

001030 Winds from Siberia

The several days of rain that occurred three weeks ago ushered in a dramatic drop in the temperature. Fall had finally reached Yantai. However, as the temperature drops so too does the air quality in Yantai and throughout China. People use a soft coal to heat their houses. For example, the man at the gate of my school has a stove that uses coal to cook over. The heat from the smoke is routed under his bed before it exits through the smokestack. The hot fumes heat his hard, wooden bed to keep him warm during the frigid weather that approaches. The smoke from the soft coal just kind of oozes out of the smokestacks and hangs in the air. The smell of the smoke is kind of sticky, sulfury and pungent. As the air pollution gets worse, I will no longer be able to see the mountain just beyond the city. However, the city has been very busy tearing up all of the roads in town to install steam pipes. The pipes will provide steam to all of the houses in the city that want to hook up to it for heat. Hopefully, the steam will help to decrease the air pollution

Speaking of air quality, I would give a conservative estimate that about 80% of the males in China smoke cigarettes. My students do not, or at least I do not see them doing it. However, the students in the high school most certainly do. Although a few buildings ban smoking, most places allow it including the Yantai airport. People smoke mostly Chinese brand cigarettes, although I have seen Marlboroughs on sale. However, foreign cigarettes are much more expensive than the domestic ones. Perhaps the admission of China into the WTO will help the cigarette companies in the US to recoup some of the losses that they have faced from the numerous class action suits.

The admission into the WTO will mean big changes for China and not all of them good. The reduction in tariffs on foreign good will wear heavily on the state supported industries. For example, currently if you want to buy an imported car you must pay a 150% tax on the sale price. Yes, 150%. So if you buy a \$40,000 Mercedes, you must pay \$60,000 in taxes. However, that has not stopped some of the newly rich from buying such luxury cars. So, most of the cars that you see on the street are either from Chinese manufacturers or from joint ventures with foreign firms. Volkswagen and General Motors both have plants in China so you see a lot of each on the road. Actually, the car market appears to be dominated by the Volkswagen Group, as every other car is either a VW or an Audi.

The banking industry will be another area that should see some big changes. If you walk down the street in Yantai, or any other city you will see a bank on practically every corner. Most of the tall buildings in Yantai are home to bank offices. The banks include the Bank of China, The China Construction Bank and the China Agricultural Bank. I am not sure just what goes on in the other banks, but the Bank of China is the only one that will exchange currency and only in certain branches. Personal loans are vary rare, so when a family wants to buy a house they must borrow money from friends and relatives. There are ATMs available, but other than in cities like Beijing or Shanghai they are mostly only for domestic money cards. People here complain about the sluggishness, the inefficiency and the lack of customer service in the banks. Just wait until the Bank of American comes in and buys them all up. But seriously, a single bank that offers friendly service and personal loans will be the most popular bank in Yantai.

I believe that China will go through some severe growing pains as the state enterprises are challenged and people are laid off from their jobs. No longer will the factories be able to support people indefinitely. The changes would wreck havoc in the country like the US. However, I believe that the current government in China will be able to force through the changes and to make them work. As I have said before, this is the difference between China and what happened in the former Soviet Union.

Only three more weeks of hobbling around on my crutches. This week I resumed my teaching schedule in full. I had to really fight for that, but I convinced the school that I could still teach. The reason for the hesitation on the part of the teachers was not solely out of concern for my ankle. Exams are coming up this week and they wanted to use my class periods to jam a little more into the students' heads. So, I have would up having three of my seventeen classes this week canceled by such teachers.

But, people at the school have been really nice. One teacher had her students meet me at my building to escort me to my classroom with umbrellas when it rained. I entered the class to find the students looking very pleased with themselves. They had dragged a chair from the teacher's office to the front of the class for me to sit on. They all started with "Sorry to see you like this" followed by a chorus of "sit down please!" I had to explain to them that I had to use the board first, but later I would sit down on the chair. They accepted this proposal.

I have also gotten all sorts of remedies for my ankle from the teachers. One teacher gave me an ointment to rub on the swollen area. The instructions that came with the bottle also suggested that the ointment was a cure for cuts, bruises and bites. Two other teachers pondered the problem for a while and determined that I needed beer and pig bones. They were really funny as they contemplated their options. However, the next morning I got a call from them during which they informed me that they were coming to take care of me. They arrived at my door with a bottle of some alcohol. They were very specific that it must be warmed up first. They also brought a plastic bag full of pig bones suspended in this clear gelatinous mass. Here and there were wisps of white that looked like mashed potatoes, but you knew that they were not. One of the teachers had made it the night before for me. I did not have the heart to toss the really nasty looking concoction, so I scooped some into my wok and heated it for lunch. The mess turned into a clear broth and the result was very delicious. I am going to have to get the recipe from the teacher.

Talk with you later,

Jeff



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