



020130 Is this really still China?

Beer in the Airport

Ms. Hou is simply awesome. Jeff and I were met at the door of the WT office at 6AM on Wed (Jan16) by a slew of school boys who whisked off our bags to Ms. Hou's car which was waiting for us at the front gate of the school to take us to the train station. Once there, the driver rushed ahead to board the train to make sure that our hard class seats were saved for us. Ms. Hou also came on board the train and of course, she knew the people who were sitting around us on the train. She knows everyone. After a sad farewell, Jeff and I were off to Qingdao.

Qingdao is a city that is about 4 hours south of Yantai by train. The city is famous in the US for the export of Tsingdao Beer which you can find in a lot of Asian restaurants. Qingdao is one of my favorite cities in China with its German architecture, clean air and parks. And it is a city that Jeff and I would spend only about 20 minutes visiting.

In sum, Jeff is a good friend. He knew that my thoughts were in Shanghai and so he decided that he wanted to spend the next few days in Shanghai rather than in Qingdao and Beijing. This meant giving up time in Beijing to see some of the sites, but it was a choice he was willing to make.

Soon after arriving in Qingdao, we walked the few blocks from the train station to the airline ticketing office where we asked for the next flight to Shanghai. For some reason, the woman behind the counter liked us and offered us a discount on the ticket price. She said a Chinese word that I did not understand and so I asked her to explain. The man next to me could write English and so he wrote on a pad of paper, "discount". Um, sure! We bought our airplane tickets to Shanghai, hopped in a taxi which drove us through the town to the airport bus which took us to the airport. We were off on the next flight after Jeff drank a Tsingdao beer in Qingdao, even if it were in the airport.

A different world

We arrived in Shanghai in the late afternoon. Thanks to the discount, we spent only \$30 more than Amy and Aileen to get to Shanghai, but avoided the 22 hour long train ride by flying. When you see pictures of the "new China", they are sure to include pictures of Shanghai. The city is immense with buildings as far as you can see in all directions. The city is an architect's dream come true with so many buildings being constructed. The theme seems to be "futuristic" with gleaming towers of steel and glass in fantastic shapes with space-age adornments. Cars cruise from one point to another on raised highways that crisscross the city. You don't see many bicycles in Shanghai, but there is the bus system as well as a subway. The city is now trying to modernize its image even further by banning the hanging of laundry in certain areas. You used to be able to go down little

streets and see laundry hanging out of windows or on lines stretched across the street, but soon that will be a thing of the past.

After checking into our hotel, we walked down Nanjing Lu, a pedestrian mall that extends for blocks from the Peoples Park to the Bund. The street is lined with stores and neon displays that light up the night sky. There are video billboards and at least three jumbotrons along the way. We wandered down to the Bund which is the name of the area that is on the east bank of the Yangzi River. The river is lined with a park followed by old, colonial buildings from when the western countries had spheres of influence in China. The western bank marks the beginning of the Pudong Development Area. It is here that the Pearl Tower resides before new skyscrapers including the future site of the worlds tallest building. Did I mention that Shanghai is an impressive city? I have been to Shanghai many times and I really like the city. The only other city that I have ever seen that is more futuristic is Hong Kong. However, Shanghai is not indicative of the rest of China and it is certainly not the only city that visitors to China should see.

Jeff and I surprised the others the next morning and would wind up moving from our hotel to be nearer to where they were staying. Aileen (the WT director in China) has several Filipino friends in the city. I will say one thing about people from the Philippines, they are very generous and hospitable. After meeting Chie (Aileen's Filipino friend who lives in Shanghai), Jeff and I suddenly found ourselves the houseguests of Chie's Filipino friends so that we would not have to pay for a hotel.

We would spend the afternoon shopping in the old city of Shanghai which is a block of buildings of the traditional architecture which are home to dozens and dozens of little shops. Haggling is the rule which is a lot of fun. I prefer to haggle in Chinese because I find myself more gutsy when haggling in another language for some reason. The whole haggling is such a game and it is fun to watch it played out. For example, Jeff wanted to buy silk scarves from a woman. She named her initial price which was very high, of course. So we would say in Chinese something like, "Women shi pengyou. Ni yigai gei women pianyi." (We are friends. You should give us a lower price). Jeff would name a price that was a fraction of the original price and the women would laugh like it was the funniest thing they had ever heard. Then they would counter with a price that was only 20 Yuan higher. Vendors would fame anxiety at their "losses" and say that they were "giving away" their merchandise. But we would leave the shop with everyone all smiles, knowing that the vendor had still made a nice profit.

Jeff and I would also later go shopping for clothes to go clubbing in. We would lead a very different lifestyle in than in Yantai. It would almost be as if we had left China altogether. The apartments that we stayed at were in gleaming highrises with gardens and fountains. The apartment that Chie and her French husband share is two stories tall with lots of balconies and beautiful rooms. It is unlike any other apartment that I have ever seen in China and more like a building that you would expect in the Yuppie part of a US city. Chie's husband manages a new restaurant / bar called Luna. It was here that we would begin our nights. On Thursday night (Jan17), we had a late dinner from Luna's very western menu, but on Friday night Chie cooked us a huge dinner of Filipino food

which was delicious. After dinner and a visit to the bar at Luna, it was off to the clubs until 4 or 5 in the morning. Shanghai has lots of different clubs to chose from, some with more of a foreigner presence than others, but all different from the New China Disco in Yantai. Other than having to speak with the cab drivers in Mandarin, the food, the clubs and the apartments would have given little clue that we were still in China.

I don't think that I could live the lifestyle of going out to clubs all night for very long. But, it was a lot of fun for the two days that we spent in Shanghai. We also took in some of the sites in Shanghai. The Shanghai Museum is arguably one of the best in all of China. We luckily got into the museum during its last hour of operation after sleeping in and breakfast. The museum closed at 5.

Saturday (Jan19) came too quickly and Jeff and I packed to catch our 1PM flight to Beijing. I also tried to find other airplane tickets. Amy asked me to go off to Thailand with her. I had to be in Boston to catch my plane to Europe on the 29th, but I had a few days to spare and so I said yes. It was one of those crazy, irrational decisions that would be something to remember. Running off to Thailand, living in tree houses and spending the days on the beaches with Amy. And then I priced the tickets. I would not only have to fly down to Chiang Mai, but also buy a new ticket back to the US. I have always heard that Bangkok is the ultimate place to buy cheap tickets so I knew that I could do better than what I found in Beijing or Shanghai. But, I couldn't take the chance of depleting all of the money that I had saved for life in Denmark for a few days in Thailand. My reason won out and I would board the plane with Jeff on Monday. Life doesn't always throw us such crazy opportunities and in hindsight, I probably could have pulled it off. I have always been so happy with the choices that I have made to follow my heart and grab hold of crazy opportunities with both hands. India, China and Denmark to name a few. I suppose that the feelings of regret will subside eventually.

I decided that this email was getting too long and so I have left Beijing for the last email. Have a great weekend!

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