

September 15th, 2004

Robert the Cheese Head

Dear friends and family on the other side of the world,

Things are definitely moving and shaking here, with never a dull or uneventful moment in my life, save for an evening or two of self-imposed solitary confinement in my dorm with a few pirated DVDs to chill out with.

My work schedule has come back into my life in full swing, and although I'm not much for the tediousness of the 9 to 5 routine---thankfully I've been able to avoid this death-trap here in China so far---it is however admittedly nice to have some normalcy back in my life again. My schedule is rather good, but significantly different than that of the last two terms; my past schedules saw me teach only a few classes a day (never more than three, except at the boarding school), which were scattered throughout the week. This time my work days are much more jam-packed (4 classes each day), but I now have Wednesdays and Thursdays off, which will give me the time to do my errands I normally reserve for the weekends (grocery shopping, laundry, etc), as well as hopefully make some much-needed advancements in my Chinese studies. I also teach at the far-away boarding school once a week just like before, although I teach there on Fridays now rather than on Tuesdays as I had previously been assigned to.

Teaching four classes a day---enthusiastically and effectively---can be tough and physically draining for me at times, but since I never work more than two days in a row, it's really not so bad. Tuesdays are particularly taxing however, as I have to teach all four classes in a row in the morning, with only the quick 10 minute interlude in between. If you don't think that's a hectic schedule, try talking loudly and consistently to four classes of 38 children for nearly 3 hours without stopping---and try to do it as enthusiastically as possible in order to keep their attention and interest---and see what that does to your voice and your energy level by the time the clock hits 12:10 pm!¹ It's much harder than you might think it is.

¹This was the official lunch time for students and teachers (12:10-1:30pm), although the teachers' cafeteria was officially open for lunch as of 11:30am.

While this job is not too demanding every once in a while, it's still very challenging at times and can tire you out.

So far---knock on wood---all of my classes have been exceptional, which is a relief as I'm teaching over 400 students this year, and that's a whole lot of potential bad behaviour time bombs if you're not careful enough. At this time they're very well-behaved and have proven to be much easier to discipline and control than last year's bunch, but then again this could just be the early-year jitters and they're testing the water at the moment. . .this can be quite possibly even truer in regards to my students (compared to Robert's or Manny's), as they are just out of primary school and their new life in a much larger middle school can make them a little nervous and uneasy at the beginning of the school year. Lucky for me however is the fact that I've got a whole year's experience under my belt now, and I can avoid all my past rookie mistakes and cultural and psychological miscalculations that made before. This year I'm also here at the school on-time, and so I'm the first foreign teacher they've had here at the school.

I often thought (and still do) think that part of the reason why I had such an uphill battle with many of my students when I first came to China was due to the fact that I came over two weeks late, and Matthew (who subbed for me until I arrived) probably didn't know how to let go of his very dry reserve and try to be a bit more approachable with the kids. The students most likely walked all over him and gave him a hard time, as Matthew hated my Junior One students and was more than happy to get the hell out of there once I came into the scene. Of course I had hastily been given the ball that he dropped, and it took some hard work to get everything under my control. This time I'm well-prepared with a concrete year's curriculum that I've made by myself over the past year, and I've also constructed a simple and clear code of conduct that I've printed out for each student, which I've also taken the time to explain to them to make sure that they understood how they must behave in my class not only to learn more effectively from me, but also in order for them to have more fun and spend less time getting disciplined. Robert and I worked together on making a general set of rules (which we later personalized into our own codes), and so far both of us have reached a very considerable amount of success as a result. If only we had thought of something like this a year ago when we were rookies!

At the boarding school in particular, things have been very successful, and some rather funny things have happened too. In one class, on the first day, I got a huge round of applause and wows from the awestruck students the very moment I entered the classroom. I was caught off-guard by this reaction from my new students, and I couldn't help but laugh at the situation. In another class, once I got in, I got swamped like a rock star from nearly all my new female students, who relentlessly bombarded me with questions ranging from what are my favourite dishes and kinds of music to whether or not I find Chinese girls prettier than Western girls. At both schools, most of my former students greeted me with a hero's welcome, which pleased me immensely. I was a little worried that these children---my first ever students and therefore my most important to my memories---had already forgotten about me or would greet my return with indifference. Luckily, this was not the case. Several of my alumni had asked me if I were going to teach them again this year, and many of them were unfortunately quite visibly disappointed when I told them that I wasn't going to be their teacher again this year. Of course, kids are fickle and have short attention spans, and I'm more than certain that once they get to know Robert and Manny², they'll be just fine.

Robert had a small string of bad luck this past week, with one incident being completely my fault as well. Robert broke his bed's box springs just as I had back in June, although to add insult to injury in his case, he was sharing an intimate moment with his girlfriend Julie when it broke. . .if you get my drift. He also had a bug problem at one point, but with my help we seem to have remedied this problem so far, or so we hope. His ceiling lights burnt out and he quite literally got left in the dark for an entire evening, but this was his own fault as he was too lazy to do something about it. Our ceiling lights have three bulbs, and rather than ask the handyman to get his tall ladder and replace the bulb as soon as one of them gets burnt out, the guy waits for all three of them to burn out before he finally realizes

² The kids at the boarding school always gave Manny an exceptionally hard time from the very moment the school year began, and he always dreaded going there every Tuesday. Most of Robert's Junior Two students were my alumni from last year and for the most part he got along reasonably well with them, although interestingly enough, he had very little trouble teaching my old *bastard class*, yet two of my better classes gave him the most grief instead!

that he needs to get off his ass and ask to get them replaced. The handyman has a tall ladder to do the job and it only takes him 5 minutes to do it, so it really doesn't trouble him at all and the school requires him to maintain our apartments anyways, so he's just doing his job. There's no point in just waiting it out until you get stranded in the dark!

In spite of all this bad mojo happening to Robert, I must however assume full responsibility for a particularly bad incident that occurred to him. Last week he had asked me to give him a haircut with my electric razor, which I had no qualms with doing as I've cut his hair over a dozen times in the past, normally around the same time that I cut my own hair every month or so. He normally asks for a #2 with a #1 on the sideburns, which is simple to do and doesn't take much time. The problem was that my shaver wouldn't cut his hair this time. . .he had let his hair grow over the summer and it was too long to cut with a #2. While on the top of his head this was a negligible fact as his hair is thinning out (and almost balding), on the back of his head it was rather thick, and the shaver would just stop and die as soon as I applied it to his head.

I would have to use scissors to trim his hair before using the razor. You can get where I'm going here, right?

I had already cut hair with scissors before but not often, and I thought this was no big deal and not difficult at all, although of course some of my aunts back home would tell me I'm wrong, and rightly so. I just took a few random snips of his locks here and there, not paying attention to the length, as I thought it wouldn't matter since I'd be going over with the razor afterwards to even it all out anyways. It didn't occur to me that since I wasn't giving him a #1 or a 0 (which would cut his hair very short), I would have to be careful of the length I cut with the scissors, as it might not even out with the razor. Once I passed the razor everything looked fine, and although I told him to wash his hair first so he can get all the loose hair out to see how it really looks, he just shrugged it off and went off to do his own business that afternoon.

The next morning, however, was a different story.

It might have been avoided if I had just kept my mouth shut, but it was better (and funnier) if he had heard it from me rather than someone else. We were walking down the fire escape from our balcony to get to the cafeteria for lunch when I suddenly noticed that he had some small bald patches on the back of his head, like funky crop circles. It didn't even occur to me that it could have been because of me, so I said *"Hey Rob, do you know you have these little spots on the back of your head?"* He looked at me with a strange look on his face, not sure if I were joking or not.

"What kind of spots?" he nervously replied.

I explained to him he had a flurry of little bald patches on the back of his skull, and that I had never seen them on him before. We then took a little pause to think about why he had them on his head, but then his face lit up in a half-amused, half-angry way, and said *"YEW BAHSTUD, IT'S BAYCUZ O' YOW FUCKING SIZZUHZ!"*

He then raced to his bathroom to check it out in the mirror, let out a shocked yelp like a dog would if you accidentally stepped on its tail, and yelled *"YEW BLOODAY FUCKING BAHSTUD!"*

And then we laughed our asses off until our faces exploded into shades of red. Manny passed by our rooms on his way to the cafeteria and asked us what was going on, and when we showed him what happened he nearly fainted from laughing so hard. Manny and I then had a few jokes at his expense, calling him "cheese head" and "spot". I offered to give him a #1 or a 0 to fix his little problem and he was willing to go through with it, but he and I both remembered how Julie had explicitly forbidden him from shaving his head *"like Eric and Sameer"*.

So now Robert still has the Swiss cheese head in the back, although now that it's been a week it doesn't look so bad anymore. I took a picture of his head right after lunch on that very day too. I'll be sure to send that home once I get it developed!³

³ The picture was taken too close and looked too blurry once it was developed, so I threw it away.

I also had the fortune to go out on a special trip last week to Henan Province in central China, roughly eight hours by train south of Beijing. Henan, which means "south [of the] river" in Mandarin, is basically the geographical opposite of Hebei province, meaning "north [of the] river". The river which is referred to is *Huang He*, the famous Yellow River. The Yellow River, along with the *Chang Jiang* (Yangzi⁴) River, is as culturally sacred to the Chinese as the Volga is to the Russians or the Nile to the Egyptians. In fact, the Yellow River (and Henan) in particular is known to the Chinese as the birthplace of the entire Chinese civilization itself. . .most archaeologists are led to believe, based on very strong evidence, that the oldest ever Chinese villages and settlements were created near the Yellow River, specifically in areas within Henan. The Yellow River is also nicknamed "*China's Sorrow*", due to its vast size, depth, and propensity to flood, which has claimed countless lives and destroyed countless homes for most likely as long as the Chinese have been living near it. Henan is therefore one of China's most ancient provinces (if not *the* oldest one), and many of its cities, such as Kaifeng and Anyang, are quite literally thousands of years old. Also historically unique to Henan province is the famous town of Shaolin Si, the birthplace of *Gongfu*. Henan is also one of China's smallest provinces in geographical size, but it's nonetheless the densest of them all, with over 90 million people squeezed into a province roughly the size of Newfoundland.

I went to Henan on a business trip of sorts, after Ms. He asked me to go there and judge an English competition at a school in Shang Qiu, a small town south of the Yellow River and near the neighboring province of Shandong. Ms. He has a friend who works for some kind of regional school council or something of the like, and this woman was on her way to a business trip to this school and she asked Ms. He if a foreign teacher could join her and judge a competition. Ms. He said she would look into it, and she personally asked me first if I wanted to go, as she knew I wanted to travel around more, and more importantly, my schedule fit perfectly with this trip. Ms. He didn't know much about the details⁵, her own understanding of it she admitted was rather vague. . .all she really knew was that I'd be doing two hours' work judging kids' English and be paid 500 kuai for my troubles, plus my

⁴ *Yangtze* in Wade-Giles transliteration

⁵ I gave her the benefit of the doubt as I wrote this entry, but afterwards I suspected she knew much more than she had initially told me.

train fare would be paid and the school where I would be doing my judging will provide me transportation and meals, and also take me out for some brief sight-seeing before taking me back to the train station. I'd be leaving Beijing on Tuesday night for the overnight train along with Ms. He's friend, and be back in town by Thursday morning.

500 kuai for 2 hours' work, plus the chance to travel somewhere and have my transportation and meals covered? How could resist such an offer, even if it were so vague?

Of course this is China and I'm a foreigner working as a teacher, and I should have been a bit more mindful that I could have just been conned into some kind of crappy scam by a hick school in backwoods China with some moderately good connections, hoping to get a white guy's picture in one of their classrooms to attract an army of new school attendees next year. Normally my "Bullshit *Guanxi* Scam" spidey-sense would detect something like this quite quickly now that I've been living here for a year, but the lure of traveling off the beaten path was too good for me to pass up. Furthermore, Ms. He had also personally asked me to go as a favour, and knowing full well that "Chinese Bullshit *Guanxi*" can also work to a foreigner's advantage, I also agreed so I could stay in Ms. He's good graces, which might come in handy in the future. In any case, she went out of her way to take me to the hospital last June, so I owed her a favour anyways.

I met Ms. He's associate of sorts at the Beijing West Train Station, where I had already been once before, on my trip to Xi'an. When I first encountered her we spoke in Chinese, but later on in the evening as we waited for our train I asked her in English if we were taking a hard-sleeper or a soft-sleeper train to Shang Qiu. . .she replied with a blank stare on her face, completely puzzled by what I had just said. Only then did I realize that she doesn't speak a word of English, and that I would have to be talking to her in Chinese throughout the entire trip.

I let out a slight grimace on my face and groaned a faint "*shit*" when she wasn't looking, as I realized that this trip was going to be more difficult than I thought it would be. Ms. He never told me that this woman only spoke Chinese. . .I wondered if she even knew that herself! Although my Chinese is far from good, it's not atrocious either. I did manage to get my point across most of the time, thanks to a

bit of pantomime in some instances. Unlike the trip to Xi'an, I would be taking a soft sleeper this time, which made a whole world of difference.

Ms. He's associate and I shared a compartment with two men in their forties who were on their way to east China's Anhui Province⁶, and whom I later learned also spoke some moderately good English. Both of them work at Beijing's Agricultural Institute, one being a professor and the other a lab researcher. In fact, the professor himself had been to Vancouver one time and has a brother who lives in Toronto. Both men were very eager to practice their English with me, as they hadn't studied it since high school and didn't know any Westerners on a personal basis. They were very friendly and so of course I didn't mind helping them practice, even if it meant that I'd lose an hour or two of sleep because of it.

We arrived at the Shang Qiu train station at approximately 4 in the morning, and the station itself was placed right on the edge of town, near a vast field. It was pitch black outside with almost no source of light to guide us through the darkness, and just about everyone who got off at Shang Qiu were peasants, lugging behind them large dirty bags filled to the brim with their stuff, some with a few shovels and hoes attached to their sacks. Henan is a very old province, but like most of rural China it is noticeably underdeveloped, and most rural Chinese live much more basic lives and rely on their own agricultural production for sustenance. I don't even need to tell you what kind of reaction I got, being a burly Westerner in a small Chinese town's train station in the wee hours of the morning. Most of the peasants meekly stared at me with interest and smiled (some saying "*hello*"), while others looked at me with concern, as if they thought I might have inadvertently taken a wrong turn and gotten off a few stops short of Shanghai, stranding myself in the middle of Nowheresville, China.

My presence definitely puzzled them---and maybe even scared them---but in all my travels in rural China I have yet to meet any kind of hostility nor resentment, unlike what occasionally happens to me in Beijing. Their curiosity is much more innocent and comprehensible, and hence I didn't find their staring as invasive as I would have in normal circumstances. The taxis and merchants outside the station's

⁶ A poor province in the east along the Yangtze River. This is also Fang Xia's native province.

gate of course had dollar signs in their eyes when they saw me come out. . . even in pitch darkness these people can spot a Westerner from a mile away.

In general Chinese merchants and taxis are aggressively persistent with everyone, but with Westerners it's ten times worse because they harbour this belief that all Westerners are millionaires, and most importantly, suckers who aren't aware of real prices in China and don't know how to bargain for anything. It's one of my biggest annoyances in my daily life in China, if not the biggest itself. I got swamped by vendors and taxis, and at first I tried to be polite and told them that I'm not interested. Most of them followed me anyways and continued to persist, until finally I lost my patience and let them have it. One guy who followed me and offered me a ridiculously jacked-up ride to wherever I was going got the brunt of my anger, and I didn't pull any punches in showing my disdain for his pestering:

"Wo zhu zai Beijing. Wo bu shi ben dan. Qu ni de!"⁷

This seems rude to many Chinese, but this guy had it coming and I didn't deserve to be harassed by this asshole. Luckily by then, the drivers of the school came by with their van and spotted us (how easy it must have been for them to find me!) and took us to our hotel, where we would be staying until 9 when they would pick us up again.

It was very interesting to see the streets of a small Chinese city from above and in the wee hours of the morning, as there was virtually no human and motor traffic, and the city was almost completely devoid of neon lights. . .which I had never before seen in this country. Every other Chinese city I've been to were apocalyptically noisy messes of sprawling human traffic and awash with tacky fluorescent nightscapes, but this was the exception and a welcome change. I managed to doze off, but I was suddenly awakened shortly after 5am.

I was surprised by a large bang, and I correctly assumed that there was a car accident. I looked out my window, and surely enough, a taxi had clipped a three-wheeler that was lugging a large trailer full of stuff behind it, at the large intersection only a stone's throw away from my hotel room. The two drivers got

⁷ *I live in Beijing. I'm not a fool. Fuck off!*

out of their cars and immediately started to yell at each other at the top of their lungs. While I have seen Chinese people get angry quite a few times, their anger is most often subdued, as loud vocal displays of anger are seen as embarrassing to yourself and hence make you “*Lose Face*”. . .this kind of behavior is a sign of a lack of manners and the inability to resolve problems, akin to a child having a tantrum in public. These guys got so angry I thought they would begin to slug each other at any moment. A small crowd began to gather around them to watch the show (loud displays of angers, like accidents, always attract crowds of curious onlookers here, and they never intervene in these situations), and shortly afterwards a passing police squad car stopped by to see what was going on. The police officers calmly separated both men, and from what I could see from my 6th floor window, I believe they wrote a report of each guy’s side of the story, and then sent both of them on their way. I took a few pictures of this whole incident with my new camera, but even with my zoom lens I don’t know if I really got a good shot of everything⁸. I then tried to get to bed, but soon enough it was 6am and the streets were flooded with thousands of noisy-as-hell buses, cars, motorcycles, and trucks honking their horns, and street vendors yelling at the top of their lungs with megaphones, repeating the same messages *ad nauseum*.

Ahhhh, the simple tranquilities of China.

I then left the hotel at around 9am and made my way towards the school, which was only a few blocks away. Although the town of Shang Qiu is very small by Chinese standards⁹, the school itself is absolutely COLOSSAL. How big? Think about a school the size a small college campus, with over 4000 students and 1000 teachers, and most likely hundreds of cooks, administrators, and other staff.

“*This is a primary school?*” I thought to myself, wondering if Ms. He was wrong about that detail as well.

I was really taken aback. This school was gigantic, with one of the campus buildings stacked at a height of 4 floors, jam-packed with as many classrooms as

⁸ The photos were successfully developed, yet the images were much too dark to discern anything in them.

⁹ Less than 800 000 people, which is considered tiny in this country.

possible. I had initially thought that maybe this was a boarding school, but then I realized that since this is a small town, it's possible that there are only maybe a few schools in this entire town, and so they're this big on purpose in order to accommodate all the students. It's actually a quite lovely school, with pastel-coloured buildings and soft children's music playing on the speakers during class intermissions. I was taken to the school's large auditorium, where I assumed I would be judging this alleged competition, but instead I was asked to sit at the long desk on stage, where a seat also had my name written on the desk. I sat beside the principal, headmaster, Ms. He's associate, and a few other people I didn't know. I then had to endure a few melodramatic speeches in Chinese, a badly-recited speech in English by one of the teachers, and then a few plaques were handed out to some exceptional students. . .or at least that's what I was able to make out, as no one made the effort to translate for me---or at least speak with me directly---and I had to completely rely on my Chinese skills to try to understand what was happening. No one bothered to let me know what was going on, of course. All they needed was my white face in front of a camera. When they were handing out the plaques, they asked me to pose with the children in a few photos, and then suddenly in my mind it dawned on me like I had just discovered a murderer's modus operandi.

AHA!! Here's the bullshit Guanxi in action, just as I had thought. They needed a token Westerner in some photos so they can entice parents to sign their kids to this school, which would boost attendance and earn them a bigger money grant from the government. I let out a soft sigh, knowing full well that other things would soon go wrong because I knew I was going to be used as a pawn, and the chances were good that something else would happen unexpectedly and cause me even more grief.

Sure enough, that's what happened, of course.

After the very lengthy photo session I was told I'd be attending some of the classes, and I said that would be no problem. What choice did I have anyways? It's not like I was able to refuse. The thing was, once I entered the first classroom the English teacher came to greet me, and then told me (in pitiful English) that she was excited to watch me *teach* the children today.

Wait a minute. Did she just say *teach* these kids? *Shit*. . .

Speechless from shock I looked at Ms. He's associate, not knowing what to do or say, and she then looked at me as if to say "*what are you waiting for?*", like I already knew I would be teaching these kids. I tried to tell her softly in Chinese that I wasn't told I'd be teaching, but she couldn't understand a thing I was telling her---or perhaps just pretended not to understand what I was saying---so I took a deep breath and took charge of the situation, not knowing how the hell I was going to get myself out of this mess they put me in.

The big problem was that these children were all six years of age or even younger, and barely spoke any English at all. I hadn't the foggiest idea as to how much English they already knew. Worst of all, I had no knowledge that I was going to be teaching that day, and I had zero preparation. I literally had to improvise my entire lesson. To add insult to injury, a dozen teachers or so, plus cameramen and sound guys, came in to watch me and tape me.

*Eric Samson, you've just been **Punk'd!***

I had wished with all my heart that someone would soon jump in my class and tell me it was all just a prank, but that wasn't going to happen. I had to fix all this on my own. I kept my cool and improvised a lesson for the kids, all of whom looked slightly nervous yet full of unblinking curiosity, as they had most likely never seen a Westerner before. I talked very slowly with them, taught them a few simple sentences, and taught them different colours and how to count. I also drew a happy face on the chalkboard and showed them the different parts of the face. Miraculously, the kids already knew just about everything I had taught them, and all I simply had to do was correct their pronunciation. I thought that the teachers in the background would realize that I was pulling this out of my ass, yet they attentively watched me in complete awe and admiration at my teaching as if I were the newest incarnation of the Buddha.

My "class" didn't end soon enough, and unfortunately for me I later learned that I had to repeat this twice more later that same day. Between classes, I got quite literally **MOBBED** by hundreds of kids under 12, all of them yelling out "*hello!*"

and "*waiguo ren!*"¹⁰ at the top of their lungs, grabbing my arms to give them a high-five or a handshake. Some kids even hugged me at the knees, poked me and prodded me like I were a monkey, and pulled on the hairs on my forearms, astonished at the sight of my body hair. Many of them followed me everywhere I went, watching me carefully as if I were an animal that escaped from the zoo and landed in the middle of their school in search of food. Even from high atop the balconies above where I was standing, all eyes were on me, a Westerner caught in the middle of a swarm of rowdy kids. I was surrounded by hundreds of smiles and unending laughter, all because I was the first Westerner to ever set foot in this school. It was just as touching and as fascinating as it was somewhat disturbing. . .this was probably the only time in my life that I've ever felt nervous in the presence of so many children. I took a few pictures of the kids, who were more than happy to pose with each other for me. Of all the photos I've taken in China, these are among my absolute favourites.

At lunch time I was taken to the school's massive teachers' cafeteria, where we ate loads of *baozi*¹¹ and unfortunately not much else. We ate earlier than the other teachers did since I had a schedule to maintain, and so we ate an early lunch, along with the hundred or so cooks. Most of the cooks were predominantly women under the age of 30 and quite a few were tremendously good-looking too, so you could imagine the attention I got there. They sat only a few tables away from me and my associates, and I could see them whisper and giggle to each other while repeatedly taking quick glances in my direction, acting not much different than my own female students in Beijing. A few of them---obviously the braver ones---came up to me and would ask me (in English or in Chinese) if I liked the food and if I wanted more, after which I would tell them the *baozi* were good and that I was quite full. They would blush and smile, and then go back to their friends and giggle together, just as my students do. The people I was sitting with looked a little annoyed by all this commotion, but they were quite amused nonetheless. The headmaster at one point shook his head side to side and gave me a "*you lucky bastard*" kind of look on his face. I tried not to laugh but I couldn't help myself, and soon enough we were both sharing a good laugh together. The other women

¹⁰ *Foreigner!* (lit. "foreign country person")

¹¹ Palm-sized buns filled with chopped pork, leeks, or plum paste. A northern food staple and a Tianjin specialty.

we were with looked at us with bewildered faces, not understanding our inside joke, which made us laugh even harder. I guess men are pretty much the same all over the world. We are quite simple creatures!

We then went back to my hotel for a three hour break before my last scheduled afternoon class. I took a shower in my dirty roach-infested hotel room and took a small nap. . .or at least I tried to. The afternoon intersection traffic was deafeningly noisy and I couldn't get any rest, no matter how tired I was. At one point all the noise pollution got suddenly drowned out by an even louder noise, so loud was it in fact that it made my windows shake. It began with one large explosion, and then followed with a barrage of rapid ear-splitting smaller ones. It sounded like a bomb had gone off! I prudently looked out my window, and people were screaming and ducking for cover behind cars and mailboxes, and smoke was flying everywhere. The explosions were going off even louder and faster. . .What the hell was going on? Was somebody shooting up the place with a *Kalashnikov*?

Nope. Some asshole accidentally set his huge box of fireworks on fire. Only in China! With the way they handle these things here, it's a huge mystery to me why I don't read everyday how some dipshit blew off his hands in a fireworks accident. . .

After my last afternoon class, the school took me out to the small town's biggest attraction, namely the shallow mouth of the mighty Yellow River. Accompanying us was Meng Hui, a friendly and easygoing English teacher at the school who was only a few years older than myself. Getting to the mouth of the river was quite an adventure in itself, as it was roughly a half-hour away from the school, and really out of the way too. We crisscrossed through countless muddy trails in the rural outskirts of town, full of peasants working off the land. Although there were numerous tractors, I also saw many peasants working the fields with horse plows, and even a few using large bulls to plow through the fields. I also saw what looked like enormous cotton fields and also peanut fields, which seemed to stretch as far as my eyes could see.

Upon our eventual arrival at the mouth of the river we stopped at a nearby dock to get a boat. The small wooden dock was occupied by over a dozen old fishermen, their skins brown and cracked from working in the sun every day for so many

years. There were other peasants hanging by the beach too, barbecuing some of the nearby freshwater fish and having a few beers. I was really far away from any nearby town or city so I got stared at big time, but this didn't bother me at all as I understood their surprised looks. They're not from a big city, so it's not every day they see a Westerner in their midst, if they've ever even seen one before me! If I were a peasant in this tiny and impoverished riverside village, I would definitely be stunned by the presence of a Westerner too!

Some of the old fishermen looked at me with some suspicion at first, but once they saw the flag on my backpack, a few of them proudly exclaimed "*Jianada-ren! Bai Qiu'en!*"¹², and then they were all smiles. I tried to speak Chinese with them, but they had such thick accents I could barely understand anything. The fishermen get locals coming by from time to time for a boat ride, so some of them also offer these rides for a small fee when they don't have many fish to catch. I was just happy to see the Yellow River with my own eyes as I love the scenery of large lakes and rivers, but once Meng Hui told me that we were all going to take a boat ride, I almost jumped. How could I resist taking a peasant's boat on the mother river of the Chinese civilization?

One of the old fisherman showed us his small boat, and then we got on it, with him standing on a platform in the back of the boat. This part of the river is very shallow (roughly 2 meters deep) and full of seaweed, fish, and plants, and so it's impossible to use a motor in these waters. This was even better, as it also kept the river pleasantly quiet. The water was surprisingly clean, although we got swarmed by dragon flies a few times. Other peasant fisherman were all over the river, looking for fish with large nets. When we would get close to these boats, I would yell "*you yu ma?*"¹³, and they would laugh and reply "*mei you*"¹⁴. The school headmaster and Meng Hui and I would look for fish in the water, and the fisherman told us that they tend to come out more in the morning than in the afternoon. Meng Hui would try to practice his English as much as possible with me, and he even called his girlfriend to tell her that he was on the Yellow River with a Westerner, excited

¹²*Canadian! Bethune!*

¹³*Got any fish?*

¹⁴*Don't have any.*

about the time he was spending with me. He asked me to call his girlfriend and talk to her (she didn't believe him), and I happily obliged, which got a few laughs between the both of us as she hung up every time I would call, thinking that someone was playing a prank on her. Meng Hui and I had a good laugh at that one. At one point we encountered a large "island" of pretty lotus flowers, and then we cut right through it with our boat like an icebreaker would in the arctic. It completely blew my mind to be surrounded by hundreds of lotuses on the Yellow River, in a peasant's boat on top of it. How Chinese is that? On the other side of the river was the neighboring province of Shandong, and we also went across to check it out. All the while, the scenery was quiet, peaceful, and beautiful. This was only a 30-minute boat ride or so, but it was one of the greatest times I've ever spent in China, no lie. What I'd give to do the same kind of boat ride, but on the Yangtze River instead!

After the boat ride we headed back to Shang Qiu, and I was treated to (not surprisingly) a big dinner, with many Henan specialties. The food was very good, including some crunchy fried potato balls filled with finely-minced pork as well as some local Henan beer that tasted a little light but very good nonetheless. The school also gave me a present for coming to their town: a large funky red sculpture that was also a miniaturized version of the large funky red sculpture that sits in the center of town. I was of course still angry with how I got screwed by the bullshit Guanxi this morning, but the school was so incredibly nice and treated me with such wonderful hospitality in spite of the region's obviously difficult living standards, I (almost) forgave them completely for everything they've done for me this afternoon. I warmly and sincerely thanked them for all the generosity they've shown me, as I was truly grateful for everything they'd done for me that afternoon. Had they not treated me this way that afternoon, my trip would have been a complete and utter disaster.

After dinner I went back to my hotel room to get all my stuff, and Ms. He's associate told me that she was staying in Henan for a few more days and that I'd be taking the train to Beijing on my own. The driver was going to take me to the train station, and Meng Hui kindly decided to hang around in case I needed his help. I was genuinely touched by this kind gesture, as surely he had better things to do than wait for a train with me. When we got to the station I had more than an hour to wait before my train ride, so the driver and Meng Hui asked me if I wanted to go to

a nearby bar for a beer or two before I leave. Of course I agreed, and we had a few beers and chilled out before getting back to the station. Meng Hui offered to pay the tab, but I wouldn't hear a word of it and eventually he gave in and let me pay. I never would have forgiven myself if I had let him pay, even if it was cheap! We then went back to the station, and Meng Hui and the driver even stayed with me until my train arrived, which was not necessary but very kind of them to do, considering that it was already 10pm and they could have gone home to their families. I traded phone numbers with Meng Hui and the driver, and they told me that I'm always welcome to stay in there place should I ever come back to Shang Qiu. I told Meng Hui to give me a call if he ever comes to Beijing some time. I would certainly be more than happy to return the kindness he had shown me!

I was back in Beijing the next morning at a quarter to six and I took a taxi home from the train station and crashed onto my bed for the rest of the morning. I told Ms. He about the deceitful actions of the school and the impromptu teaching I had to do that could have gone seriously wrong and might have ruined our own school's reputation, and she looked visibly upset and said she would make a complaint to her associate about it¹⁵.

Meanwhile, at the same time, the school also called Ms. He and were singing my praises, and told her they would like to have me again there sometime in the future, in the hopes that I would come to Shang Qiu once a month. I told Ms. He that I don't mind doing these kinds of trips in the future if she asks me again, but I have to be given FULL DETAILS about it. . .no more "assumptions".

All in all, despite the deception I suffered at the beginning of the day, my time in Henan was a terrific experience and I have no regrets. The Yellow River itself was worth everything, and more importantly, the hospitality I was treated to was unforgettably wonderful.

¹⁵ She most likely never did anything about it, as she never raised this issue with me afterwards. . .further fueling my suspicions that she knew about everything all along.

I don't think I'll be coming by to that school again in the future, but then again, never say never¹⁶. Life is full of surprises.

Eric / Sun Yi
Laoshi

¹⁶ I never returned. I declined their offer to teach at their school once a month, and He Yuan never asked me nor any other foreign teacher to go on such a business trip again. Had the Henan school (and Ms. He) been honest with me from the very beginning rather than purposely duping me, I probably would have agreed to their offer.