



020123 A 13 hour time difference = terrible nights of sleep

We departed from Boston to Beijing on January 4 via Vancouver on Air Canada, the airline which subsequently lost our luggage and which allowed my bag to be broken into, but that will probably all be worked out. From Beijing, we caught another flight to Yantai, arriving late on the evening of the 5th. The original plan for the trip was to spend a lot of time in Yantai (where I lived in China) with perhaps a day trip to Qingdao or Penglai (both near Yantai). The last few days were to be spent in Beijing so that Jeff could see all of the sites before we returned back to Boston

Yantai

So what was it like to return to Yantai after being gone for a year? Some of my Chinese friends have asked me this same question during my stay; eager to see their city through the eyes of someone who left and then returned. China is amazing at being able to change itself overnight. You can actually see and sense the changes that have occurred in only a year. What China is going to be able to accomplish in the next ten years is anyone's guess.

My first impression of the changed Yantai to which I returned was the Number 5 Middle School where I taught. As our taxi rushed past the school during our race from the airport to our hotel, I was startled to see the new façade on the school. Gone was the rubble of dingy, squat, concrete buildings which I had last seen between the road and the school grounds. Instead, gleaming new four story buildings stood proud before the school with a wide sidewalk/parking lot before them. The office tower which I witnessed and heard being built 20 hours a day, a mere 5 meters from my apartment at #5 was now finished and modern looking. A later tour of the school would reveal new dormitory buildings for the students and an Astroturf field and rubber track to replace the concrete and dirt ones which were littered with stones (a hazard to any runner). (For those unfamiliar with my China emails, I broke my ankle by stepping on a rock while running around the track. I was on crutches for three months of my time in China).

My school is indicative of the new Yantai that I found. Buildings that I saw going up were finished and more were being built. The grotty Yuhuan Ding Hospital was replaced by a gleaming edifice with sparkling rooms. A world of difference from the old hospital! More hutongs and older architecture had come down for more of these buildings of gleaming glass. But, some had also come down to make way for green space which was neat to see. Unfortunately, favorite restaurants were closed, but new offices and restaurants had opened.

The new restaurants revealed more of a tangible western influence along the streets of Yantai than before. No, the McDonalds and Starbucks which have populated nearly every corner in Beijing and Shanghai have not yet raided little Yantai. But, there are new ice cream stores, western style restaurants, and even coffee houses. The coffee house near Didi Hamburger is even two stories high with swinging chairs and big colorful couches.

Beyond the physical changes, a change below the surface that was even more startling was that the population seems to be getting used to the presence of foreigners. As Let's Go China once wrote, "If you went to China wearing an extra head, you couldn't attract any more attention than you will merely by virtue of being a foreigner." The incessant staring which could drive me to the brink of sanity some days has lessened tremendously. Also reduced was the volume of "hello"s which could have the affect of nails on a chalkboard. People were still curious about us, but no longer is the curiosity so overwhelming as foreigners become more commonplace. Not that I saw more foreigners than before. I think that it is just that the novelty is wearing off.

What has remained unchanged, however is the sheer generosity and warmth of the Chinese people. Returning to Yantai felt like the return of the prodigal son. The moment that I would call people to tell them that we had arrived, they would rush to wherever we were. The Monday after our arrival, I called the former Communist Party Secretary of #5 School, Ms. Hou (she is now the Headmaster of #9 Middle School) who was like my mom in Yantai. Within what seemed like minutes, she came to our hotel bearing tons of goodies that she had picked up along the way. Soon after she arrived, she started working her mobile phone and in less than five minutes, she had arranged for a banquet to be held in our honor which was attended not only by many of my good friends from #5, but also the headmaster and the principals. Ms. Hou is a powerful woman in Yantai and amazing at impromptu banquets. More banquets would follow during the week including multi room ones and the single biggest banquet table that I have ever seen.

However, not all of our meals were banquets. There is my friend, Li Mei who is a woman who befriended me in one of the street markets during my time as a teacher. Li Mei is amazing. She studies English not for advancement, but out of a thirst for knowledge. She was always generous when I lived in Yantai and to this day remains an incredibly diligent letter writer. On our first full day in Yantai, she welcomed us into her hutong, something most tourists would never get to experience. There she had laid out all sorts of fruits and nuts to snack on as we talked and looked at the pictures from Europe which I brought with me. We would share many meals with this good friend over the course of our stay.

It is for these reasons that I am glad that we started our trip with Yantai, rather than Beijing. Yantai is not the usual tourist destination, with its smog and its squat, concrete buildings. But the warmth of the inhabitants makes up for the cold winter air and it is my second home.

I will begin the story of our trip with the next email. I have debated about how to present our whirlwind adventure to you. I can not believe that we were in China for only 18 days. During our stay, it both seemed like we had been there forever, but at the same time, for only the blink of an eye. Our days were so jammed packed with visiting friends and experiencing so much. In hopes of relating all of the adventure without making it too long, I have decided to tell it all sequentially, coming soon!

Zijian!

Jeff

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