

000228 Yantai Described

Hello,

I know that the last few emails have been long, but they will be the last as I begin teaching in earnest this week. I usually just type using notepad as I wait the hour to access the six emails that I might have in my inbox because the connections here are so slow.

A day does not pass during which I don't wish that someone from home would visit me so that I could share what I am experiencing here in Yantai. So, since not everyone can visit, I will try to describe Yantai and what it is like to live in China so far. The guide books all describe Yantai as being a sleepy sea port whose only redeeming value is that you can catch a ferry or bus to elsewhere. I believe them to be very unkind to the city. I expected a little, dismal town based on my research. I was pleasantly surprised to find out what Yantai was really like.

Yantai is a small city, but bigger than St. Louis. There are mountains or hills on three sides of the city and the ocean on the other. Some of the mountains still have snow on them despite the city being free of snow. There are radio towers and a little house on the hills that beacon for a long climb one Saturday morning. The city itself is grey and drab as cities tend to be in the winter. The streets are dusty, but well kept by a legion of people with broom that disperse over the city each morning. This morning I saw one of these with a brush trying to get grit off a drain, so they are pretty dedicated to their task. Most streets have one or two lanes on each side plus a bike lane and a side walk on each side. The streets are lined by stores and restaurants. Some stores are not very large and may just be 10'x10'. Some stores also serve as the proprietor's home for you can see their bed in the back. Other stores are bigger as are some of the restaurants. The back alleys can be dirt and you can find markets where people have brought car loads of fruit, vegetables or meat to sell; adding color to the gray. Most people live in apartment buildings. These are generally five story, drab buildings with big blocks of windows for each apartment. From my windows I can see a building five stories tall and 35 to 40 apartments wide. The room with the windows appear to mostly be kitchens, although I have seen some that are used as rooms for plants or for a study. I am looking forward to the first time that I am invited into someone's home so I can see what they are like on the inside. The outside of the buildings are basically dumpy looking due to the pollution and the massive use of concrete. However, the insides are supposed to be spotless and well kept. This is the inhabitant's, or more likely and entire family's space and they take good care of it. They would not dream of spitting or making a mess of the bathrooms, but outside of their apartments seem to be fair game.

The apartment buildings make up a good part of the city with their first floors used for shops or restaurants. The height of most buildings is kept to five stories due to the scarcity of elevators. Living on the fifth floor myself I can tell you that it can be a pain with heavy loads! That is not to say that there are not taller buildings in Yantai. There are dozens of buildings sporting 20 or more stories and many more of these being built. These are modern glass and steel buildings that could easily have been transplanted from Boston or any other US city. A lot of these are hotels, but there are office buildings in the population as well.

They are also building a mammoth, new department store on the main street. It is nearby the Hyper-Market where I do my shopping. The department stores in town are five stories tall and are full of goods and staff members. The presence of so many staff members is intimidating since I can not speak the language very well yet.

The main street which is several lanes wide and has a lot of businesses located on both sides. The road itself is separated from the bike lanes and the side walks by three foot high fences that prevent people from crossing. You can cross the street via bridges that are located every 400 feet or so. The main street is host to the post office and the KFC. Nearby the post office are a half dozen little stores that are basically just holes in the wall that sell industrial equipment such as valves, motors and HVAC equipment. The internet place that I use is also on main street as is the International Grocery Store which I have yet to check out. I found peanut butter at the Hyper Market and so have enjoyed PB&J more than once for lunch.

Yantai small enough to get around easily. I walk most of the time because I think that I can see and experience more than in a car. I also enjoy the exercise. Cabs cost 5 yuan (~\$.60) or busses are about 1 yuan (~\$.12) I have used both and both are very convenient. The little stores that are everywhere sell water, coke, pepsi, kit-kats, dove bars, cookies and other foods. How they all can stay in business with so many of them on each street is beyond me. There are also CD and VCD stores with speakers out front that blare music at ear shattering volumes. The VCD's are like DVD's, but lower quality. However, you can find any movie here, even some in English with subtitles. Some are of movies that are still running in the States, although the quality can be questionable. Jessica saw one movie in which you could see someone get up in the movie theater and head out to the bathroom. So, you can guess that most of these are pirated. You can also get cd's for under a dollar, so the same holds true for the music.

There are also a lot of stores selling beepers and cell phones. Digital beepers are very common and most of my Chinese friends have one. Cell phones are also around, but only a few of my friends have these. There are also book stores in Yantai, but there are not any English books. Near my school is also a nice grocery store which has better prices than the little stores and a large selection. I buy my water and ramen there. I am also near the Yantai brewery which brews the local beer. Beer here is cheaper than water, so many decide to give up the expensive water habit.

Standing on my fifth floor balcony you can see the dozens upon dozens of smoke stacks spewing out fumes into the air. Some are large, industrial stacks while others are from the furnaces of the buildings. The smell of coal burning hangs in the air and the dust collects everywhere. The city does have trees along the roads and is also home to a few parks. However there are not many "green spaces" in the city at all. Dirt or concrete cover most of the city. Near me, however is a park with a pond. I will need to check it out.

The streets are filled with busses, cabs, cars, bikes, mopeds and motorcycles as well as pedestrians. They drive by rules that I don't understand, although I am becoming adept at crossing the street. Cars pull into the road without stopping, apparently with the faith that the cars that they are cutting off will stop (and they do). Today I saw a guy make a left turn onto

the road. He saw no reason to get over quickly and so drove down the wrong side of the road into oncoming traffic as he slowly drifted onto his side. The cars are not very mindful of bicycles and I have witnessed several cab-bike accidents as the cabs cut off the bikes. Fortunately, although the traffic pattern resembles mayhem, the cars are only going at most 30 miles per hour, so they have a lot of response time.

I have never been in a building that would be called warm by US standards. But as I am learning, heat is a luxury that I never truly appreciated in the States. "What do you mean that I can not wear my shorts inside during the dead of winter," used to be my battle cry. People here just dress warmly and get used to it as I am currently doing.

Yantai also has bakeries, florists, photographers and hair saloons and barber shops which are really fronts for brothels. Our group has yet to get tired of jokes about going out to get "hair cuts." A mile or so outside of the down town area, Yantai also hosts one of China's special economic zones. From speaking with people at the English Corner, I discovered that the zone was created in 1988. I drove through the zone on the way to Penglai last weekend. The zone has apartment building after apartment building in massive rows. These are to house the workers who work in the zone. There are also industrial buildings which as the apartment buildings are built about 200 feet from a four lane, main road. It was eerie driving through the zone at night because it was like a ghost town. There were very few lights on in the numerous buildings. Apparently, most of the investment in the zone has been by Chinese companies rather than foreign ones. So, the zone has not been as successful as others. However, I have also heard that a lot of money has been poured into the area as of late, so we shall see what happens. I will need to check it out in the spring since the zone is host to the best beach in the area.

With such a variety of stores and the availability of so many goods it can be hard to remember that I am living in communist China. If you take away the characters on the signs and clean up some of the pollution, Yantai might feel like a Western city. Perhaps not, the city does have a different feel than a city in the US or Europe. But, the fact that this is a communist country does not really stand out. I don't think that I expected it to stand out. I remember being in East Berlin before the wall fell and that did feel different than the west. The architecture was designed to impress and I was very struck by it all. However, overall whether it was truly different than West Berlin or whether I was an impressionable eighteen year old caught up in the cold war propaganda remains the question.

People here in Yantai are happy and go about their normal lives as people do in the states. The PLA is nonexistent and the only police that I have seen are those at the police station.

I feel very safe in Yantai which is a nice feeling to have. Not that I let down my guard, but it is very unlike Calcutta or London. The feeling is shared by the other foreigners. From what I understand, China is an easy country to travel in for this reason. Part of the reason for this may also lie in the fact that violent crime against foreigners is punishable by death. However, I think that it is more due to people being curious about foreigners and being very nice, but not threatening to us. I have enjoyed my conversations with others here and have liked those people that I have met.

This morning Jason and I were visited by one of the teachers from our school. She had come to our apartment to give us our teaching schedules. It was around 8:30 AM and the school wanted us to begin classes at 9. Fortunately, we had a banquet with the education committee that overrode all plans for class. We will begin teaching on Tuesday which gives us a bit longer to get ready. I will see over 700 students per week. I have classes with the boarding school students once per week per class and with the non-boarding school students once every other week. In my next email, I will try to discuss more about the education system here in China and the difference in the schools.

There are two other points of interest to mention. Last night was the last night that our WT group was together. The others set out for their schools this afternoon. So, we went out to a restaurant to bid them farewell. We decided on a dish called gorou. Now, in an attempt not to encourage stereotypes of China, we had to go out of our way to get this dish. The restaurant that we went to specialized in northeastern Chinese dishes and it is the only place in town that I have seen that served this dish. People in Yantai normally just eat sea food. In English, the gorou would be called dog. We all had to try it since we are here. Dog tastes a lot like the dark meat from a turkey and is very tender. I actually liked it a lot.

Also, I have managed to get sick once again. I now have a nasal infection so every breath of the polluted air is like a throbbing pain in my head. Fortunately, it was easy to get antibiotics and so hopefully this will clear up soon. Also, I hope to get over all of my sickness for the entire year during this first month.

I can not believe that I have been in China for about 3 weeks. So much has happened that it seems a lot longer. However, the weeks have just gone by so quickly. I have heard that the time will only pass quicker during the next month.

There are several people on this distribution list that have lived in China for a lot longer than I have. If you read my emails and see that I have misinterpreted something here or I am getting something wrong, please don't hesitate to respond and correct me. For a lot of people, this email is their first taste of China and I want to make sure that it is correct!

Also, I have been unable to get my excite account to work again properly on these computers. So, thank you to those of you that have left voice mails, but please don't send more until I can get this worked out. Unfortunately I can see them in my inbox, but I can not listen to them :(.

Take care and I will write again soon!

Jeff

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