

000403 Mountains

How are you? It is now spring in Yantai and the city is beginning to shake off some of its drabness. At my school there are Forsythia bushes that are beginning to bloom. One of the Chinese teachers told me the bush's name in Chinese. Translated, the name means "welcome spring" which I think is very poetic. The street vendors are now selling pears and apples all over the city. The fruit are huge; I have never seen pears so big. The size and abundance of the fruit is a testimony to how fertile the soil here is. Now wonder that when the farmers are left alone, they can produce enough food to feed a country with so many people. The days are warm enough to shed my long underwear and the sky is blue more often than white as of late. The evenings are still cool, but the warm days are a promise of things to come.

I have become more confident in walking across the streets here. Doing so can be an adventure. There are special lanes for the bicycles, but that does not stop cars or motorcycles from cruising down these lanes, sometimes the wrong way. There are traffic lights at the busy corners, some with walk signals. However, even if you have a green light or the walk light, you still must look in every direction. Some drivers seem to consider traffic lights to be voluntary or you will still have cars coming from all directions. So as you cross, you must always look in all directions since cars and especially motorcycles and bicycles will sometimes drive on the wrong side of the road. So basically, you just need to commit and begin to go and let the cars avoid you. This will sometimes mean that they will drive on the wrong side of the road to avoid you, but that is what they do.

On Saturday, two of the teachers from school, Harriet and Beatrice (their English names) offered to take Jason and I to see beidao (North Island). It is a large "island" to the north of the city, connected to the main land by a thin strip of land. The island is dominated by mountains and looks very enticing to visit. We taxied to the island and visited the docks belonging to the Yantai Salvage Bureau (YSB). Beatrice's uncle and aunt both work for the YSB and so she was very familiar with the area. The YSB was involved with the ship that sank in Yantai last Thanksgiving, killing around 300 people. I am not sure what exactly the YSB's role was. Either they also had a ship sink, or they were involved in the rescue of the ferry. In either case, there was a big government investigation into the YSB after which they were cleared of any wrong doing.

We walked up to Beatrice's aunt and uncles house and paid an unexpected visit. This was my first visit to a house in China and it was amazing, so let me describe it. I have already said that most houses in Chinese cities are not as we have in the US. They are drab, concrete buildings that are 3 to 5 stories tall. In this case, there was a central staircase with two houses on each floor. The layout is very similar to an apartment building with 6 units in the US. Most of the first floor apartments have bars on the windows. All of the homes have large, bowed windows for the kitchen or for a porch. There are not enough of these houses in China for everyone who wants one. Plus, houses are too expensive for most people in their twenties to have their own. Therefore, most young people live with their parents until they are married and can afford to get their own place. Or, some families have more than one generation under one roof as the children stay after they are married. People here are therefore always amazed that people in the US leave home generally at age 18 to go to

university. The limitation on space here foster strong family bonds and a lot of my Chinese friends do not want to move from their parent's homes lest they miss them too much.

Since houses are scarce, they used to be offered as perks with jobs. Government officials or company executives would be given the best houses. But, even common workers would be offered company housing, albeit, not as nice. However, this system encouraged corruption with some officials having several houses. About five years ago, people began to need to pay rent on their company housing. Or, another option could be to buy the house from the company at a reduced price. So, the appearance and size of a person's house still depends on their position within the government or a company. (All of this information came from people at English Corner and I hope that it is correct.)

Beatrice's uncle is a radio engineer for the YSB and her aunt is a legal secretary, so they lived in what they described as a middle grade house. I believe that in this case, the higher the grade, the more space, rather than how nice it was. The home was absolutely beautiful. The front door opened to a living room and connecting dining room. The floors were a dark marble and the white walls were embellished with a thick, wood trim. The plaster of the ceiling was sculptured into designs that met the wood trim at the corners. The house was lit with recessed lights located in the wood work. The house was light and airy and beautifully furnished. It was simply beautiful.

However, not all of the houses that I have seen are quite this nice. On Sunday I went to one of my student's houses for dinner. His father is a professor at the Yantai Coal University and owns a computer shop on the side. The housing was at the university and since he taught only a few computer classes a week, it was not as nice as the one on Saturday. It was large, but missing the woodwork on the walls and the really nice kitchen. However, it was a nice house and the family was very nice. I just had high expectations when I was picked up from school in a Mercedes. Therefore, even with a business that could afford such a nice car, his housing was still that of the university.

Returning to Saturday, Beatrice's aunt and uncle were warm and hospitable and offered us apples and coke. Jason and I spoke in Chinese with the teachers helping us when necessary. It became more necessary as time went on and I grew tired from concentrating on the words so much. But, my Chinese is getting much better and the conversation was really fun. Beatrice's uncle wanted to speak of politics, but Beatrice would not let him. So we spoke of the ferry disaster for a while because they were both involved in the investigation. We spoke of the differences between our countries and the similarities.

After a time, we set forth for our original goal of climbing the mountain, via a dirt road. Her uncle and aunt joined us and I walked with Beatrice and her uncle. We spoke of the beauty of China and of her difficulties. Our walk took us to a large tunnel which was dug into the side of the mountain. The tunnel had a 20 ft square door that could be swung open, but which was then shut. The tunnel was built by the military during the Korean war to protect the population of the city in case the US attacked China with nuclear weapons. Yantai is only about 150 miles from what is now N Korea. The tunnel is no longer maintained and appeared abandoned. We continued on with the discussion turning briefly to the Korean

War. We came to another tunnel that we walked through to get a view from the other side of the mountain. However, we turned around and went back through the tunnel when we ran into a sign that said that we were entering a military base.

The aunt and uncle returned home since we had walked a long way and the rest of us continued on our climb. A little further up we were passed by two cars with what appeared to look like military officers inside. The sight of the military shook the teachers a little and they asked Jason and I not to take any pictures. We offered to turn back, but the teachers wanted to press on. I was so disappointed that we could not take pictures because the height of the mountain offered amazing views of the city and the surrounding mountains and ocean. Or, at least where the city should have been, for it was covered by smog with the mountains rising boldly behind it. It was a warm, beautiful day and the sea sparkled and the jagged peaks of the mountains jabbed upwards from the mist. I believe that Edgar Snow describes the Chinese countryside well when he writes in his book, *Red Star Over China*: "...an infinite variety of queer, embattled shapes - hills like great castles, like rows of mammoth, nicely rounded scones, like ranges torn by some giant hand, leaving behind the imprint of angry fingers. Fantastic, incredible and sometimes frightening shapes, a world configured by a mad god - and sometimes a world also of strange surrealist beauty."

As we got higher on our climb, the teachers became more nervous, but still they resisted our offers to turn around. We passed or saw more of the old tunnels as well as decrepit emplacements or shelters for cannons. The mountain offered a perfect position to fire on invading ships in the harbor below. We got close to the top of the mountain with its awesome views when we met three groups of people. One group were students from Yantai University who were also hiking up the mountain. The second group were two middle school age girls who were doing the same. The last group were the military officers we had seen drive past us and they were not happy that we were there. Beatrice approached them first as they walked down the road with their cars behind them. I assume that she asked if it were all right that we were there and if we could take pictures. I am not sure of the ensuing conversation because by now the teachers were really scared and they gave us only bits of information later. What I understood is that one of the officers wanted to know how we had gotten there and why, as if they had not passed us on the way up. There had been not signs or fence to warn us that we should not proceed or we would have turned back as we had when we were confronted by the earlier sign. In the end the officer wanted to know where the teachers were from and where they worked or the soldiers would not let us go. The teachers lied and said that they were students. I am not quite sure how they explained the two Americans that they had in tow, but the officer accepted what the teachers said and we were allowed to go back down the mountain.

The teachers were really a lot more frightened than Jason and I were since we do not know what was being said and we considered it a part of the adventure. I just did not want to have my film taken away, but I had taken not pictures from mountain. The teachers were not amused by our light attitudes. So, we proceeded down the mountain. I only got a few pictures of the city from close to the bottom because I did not want to further worry the teachers. We made it back without further mishap despite our run in with the military and despite our cab driver racing another cab at speeds over 100km/ hr as we tore back to the

city.

On Sunday after mass, I had a great conversation with a woman named Shannon who is working at an orphanage here. She arrived just recently to act as a liaison between donors in the us and the orphanage. Shannon as it turns out was in Calcutta just recently with the Missionaries of Charity. Actually she was in Calcutta also in 97, just before we were there. So we talked about the different houses and about people that we knew. It was so nice to meet someone here who has seen and experienced the same things in Calcutta as I did and I am looking forward to speaking with her more about it. Small world.

One last note. I forgot to mention that there is a market outside of the church that I go to here in Yantai. When I leave church, a lot of the vendors have begun to roast chestnuts in huge metal drums. The smell of all of those chestnuts roasting is amazing. On Friday I am having my tutor, Lisa (our director) and Jason over for dinner. I am whipping up some dishes that I have gotten the recipes for or I have created. I am experimenting a lot and having fun with it. I am just bummed that I do not have an oven. I am going to us some of the raisins that my parents sent to me and some apples with brown sugar to make an outstanding dessert. We shall see, but it will be a lot of fun.

Take care,

Jeff

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