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Up Close: Steven Weathers

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UP CLOSE

Steven Weathers: China's connection to the American South

When Steven Weathers first moved to

China in 2005, he was served a bowl of boiled peanuts as an appetizer at a local Chinese restaurant.

"It was this surreal moment," says Weathers in an email from his luxury apartment high above the bustling blue-lit streets of Shanghai. "I remember thinking, 'Only Southerners and Chinese eat boiled peanuts.'"

Thirteen years of living and working in China has presented plenty of opportunities to connect the dots from his Southern upbringing to his status as one of China's most recognizable foreign faces.

But the question remains: How does a kid from Greenville, South Carolina, become a favorite foreign son in Shanghai? The answer lies somewhere between ambition and luck.

Weathers spent his first two years of undergraduate study at Furman but transferred to St. Andrews College in Scotland in 1993. He speaks fondly of his Furman days, however, and is quick to credit the college for sowing the seeds of his present-day success.

In 1998, Weathers visited China as part of a tour group and developed a deep appreciation of the country. But it wasn't until 2005 that he decided to move to the small town of Luoyang, where he taught English and learned Mandarin.

Ready to tackle the big city, Weathers made his way to Shanghai in 2006 and began teaching marketing and advertising, as well as courses in British and American literature, at Normal University.

"I often thought of my Furman professors and classes," Weathers recalls, "specifically grammar, writing, and interpreting poetry. I even used some of the poems, short stories and novels I had read at Furman as part of my curriculum."

By 2008, Weathers was recording his travel experiences with a handheld camcorder and created a web travel series called "Foreign Perspective." The low-budget online travel and cultural program explored everyday China through the eyes of an outsider.

By immersing himself in the language and culture, he learned more than enough Mandarin to communicate, do business and perform as an actor or emcee.

"I recently realized I would never be able to master all the characters," Weathers says. "But that's a healthy

thing for me. It means I'm always learning."

Following the success of "Foreign Perspective," Weathers secured a recurring role on a top-rated Chinese series called "Dwelling Narrowness." A born entertainer, he quickly became a fan favorite. That was 2009, and nothing has been the same since.

Then in 2012, he won an "Outstanding Director Award" at the 15th Shanghai International Film Festival for a short film he created. That same year, the city of Shanghai awarded him the prestigious Magnolia Award, given to international residents who make significant contributions to the city.

Thanks to the Magnolia Award, Weathers now has a five-year work visa, allowing him to return home to Greenville more often. Weathers hopes to parlay his hometown visits and Furman connections into his next big project: working with Furman alum Vivian Wong and her Global Trade Center to establish film studios in Greenville to keep up with the demand for Chinese film crews who want to shoot abroad.

"Vivian and I often speak Mandarin together to discuss our projects," says Weathers. "And we've even used it as our code language in business meetings when we want to discuss negotiation strategies in front of the clients."

This type of international, fast-forward thinking is Weathers' greatest gift. And judging from his current list of projects, including a role in the upcoming sci-fi film "Shanghai Fortress," he's poised to expand his brand of Southern-laced charm in China. ●

— Brent Hill