



## The Schoolhouse Internship

**Tessa Cheek, March 2013**

The internship is unusual from get-go because of the rural Chinese live-work environment populated by people with a variety of language facilities and cultural backgrounds. In some sense, the first step of the internship is to build home here/ integrate into a unique professional-family community.

The internship is much more challenging than any I've done before in terms of time, scale, complexity and number of projects/ kinds of work.

The internship also offers *much* greater opportunities than any other I have experienced or heard of. Interns are asked to take total ownership of their projects. Belief in an intern's capability to do so is real and substantiated in practice.

The internship requires not just intellectual and practical commitment but also emotional.

### Reflections on My Schoolhouse Internship

Unlike any internship I'd had before, The Schoolhouse's is set in a live-work environment. Its lifeblood is care and it has high blood pressure — the situation basically cannot abide apathy or even a willingness to consistently

settle for less than the most you are capable of. There is very little patience for fear and even less for laziness. In that way, it's not always a nice internship, but in the most honest language of practice, it is a deeply kind and a deeply generous one.

What I mean to say is this: interns need to know going in that they will be asked to work harder and give more of themselves to that work than, most likely, ever before in their lives. They also need to know that their commitment to their projects will be more than met by the scale of the opportunity and by their mentor's commitment to their work and to them personally.

Interns work and live in a small, somewhat isolated community. Many of us arrive without the linguistic and cultural tools to navigate our situation with ease. When I arrived without a word of Chinese it seemed as though everyone was yelling. The sudden rupture of a shouted conversation into laughter was utterly bewildering. Today I can waitress and host in a restaurant where people don't speak the same language. I have learned to speak a tender, broken-down pidgin Chinese that I use both to convey guests' orders and my deep affection for the people I work with.

Some days I speak more Spanish than Chinese. Some days I meet people from towns near mine in Colorado, or people who long ago attended my tiny liberal arts college. The Schoolhouse has a way of making the world feel small and various at the same time. It's a family business in every sense of the term and when it works Schoolhouse guests feel like visiting friends or transient extended family. That's a powerful thing to be able to say about your guests and it's a testament to The Schoolhouse from business practice through design.

The situation is also particular in a rural sense. It's a kind of internship in place. Interns scrabble over hillsides together on the way to work and spend

off days exploring the Wild Wall. Part of welcoming guests to a place is feeling that you know it, that in whatever small way you belong to it and it to you. The fact that we live out here allows for that kind of relationship with the surrounding village communities (we are *laowai*, but we are the local village's *laowai*) and the surrounding landscape. Essentially interns have to find a way to build home here for ourselves in order to do our work in a real way. It takes time.

One of the internship's most defining aspects is the project orientation. Ideally an intern's project falls into an area of best fit: something they're passionate about and challenged by, something that is also valuable to The Schoolhouse. The importance of finding a project you really care about basically can't be underestimated. From conception and research through management and production, the project is *yours*. There is a lot of self-teaching, a lot of experimentation, a lot of trial and error. It's a very experiential learning process that requires a great deal of mental, practical and emotional commitment.

The Schoolhouse working environment tends to have high blood pressure. That fast moving current of care is part of what has kept the business in a constant state of evolution in terms of creative, professional and sustainable practice. It can also make it an intense, stressful place to work. The line between the professional and the personal is very blurry. There are shouts, tears and disappointments; late nights and early mornings. There are also uncountable shared meals, laughs, hugs, high-fives, and even episodes of in-office dancing. Much is asked, more is given.

### **About Tessa Cheek**

Schoolhouse Intern from October 2012 to April 2013, Tessa arrived with no

background in Chinese, limited work experience and a recent degree in Philosophy from Grinnell College. Her central project included writing and assisting in the publication of a book about the architecture designed by Schoolhouse Partner Jim Spear. *Great Wall Style: Building Home with Jim Spear* is forthcoming from Images Publishing, November 2013.