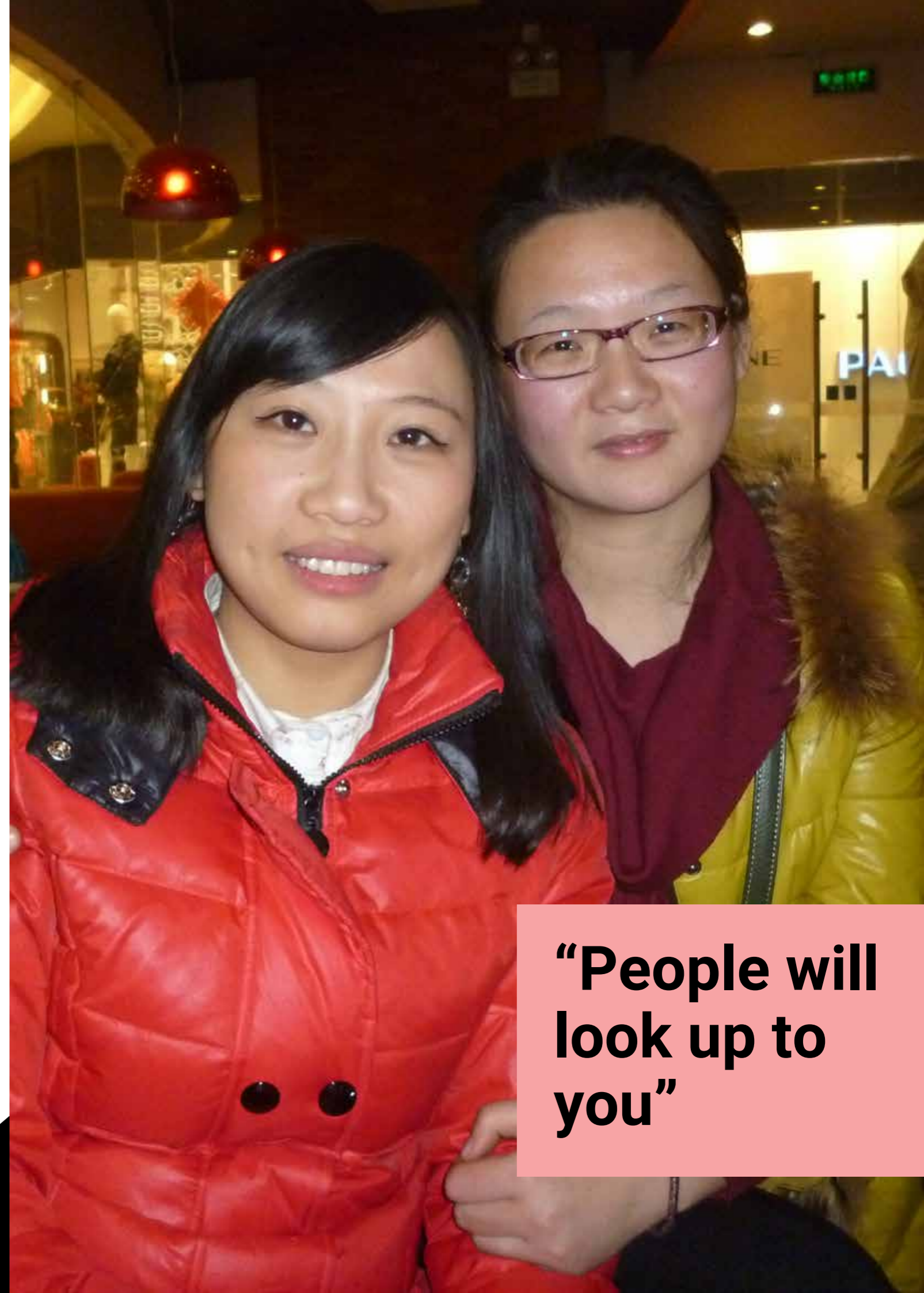
You will most likely be invited to a welcome dinner soon after arriving, and to a host of other activities and events throughout your teaching life. Try to attend as many as possible out of respect for your host school – it's all part of the experience of teaching in China.

You're an ambassador of your school the whole time you're employed there. This means you should also act professionally outside the classroom, including on evenings and the weekend. People will look up to you and even strangers will want to practise their English with you. You'll often be asked where you work.

### **Departing**

When you leave your school, it's a nice gesture to give your school contact person a small gift such as packaged food, fresh fruit or even a bottle of wine (if they drink alcohol). A keepsake from your country would also be well received.

Make sure you have everyone's contact details so you can keep in touch with them after you've left China. Most Chinese people use WeChat to communicate, so this makes things easier!



**“People will look up to you”**



# 5

## Do immerse yourself in Chinese culture

You'll get the most out of your experience if you try to live and breathe as much of China as you can. Go ahead and sample the food, learn some of the language, travel in your spare time and rub shoulders with the locals.

If all else fails, there's no shortage of Western creature comforts that you're familiar with.

### Be adventurous with food

The food in China often surprises many Westerners when they first arrive. It is nothing like the typical Chinese food served in Western countries. Lemon chicken in batter, spring rolls and special fried rice cannot be found in mainland China. This style of food hails from the Hong Kong area, adapted for the Western palate.

The 'real' Chinese food is a culinary delight. The province you teach in will greatly influence the kind of food you will experience and learn to love. Each province (and most areas within each province) has their own specialties.

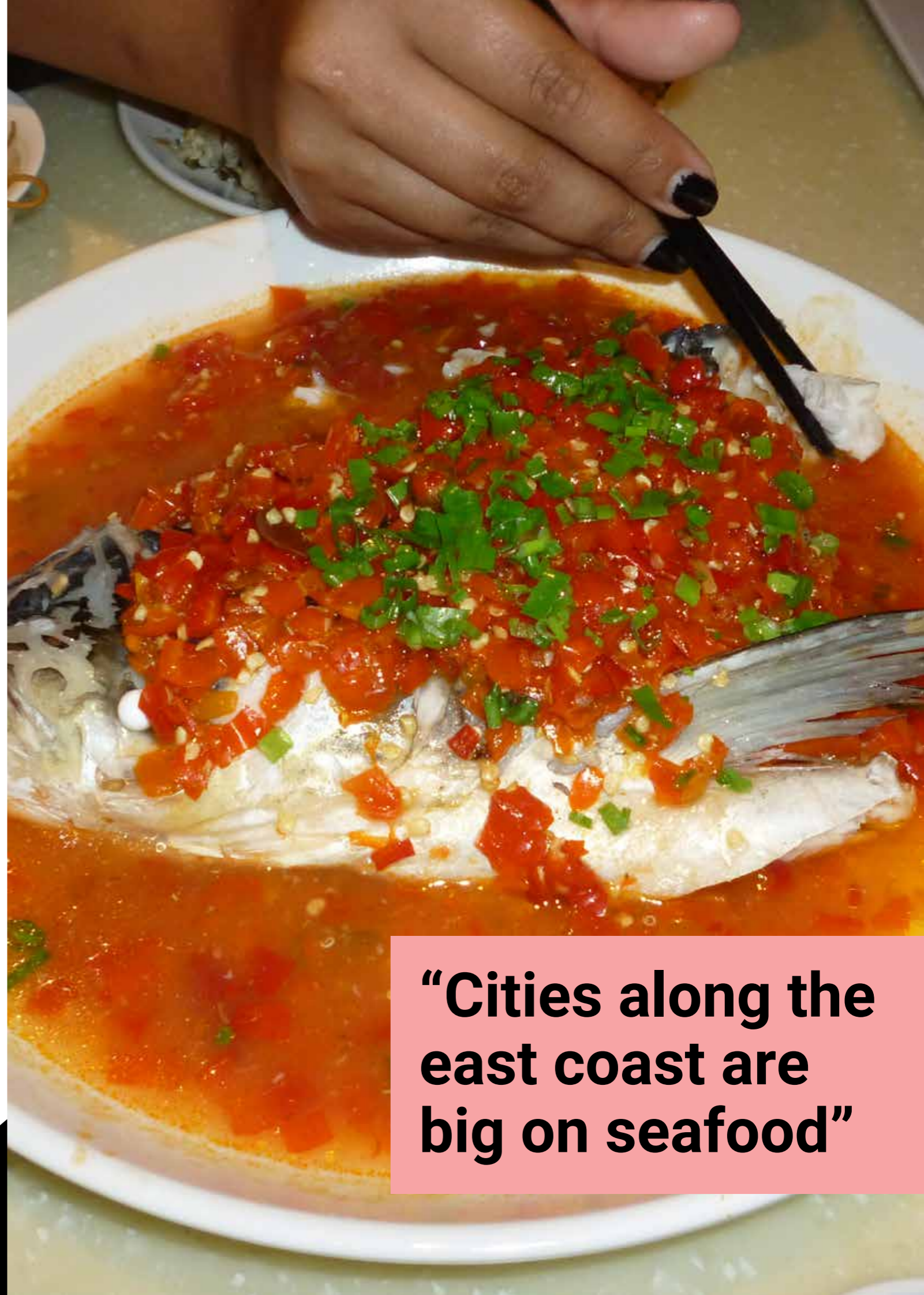
Generally speaking, in northern China, such as Beijing, carbohydrate is king. It's well-known for its delicious noodles, bread and dumplings. In the south, for example in Guangzhou, you'll experience sweeter food and a host of rice dishes. Cities along the east coast (like Qingdao) are big on seafood, while in the west (such as Chongqing) spicy food is the norm.

### Learn a few words

As a foreign teacher in China, you are not expected to be able to speak Mandarin. In fact, most schools prefer you have no knowledge of Mandarin at all as it effectively forces students to speak English with you. If you do know some Mandarin, try not to let your students know as it will only make them lazier!

Outside the school ground, life will be much easier if you know how to say a few simple expressions. Take advantage of the Mandarin lessons which may be offered at your school (check your contract to see if this is included). The quality of lessons, however, can vary greatly between schools. In smaller institutions, lessons are often taught by younger teachers with no prior experience in teaching Mandarin to foreigners. Be patient and don't expect to become fluent in one semester.

Whether or not language lessons are included in your package, you'll learn everyday language on the street. Within days of arriving in China you probably would have already eaten at a restaurant, bought groceries at a supermarket and taken a ride on public transport or in a taxi. Practising in these real-life situations will stand you in good stead.



**“Cities along the east coast are big on seafood”**



## Travel as much as you can

Many foreign teachers in China enjoy a four-day work week in the public system. In addition, classes aren't held on national holidays, and there's extended time off between semesters. This means there are plenty of opportunities for travel.

China's high-speed rail network is world-class and can get you from 'A to 'B' in a flash. It's also clean, efficient and the transport mode of choice for most Chinese people wanting to travel extensive distances.

Compared to most Western countries, flying domestically in China isn't cheap so unless you have the money it's better to take the train.

China is a massive country so get moving!

## Get to know the locals

They say the best way to get immersed in a foreign culture is to get to know the locals. They're right.

Whether it's dancing with strangers in the park to traditional music, drinking 'bai jiu' (Chinese liquor) in bars and clubs or simply chatting to the local street-food vendors, you'll be sure to make new friends in no time.

## Want a taste of home?

Don't panic if you occasionally get a little homesick in China. It's completely normal and experienced by a number of Western teachers. Your fellow teachers, many of whom will become lifelong friends, will support you.

The great thing about China is that familiar fast-food restaurants like McDonalds, KFC and Pizza Hut are everywhere, even in smaller cities. So if chicken feet don't appeal to you, you're in luck!

In addition, Walmart and French supermarket Carrefour are expanding their presence. You'll find a range of well-known consumer goods and foodstuffs in these stores.



**“You’ll learn  
everyday  
language on  
the street”**



# 6

## Don't choose a job based on salary alone

Choosing a teaching job in China based on salary alone is one of the biggest mistakes you can make.

Some jobs may seem enticing with a salary of double what's on offer at another school. You need to carefully weigh up everything as the schools that offer the highest salaries generally expect teachers to work 35-40 hours per week. This may include what's known as office hours – compulsory time you need to spend in the staffroom preparing lessons and marking papers.

If you're looking for more of a work-life balance, consider fewer hours and a smaller salary. It's a trade-off and only you will know what's right for you.

There are a number of considerations apart from salary when it comes to choosing the right job, including location, housing, working conditions and class size. You may have already identified some of these factors when thinking about your plan (see Section 1, Do plan before you go).

### Location

How important to you is the location of the school? Is it in a small city or big city? How far is it to the nearest supermarket? Will you need to buy a bike to get around? And what's the weather like there? These are just some of the questions that you should consider.

### Housing

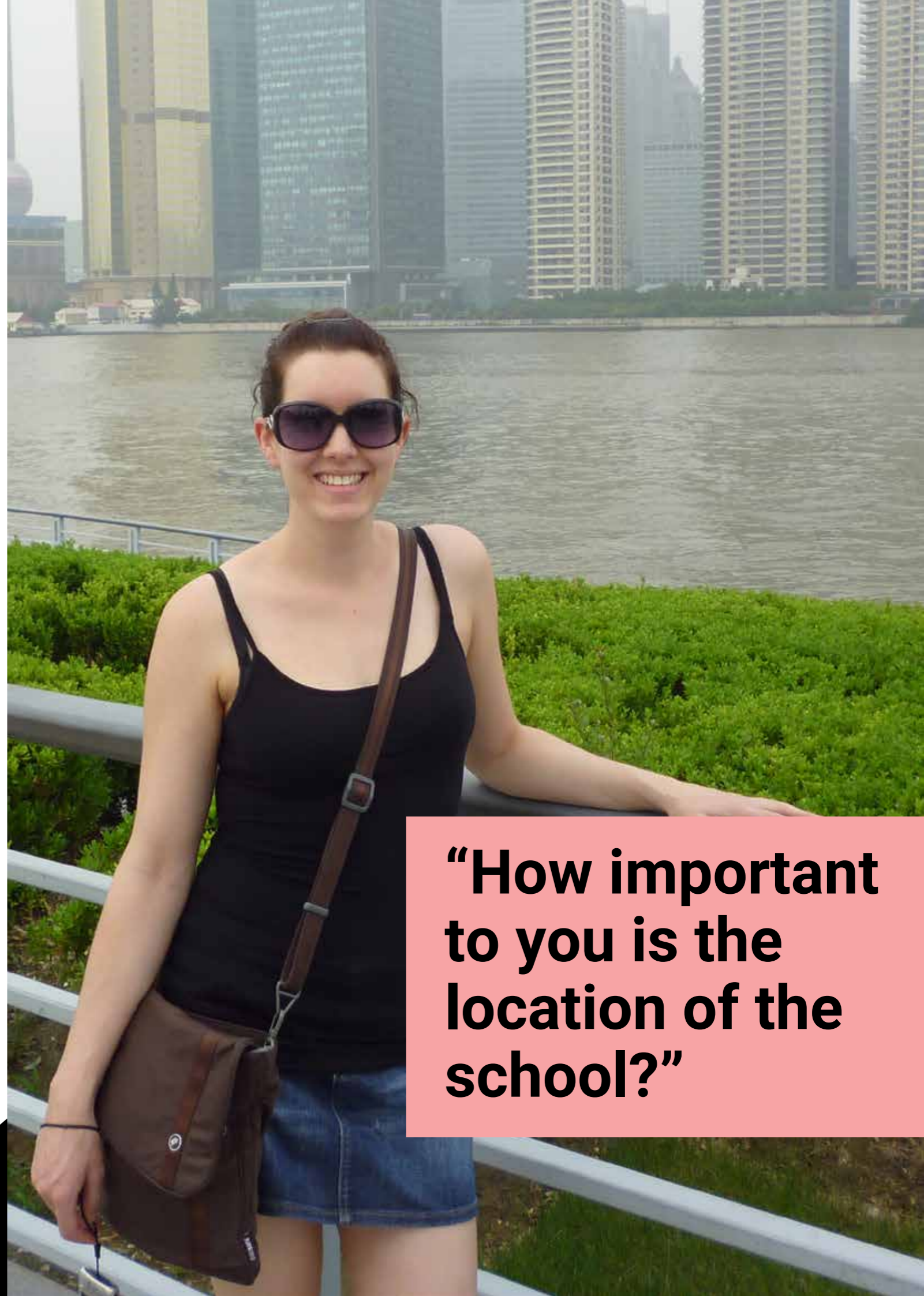
Will the school place you in accommodation or will you need to find somewhere to stay yourself? How big is the apartment? Can friends and family stay? Is it on-campus or off-campus? Is there internet access (and who pays for this)? Is there adequate heating and cooling? Are there cooking facilities?

### Working conditions

Do you want to work during the day or at night? What about weekend work? Do you want to prepare lessons in your own home or during compulsory office hours? Are you happy using only basic classroom facilities or do you expect the latest multimedia equipment? How many hours per week do you want to work – 16, 25, 40? These things will influence how much you get paid.

### Class size and student proficiency

In China, 45 students in each public classroom is normal. However, in private centers the number is significantly lower, often around 12 to 16.



**“How important to you is the location of the school?”**





**“45 students  
in each public  
classroom is  
normal”**

This means each student receives more attention, thereby improving (hopefully) their English skills more quickly. Students' parents pay for this luxury.

Private centers generally pay higher salaries than their public counterparts. In exchange for this, you will probably need to work some evenings and weekends.

### **It's not always about the money**

As highlighted earlier, most people teaching English in China aren't doing it for the money. Despite the low cost of living, salaries are low by Western standards and any money you save while working there will be worth less when you exchange it in your home country. Think hard when choosing a job in China solely for the money.



# 7

## Don't buy the cheapest airfare

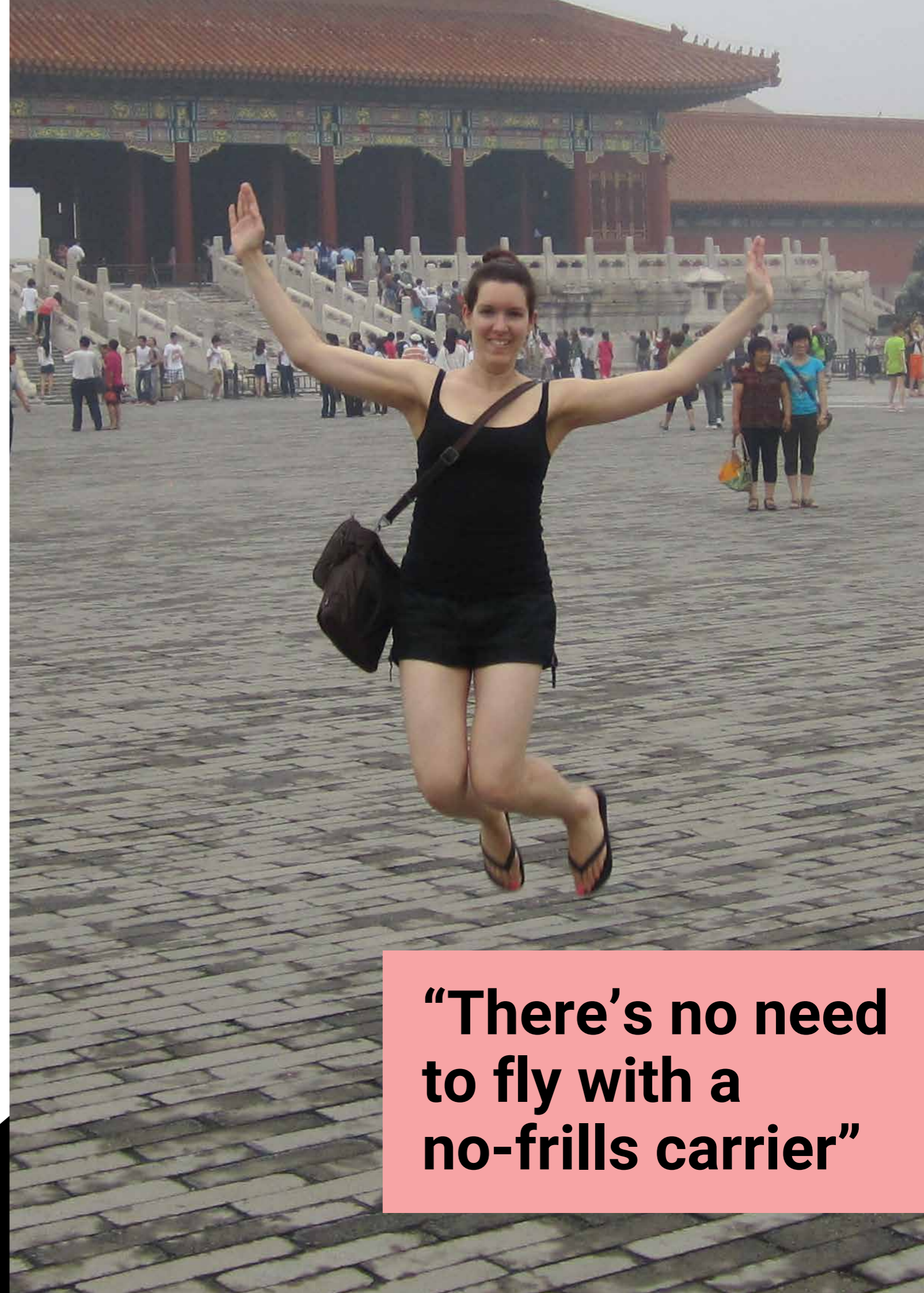
Most teaching contracts include a free return flight for a one-year commitment. Note that the cost is reimbursed on successful completion of the contract, not upfront.

Some prospective teachers mistakenly pay for their airfare before their contract is finalized, thus risking being left high and dry. Your contract should be signed by both you and the school before you even think about the airfare.

Once your contract is finalized, you'll know how much money your school will reimburse for the flight. In most cases the amount should be more than enough to fly with a reputable, full-service airline in economy class. Consequently there's no need to fly with a no-frills carrier, unless you're on a very tight budget and can't afford the initial investment to get you over there.

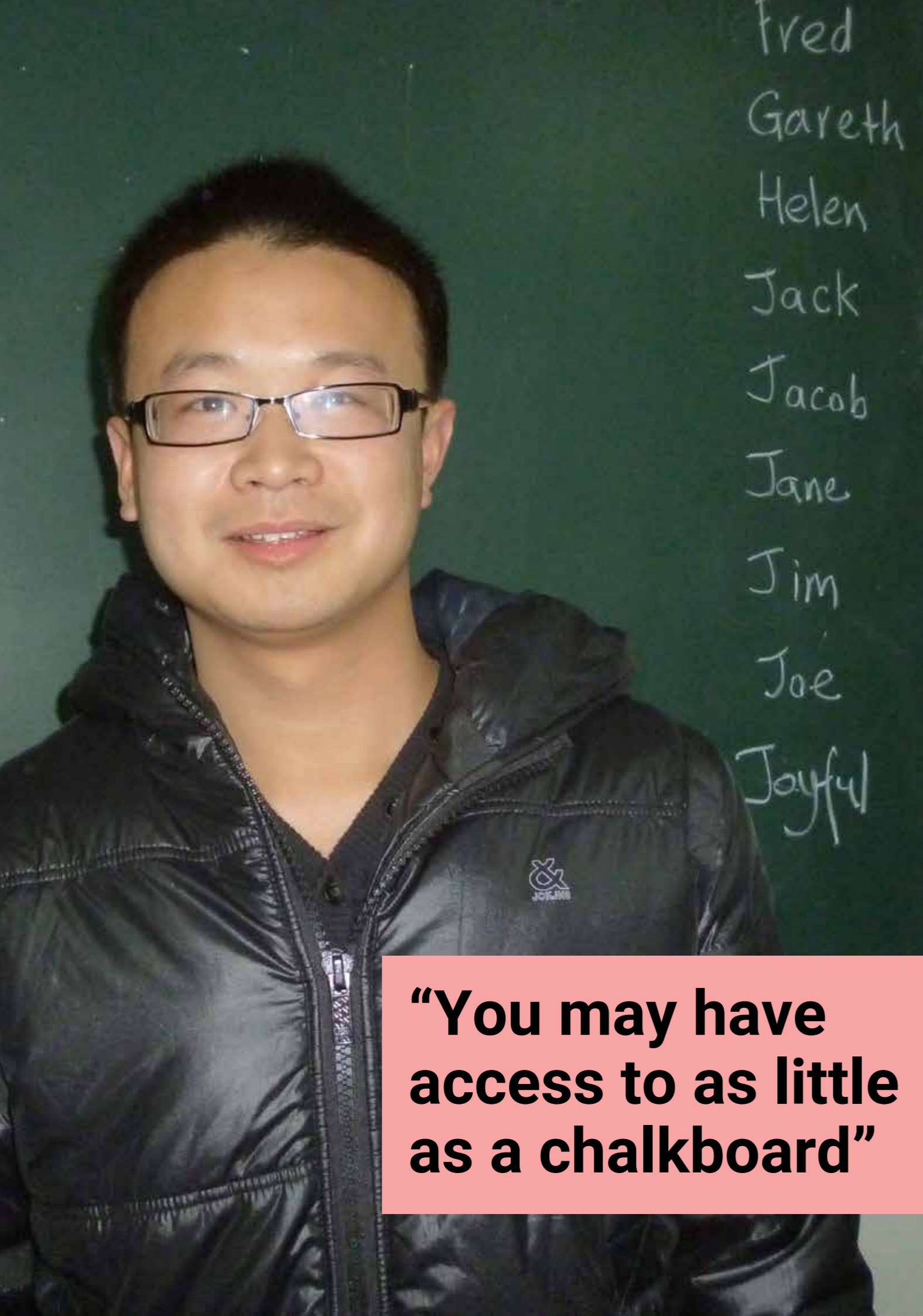
If you are on a tight budget, or flexible regarding how long you'll stay in China, you could pay for a one-way ticket (just to get you there) and worry about the return flight later on.

Make sure you arrange in advance a contact from your school to meet you at the airport. If you're lucky, the school will arrange its own driver, so you'll have a private chaperone all the way to your new home. It's a great way to start your brilliant adventure.



**“There’s no need to fly with a no-frills carrier”**





**“You may have access to as little as a chalkboard”**

# 8

## Don't expect the same conditions you're used to

China is still a developing country. This means that the conditions, both inside and outside the classroom, will be different to what you're used to. This is not something to be afraid of, though – it just makes your experience all the more richer. Just a few of the different conditions are outlined below.

### Number of students

Class sizes in the public system are big by Western standards. You should expect about 45 students per class. If you prefer much smaller groups, consider teaching in a private center, which typically have much lower student-teacher ratios.

Although classroom management is harder with a large class, you shouldn't have a problem finding students willing to participate. Activities will take longer too, so it's rare to run out of things to do!

### Classroom equipment

Equipment can vary greatly depending on the school. You may have access to the latest multimedia or as little as a chalkboard or whiteboard.

Most classrooms have internet access but the connection may be slow or unreliable. If you've prepared a lesson around something online, always have a back-up lesson ready to go in case there are problems with the internet connection.

### Apartments

Your apartment will be comfortable and should contain all the modern-day essentials like a TV, microwave, fridge and washing machine.

The one big difference between Chinese and Western accommodation conditions is the quality of mattresses. In most cases, your mattress will not be soft and will take time getting used to. As a stop-gap measure, consider buying a comforter as an extra layer to sleep on top of.

### Seeing a doctor

If you happen to get sick and need to see a doctor, you will be taken by your school contact to the local hospital. There is no such thing in China as a doctor's clinic.

The standard of hospitals is constantly improving, and in big cities like Shanghai and Beijing the standard is excellent. The wait time to see a doctor can be long though, so don't expect to squeeze a trip to the hospital in between classes.

Although over-the-counter medication is widely available in pharmacies across China, the brands you know and trust won't be. If you are uncomfortable taking something you haven't had before, you'd best bring your own.



# 9

## Don't be afraid of asking a lot of questions

To ensure you get the position that is right for you, you should ask your recruiter as many questions as possible. Ideally, all crucial information should be included in your teaching contract.

Once you arrive in China, keep asking questions. The more questions you ask about this incredible country, the more you'll find out! Chinese people can be inquisitive by nature and will have no problem with you asking them plenty of questions. In fact, they will be happy to tell you about the country's long history, interesting places to visit and delicious food.

Most importantly, and particularly in your first few weeks in China, you should ask a lot of questions because there will be numerous day-to-day things you need to know to help you settle in and perform your job well.

Chinese people are sometimes not forthcoming with information – this is a cultural phenomenon and should not be taken personally. It just means that you'll need to ask more questions than you're used to, including closed-ended questions and yes-no questions. Once you have the answer you need, you should clarify and confirm the outcome.

Take a look below at the example dialogue between the Western teacher and school contact/coordinator. The teacher is obliged to continue asking questions in order to pinpoint a meeting time and place. You'll get used to this kind of interaction!

**Western teacher:** Can you show me the way to the classrooms?

**School contact:** Yes.

**Western teacher:** When are you free?

**School contact:** Tomorrow.

**Western teacher:** What time?

**School contact:** In the morning.

**Western teacher:** Is 11 am ok?

**School contact:** I'm busy at 11 am.

**Western teacher:** Ok, how about 10 am?

**School contact:** Ok, fine.

**Western teacher:** Where shall we meet?

**School contact:** Your apartment.

**Western teacher:** Ok, see you tomorrow morning at 10 am at my apartment.

**School contact:** Ok, bye!



**“You should ask a lot of questions”**





**“Public dancing is commonplace in China”**

# 10

## Don't forget to have fun!

Although much of your time in China will ultimately be spent working, don't forget to have fun.

### KTV

Ask any Chinese person what karaoke is and they will have no idea; ask them about KTV and their eyes will light up!

In China, karaoke is known as KTV. The main difference between the two is that KTV is enjoyed in private rooms with friends, not in front of strangers. It's a popular pastime loved by people of all ages, especially younger people. Often combined with alcohol in the evening, KTV is a very social activity.

There's usually a broad selection of both Chinese and English songs to choose from, and certainly no shortage of big ballads and cheesy classics from days gone by.

If you're invited to participate, accept the offer as it may be considered impolite otherwise. Don't worry if you have a terrible singing voice – just have a go!

### Public dancing

At first you may be amused, but eventually you may join in with the groups of mostly middle-aged women dancing in public places.

Public dancing is commonplace in China and is done for fitness, learning traditional dance moves and for socialising. People usually dance to traditional music (which tends to be on the slower side) broadcast from a large, portable stereo and amplifier.

Don't expect to become an expert on your first go – some of the more experienced dancers have been doing it for years.

### Sport

Basketball, badminton and table tennis are hugely popular in China. You could join an existing game or team, or even start your own.

China is a big country, and there's a lot of ground to cover. Why not buy a cheap bike and explore your surroundings on two wheels?

If you're not sports-minded, grab some of your fellow teachers and get lost in the side streets – you'll never know what you might find! Beijing-based teachers can enjoy exploring the famous ancient 'hutongs', or alleyways, by foot.



# Want more information?

The Helpful Panda has loads of information about what it's like to live and work in China. Search 'teach' and take a read of the articles.

One of the best things you can do is have a chat with a recruiter. You can find all the agencies that specialize in teaching in China here: [thehelpfulpanda.com/directory/china-teacher-recruitment-agencies](http://thehelpfulpanda.com/directory/china-teacher-recruitment-agencies)

And don't forget to get your TEFL certificate here: [thehelpfulpanda.teflsource.com](http://thehelpfulpanda.teflsource.com)

