
On The GreatWall

5 Minute Chinese

Is China Safe at Night for Tourists?



PandaWu: Hello, this is 5 Minute Chinese from On The GreatWall. I'm PandaWu.

Emma: And I'm Emma. PandaWu, would you walk through a Chinese city at two in the morning?

PandaWu: I wouldn't recommend it. Walking around at 2 a.m. can be dangerous for one reason. I lost 200 yuan last night.

Emma: Wait. Were you robbed?

PandaWu: Yes. By beef skewers and grilled oysters.

Emma: You were robbed by food?

PandaWu: I passed a roadside barbecue stall. The beef smelled smoky and spicy. The oysters were covered in garlic. Two hundred yuan disappeared.

Emma: That is not robbery. You ordered dinner.

PandaWu: I had already eaten dinner. That is what makes it serious.

Emma: So, barbecue-related financial crime aside, would you actually walk around at two in the morning?

PandaWu: I have, many times. On a busy food street, you may not be walking alone. The grills are still smoking, delivery riders are passing, and someone nearby has just ordered enough oysters for a small wedding.

Emma: So the street is not frightening. It is hungry.

PandaWu: Exactly. Your phone is probably safe. Your plan to eat nothing after dinner is in serious trouble.

Emma: How did you lose 200 yuan? That sounds like more than a few skewers.

PandaWu: It began with two beef skewers. A modest purchase. While I waited, I saw the oysters. Then the table beside me ordered grilled eggplant covered with garlic and chili.

Emma: And the eggplant threatened you too?

PandaWu: Very aggressively. Then the owner asked whether I wanted fried noodles. At some point, a plate of chicken wings appeared. I cannot explain every detail of the attack.

Emma: Did anyone at the stall force you to order these things?

PandaWu: No. The stall simply kept smelling excellent in my direction.

Emma: I see. A highly sophisticated operation.

PandaWu: This is why late-night food is different from dinner. At dinner, you arrive with a plan. Late at night, you follow the smoke, sit on a plastic stool, and begin making decisions that tomorrow's version of you must live with.

Emma: Is it usually barbecue?

PandaWu: Barbecue is a champion, but every city has its own temptations. It might be noodles, dumplings, congee, hot pot, crayfish, sweet soup, or a whole charcoal-grilled fish. This is not always a tiny snack. It can be a complete second dinner.

Emma: A second dinner sounds unnecessary.

PandaWu: That is because you are thinking with your daytime brain.

Emma: What changes after midnight?

PandaWu: People finish late shifts. Friends leave a bar or a movie and are not ready to go home. Someone says, "Let's just sit down for ten minutes." Then one person orders food, another orders beer, and ten minutes quietly becomes two hours.

Emma: So the food keeps the night going.

PandaWu: Yes. That is the part a packet of chips at home cannot replace. At a late-night table, you share dishes, complain about work, tell stories, and keep adding food because nobody wants to be the person who ends the evening.

Emma: Now the 200 yuan makes more sense. You did not buy dinner. You bought extra time.

PandaWu: With garlic.

Emma: Important upgrade.

PandaWu: In Guangzhou, friends might gather at a late-night dai pai dong with woks firing beside the tables. Somewhere else, the night might end over lamb skewers or a bowl of noodles. The dishes change, but the invitation is wonderfully dangerous: sit down and have one more thing.

Emma: What do you call this meal in Chinese?

PandaWu: 宵夜.

Emma: 宵夜.

PandaWu: It means a late-night meal or snack. You can also say 吃宵夜, which means to eat late-night food. But "snack" does not really capture it. 宵夜 might begin with one skewer and end with six friends around a table.

Emma: Can I say, "I am only having a small 宵夜"?

PandaWu: You can say it. The barbecue stall does not have to believe you.

Emma: Fine. I need a defense plan. I will eat before I go out.

PandaWu: So did I.

Emma: I will carry no cash.

PandaWu: They accept mobile payments.

Emma: I will not look at the food.

PandaWu: You can still smell it.

Emma: Then what am I supposed to do?

PandaWu: Sit down. Resistance only makes you hungrier.

Emma: Did you at least learn anything from losing 200 yuan?

PandaWu: Yes. Tonight I am taking a friend, so we can lose 100 yuan each.

Emma: That is not how financial recovery works.

PandaWu: It is how 宵夜 works.

Emma: Once again, our five minutes are up, but if you'd like to hear more authentic stories about Chinese food, history and culture, you can head to our topic page on our website, onthegreatwall.com. See you again soon. But for now, it's goodbye.

Useful Examples

宵夜

Xiāoyè

A late-night meal or snack.

我们去吃宵夜吧。

Wǒmen qù chī xiāoyè ba.

Let's go out for some late-night food.

你想吃什么宵夜？

Nǐ xiǎng chī shénme xiāoyè?

What would you like for a late-night meal?