

## 000518 Meetings and Singing

### Conference

This past weekend I attended a teacher's conference in Jinan, the provincial capital. I was originally torn about whether or not to attend, because the trip would be self-financed and I am trying to save my money for my travels during the summer. But, in the end I opted to go for a few reasons. I wanted to learn more about teaching so that I could help my kids more (that is why I am here after all). I also wanted to go so that I could share my experiences with the other teachers at the school. Finally, I wanted to go to prove to myself that I could make the trip. I would have to find the bus to Jinan, ride on it for 5 1/2 hours, arrive in a strange city late at night with no contacts, haggle with the taxi drivers once I found one that knew where the hotel that I wanted was and finally, find my friends.

I caught a 5:45PM bus so that I could teach my Thursday classes and my tutee. I opted for the more expensive, but faster bus because it had a definite time of departure, rather than just going when it was full. It turned out to be a bus made by Volvo and similar in size to a Greyhound bus. It was awesome. There were only six other passengers so I could spread out. We even had a stewardess who brought me water and little snacks. The bus even had a VCD player and a bathroom. We arrived in Jinan around 11PM, too late I suspected to get a cab to go by the meter. I met some cabbies as soon as I stepped off of the bus and asked them if they knew my hotel. They did not know it. Fortunately, the papers that I had read that the hotel was close to a university which the cabbies did know. The haggling went quickly (there were only two cabbies who knew the university) and I was off. Fortunately, the prior conversations did not require a large vocabulary on my part, so my driver thought that I knew a lot more Chinese than I did. He kept trying to ask me things, but I had no clue what he was saying. After a lengthy search by my driver, we finally found my hotel and I found my friends and checked in successfully after a carefully scrutinization of every aspect of my documents by the hotel staff.

The conference itself was called "The Chinese and Foreign Teachers Symposium on English Instruction in China." It was sponsored by the Shandong Teacher's Association, Provincial Association for International Exchange, Amity Foundation, World Teach and China Teach. It was attended by perhaps one hundred people from all around the Shandong Province. Maybe 1/3 of the attendees were foreigners, mostly from the US. The conference was conducted in English and the English of the Chinese teachers was excellent. Most of the attendees were from universities or middle schools. The conference was by invitation and I am not sure which schools were invited or why. There were a lot of teachers present from the Shandong Teachers University (STU). There were also a lot of people from all over the province who are part of the Amity Foundation. Amity is a religious organization which draws on people from several religions to teach in China for two years. I do not know if the purpose is service work or missionary work. It is common in China for religious organizations to send English teachers with the goal of missionary work on the side. Outright mission work is illegal in China, especially so for unrecognized and therefore illegal religions (like Catholics who are loyal to the Vatican.)

It was really interesting to meet so many other teachers who wanted to talk and to share their experiences. I was surprised by how many older Americans are currently teaching in China. Many are husband and wife teams who had taught in the US and then had decided to do something different once they retired. One very interesting couple had lived in Hong Kong in 1950 and had seen the birth of communist China. Now they are back to experience China again for a few years. All of these people had very good things to share and their experiences were interesting to hear.

We also ran into some other teachers from around Yantai. This is always interesting, but sometimes tiresome because they often have their own agenda in meeting foreign teachers: to get us to teach at their schools on weekends. However, I decided long ago to decline these numerous invitations no matter how generous because I often feel that I am spread too thin as it is with teaching and tutoring during the week. I would much rather spend time hanging out with my Chinese and foreign friends than to hang out with people whose only interest in me is that I speak English.

The conference was a two day meeting. The first day started with the attendees observing two English classes at a local middle school. The school was connected with the STU and serves as a teaching lab for the university. The lecture hall that we observed in was beautiful; more like a modern lecture hall in a US university than at a middle school. The afternoon session included speeches by several individuals including representatives from the sponsors of the conference. The next day started with small group discussions and then a general assembly in the afternoon. There of course were banquets each night.

Some of the main ideas that were presented in the general and small group sessions included:

- in the instruction of ESL, most of China is still resistant to changes in the educational methods that must be made. The changes include a change of emphasis from written English to spoken English. Currently, the exams are only testing written English (although this will change) so teachers are teaching only to the exam because there is so little time and so much material to cover. The resistance is due to the difficulty in breaking old ways and due to the fact that blame must be placed for the failure of the old system.
- the students and the teachers work very hard and there is a great desire to learn
- the current education system is based solely on examination skills, not cognitive reasoning. Students are not taught to think individually. This leads to passive and mechanical learning.
- the idea that the students can write, but not speak was a theme that I often hears. This has been so ingrained into people's heads that many of my students who are good speakers do not believe in their abilities.
- many teaching tips such as variety in lesson plans and an active learning environment (student centered).

- class size and motivation. China has a large population, so large classes are here to stay for some time. Therefore, motivation is key because a large, motivated class is better than a small, unmotivated class.
- teachers need more training in group dynamics or in how to relate to students.
- the role of the foreign teacher. Often the foreign teacher is only there for the prestige of the school and the school does not know how to use the teacher once he/she is there. The expectations of the teacher and of the school must be expressed initially.
- discussions about "standard English" There are so many sources of English and the language itself is constantly evolving. Chinese teachers must have confidence in their own abilities rather than to constantly pursue the elusive goal of speaking "standard English".
- and many other ideas

I wound up being a spokesperson to present some of these ideas in the general afternoon session which was fun. The WT group stayed until Sunday morning at which time we boarded the bus back to Yantai.

#### Awards Ceremony

On Thursday, the school held an awards ceremony to reward those students who had done well on the exams held in late April. The ceremony was held in a large auditorium in Yantai and there were two sessions: one for the boarding school and one for the non-boarding school. The ceremony was followed by a talent show of sorts. I can just imagine the planners of the show discussing what they would do:

planner 1: "Let's see, we have a few ethnic dances."

planner 2: "Yes, that's right, those are always popular"

p1: "We have a few students singing and some instruments being played"

p2: "yes, and one act with a dozen keyboards. What else do we need?"

p1: "What about the foreign teachers singing?"

p2: "perfect!"

Jason and I were informed on Wednesday that we were expected to sing. We asked if any other teachers were singing and when we found out that we were the only one's we protested. All that this did was to drag in two other teachers who were more than eager to put on a show, so we were stuck. We spent a few hours on Wednesday practicing for our performance of Auld Lang Sine (very popular here and not just for New Years). The matter got worse and worse as singing the song progressed to solos, duets and even dance steps. However, most of these were conveniently forgotten by Thursday. The performance went off alright, except that Jason and I never had adequate time to look at the Chinese

version of the words, so many were forgotten. But, in the end it was an interesting experience.

## Classes

I taught my J3 classes about the US judicial system this week. They knew very little about it last week when I mentioned lawyers and judges during the career lesson. I also got to learn about their system. In mainland China, there is not a jury and the judge decides the verdict. However, in Hong Kong and Macau, they do have juries. I set up the class for a mock trial to be held in one of the following classes. I think that next week I will write a court drama to be read in class so that the lawyers and witnesses know something about their roles. I hope that it goes well because it could be a very fun class if the students get into it.

My J1 classes this week will have a class about photography. They will learn phrases such as "take a picture" or "develop film". I will also introduce "a picture is worth a thousand words" and have them talk about this. I have several pictures which I will then distribute to have them write a story about them. The pictures are from Newsweek. I am hoping that they will be creative and make up some interesting stories about what they see.

That is it for this week. Thank you for all of the emails that I have been sent. It is very good to hear from you. Don't forget that I can receive voice mail and please keep the emails coming!

Take care,

Jeff

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