

000429 Travels

This week was a whirlwind of travel to places in Shandong Province, the province where Yantai is located. On Saturday, all of the WT volunteer gathered in Yantai for a trip to the Tai Mountain (Taishan). The trip was offered by the Education Committee (EC) and it is an annual event that they have for the volunteers. We expected to be taken by bus to the mountain by members of the EC. Instead, we were met by an EC member who we had never met before and a professional tour guide, Vivian. During the subsequent four days we learned to dislike our tour guide. Or, rather, I learned that I will never take an organized tour in China again as long as I can help it. Maybe it is because my personality and the personalities of the other volunteer are such that we did not like losing control of the basic things such as what we eat and where. However, we were only allowed to eat in hotel restaurants and Vivian ordered all of our food for us despite our protests. She even tried to get us silverware instead of chopsticks because she feared that we could not really use them. There were several conflicts over the food because it was the first awful Chinese food that we had eaten in China. I never eat in hotel restaurants because you can get much better food of the street and at a fraction of the cost. But, V was set in her ways. I doubt that she was used to dealing with a group of Americans who wanted to be independent addressed their concerns to her. For example, she would protest if we wanted to go for a walk after dinner out of fear that we would get lost and that it was too dangerous. I responded in Chinese that we were fine and that we could speak Chinese, but she was never comfortable with this. I know that she was probably just looking out for us, but it was frustrating none the less!

I also learned that some of the mid price range hotels may be nicer than the budget ones that I have been staying in so far. However, the beauty can be skin deep. The ones that V chose for us were probably Y200 more than the 3 person dorm that I stayed in at Qingdao, but it was not Y200 nicer and it lacked the character of the other. I don't know if this is universal, but it will be something to keep in mind as I travel this summer. Ok, enough griping and on with the tour.

On Saturday, we drove to Jinan, the capital of the province where we spent the night. It was great to have our own bus and the roads to Jinan included super highways. All of the other trips that I have made in Shandong so far have been over two lane roads and the vehicles competed for space as they passed each other. It was nice to be on a highway and to let the miles effortlessly go past. We also took the highway when we went to Qufu the next morning although the road terminated a few hours outside of the city and bumpy roads were ahead.

The view along the drive to Qufu was beautiful. There were lush fields of green and some fields with plants with yellow flowers. Some of the hills and mountains that we passed were terraced so that crops could be grown between their rocky outcroppings. There were villages of one story stone or brick houses beside the road. The houses had clay or stone, sloped roofs. The houses were nestled close together amongst large, flowering trees that offered shade. Dirt roads ran between the houses and occasionally we could see markets set up in the streets. The little villages were really nice and the trees were beautiful. Here and

there I could see the remnants of viaducts that at one time must have distributed water to the crops. Some were beautiful with graceful, white arches. Most of the viaducts ended where a road had cut through them. Now, most of the crops appeared to be watered using a fire hose and a pump. There were people all about working in the fields. I also saw horses being used to plow the fields as it must have been done for thousands of years before. Mechanical equipment such as tractors or combines were nonexistent since most of the individual plots were small. Nor could the people or the economy afford the tractors since one tractor would put hundreds of people out of work and cost more than the farmers make maybe in their lifetimes.

Qufu is the home of Confucius. The city itself was nice, but bustling with the tourist industry. The down town area had the standard concrete, three story buildings, but with sloping, clay roofs that gave the buildings character. We first visited the Confucian Forest where the tomb of Confucius is located. Once you get past the long rows of vendors selling tourist junk and through the second gate, you are met by a wonderful pine and cypress forest. The trees cast dark shadows upon the ground and flowers were growing all about the paths. I would have like to have strayed from the numerous other tour groups complete with guides with megaphones and matching baseball hats, but alas, I too was part of a tour (minus the megaphone and the hats. We did however have a flag.) The forest was a place that you could easily lose yourself in and have a nice quiet stroll once you lost the crowds. There were graves throughout the forest where Confucius's descendants were and continue to be buried. The highlight of the forest is the tomb of the great sage, himself. It is a large mound with a rectangular stone column before it.

Our next stop was the Confucius Mansions. The mansions are a gigantic maze of interconnecting halls, rooms and buildings. Although Confucius himself lived in poverty, his ancestors obviously did quite well for themselves. Some of the buildings were open and other rooms could be viewed through windows. The rooms often contained paintings, furniture and other artwork. The beautiful courtyards contained trees and flowering bushes as well as a plethora of vendors. Yes, many even had electrical hookups for their computers or refrigerators. They were everywhere hawking drinks, souvenirs or digital photos. Here as during most of the trip I wished that I just had a sign that read "wo bu yao le" - I do not want.

The Confucius Temple was a larger area with many small buildings built around large monoliths that had characters carved into them. As in the mansions, the buildings were beautiful. The buildings were built from wood stained black with predominantly green and blue colored designs painted onto them. The main support columns were huge as many of the buildings were over 30 ft high. The roofs were intricate works of construction with clay tiles and elaborate wood work. My favorite was the Dacheng Hall which had amazing columns with dragons carved in relief winding about them. The dragons were supposed to have been so expertly carved that they had to be covered by red silk when the emperor came to visit, lest he feel that the columns in the Forbidden City paled in comparison. Dispersed about the different halls were cypress and pine trees that rose from the stone floors. Also about were large statues of what looked like turtles, but were actually bixi, dragon offspring. Many of the monoliths themselves were borne on the backs of bixi. The entire temple was

surrounded by a stone wall that kept the bustle of the city out and offered quiet within.

We left Qufu in the afternoon and drove to Taian which is a city at the foot of Taishan. We visited the Dai temple that evening where emperors would offer sacrifices to Taishan. The temple was a beautiful array of wood buildings arranged in gardens. Like the temple at Qufu, there were hundreds of monoliths, some believed to be over two thousand years old. The Tai Mountain itself has been named a World Heritage Site by the United Nations and the city has gone to great lengths to make the city around the base very beautiful for the tourists. One Sunday night I strolled around our hotel and was pleasantly surrounded by wide, clean sidewalks, trees along the roads and street lights of glass globes. The air was warm and there were people all about despite the hour. It was very relaxing and everyone was in a good mood. Some people were getting ready to climb the mountain in the night so that they could be at the summit to see the sun rise.

The next morning, we awoke early for our climb up the mountain. The climb is not a leisurely stroll up winding paths, but rather up stone staircases that were laid into the mountain over the past several thousand years. Nor is the climb a chance to commune with nature for there were lots of other people all about and vendors all along the climb. There were even men who offered to carry people up the steps in carriages. Despite the people and the vendors, the climb was very enjoyable. The people all about were in a good mood and there was a general sense of well being. People gawked at our backpacks (I had my little one) and we gawked at the colorful hats and the inappropriate foot wear (heals?). I had my picture taken with random tourists and enjoyed speaking with others. The wide, white stone stairs offered beautiful views and places to rest along the way. Every now and then, there would be workmen lugging stones or bags of concrete up the stairs to do repairs at the top of the mountain. Four men would struggle to carry each of the large stones and would sometimes slow the traffic. These were opportunities to play games such as finding the most inappropriate footwear or chances to pursue hypothetical questions such as "if the red hats fought the yellow hats, who would win?".

At the top of the mountain there were temples to Taishan. There was also a weather observatory, a hotel, restaurants, a satellite dish array and a gondola for those that did not want to make the walk. The temple was neat and the views that were offered were awesome. I went to the very top of the mountain which was marked by a stone. The air was chilly and there were strong gusts of wind. I think that climbing the Tai Mountain offered one of the more traditional Chinese experiences that I have had so far here in China and I really enjoyed it.

We returned from our climb and boarded our bus for Jinan. During both of our nights in Jinan we never really got to see the city because our hotels were always on the outskirts of the city. However, this time our hotel was near the botanical gardens. They were beautiful with a plethora of trees and grass all about. I will return to Jinan in two weeks for a teachers conference during which I hope to see more. Our trip was concluded on Tuesday afternoon when we arrived back to Yantai after long trip made longer by us taking a route through back roads to drop off volunteers along the way.

Thursday was Sports Day at my school so the students did not have classes. The day was held at a stadium nearby and was larger than any field day that I ever participated in. Twenty students from each class competed in a variety of races ranging from 100 to 1500 meters. Also offered were high jump, javelin and shot put. The sports day came after exams earlier in the week and offered the students a chance to relax and be kids.

On Friday, the BS Junior One students went on a field trip to Weihai and Jason and I were invited to go along. We traveled by bus to an island and a nature preserve outside of Weihai, about 2 hours from Yantai. Maybe my students are not used to bus travel, but I could not believe how many students got sick on the ride. There were a steady stream of bags handed up to the front of the bus to be thrown out and the side of the bus was rather nasty by the end of the trip. The island we visited was supposed to be the easternmost tip of the peninsula and was very pretty with yellow flowers all about.

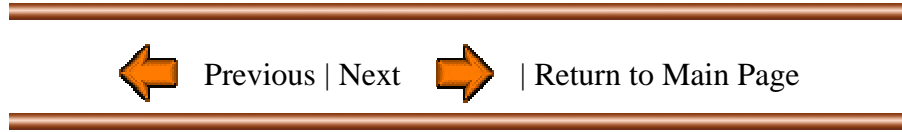
The nature preserve reminded me a lot of Jurassic Park. It was set on a large hill with tall, metal fences all about buttressed by electrical wires. The preserve held several lions and tigers as well as bears. It was much nicer than the zoos that I had heard bad things about in this country. But, then we went on to the "petting zoo". However, rather than goats or rabbits, there were spider monkeys and emus. We walked into the monkey cage and I knew that I wanted no part of this. The students and teachers were offering the monkeys candy, cookies and other goodies. However, I remembered the monkeys in India and they were anything but friendly. Sure enough, some monkeys turned nasty and jumped at or bit the students. Never would I have dreamed that I would have to worry about protecting their students from monkeys during field trips! The preserve also offered a chance for the students to buy fish to throw to sea lions and seals. These animals did all sorts of tricks for their food and were very entertaining. In all, it was a very nice trip.

Monday, May 1st is Labor day here in China. The labor movement in the US just does not have its act together because here at the No 5 School we will have seven days of vacation. Jason and some of the others will go to Beijing and then on to Inner Mongolia for their vacation. I had wanted to go down to Shanghai to visit with the Serigs, friends of mine from St. Louis that I knew from Wash U and from the Newman Center. However, due to the holiday, all of the hard class sleeper trains were sold out until next week. I could have flown, but in the end the cost of my trip would have been a quarter of what I have budgeted for my travel during the summer, so I decided to postpone my Shanghai excursion. Instead, I will travel to Dalian which is north of Yantai. Dalian is supposed to be the Hong Kong of the north and is Boston's sister city. I will go by either hover craft or steamer. The hover craft are a lot faster and the steamers have a tendency to sink (see prior emails). So, I think that I will take the hover craft. Plus it is 6 hours faster.

However, today Jason and I discovered that we were supposed to teach today and tomorrow. None of the teachers or the administration had told us, as is often the case. Too often have I gone to teach a class to find that it has been moved or the time changed. The school administration can often be very frustrating and I need a vacation. :)

Have a great Labor Day!

Jeff



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