

Lao Shi: Hubei, Wuchang, May 31st, cloudy.

Saturday, May 31st: I've skipped an afternoon conference session in favor of napping, blogging, and packing. Before I came here, I'd have said, "come to lovely Wuhan" as a nasty joke, but the weather this week has been unusually temperate. At partly cloudy and 22 to 30 degrees C, China's so-called oven is indeed lovely. The trees are a riot of greens, and the air is soft and caressing. In comparison, Shijiazhuang has sandpaper for air. I am not using any allergy meds, and my eyes don't itch down here in Hubei like they did up in Hebei. I've already been invited back to teach next year. My old failure as a night school teacher has been laid to rest. Here's what happened.

Tuesday 27th.

I arrived at the drab university guest house after a 45 minutes cab ride, over the Number 2 bridge, past Walmart and parks, lakes and endless apartment blocks. Yang Ju Feng, one of my two teaching assistants was there to greet me. She insisted on carrying one of my bags up to my room. This seemed ridiculous to me, but I knew that to turn down her offer would be awkward and insulting. For a quick moment I scanned my Spartan room in the Communist-era university guest house. Running water, and air conditioning, yes, but what about Internet? There was an odd looking wall jack that I could not figure out, and with my assistant waiting downstairs, I bolted down to meet her, with the horrifying prospect that for the next several days I'd be a long cab ride from any evening action and bereft even of the Net for entertainment. Yang got us into a cab for the quick ride to North Campus. Her halting shy English improved by the minute as she pointed out dorms and cheap restaurants on the winding street. She told me I was to have over 60 students; I'd envisioned 15 or so. She also said I could use the Net from our classroom if necessary, but I feared that her "yes" could be more of a "beats me, and please don't press me on the subject". For shelter we walked through the tunnel that connects the two campuses, it's a re-purposed military tunnel and it provides excellent shelter. She took me to the petrified forest exhibit and took my picture but declined to be photographed herself. Then she dropped me off for a couple of hours. We'd be having dinner with Hu Jianguo, the other teaching assistant, and Professor Fan Song, my host. I unpacked a little, napped a little, and soon it was time. I went downstairs at 5:55 pm and there they were.

Dinner was fun, but strained. We had a dining room in the University restaurant next to the guest house. In China, eating in groups is the norm, and reminded of a great business book title, "Never Eat Alone". My professor is genuinely concerned that I have a good teaching experience, but his English is about as good as my Chinese. Fortunately, Yang had been poor-mouthing her language skills in order to flatter mine, and she was able to translate key points about the procedures of the class. Otherwise the discussion was almost entirely in Chinese, which felt great even if I did a lot of nodding and grinning. I passed the rest of the evening in my room, having figured out the Net connection. Early to bed, and up as the first gray light pummeled my eyelids, like every other morning here.

Wednesday, May 28th: What if the dream comes true?

My class had over sixty students. On this first day, despite my planning, many of my fears came to pass. I'd salted my lecture with some questions for the class. None got an answer. My classroom was a re-purposed computer lab, so I faced row on row of teenagers, faces hidden by CRT monitors, texting their friends and avoiding my gaze, but for a rare sulky challenging boy or flirty challenging girl. My software demo ran aground when I tried to use a feature (link to a sub-

process) that I hadn't adequately rehearsed. Yang was my only ally, since Hu was good only for computer and project support. She got me some water, and told me to relax. I got a few answers, like a "yes" when I asked if they'd had statistics and probability, and some hands when I asked who had ever written any computer code. Eventually I gave them a non-graded quiz, for my information. 15 minutes became 40, but I got enough answers out of them to go back and revise my stuff a little. The "non-graded" part mystified them. No one passed papers in when I asked. Hu and Yang rescued me (again) by making the rounds and collecting them. I talked them through Homework 1, got a full quota of blank looks, and dismissed class, on the very dime of noon.

I went to my students' other class when it started at 3 pm, met Yang and her friend Ma, and they took me off to do some sightseeing around campus. I suggested that we go to the botanical garden, which is a world biodiversity reserve. It was fun to have two admiring young women taking me around, and I was very aware that they were teenaged students. I made sure they dropped me off at 6 pm.

Dinner was weird. I was a solo person with a meal ticket, and the university guest house staff really didn't know what to do with me. The waitress studiously ignored me, not even bringing chopsticks for about twenty minutes. I heard the hostess and the manager refer to "the single person" now and then, which would result in a surly glance in my direction and little else. Eventually she brought me a plate with a selection of vegetables, fish, pork, and tofu, which was very tasty. The service reminded me of every old cliché about Communism. Not so the next day when I asked for laundry service, where I was helped at once, and got a confusing phone call; they'd found a hole in one of my T-shirts and didn't want me to blame them. I went down the hall where half a dozen country girls in white blouses and navy skirts clucked in relief. I was relieved too, that I could communicate just enough, since my Chinese skills seem to evaporate every time I speak or think a word of English.

I caught a cab back across the river, to have a Belgian brew and then some skewers at an outdoor restaurant. As I got back, I got an SMS, "Sorry to bother you. I am one of your students. We have been working all evening but cannot understand your assignment". I answered at once "we will discuss this in class first thing tomorrow". The assignment had been to make a simple process flow diagram based on one page case study they'd received before the class, a permit issuing process of the Kansas highway department. I had enough beer in me to feel useless, and now had enough adrenaline in me to sleep poorly, since all of my fears had been realized despite my lengthy preparation. Should I call off the team exercise? The teaching situation called for a rewrite, so I set the alarm for 5:30, crashed and slept fitfully until 7:00, made some quick revisions to make my team exercise more specific, and made it to class.

Thursday May 29th: Turnaround Artist

Neither my class nor I arrived quite so early this time. Students trickled in as I said good morning. I asked for homework #1. No one stirred. I was facing down my first civil disobedience campaign. I told them that I'd heard there were problems, could they please help me give them the information we needed. Silence. I asked "would the student who SMS-ed me last night please stand up, I want to thank you". To my relief, she did. I started clapping and the class joined in a round of applause. She said, "We don't know much about the Kansas highway department, and it's hard to research it from here in Wuhan". I hadn't spelled out clearly enough that they were to use the case study as their sole source of information, that I was teaching a

diagramming technique, not a land-use issues resolution process. At the first break a student came up to me and asked me to give them stories about my working life, since they could read my Powerpoint slides. And another asked me to explain what “workflow” was, since my explanation on the first day hadn’t made sense. For my second hour of class I turned off the computer and drew a workflow model at the board, teaching Kansas permit process example. Same material, different presentation. I connected better with people by using the marker on the white board instead of doing the same old slide presentation style I use for conferences. For my final segment, I whipped through the Powerpoint slides on content management, then spent half an hour explaining the team assignment: using my case study, model the business process by which you create, approve, and present information about your products. I had students help me edit the assignment on the computer with the projector on. This gimmick inspired more comments from the group, and we finished class with me feeling tired but back on top of the situation.

A few minutes noon, a student called me and asked if I had any time. We met and he took me to lunch at a neighboring campus. He asked some standard questions about US race relations and social security, and I asked him about his background. We wound up spending nearly three hours together. I don’t know why he suggested that we go to a gay bar at another nearby campus. Was this a sexual approach or an attempt to sound cool to a visitor from San Francisco? I led the invitation pass, and wound up our conversation half an hour later. I worked a couple hours, then had a massage and buffet dinner at the spa at the Lake View Garden Hotel.

Friday May 30th: Exam Day.

Giving the exam was easy. The questions were on a Powerpoint slide, projected on the front of the room, and distributed to the class via a thumb drive and the students’ not-quite-furtive instant informal network. It was hard to get them to stop writing when the time was up, even when I played up to them by asking in Chinese. I actually grabbed a couple of papers, and Yang and Hu made the rounds. No more passive resistance. We then had presentations from about half of the project teams, with the others just handing in paper. A couple were quite good, presenting as a team and role-playing as asked. I closed the course with a forty minute career auto-biography, pointing out the constant change in organizational structure, the importance of internal marketing in a large organization, and the banality of technical innovation divorced from business need.

That afternoon, Professor Song came by the university guest house to pay me. Mmmm, cash! He told me that he’d heard very good things from the students and that I’d be welcome to come back next year. Mission accomplished! .. and I hadn’t even graded the projects and exams. I high-tailed it over to the ornate red-and-gold Lake View Garden Hotel to register for the eBusiness conference. I positioned myself in the lobby with my stack of papers and did my grading where I could scan for arriving colleagues. No solo dinner for me this year! I intercepted Prof. Wil Huang, the U.S. co-lead of the conference and went to dinner with him, Jurgen Seitz, his European co-lead, and a few of their students. I had to pass on further drinks or foot massages, since I had to retire to my room and grade the rest of the papers from the course.

Saturday May 31st: WHICEB conference.

This was my only full day of conference-ing. I turned in my grades to a student messenger. I risked protocol violation when I buttonholed the program head for the department where I’d been

teaching, to thank her. Her English is poor, and I gushed too much, but contact was made and she noticed me for the rest of the weekend, and invited me back for 2009. We were all bused across town for a tasty if rushed dinner followed by a circus, with live animals, real fire, and aerialists with no nets. Afterwards, my friend Daivd Psitruai and I went back to the university neighborhood. I took him to “degenerate street” where student restaurants and clothing stores are interspersed with KTV’s and even a condom shop. We had crayfish and beer and then checked out “Vox” the Western-oriented bar where touring punk and metal bands play. All they had was a hiphop DJ, but there was a multiracial crowd (French speaking Africans!) and a good-natured hiphop dance competition among some of the young Chinese men.

Sunday June 1st, at Wuhan airport.

I got a cab at 3:30 pm, as planned, but the young student who helped me into the cab thought I might be short of time. Ha! The cab driver drove like a demon, taking a new freeway which wasn’t there last year, and we got here not only on time, but before the checkin counter had even opened. It was a wonderful ride, cruising at 120 km/h, braking, dodging trucks crawling in the left lane at 20 mph, then weaving over giant potholes for five miles of road works. That part of the highway must have been old, maybe even five years old. I’m at the departure area, having once again had to surrender my freakin’ Swiss Army knife by being too stupid to put it in my checked bag. But I haven’t lost anything else. I have a nice, new, cheap, Nokia phone since my other one died Friday, and a lot more cash than I strickly need still on hand. Mary is in Hong Kong; we spoke this morning. I miss her, just in time to enjoy getting back together. It’s not too soon, and it could have been. I’ve shot my wad professionally: I gave my talk and got two questions which allowed me to ramble for ten extra minutes. I chaired my session, where only two of my seven speakers showed up. I’ve been invited back to teach next year. I buttonholed the dean and jabbered enthusiastically at her in English until she invited me back. I spent the last 15 minutes at the conference talking with the Jurgen Seitz, the German professor who is Wil Huang’s counterpart for Europe. We corroborated our impressions of dealing with C.U.G. (that’s “Di Zhi Da,” for “earth sciences uni” in Chinese). I’m now ready for some real vacation, whatever that means. Our neighbors, the Fongs, have put Mary in touch with some friends of theirs in Hong Kong, which might be really great. The trip to Guilin looks like a go. The weather continues to be unseasonably not too hot, if gray as a press release. My laptop now promises me “0:42 remaining” having used 20% of its battery slogging through Windows, Norton, and Word initializations. I hope they serve beer on the plane because I could use a nap about now.