

EXPECTATIONS AND REFLECTIONS

- from Ferry van Mansum and Aukje Both



Spring Festival is over. Students have returned from their home towns, almost wishing to kiss the ground after excruciating long train rides of more than a day, trying to get comfortable on hard seats on overcrowded trains. Early Monday morning the Hexi drill team performed their first official flag raising ceremony of the new semester and classes are now back in full swing.



But something is missing.

When we arrived at Hexi University two years ago we were put in charge of a new project - teaching oral English to non-English major students. A first. Up till then foreign teachers had only been employed to teach the English major students. Now the non-English major students, who all have four hours a week of English in the first two years of their study, would get 50 minutes with us once a fortnight. Not much, but for most of them it was the first time they were face to face with an English speaker and there was an actual need to communicate in English.



A challenge. It's not ideal teaching oral English to classes of up to 75 students. However, they were sharing a computer screen in pairs. That was good, so we could use visuals to make the lessons more interesting. We created PowerPoints around a theme and over the course of two years we could show the students how things work in the West and at the same time we learnt a lot about China and the Chinese way of thinking. So now

we know, for example, why there is so much red underwear for sale in China, what it is like to be a guest at a wedding banquet and how to deal with taxi drivers who may want to overcharge.



Chinese students are shy, that is what they all agree to when you ask, but we found that many will try very hard to improve themselves and it has been great to see students who were too embarrassed to even say their name in English, volunteer to answer a question in class.

During our time in China we taught about 5,000 students between us, more than a third of the campus population. Too many to remember them all, or to know all of them well, but the ones that stay with us, are those who were regular visitors to the English library, where we had more time to talk to individuals. We will keep in touch. We are getting regular emails already and who knows some might fulfil their dream to visit New Zealand one day.



So what is missing? From our co-teacher, we heard that we have not been replaced. I am sure it is not because we are irreplaceable, but there are not enough foreign teachers on campus this semester to fill all the teaching slots. And since the English major students get priority, the non-English majors will miss out. Such a pity.

When we arrived in China two years ago we were not quite sure what to expect, except that it was going to be an adventure. We never thought our classes would be that large, but they were, and it did not matter. Staying in a hotel room in Lanzhou, our last stop before Zhangye, we wondered if our apartment would look just as dilapidated, but it didn't. It was great. We had learnt that winters in Zhangye would be terribly cold, often well below -20C. And they were, but with a very warm apartment and the dry atmosphere it did not feel that cold at all.



We knew about the bad air quality in China, but that is mainly in the East, and we were under the blue skies in the West. People had told us that toilets in China could be very dirty, and yes, some were beyond what you think would be usable, but not everywhere. We were looking forward to eating delicious Chinese food, and we sure did and, especially in Zhangye, it was so cheap! We could have dinner for two with a beer - cold between May and September - for less than six New Zealand dollars.

We hoped we would have the opportunity to travel and boy, we did. With a teaching schedule that was full on one week and often no classes the next, we were able to visit almost every province in China, from Tibet in the west to Shanghai in the east, from Heilongjiang in the north to Hainan in the south and just about everything in between. We clocked up countless days and nights on trains and towards the end, when we had had our fill of train travel, we flew to some of the places a bit further from our base in Zhangye in Gansu Province.

We saw many facets of China, the fast developing East, and the West that is trying to catch up. We met people who work for only a few dollars a day and saw others driving cars the price of a good-sized house. China is changing rapidly and we were glad to be able to see the diversity that is part of this enormous country.



An adventure indeed and a very worthwhile, memorable experience. One we can recommend.
