

Teaching English Country Dancing in China

by Grigsby Wotton

I recently had a very rewarding experience teaching English country dancing in China. For five years, until the summer of 2012, I was a teacher of English, Western culture, and various other courses at Zhejiang Normal University, a school with 25,000 students about five hundred kilometers southwest of Shanghai. I had never taught ECD before—had never imagined that I would—but because I had danced for fifteen years and really missed it, I decided to try. It was challenging in the beginning—I searched dance instructions and sheet music on the Internet, attempted with some difficulty to find piano players who would commit to playing at a weekly class, advertised a free class by posting notices around the university, and to those who showed up attempted to teach the dance figures (in a foreign language) to people who, other than a few who had seen ECD in Jane Austen movies, were totally unfamiliar with them.

For the first couple of years I had mixed success. Chinese university students, generally diligent and often taking twenty-five or thirty class periods a week, experience a lot of academic pressure, but a few took to the dancing and encouraged me to persist. I gave up trying to find reliable piano players, settled on recorded music, and for my last two years committed to teaching a weekly dance, gradually extending it to three hours. Slowly the dancers increased, and by my last year in China the weekly dance attracted twelve to twenty dancers, sometimes more, with

undergraduates, graduate students, and occasionally a Chinese teacher.

I began with simple dances and did lots of demonstrating. It was exciting to see some good dancers emerging, and they then encouraged and helped others. I began to be able to teach new and more complex dances. By the end of my time in China, I had been able to introduce about seventy different dances. In my last year, some of us did a dance performance for a major TV station in the province, part of a special show aired during the Chinese National Holiday in October and perhaps viewed by millions. Another group also performed at a campus dance festival, and a few student groups used English country dances for special performances on campus.

Many, maybe most, of the students who participated in the English country dancing had never danced, and some had never thought that they could. It was great to see them learning to express themselves in this way. It was also great to see how the dancing brought about some special friendships between the dancers and created a small dance community (and it was great to be a part of it myself).

I was sad to have to leave China and this dance project, which seemed to be just getting off the ground, but I was delighted that some of the dancers I left there held their own little 2013 New Year's ECD Ball without me and reported that they had a wonderful time. I'm hoping in the future they will find ways to keep alive the joy that they discovered in English country dancing.



Dressed for a performance on campus (GW standing center back); performing Leather Lake House on Chinese television; photos courtesy the author.