

000503 The bad and the good

I have had a really rough time for the past two weeks and I fear that it is in part my own fault. I have allowed myself to be so wrapped up in my teaching and tutoring that I have not taken the time that I need to reflect or to slow myself down from the craziness of the outside. I know that one of the techniques that I can use to cope is to give myself downtime in my room, but I have not been doing this which has been causing the stress to build up. The angst has probably been apparent in my past emails which I suspect were a little jaded.

During my stay in China I have had the privilege of meeting a lot of really neat people. The kindness of strangers has helped me tremendously during my travels. So many people here in Yantai have been warm hearted to me whether it be teachers, students or people in the market. I have had some tremendous experiences so far, which was what I have been hoping to have.

I am so grateful for the good experiences because some of what I experience just simply wears me down. I have mentioned some of these in my past emails. The hard experiences include:

- people incessantly staring at me
- walking down the street and having dozens of people yell "hello" and then laugh because I am a foreigner
- always being the center of attention which can be good and bad
- people spitting everywhere
- xenophobe
- racism against minorities, especially against blacks
- a belief that if something is on TV, then it must be true.
- the pollution and the lack of respect for the environment. For example, when we were done eating squid on a stick in Qingdao, the vendor took our scraps and threw them onto the beach. There was not even a moment of hesitation. That is just where it goes. Or, on the Ferry from Dalian or on bus rides. Trash goes out the window.
- stereotypes about people from the US
- men and kids go to the bathroom on the street
- people here do not form lines, but instead push each other on their way to the front
- TV's must be listened to at full volume

Let me reiterate, however that there have been so many awesome people here. I need to be sure to take better care of my own state of well being so that I do not get so preoccupied by the bad and so I can concentrate on the good.

Now that I am done venting, I want to share some of the good experiences that I have had as of late.

Call me Ishmael

During my first week of teaching, I gave almost all of my students English names. Now a student in one of my Junior 3 classes decided to turn the tables on me and to give me a Chinese name. The name that I have been given is Li Ji Fu. I was also given a letter to explain the reason behind the name. It took the student three study periods to write because some of the grammar and vocabulary were tricky. The student wrote:

"Long ago there was a dynasty in China. Its name was Tang (618-907). The dynasty is very famous in Chinese history. During that dynasty, Chinese economy was unprecedented flourishing. Marco Polo had been to China at that dynasty. Especially the emperor's surname is Li. Now do you know why I want to give you the surname Li?"

Ok, lets talk about your name Ji Fu. I know your own name is Jeff (It's really great!) According to the pronunciation to translating it is called Ji Fu.

In Chinese, Surname + name = all name; so your name is Li Ji Fu. If you can grasp Chinese very well, you will know that this name is very great in Chinese because Ji means lucky and happiness. Fu means the male sex. All in all, these mean a man is very lucky. Another important cause is when somebody calls you, he (she) will be very happy."

mantou

I have been befriended by a woman in the market by my school who sells steamed bread (mantou) and noodles. I met her one day about a month and a half ago when I was buying vegetables from the stand next to hers. She came over to help me with my purchases because it turned out that she spoke fluent English. I now visit her stand every time that I walk past to chat for a few minutes and I make a point of buying my vegetables from her neighboring stand. I am not quite sure why she is selling mantou if she can speak fluent English. However, she has been very kind to me. I stopped by her stand on my way to Qingdao to say goodbye and she insisted that I take a gift of some steamed bread with me. I failed to stop by before I left for Taishan and she got so worried that she had not seen me in a week that she called my school to make sure that I was not ill. So, before I left for Dalian, I made sure that I told her that I was leaving town for some time. She nodded in approval and then told me to follow her as she got out from her stand and went down the market alley. She went to other stands and insisted on buying me bananas and a watermelon to eat on my travels. I am not quite sure of the thought process behind the watermelon, but it was extremely kind of her to do that for me.

fast boat

I took off for Dalian on Tuesday morning. I arrived at the ferry station at 6:30 in hopes of buying a ticket for the 8:30 fast boat, but it was sold out. Actually it worked out that I took the 10:00 fast boat because I met a family who were sitting behind me. Actually, I wound up

sitting in an empty row which was a little annoying at first because people who wanted to speak English quickly took the seats next to me. However, the man behind me was very nice and although he wanted to practice his English, he was not annoying or overbearing. He also had a daughter of about 6 who was very cute and could also speak some English words. She gave me her ice cream and she loved my pocket Chinese/English dictionary.

Her father became very distressed when he discovered that I did not have a hotel reservation in Dalian. My game plan was to wander around to the different hotels listed in my guide book and to haggle on the price. However, I was to learn that this is not really possible during a long holiday in China. The man was so distressed that he insisted that I go with him from the boat to meet his friend who had booked him and his family and friends who he was traveling into a hotel. It actually was really nice because we were met at the station by his friend who had a minivan. We went to the hotel where I discovered that they only had a suite left. They gave me the preferred price thanks to my Chinese friends, but at Y430 it was still way above my budget. I thanked them profusely and then headed out into the city in search of a place to stay.

Dalian

Dalian is a beautiful city with a visionary mayor. From what I have been told, he abandoned the usual Chinese approach of allowing heavy industry in the downtown area and opted for green spaces instead of smokestacks. The result was a city that has clean air, lots of green spaces and higher property values. The bus fleet is modern and to protect the air, some of the busses run on natural gas. It was nice to be able to breathe through my mouth without feeling grit in my teeth as I wandered from hotel to hotel. The first hotel that I went to was full, but the helpful clerk called around for me and found me a good deal at another hotel. But, being determined to be a true backpacker, I had to check out the hostels and other cheap hotels (all full) before I went back to the midrange that he suggested. It actually turned out to be a great hotel for the cost.

I spent the rest of the day wandering around the city and checking out the parks. I wandered into Zhongwen Square around 8 to find hundreds of people hanging out. The Square (actually a circle) is beautiful with white, stone walkways emanating from the center of a circle of green, lush grass. There were trees throughout the square which was illuminated by arrays of lights that themselves looked like trees. The lights lit the warm, breezy air. The square is fronted by classical style buildings that are themselves lit with lights. The end result is a beautiful, tastefully done Square that people enjoy hanging out in. People were all about strolling, playing badminton, playing hackysack, rollerblading or just sitting. It was such a delightful sight and I sat for quite a while watching and journaling.

In the morning I awoke early and went to the ferry station to book my ticket home. I wanted to take the 11PM slow boat back to Yantai which would give me all day to explore Dalian's beaches. However the tickets were all sold out. I guess that the ticket woman thought that I would much rather take a 10AM fast boat than the 1:30 PM slow boat so she gave me that

ticket before I realized. Here let me say that the woman at the information booth was awesome. She worked with me as I spoke in Chinese rather than telling me that she did not understand me some info booth people have done. She helped me many times during the day and I was going to see her again when a woman asked me in English if I needed help. In a nutshell, she explained that most of the tickets were sold and that the fast boat was my best bet. I left the station disappointed that my stay would be so much shorter than expected, but happy with the kindness of strangers. I toured around for the next few hours before heading back to the ferry and the awaiting mayhem.

I arrived to find that my boat was not on the electronic display board. I went to another info booth in another building where the boats left from and the woman pointed to a long line. But, it was 9:40 and my boat left in 20 minutes! I asked a security man and then other people and they all pointed at the line. Not enough time! I then asked a security man who cut into line and went to the window for me. He wrote on my ticket "stop". Stop? What does that mean? I was so frazzled by my inability to speak fluent Chinese and I was desperate for an English speaker, but none presented themselves. Finally, I rushed over to the original info woman. Surely she would help me get on my boat that leaves in 5 minutes! I found her and she called a friend over. Her friend took me by the arm to the ticket window and she bought for me a ticket for the 1:30 slow boat from a woman in line. Weisheme chuan buqu (why does the boat not go?) I asked. She made gestures that indicated the wind. Oh. The teachers at my school had told me that I should not take the fast boat if there were wind. I thought that they were being wimps about boats and I did not understand that the fast boat did not run if there were wind. The helpful friend showed me where to be at 1PM. I thanked her profusely and left the station to explore some more of Dalian.

slow boat

I explored the coast a little before returning to the ferry at 1. For a while I got nervous when the helpful woman did not appear. However, she finally did and made sure that I got on the correct bus to the ferry. I had in my possession a hard class ticket which fortunately for Y10 more had been upgraded to a bed. The ticket itself was Y90 rather than the Y170 for the fast boat. The fast boat took 3 hours and everyone had comfortable seats. The slow boat took about 7 hours and left when all of the freight was loaded into the bowls of the ship, not when the passengers were on board. I am so thankful that I had a bed to sit on because those that had not spent the extra Y10 sat or slept on blankets or boxes spread on the floor. I was in a room with maybe 12 people per side. On my side were several men who passed the time playing cards.

I must admit that I was really nervous getting on the boat. It was not the "safe" boat that the teachers had insisted on. However, once I was on board and saw that I was not locked below deck, but rather was allowed to roam outside on three levels, I was reassured that if the boat sank at least I could get out. I hung out on deck for the first 45 minutes and bantered with the crowd that gathered around me, or at least tried to. I was the only foreigner on board and the novelty. I spent the rest of the trip, mostly reading on my bunk or writing to pass the time. The trip was a long one, but it was what I expected and it actually kind of fun to go that way.

In all, the trip was very fast, but I had a great time in Dalian.

Take care,

Jeff

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