

90. Letter from China by Tom Greco

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I recently spent a month in China. Most of my time there was devoted to a three week assignment teaching English to first year graduate students at *Huazhong University of Science and Technology (HUST)* in Wuhan. Wuhan is a city of 8.3 million people located on the Yangtze River about 400 miles west of Shanghai.

There are many such teaching opportunities in China for both short-term and long-term assignments, as the Chinese are eager to learn English which is becoming the global language, particularly in commerce, science and industry. These opportunities cover various levels from primary school, to middle school, to university and adult education. Generally, no certificate or *English as a Second Language (ESL)* experience is required; it is only necessary that one be a native English speaker and has a college degree, although each application is considered on its merits by the Chinese administrator of the program.

Some of the teachers in the *HUST* three-week intensive course had no teaching experience at all. Students in such programs usually have studied English for several years with Chinese teachers and have some skill in reading and writing but need help with speaking and oral comprehension.

I had several reasons for choosing to do this. First of all, I wanted an excuse to visit the Orient. I've traveled extensively in Europe and Latin America, but had never visited the Far East. Secondly, I wanted to get back into the classroom after 25 years, even though my fields of expertise are in money, banking, finance, economics, management, and applied mathematics. Thirdly, I wanted to learn something about the developing Chinese economy and the cultural and political changes that are current there, and finally, I wanted to meet up with a couple correspondents in my alternative exchange network who happen to be in China.

To sum it up, my month in China was wonderful, exciting, pleasant, difficult, painful, and life-changing. The assignment at *Huazhong University* was demanding and difficult for me. They worked us very hard - teaching two 3-hour classes each day, five days a week for 3 weeks. There were 48 teachers and about 3,000 students in the intensive program. Each teacher had four classes of about 35 students each, meeting each class every other day. That schedule required that we prepare seven different lessons, which I did in the evenings and sometimes, during episodes of insomnia, in the middle of the night.

While accommodation in the campus hotel were very comfortable, the teaching environment was difficult because the weather in September was hot and humid and some of the classroom buildings were not air-conditioned, so we had to keep windows open and fans running which made the space very noisy. Chinese students, especially the females, are very soft-spoken so it was often difficult to hear them during their recitations and reports.

Adding to my fatigue was the fact that the classroom building was distant from the hotel making it necessary for us to be bussed back and forth twice a day consuming more time that could have been spent resting. I was also sick for much of the time, not with the expected intestinal upset, but with a sore throat and a cold that lasted a few days followed by severe pain in my right shoulder that defied attempts to relieve it. The pain would wake me up in the middle of the night and kept me from getting proper sleep, and remained, more or less severe, throughout the day.

Despite all of that I managed to fulfill my commitment, meeting my classes every day and developing lessons that I think were effective in helping my students to better speak and understand spoken English. By the last day of classes I was feeling much better and was able to enjoy the student performances that were presented in English to the entire body of students, teachers and administrators. Since there was time for only 15 of the seventy classes to do performances, these were selected ahead of time in auditions held by the administration.

Despite all the difficulties and my physical distress this teaching assignment was a wonderful experience. I loved working with my students, who were polite, respectful, and for the most part hard-working. I learned a lot, and if I were to take on another similar assignment in the future, I'm sure I will be more effective as a teacher, and it will be more fun.

I arranged my flights from the US so that I had a few days to spend in Shanghai at both the beginning and end of my trip. The time spent there was quite enjoyable. I was fortunate that I had a correspondent there, Australian author, actor, and world-traveler, James Taris, who graciously helped me find my way around and get oriented to the local Chinese culture. We had not known each other very well and had not previously met in person, but found that we had much in common and enjoyed each other's company.

James has made several trips to Shanghai, has been living there for the past few months, and plans to remain there until the middle of next year. He has made some good contacts with local people who were happy to spend time with us and show us around, giving them an opportunity to practice their English. James met my flight from San Francisco at the Pudong airport and escorted me to the shuttle bus and my hotel. I'd have had a hard time finding it without his help. The shuttle, luckily, stopped in front of Shanghai Mansion, just across the street from the Pujiang Hotel where I had already booked a room through the internet site of *Hostelling International*.

Using the internet turned out to be a wise move since the rate I got was much better than the rate that was offered on the spot. The Pujiang Hotel, formerly called the Astor House Hotel, is no flop house for teenage travelers but a vintage hotel that carries its age gracefully. Described as "the first western style hotel in China," it has a long history and boasts having had in its heyday such illustrious guests as Bertrand Russell and Albert Einstein.

James and his Chinese friend Rachel met me again the next day for some sightseeing and shopping. Rachel is in the process of becoming a licensed tour guide and has already been a great help to some highly placed foreigners. She has a bright and breezy personality and knows her way around the city, and was a delight to be with.

One of our stops was the "Fakes Market" where there are dozens of stalls that sell knock-offs of various brand name, designer merchandise, including shirts and shoes, plus jewelry, watches, and many other things. James and I allowed Rachel to do our hard bargaining for us (in Chinese) with the merchants and we were amazed at the low prices we were able to get on some pretty nice stuff. I also arranged through another contact in the US to connect with Frank Sang who runs the Shanghai Barter company, a commercial trade exchange.

The "barter" industry is relatively new in China so the potential for growth is huge. Frank and I seemed to agree on the basic principles relating to the proper operation for such exchanges, so I have a strong sense that he will be successful in quickly building his business.

After completing my assignment at *HUST* in Wuhan, I flew back to Shanghai where I enjoyed another three days. Once again, James managed to connect with several of his Chinese friends who showed us around and proved to be good company. We enjoyed taking the ferry across the river to Pudong with two young ladies (college students) from the "English corner" who were eager to practice their English.

We went up into the Oriental Pearl tower where we got a bird's eye view of Shanghai and Pudong (I learned that Pudong means "east of the river;" Pu Xi means "west of the river," i.e. old Shanghai) and took some awesome pictures.

English corner, by the way, is a regular prearranged gathering where Chinese get together to speak English. They are very grateful to have a native English speaker show up, so James has been very popular with them. The next day Rachel took us to a shop where we bought new movie DVD's for 8 yuan each (equivalent to about one dollar).

I was happy that she suggested that we have dinner at the *Pizza Hut*, since I was by that time pretty maxed out on Chinese food. The *Pizza Hut* in Shanghai is unlike any I've seen in the States, it's quite the plush restaurant with good food and immaculate bathrooms; expensive by Chinese standards, but a good model for them to emulate.

Bathrooms in China are often disgustingly dirty and lack both toilet paper and soap. That seems to be changing rapidly, though, as China is making a great effort to modernize. One article in the English language newspaper reported that the Shanghai municipal government is planning to build 1,200 new markets all around the city and to outfit them with modern, hygienic toilet facilities.

After dinner, we wandered over to the bar at 5 on the Bund where we found the pool table unused and waiting for us. Rachel, who had never played before, caught on quickly. 5 on the Bund is a classy, expensive place but we got there in time for happy hour so we got to play pool for free and enjoyed two-for-one drinks so it ended up costing us only 80 yuan.

On Tuesday, we met two other people from the English corner, David, a businessman who owns a car, and 'Nono', a young lady friend of his, who drove us out to the newer area of Pudong, which is mostly residential and filled with high rise apartment houses, a couple fancy hotels and a few restaurants.

There's also a nice park, Century Park, which we spent a couple hours exploring. There's a ponsai (what the Japanese call "bonsai") garden and a small lake, and some nice trees and foliage. Surrounded by the burgeoning new city, it appears that Century Park will soon fulfill a role similar to that of Central Park in New York.

We finished the evening with dinner at a "hot pot" Chinese restaurant, which was quite an experience. The basic format is that each table has a propane burner in the middle on which is placed a pot of broth. You then select from a variety of meat and vegetable offerings brought to your table, which you cook one after another in the broth. Our pot came with a whole duck and a variety of herbs and spices. I managed to prevail upon my companions to avoid selecting most of the Chinese favorites (which to me and most westerners seem weird), so it turned out to be a pretty enjoyable dinner.

On the morning of my departure, September 28, James met me at the Captain Hostel, where I was staying. As I was checking out, I overheard the woman next to me asking directions to the MagLev train station. Since that was our destination also, I introduced myself.

Barbara turned out to be a consultant and professor of management from California who has taught several times in China and was booked to return on the same flight to San Francisco. The three of us agreed to share a taxi to the MagLev station in Pudong where we would board the ultra-modern "magnetic levitation" train that goes to the Pudong airport. The train ride is expensive by Chinese standards (50 yuan or about \$6.25) but it's a thrilling experience. Reaching a top speed of about 260 miles per hour, the trip to the airport takes less than 8 minutes.

There's much more that I could tell but that's probably more than you wanted to know already. I have hundreds of pictures and a few souvenirs, and if anyone is interested, I'd be happy to answer questions. I'm glad to be back in the comfort of my home but I know I'll be traveling again before too long. My plan for the next few months is to focus more attention on writing my next book and improving the www.reinventingmoney.com website.