

Shanghai 2009-4

April 9, 2009

The internet is down again. Grrrrr. Been down for over a day. You don't realize how dependent you are on the internet for staying in touch with the world until you don't have it. More important, I need it to check homework that comes in from the students. Might have to go to the university to use their connection for a while. It appears from the wireless box that it's the cable itself that isn't providing service. Even tried plugging directly into the cable, rather than running it through the wireless connection, but that didn't work either. Oh well. Part of life in China. I'll call the university later and have them call the cable company.

The sinuses have been in terrible shape the last couple days. Don't know if it's the weather front that moved in with the warmer weather or all the smog that it seems to have brought with it. Quickly ran out of sinus pills so I resorted to Dr. Oz' netti pot solution of using a small pot and pouring warm salt water through each nostril to wash out the sinuses. That seems to work best. (Glenn: If you use this apartment sometime soon you might want to wash the white tea pot one extra time before using it.)

Went down to the bakery place yesterday to get a bite for lunch and then ate it in a park that I saw was only two blocks away from it. There was a young guy working there yesterday. The place looks like a family operation so I presume he's a brother of the girl that was learning to count in English. He pointed to something that just came out of the oven to suggest it. I didn't know what it was but tried one with the other item I bought.

Turned out it was really good! Looked like an over-sized Ritz cracker on the top and bottom with about 1 inch of sweet potato or squash between them and sesame seeds on the sides. Seemed more like a main dish than a pastry so after lunch I returned and bought some more to bring home for dinner. Nuked them warm and had them with some celery and ham.

It seems like every Chinese person on the street has a smile, but the nicest people are by far the small shop owners. Whether it's the bakery or fruit stand or restaurant or roadside vendor or barber, they're just all so cheerful and good to do business with. I don't think I've seen anyone frowning on any of my visits to China.

After three weeks of taking daily walks in different directions I start to think that I've seen most of the streets at this end of Shanghai, but then I'll decide to take a side street that I haven't taken before and discover an entirely different world. That's how I discovered the park near the baker yesterday. It particularly caught my attention on the morning walk because the old folks were exercising to blaring rap music instead of the mellow tunes used by every other exercise group in China. (Why is it that rap music is played at maximum volume everywhere in the world?) Also, the local vegetable market had people selling pigeons (yes, Don) along with chickens, eels, snakes, turtles and other delicacies. There's a reason you don't hear or see many birds in China's cities. Sometimes the new streets end up in several unplanned exploratory turns, but that just provides for a little extra exercise and some new adventures.

This morning I crossed a bridge in a neighborhood where I was clearly the only westerner around for at least a week, if not longer, and was accosted by the typical street-side watch seller. “Buy a watch? Rolex. Cheap.” At the Shanghai Museum the girl started at 300 RMB and quickly dropped to 100 RMB for a watch. Today’s side-street woman in the middle of nowhere started at 100, dropped to 2 for 100, then 3 for 100 and finally 4 for 100 RMB. That’s about \$3.50 U.S.D. each, cheaper than replacement batteries. Must be a heck of a markup if some are actually being sold for 300 or even 200 RMB.

I didn’t buy one and kept telling the woman “no” and “bu” (Chinese for no) as she dogged me down the street, then she suddenly got quiet and stuffed everything into her zippered sweatshirt and turned around. I wondered what the magic word was so I’d know it for later, then I looked over my shoulder and saw a motorcycle cop riding by. Her sales English was okay so I mostly wondered why she was banished to some Chinese-only area for selling watches. Must be a good story behind that.

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April 10, 2009

Finally got the internet back. Yea!!! A woman from the university came and worked it out after an hour’s worth of phone conversations with the cable company. Just glad to have it back. A lot of homework to grade on Fridays. Looking like they pretty much all did their own work so far this week.

Started a new book but it’s nor nearly as good as Follett’s. You know it’s a new author when the author’s name is in small print at the bottom of the book rather than at the top of the book in print larger than the title. Also, I know to always be wary of too many testimonials at the front of the book, especially if some of the testimonials are about another book the author wrote. That’s always a sure sign that the book is lacking in quality.

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April 13, 2009

Just returned from Shenzhen. It was a beautiful drive into the city with a huge, glowing full moon slowly rising over the city’s skyline as we drove into the city.

Shenzhen is a relatively new “city” in China. For years it was only a small fishing village, but China decided to make it a major city 15 years ago so now it is one of the fastest growing cities in the world, the second largest port in China and a large manufacturing hub. Many of the items available at WalMart and other stores are manufactured in Shenzhen or the surrounding area. It is also a major research center and home to 20% of China’s PhDs. Shenzhen is just across the border from Hong Kong and a major entry point for many people going through Hong Kong. The city has a rolling terrain, much like southern California and a hot, humid tropical climate.

The city is much more densely populated than Shanghai since it was developed recently and thus has only high rise buildings. Shanghai has miles of high rise dwellings in the newly developed area coming into the city from the airport, and numerous high rise apartments throughout the city, but there are still a few pockets of older buildings of less than 10 stories. That diversity helps give Shanghai its charm.

The high rise buildings in Shenzhen are occupied primarily by young people who come to the city to work in the many factories. They live with several people packed together, sharing each apartment. That's evident driving into town. It takes 45 minutes to get from the airport to the downtown section and another 15 minutes to cover the last 4 blocks on Saturday night because the streets are packed with swarms of young people walking, milling about and going to inexpensive night clubs that seem to be concentrated in the area near the hotel. We're talking tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands of young people clogging the streets and moving slowly, if at all. Not like anything you've ever seen in the U.S., even in Times Square at holiday times. Vehicles just can't move because of all the people on the sidewalks, walkways over the streets and clogging the streets as the pedestrians themselves are too jammed together to move.

Must be great for guys. The woman from the university was telling me yesterday that there are several million more women than young men in the city because the factories tend to hire women more than men. That disparity has also caused many to move back home in recent years as they've been unable to find a mate in the city and a young couple would find it difficult to afford a home there anyway.

I read online that the crime rate is supposedly higher in Shenzhen than other Chinese cities and it appears evident when driving the streets. Many of the buildings have bars on the windows in Shenzhen, several stories up. I asked the woman from the university if that was to keep young children from falling from the balconies and she replied no, it was for security. I suppose with that many young people swarming into the city from rural areas and working for low wages, there is probably a higher propensity for crime.

While I enjoy teaching in Shanghai, classes in Shenzhen are a lot more fun. The class is smaller, with only about 25 students, and the students all have a little tent with their chosen English names in front of them on the tables. It provides for much more interaction and a jocularity with the group (to the extent one can find humor with management accounting). I feel much closer with them.

One of the nicest features of teaching in Shenzhen is that the men's restroom is located at the opposite end of the building from the women's restroom on the 9th floor where the class is located. With so many people packed so closely together, they are much more relaxed about personal matters in China. In Shanghai, the women's restroom is down a short hallway directly past the men's room. They tend to always leave the door to the men's room open for all to see in as they walk past. Even worse, they have huge sliding windows in the restrooms that are left open now that it is starting to warm up and the windows open onto the walkway where students gather as they go to class next door. For an American, there's something about having your female students walk by, smile and say hello while you're standing at the urinal under the

window with your pecker in your hand that makes you feel like you just lost a certain degree of professorial dignity.

I've thought about spending an extra day in Shenzhen on one of my trips to explore, but it just doesn't appear there's much there to see since everything is so new. Factories and high-rise apartment buildings, that's about all there is to see in and near the city. The internet mentions a new theme park that is basically a Disney knock-off, but that's about it. Could go over to Hong Kong but I only have a single entry visa and there is some fear that I could not get back into the country, even though Hong Kong is supposed to technically be part of China. One student offered to take me to the beach if I stayed over, so I had to explain that I live at the beach in Florida and can relax on it every day for my other 10 months of the year.

Just the act of traveling is always an adventure in China.

My flight from Shanghai to Shenzhen was cancelled when I got to the airport Saturday so the guy at the check-in counter directed me to another counter. You have to keep in mind that people don't queue-up in China, they swarm. There was a swarm of people at the counter to change flights so I packed myself up behind someone as close as I could get without getting slapped. I was already to hand the clerk my e-ticket and passport when the guy in front of me finished when two women rushed up behind me and thrust their paperwork over my shoulder and started shouting to the clerk. He handled them first but I had my arm ready over the shoulder of one to thrust my stuff forward when he was finished with them. Two other guys came up on the side and thrust their paperwork in, even before the clerk was done. The clerk took the paperwork from all 3 of us and handled it as they are accustomed to this normal approach in China.

I finally got my new flight and boarding pass (after being passed to two more counters for more processing) and just made it to the gate in time for boarding.

The return flight was uneventful, but then I had to catch a taxi for the drive from the airport to the apartment. You have to keep in mind that in China, like in many places throughout the world, many people become taxi drivers as their first job when coming to the city. They don't necessarily know where they're going during the learning phase.

I think my bright and cheerful taxi driver was one of those, but he had a system . . . a GPS system! After I gave him the card with the apartment address, he pointed to his GPS and smiled at me. I smiled back, pointed at the GPS, then to me and gave him a thumbs up to let him know I had one too. He understood and we became instant friends.

He had to pull away from the curb after I entered the cab at the airport, so as we drove down the road he tried to steer with one hand while simultaneously shifting gears, reading the tiny print on the card with the apartment address, and using a stylus to draw the Chinese characters into the GPS system. After he entered them he looked at me to ask if it was the correct address. I smiled and shrugged. I wouldn't know one Chinese symbol from another.

He punched it in and several choices came up. Assuming he spelled it right, there must be a Linping Road, street, lane, circle, etc. He pointed at the list to ask me which one. Again, I

smiled and shrugged. If I didn't know any symbols for the input, how would I interpret even more symbols for the alternate choices? He cocked his head quizzically, punched the first choice, smiled at me for reassurance and as if to say "Let's try this one," and we were off.

Since we were new friends, he smiled and tried to talk to me while we were driving. I didn't understand a word but smiled back and finally said, "Woh bu dong," which is Chinese for I don't understand. He nodded, turned back to the road for a moment, and then started talking and smiling again. This process went on, repeating itself for several miles. Smiles apparently encourage people to talk in China, whether the other person understands or not. I've found that several times on each trip to China.

The major drawback of GPS systems is that they only guide you to the destination but don't necessarily give you the big picture. That's why I usually check a map online before a trip so I can get the big picture before embarking. I think that factor came into play in our trip because the driver either hadn't come into the city at the north end before, or he automatically assumed that all Americans reside in the southern end of town near the Shanghai Stadium and all the western consulates near the hotel where the Rotary meeting was held. So, he assumed that my street was at the south end of town and he should ignore the recommended turns on the way into the city from the airport.

For whatever reason, the driver decided to ignore the directions to turn off on the way into town. I saw us pass the turns and swear I could hear the GPS saying, "Recalculating. Recalculating," in Chinese. He kept driving his way and entered the city at the south end of town instead of the more direct route displayed by the GPS. The meter kept rolling up cost and I didn't know where he was taking me until I finally recognized some of the buildings and streets from my trips over to the south end of town. Fortunately, the GPS keeps recalculating so it charted new routes for us. We circled way around to the south and then west of the apartment, rather than coming in directly from the east.

As we kept driving, I think he saw from my expression and checking signs that I knew we were lost. He smiled, pointed at the GPS and said a few sentences in Chinese to reassure me. After a while, we came to some streets that I knew from my many walks. I nodded, smiled and gave him the thumbs up. He smiled back and said in his sole English vocabulary, "Sank you, sank you."

Twenty minutes and 50 RMB later than normal, we finally made it to the apartment. I was happy to be home so I gladly paid, gave him the thumbs up and he kept repeating, "sank you, sank you." Part of the joy of being in China is the unforeseen adventure every time you try to travel somewhere.