

We entered the gloriously air-conditioned hotel and Qiao had me checked in, fairly painlessly it seemed. All three of us, Qiao, her friend and myself, took the lift up to the sixth floor and my room. While the hotel's lobby was quite impressive, a tall, cylindrical space with a shiny marble floor, the sixth floor was homelier. Large strips of paint had been liberated from the wall and a pile of shoes and bags, presumably those of the maids, lay on the floor. The windows certainly needed some windex as well, although I thought for a moment that might have been the smog on the other side of the glass. Qiao showed me how my electronic key card worked and, as I had a look to see what Jinqiu Road looked like from six floors up, she and her friend conducted a quick inspection of my room. Apparently, it was satisfactory.

Just as Qiao and her friend were about to leave me to get cleaned up, the phone rang. It was Wei, one of my faculty contacts and the person with whom I had been the most in touch. She was wondering if I wanted to be shown around the campus and to get something to eat. At this point, sweating through my navy blue suit and feeling a bit overwhelmed all of the sudden, all I really wanted to do was have a shower and maybe a nap, but I knew that getting out - and, more importantly, staying up - was a much better idea.

Wei met me in the lobby with a smile that suggested she was quite relieved that I had arrived in one piece. She was small without being really diminutive, in her early thirties, I figured, and wore her hair in a sensible bob. She had been really helpful over email in the lead up to my visit and, after failing at Dick and Jane with Qiao, I was rather relieved that her spoken English was as coherent as her emails. After a few pleasantries, she asked me if I wanted to go to a shopping area just outside of campus to get a few supplies and something to eat and, nodding in agreement, I ventured out into the oppressive heat.

Within seconds, every square inch of my skin was coated in prickly, dripping sweat; it gushed down my back like rivulets coursing down Glencoe following a week of solid rain. We weren't even walking that fast - limping octogenarians with peg legs were passing us - and yet sweat was starting to seep through my suit. As I tried in vain to wipe my forehead dry with my sweaty palms, I seriously considered going back to my room and getting one of the hotel towels. As we strolled down the ring road that encircled campus, I noticed a few dozen students playing basketball on a series of courts in the hazy sunshine. I

thought about going up to one of them and asking to trade my suit for their shorts and t-shirt, but resisted the temptation.

Almost on cue, Wei turned to me and said, "It's very impressive that you wear such a smart outfit on such a hot day."

Thinking that my choice in clothing was anything but smart, I flicked the sweat from my temples for the umpteenth time and replied, "Well, I find that I get less hassle at airport security when I dress up a bit."

Wei laughed nervously and asked if I wanted to go back and change at the hotel. I demurred, implying that I always walked around glistening like a chicken wing coated in hot sauce all the time. She nodded sceptically, not for the last time, and we kept trudging along.

Soon after the basketball courts, we left the West Gate of Shanghai University and entered a busy street, crowded with hawkers selling fruit on the pavement and lined with dozens of restaurants, shops selling electronics, and hair dressers. Wei asked if I had lunch and I explained, in a convoluted, jet-lagged kind of way, that the breakfast on the airplane served as my lunch.

"So, you haven't had lunch?" Wei gasped, casting a sharp glance at Qiao and her friend.

"Well, no, but the breakfast was sufficient. Plus the heat..."

"Yes, it is quite hot. There is a mall a little way's further that has air conditioning. Would you like to go inside? Maybe get some food for supper at Wall-Mart? Wall-mart is like this in your country, isn't it?"

Now, I hadn't been to a Wall-Mart for quite some time - and wild horses haven't dragged me into one since - but I knew what a Wall-Mart looked like, and it wasn't this. In fact, the air conditioning was the only thing that seemed the same to me. Sure there was wall to wall crap from floor to ceiling, but it was Chinese crap. Okay, I know, the stuff in North American Wall-Mart is also Chinese crap, but not as Chinese as the Chinese crap in the Chinese Wall-Mart.

We weaved our way through the hoards of others relaxing in the air conditioning, looking for the food section. Here, it was really Chinese, as you might expect. Lumpy, doughy dumplings, a forest of leafy vegetables, slabs upon slabs of mysterious meats, a sea world's worth of fish tanks, it was about as exotic as a Wall-Mart got. Just as I was about to point to a creepy-crawly at the deli counter, Wei pointed towards the bakery department and asked if I wanted some bread. I looked at what was on offer. Wei indicated to a couple of stale-looking European-style loaves.

"Do they look okay?" She asked hopefully.

I shrugged. "Hmm. I don't know." I turned to the other side of the aisle where some more Chinese-looking goods were on offer. "What about these?"

Wei looked surprised. "Don't you want Western food?"

I laughed, thinking about the tasty Chinese meal I had on the airplane. "No, I figure I should get into Chinese cuisine right away. Don't you think?"

Wei frowned. "I suppose so." She turned to the assortment of buns, dumplings and cakes. "Which look good to you?"

I furrowed my brow. What the heck did I feel like? This was to be my first Chinese meal; I shouldn't treat it lightly. "What's that one?" I asked, pointing to a splodgy little bun with some kind of meat on it.

Wei frowned again. "I don't know, it doesn't say. Let me ask."

She said something hurried to Qiao who hurried off to find a grocery clerk. While Wei and Qiao's friend stared quizzically at the bun, speaking in Chinese, I figured that this was the most attention any baked good had received in this Wall-Mart since, well, the last time some Westerner happened by. After a minute or so, Qiao came back with a crabby-looking clerk who appeared to have been dragged away from spritzing lettuce or something. After a few moments of discussion which bordered on the animated, Wei announced, "It's ham and cheese." She looked at me hopefully.

I said, "I'll take two," and, after a nod from Wei, the clerk dutifully, if grumpily, placed two of the buns in a plastic bag and thrust it in my general direction.

"Xie xie!" I said, surprised that I had remembered how to say thank you in Chinese. The clerk harumphed back to her vegetables.

"You speak some Chinese!" Wei exclaimed.

"Uh, that's about it, I'm afraid," I sighed, hoping I didn't raise any expectations that would be thoroughly dashed. "Now where was that produce department?"

I ended up getting a couple of oranges, some peaches and a punnett of grapes, as well as a couple of drinks. The awkward experience of selecting my buns was made up for somewhat by buying the fruit. We were queued up at the cashier when I noticed that most people already had a little price tag on their bags of dragon fruit and lichee nuts, or whatever else they were purchasing. I recalled an exceptionally annoyed-looking woman weighing produce and realised that we'd missed a step. "Just give me a minute," I said with an inspired burst of energy, "I think I have to get this priced."

I rushed off and, all by myself, managed to get the oranges, peaches and grapes priced by the angry produce-weighing lady. When I returned, Wei and the others looked impressed, in awe almost. "I totally forgot that you had to get those weighed first," she said. "Pretty silly with a name like mine."

It took me a minute to get the joke, but when I did I laughed appreciatively. I think Wei and I were going to get along.

We managed to get back to my hotel with me only losing a few more litres of sweat. I had to refuse offers from all three young women to carry my bags back for me. I also turned down the suggestion of getting a taxi to drive the half mile or so back. I must have looked as shattered as a church window during the Blitz. Before bidding adieu, Wei told me where the hotel breakfast was, inquired about whether I had enough food for supper and handed me a brown envelope. "Some cash to keep you going. We don't have your campus card yet, so you'll have to pay for things out of this."

I thanked her, took the envelope and headed up to my room to count pictures of Chairman Mao.

The rest of my evening was fairly routine for a first night in a strange town after a long trip. I ate a disappointing meal (the oranges were American, ancient and had the texture of drywall), flipped through 57 Chinese channels of nothing on, and struggled to get to sleep, despite being fabulously tired. At least some things were the same the world over.