



Pre-Departure Packet

Immersion Program

CLI is a center for Chinese language and cultural studies where students from around the world experience China and gain an invaluable advantage in our ever-globalizing world. As adequate preparation is the first step toward making the most of your experience, we've developed the following packet to jumpstart the process. As always, please feel free to contact us anytime.

Utilizing CLI's Language Environment

- 1. Make sure you know all 58 pinyin sounds:** Do not undervalue the importance of pinyin (拼音). Once you can make all of the sounds, you can essentially say any word in Chinese. Concentrate on hearing and saying the slight variations between sounds. Tones are very important, but clear pronunciation of the pinyin sounds is still the most essential building block of spoken Mandarin. Visit studycli.org/pinyin-chart for an interactive audio chart.
- 2. Speak (and think in) Chinese, regardless of your Chinese level:** Whether you are an absolute beginner or the world's greatest Mandarin speaker, you can always advance your skills by practicing the language at every turn. Take the initiative to speak with those around you every day. Chat with local shop-owners. Ask the police questions. Talk to waiters and waitresses during meals. These people are your teachers too. When it comes to spoken Chinese, there is no better way to improve than to simply speak.
- 3. Keep CLI informed:** All of CLI's team members—teachers, directors and tour guides alike—are here because we love the Chinese language, love sharing it, and love that you're interested. Let us know if you don't understand something or have a specific question. Be an active learner. Don't forget that a student's dedication and persistence is the ultimate factor that leads to success when learning a foreign language.
- 4. Attitude is everything:** Maintain a relentless attitude in your approach to mastering the Chinese language. If you feel you're hitting a plateau, push even harder. Many non-native speakers have reached a high level of proficiency in the Chinese language, and with the right combination of language environment, determination and attitude, you can too.

What You'll Want/Need

Fall

The months from September to December are Guilin's most mild. Expect a lot of sunshine, moderate temperatures, and limited rain.

- ❖ **Autumn clothing:** Even though Guilin's latitude (25°N) is just north of the Tropic of Cancer, it can still get quite chilly during autumn. You should pack a light jacket and additional layers. Most days will be warm, but temperatures steadily decrease as November and December approach.



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Winter

Guilin winters can often be quite cold. Because the city is in a mountainous region, its southern latitude does not guard it from chilly temperatures. Be prepared to have the following items:

- ❖ **Winter clothing:** Thick winter coat, long underwear tops and bottoms, winter hat, scarf, gloves, and winter socks. Many locations in Guilin do not have centralized indoor heating.

Spring

Spring brings Guilin's rainiest weather, in particular from early March to late April. The following items can all be purchased in Guilin:

- ❖ **Umbrella:** This is a must. Nearly every corner store in town sells umbrellas for 2-10 USD depending on quality, but you may want to bring your own from home.
- ❖ **Rain boots:** Rain boots are a great way to go. They will keep your feet, socks, and the bottom of your pants dry all spring.
- ❖ **Raincoat:** A variety can be bought in Guilin.

Summer

During the Guilin summer, temperatures usually stay in the 80s (low-mid 30s Celsius) and peak in the high 90's (high 30's Celsius). Be sure to have the following items:

- ❖ **Sunscreen:** If you have sensitive skin you may want to use sunscreen. The summer sun is high. Sunscreen can be purchased in Guilin at beauty stores, pharmacies, and some large grocery stores. For the greatest variety of options, Watsons in KD World Mall (桂林客世界广场).
- ❖ **Sunglasses:** Being even in latitude with the furthest point south in the USA, the sun is very powerful in Guilin.
- ❖ **Bathing suit:** There's a pool near GXNU where you can swim for 2 USD per day. Guilin's Li River and Yangshuo's Yu Long River are also popular swimming destinations during the summer.
- ❖ **Breathable summer clothes:** Guilin gets hot in the summer, so be sure to plan accordingly! For affordable, high quality, quick drying clothes, Decathlon at Wanda Plaza is a popular choice.

Visit the following site for Guilin climate information: www.travelchinaguide.com/climate/guilin.htm



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Electronic Payments (WeChat and Alipay)

QR-code payment is the default for everyday purchases in China. Cash is still useful as a backup, but most students will pay mainly by scanning a merchant's QR code or by showing their own payment code for the cashier to scan.

The two most important payment apps are Alipay and WeChat Pay. Both now allow many international visitors to link Visa, Mastercard, American Express, and JCB credit or debit cards, though approvals, transaction limits, and identity checks can vary by account and card issuer.

Set up Alipay before departure if possible, and also try to activate WeChat Pay. For many short-term students, Alipay is often the easiest first option, while WeChat Pay is still important because WeChat is used for messaging, groups, and many mini-programs.

To set up either app, download it, register with your passport information, and add your card. Small transactions are often fee-free, while larger transactions may include a service fee. International cards may also have lower transaction limits than Chinese bank cards.

Do not rely on Apple Pay, Google Pay, or foreign credit cards for in-person purchases. They are rarely accepted by small restaurants, taxis, markets, and local vendors.

Essential Apps in China

Install key apps before departure when possible. Some apps may require identity verification, a working phone number, or help from CLI after arrival.

- ❖ **WeChat 微信:** China's essential messaging app. Use it to communicate with CLI, classmates, teachers, homestay families, shops, and local contacts. WeChat Pay is also useful when it works with your card.
- ❖ **Alipay 支付宝:** Often the easiest payment app for short-term visitors. It is useful for QR-code payments, transportation, ride-hailing, and many mini-program services.
- ❖ **Amap/Gaode Maps 高德地图:** The most useful map app for navigation inside Mainland China. Google Maps is not reliable for local China navigation.
- ❖ **Didi 滴滴打车:** China's main ride-hailing app. Always check the license plate and driver details before entering a car.
- ❖ **Meituan 美团:** Useful for food delivery, milk tea, restaurant listings, local services, and reservations.



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- ❖ **Taobao 淘宝 and Cainiao 菜鸟驿站:** Taobao is China's main online shopping platform. Cainiao pickup stations are common places to receive packages.
- ❖ **Xiaohongshu/RedNote 小红书:** Useful for finding cafés, restaurants, shops, citywalk routes, photo spots, and local recommendations.
- ❖ **Pleco:** The most useful Chinese dictionary app for students. Its flashcard tool is also helpful for vocabulary review.

Online Shopping and Delivery

Students who stay in Guilin for more than a short visit often use Taobao for everyday items, clothing, electronics accessories, toiletries, and gifts. Ask CLI for help if you need assistance creating an account, entering an address, or understanding delivery messages.

Packages may be delivered to the CLI Center, your homestay, your residence, or a nearby Cainiao pickup station. Before ordering, confirm the best delivery address and phone number to use. If you only have a data-only eSIM and no Chinese phone number, package pickup and delivery communication may be more difficult.

Cash (as a backup)

Bring or withdraw a modest amount of RMB as backup, especially for emergencies, small vendors, or situations where your payment apps are not working. Try to keep small bills on hand, because many vendors will not have change for large notes.

ATMs from major banks such as Bank of China, Industrial and Commercial Bank of China (ICBC), and China Construction Bank are widely available in major cities. If you plan to use an ATM card or credit card in China, notify your bank before departure so your card is not frozen for suspected fraud.

International Medical and Travel Insurance

If your current insurance carrier does not already provide international medical and travel coverage, you may want to secure additional insurance. Many CLI students have purchased insurance through iNext (www.inext.com), a student travel insurance provider, or their airline. Please note that arranging international medical and travel insurance is optional.

General

Evening Wear

- ❖ **The whole spectrum:** Although Guilin's atmosphere is very casual, Chinese people also like to dress up when going out on the town. You will see many young people dressed up in gowns,



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Hanfu, or cosplay outfits taking pictures with Guilin's scenery or in trendy cafes. A suit or dress can be custom made for around 100 USD. Bring fashion magazines, pictures, or the actual item with you if you want something replicated.

Electronics

- ❖ **Laptop:** While not required for your studies, some students enjoy ringing their personal laptop to read articles or watch Chinese films, TV shows, and videos their teachers suggest. All CLI housing options have WiFi Internet access, and most cafés and restaurants have WIFI for customer use.
- ❖ **Converter:** Electricity in China is 220V while in the US it is only 110V. Most computers, iPods, and chargers have built-in converters on their power adapters. Yet electric shavers and hair dryers often do not. Check the voltage range before coming – some electronics range from 110-240V. A converter can also be bought in Guilin. Lastly, not all plugs are compatible with Chinese outlets, so this should be taken into consideration as well.

Miscellaneous (**starred items are difficult to find in Guilin*)

- ❖ **Gifts for newfound friends*:** You are sure to make many new friends while in China, and in keeping with Chinese custom, you may want to offer a very simple gift upon departure, such as a t-shirt, baseball cap, or other small token of appreciation.
- ❖ **Note cards (flash cards):** You may also consider utilizing the [Pleco](#) app's flashcard tool.
- ❖ **Prescription medicine*:** If you take prescription drugs, be sure to bring enough to last the duration of your stay.
- ❖ **Feminine products*:** Pads are available, but tampons are harder to find.
- ❖ **Lonely Planet travel book:** A *Lonely Planet* guide book is excellent to have on hand while traveling in the PRC. CLI's library includes several.
- ❖ **Books*:** There are countless books in Chinese in Guilin, but few in English. If you would like to enjoy recreational reading, you may want to bring your own books or ebooks. CLI also has a quickly growing library from which you can borrow books.
- ❖ **Organic or natural products:** Unfortunately there are few all-natural products in Guilin, and surprisingly enough, the one shopping market in Guilin that does have an organic section is Walmart.



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- ❖ **All-terrain shoes:** These are easy to find in Guilin (as long as your shoe size is under 44 on the international scale).
- ❖ **Hand soap and toilet paper:** Chinese toilets usually have neither soap nor toilet paper, so always carry your own with you when you go out. Little tissue packets are for sale everywhere and you can buy hand-sanitizers at all grocery stores.
- ❖ **Phone compatibility and roaming:** Before departure, make sure your phone is unlocked and compatible with eSIMs or Chinese physical SIM cards. International roaming can work as a temporary backup, but it may be expensive and may not provide a Chinese phone number, which is useful for deliveries, ride-hailing, and local services.
- ❖ **Chinese SIM or eSIM:** If you want a local Chinese number, CLI can help you get a physical SIM during your first few days in Guilin. If you prefer an eSIM, choose a Mainland China plan, install it before departure, and remember that many travel eSIMs are data-only.
- ❖ **VPN to access the entire Internet:** CLI's recommended VPN is Astrill VPN. Install and test your VPN before departure, because VPN websites and app downloads may be difficult to access once you are in Mainland China. See "The Great Firewall" section below under "What to Expect."
- ❖ **Contact solution:** You can buy this all over China, but make sure to bring enough for at least the first week.
- ❖ **Leave empty space in your bag:** You will likely return to your home country with more than you brought to China. Anticipate this and pack light. While in Guilin, you can also buy another suitcase or have things shipped home.

Skills to Work on Before Arrival

- ❖ **Chopstick skills:** Very, very few restaurants in China have forks. Only Western-style restaurants will. All other restaurants use chopsticks. You can also always ask for a spoon (sháozi 勺子).
- ❖ **Squatting skills:** All CLI housing options have Western toilets, but most of China has squat toilets. Don't forget to bring toilet paper with you whenever you go out (see "Chinese bathrooms" in the "What to Expect" section below).
- ❖ **Open-mindedness:** You will encounter minor and major differences in culture, food, social-interaction, and surroundings. Depending on the observer, these differences can be exciting, shocking, eye-opening, delightful, and even frustrating. In order to enjoy your time in



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China and gain as much as possible from the experience, always keep an open mind and be accepting of the many, many differences.

What to Expect

- ❖ **Friendly, excited people:** Guilin truly has a southern hospitality that you don't always find in the rest of China. Strangers are often enthusiastic to help you with your Chinese and it is common for CLI students to sit in a restaurant or store for hours learning with locals.
- ❖ **Curiosity towards foreigners:** Foreigners are a somewhat common sight in major cities, but for many people in smaller cities, and especially in the countryside, you may be the first foreigner they have ever interacted with. Expect occasional staring and calls of "Hello!" The stares and greetings from strangers are innocent and not done in malice; people are truly curious, and once they discover you speak Chinese, you will have a new best friend.
- ❖ **Big city and small town wrapped into one:** CLI lies in Qixing district on the eastern half of Guilin, an area full of locals, great food, and incredible scenery. You can walk to the city center in about 45 minutes, ride a bike there in 15, or take a cab there in 8. Likewise, you are about the same distance to pure countryside.
- ❖ **Surreal scenery:** There is a famous expression known across China, 桂林山水甲天下 (Guilín shānshuǐ jiǎ tiān xià), which means "Guilin's scenery is the best under heaven." Guilin's beauty is so renowned that it is even on the back of the 20 RMB bill. You will immediately realize why Guilin is one of the premier destinations in China. You'll fully experience the natural beauty of Guilin in its countryside, especially near Yangshuo and the Longsheng rice terraces.
- ❖ **Awesome biking:** Major roads in Guilin have separate driving lanes, bus lanes, and bike lanes, and also have sidewalks. Almost everywhere in the city is accessible in under a 30 minute bike ride.
- ❖ **Qigong, kungfu, and yoga:** Some of the most entertaining 'performances' in Guilin are locals doing Taichi (tàijí) by the river with the sunrise each day and old ladies with boom boxes dancing each night by the high arched bridge over Banyan Lake (rónghú). In addition, there are endless kungfu and yoga classes to attend.
- ❖ **Daily rest time:** There is a daily rest time from noon to 2:30pm that many Chinese people observe. Universities and most government offices close within this window, and it is therefore sometimes difficult to accomplish tasks requiring cooperation with locals during this time.



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- ❖ **Low cost of living:** One of the luxuries of Guilin is that you can live very comfortably on 500-1,000 USD a month (depending on your lifestyle). Many services that are very expensive in America are quite inexpensive in China; for example, massages (\$8/hour), maid service (\$2/hour), a personal cook (\$6/meal), and taxi rides (\$4 almost anywhere in town). In addition, clothes, food, and traveling are much less expensive.
- ❖ **Upbeat nightlife:** Bars in Guilin range from quiet cafés to all-night dance clubs. The two most popular bars in town, frequented by younger Chinese patrons and foreigners alike, are Muse and Cats & Rabbits (māotù). Muse is located downtown and mostly spins international pop, electronic, and hip-hop music, while Cats & Rabbits offers a more laid-back atmosphere and regularly plays lounge and punk music.
- ❖ **Milk tea culture:** Milk tea shops are everywhere in Chinese cities and are a fun, low-pressure way to practice ordering in Chinese. Popular orders can be customized by sweetness, ice level, toppings, and tea base.
- ❖ **Night markets and citywalks:** Young people in China often spend evenings exploring food streets, night markets, scenic walking routes, and photogenic neighborhoods. Xiaohongshu is especially useful for discovering current local recommendations.
- ❖ **Gym and café culture:** Guilin has cafés, gyms, yoga studios, and casual study spots where students can meet locals and build daily routines outside class.
- ❖ **Chinese social media culture:** WeChat, Xiaohongshu, Douyin, and short-video platforms shape how people find restaurants, events, products, and travel ideas. You do not need to use every platform, but understanding them will help you understand daily life in China.
- ❖ **Karaoke:** Known as KTV, this is the preferred choice of entertainment for many Guilinese. At some point during your stay in Guilin, you will most likely end up at KTV and have a mic handed to you. If you do not know how to sing the Carpenters “Yesterday Once More” or Celine Dion’s “My Heart Will Go On,” you will soon.
- ❖ **Delicious food:** Though it’s likely not the Chinese food you are used to from Chinese restaurants in your home country, most will agree that Guilin cuisine is truly excellent. And if you’re ever craving some food from back home, Guilin has an excellent Western food store and several Western-style restaurants.



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- ❖ **Traditional Tea Houses:** Tea is an important part of Chinese culture and there is ceremony and ritual associated with the process of drinking it. Tea houses are a great place to go to study Chinese and meet friendly locals.
- ❖ **Wonderful parks:** Being a tourist town, Guilin has numerous parks scattered throughout the city. All parks feature pagodas resting atop karst mountains, great for midday studying or relaxing.
- ❖ **People from all over the world:** There is an excellent international community in Guilin, which includes people from the United States, England, Ireland, France, Germany, Spain, Holland, Poland, Switzerland, Russia, Australia, New Zealand, Mexico, Puerto Rico, Estonia, Nigeria, Algeria, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Vietnam, Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, Korea, Japan, and more. That being said, Guilin is a great place to avoid all foreign contact if so desired.
- ❖ **Haggling/special foreigner prices:** Since parts of China heavily cater to tourism and have countless visitors each year, vendors sometimes try to take advantage of foreigners by overcharging them for items and services. However, once they hear that you speak even the most basic Chinese, they will be much more willing to negotiate with you and will accordingly lower their prices. In most bustling markets, expect to pay 25-30% less than the asking price for the majority of items, and in more touristy areas, the price could drop well over half.
- ❖ **Scam and payment safety:** Be cautious with unknown WeChat contacts, suspicious links, fake QR codes, urgent phone calls claiming to be from police or banks, and requests to transfer money outside official apps. Only scan QR codes from trusted merchants, confirm prices before paying, and ask CLI if something feels unusual.
- ❖ **The Great Firewall:** In an effort to “harmonize” the Internet and prevent anti-government activity, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) blocks access to numerous websites and apps. Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, X, and other social media sites are among those that you cannot access without a VPN. Additionally, major social and political advocacy sites, such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, are blocked. Many foreigners and locals use a VPN to get around the firewall. Some, such as www.torproject.org, can be downloaded for free, but these are not as reliable as paid networks. Astrill VPN (<https://www.astrill.com/>) provides a reliable paid option. Please note that, even when using Astrill or your chosen option, almost all foreign websites run slower in China than they do in the West.
- ❖ **A lack of violence:** Your biggest threat in China is someone coyly trying to steal your bike or your wallet, and thieves quickly submit when caught. Even so, make sure to lock up your bicycle and keep your bag zipped. Fighting almost never happens in China, especially Guilin.



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Many people speak loudly, and it may appear as if someone is angry when (s)he is merely trying to express a point.

Note: One of the worst things you can do in China is to get in a fight. If you find yourself in a tense situation, just walk away or conclude any argument diplomatically. Chinese people very rarely throw the first punch, but if they see one of their countrymen fighting with a foreigner, it is possible they join in.

- ❖ **Firecrackers and fireworks:** Days are frequently punctuated by the sparkle, boom, pop, and thump of firecrackers and fireworks. Major events such as holidays, weddings, and business openings are almost always marked by the ritual of lighting firecrackers. The loud sound is used to ward off evil spirits and thus bless important events with a fresh start.
- ❖ **Incredible language environment:** Wherever you go in Guilin, you will find yourself in an amazing language environment. Unlike Beijing and Shanghai, English is seldom heard in Guilin. Chinese is even used as the medium of communication between many foreigners. Guilin is a fantastic place to call home and offers the best of both the countryside and a small city to create an amazing language-learning environment.

Suggested Books and Movies

Suggested Reading List

- ❖ **The Search for Modern China 4th Edition** (c. 2025) by Jonathan D. Spence and Janet Chen: The Search for Modern China originated in a legendary course at Yale taught by the late Jonathan Spence and has been the best-selling text for students and teachers of modern Chinese history ever since. Janet Chen (Princeton University), a leading scholar and expert in social and cultural history, updates The Search for Modern China for a new generation. Incorporating insights from recent scholarship throughout, she has also streamlined the text to make it more student-friendly while maintaining the spellbinding narrative.
- ❖ **River Town** (c. 2006) by Peter Hessler: In 1996, 26-year-old Peter Hessler arrived in Fuling, a town on China's Yangtze River, to begin a two-year Peace Corps stint as a teacher at the local college. Along with fellow teacher Adam Meier, the two are the first foreigners to be in this part of the Sichuan province for 50 years. Expecting a calm couple of years, Hessler at first does not realize the social, cultural, and personal implications of being thrust into such a radically different society. In *River Town: Two Years on the Yangtze*, Hessler tells of his experience with the citizens of Fuling, the political and historical climate, and the feel of the city itself."



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- ❖ **Iron and Silk** (c. 1987) by Mark Salzman: Salzman captures post-cultural revolution China through his adventures as a young American English teacher in China and his shifu-tudi (master-student) relationship with China's foremost martial arts teacher.
- ❖ **China Wakes: The Struggle for the Soul of a Rising Power** (c. 1995) by Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn: Published in 1995, the husband-and-wife team of Kristof and WuDunn, whose reporting of the Tiananmen Square massacre for the New York Times earned them a Pulitzer prize, range from Beijing to the Tibetan highlands in their illuminating look at the changes and contradictions unfolding within Chinese society.
- ❖ **Business Leadership in China** (c. 2011) by Frank T. Gallo: This book is ideal for any international manager who wants to better understand how to blend the best practices of Western leadership with traditional Chinese wisdom. The content comes from a combination of English and Chinese literature, interviews with practicing executives in China as well as the author's own experience as a leader in China.
- ❖ **Let Only Red Flowers Bloom** (c. 2025) by Emily Feng: A deeply reported investigation into the battle over identity in China, chronicling the state oppression of those who fail to conform to Xi Jinping's definition of who is "Chinese," from an award-winning NPR correspondent. Feng tells the stories of nearly two dozen people who are pushing back. They include a Uyghur family, separated as China detains hundreds of thousands of their fellow Uyghurs in camps; human rights lawyers fighting to defend civil liberties in the face of mammoth odds; a teacher from Inner Mongolia, forced to make hard choices because of his support of his mother tongue; and a Hong Kong fugitive trying to find a new home and live in freedom.
- ❖ **Factory Girls: From Village to City in a Changing China** (c. 2008) by Leslie T. Chang: An eye-opening and previously untold story, *Factory Girls* is the first look into the everyday lives of the migrant factory population in China. Chang tells the story of these workers primarily through the lives of two young women, whom she follows over the course of three years as they attempt to rise from the assembly lines of Dongguan, an industrial city in China's Pearl River Delta. *Factory Girls* demonstrates how the mass movement from rural villages to cities is remaking individual lives and transforming Chinese society, much as emigration to America's shores remade our own country a century ago.
- ❖ **China in Ten Words** (c. 2012) by Yu Hua: A witty, courageous essay collection that uses everyday vocabulary to explain the contradictions of the "Chinese miracle". Framed by ten phrases common in the Chinese vernacular, *China in Ten Words* uses personal stories and astute analysis to reveal as never before the world's most populous yet oft-misunderstood nation.



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Suggested Movie List

- ❖ **China: A Century of Revolution:** *China: A Century of Revolution* is a six-hour tour de force journey through the country's most tumultuous period. *China in Revolution* charts the pivotal years from the birth of the new republic to the establishment of the PRC, through foreign invasions, civil war and a bloody battle for power between Mao Zedong and Chiang Kai-shek.
- ❖ **The Passion of Mao:** An excellent documentary. The director brings a tremendous amount of rich primary source material to the screen with an original and entertaining perspective, uncovering the relationship between Mao's political and policy achievements with Mao's colorful life story, marked by some of his comically bizarre traits.
- ❖ **Young & Restless in China:** A riveting and poignant documentary, *Young & Restless in China* tracks the lives of nine ambitious young Chinese professionals who are struggling to make it in this very tumultuous and rapidly changing society, as it prepares to host the 2008 Beijing Olympics.
- ❖ **My People, My Homeland:** A slate of China's most acclaimed directors weaves together an omnibus of heartwarming stories that showcase the unique communities found in different parts of rural China.
- ❖ Any and all films by director **Zhang Yimou**, especially **To Live**, **Hero**, **House of Flying Daggers**, **The Story of QiuJu**, **The Curse of the Golden Flower** and **Raise the Red Lantern**. Zhang Yimou is well-known as the director of the 2008 Beijing Olympics Opening Ceremony.
- ❖ **PBS's Around the Globe: China** offers an incredible array of free online learning resources to help bring you up to speed on many aspects of China. Learn about China's traditional concept of the Mandate of Heaven, understand the basics of Confucianism, explore the influence of Buddhism in China, and much more. To access this resource, simply search "pbs around the globe china" in Google.

For more information, please visit the FAQs section of CLI's website (www.studycli.org/faq) or contact CLI anytime. We are all very excited to welcome you to Guilin and are looking forward to an excellent educational experience together!

一路平安 (yī lù píng ān, *bon voyage*)!

The CLI Team