

Blog -IV- September '09

Peace Corps is all about humankind. It is about sustainable projects. It is creative and innovative. It is about fairness and justice. It is working to keep our earth green and our air and water healthy. It is a smile of peace and friendship. For volunteers, it is an opportunity to get outside the boundaries one grew accustomed and took for granted. It is jumping over the perimeter and living outside the box. It is a time for an opening-up, to see the horizon beyond the cityscapes, the woods and the oceans. It is a renaissance. One begins a new language, one learns life skills again to live independently and one begins to adapt to cultural norms and habits with challenges come adventures to excite and to stimulate like any child who is ready to play. We are eager and motivated. Culture shock is around every corner we turn. It is ancient, breathtaking, colorful, classical, obsolete but traditional. It clashes and crashes. This is Peace Corps China. Some people have referred to this volunteer assignment as 'Posh Corps'.

We teach English as a Foreign Language (TEFL). We live in apartments on the university campus. We do not live in villages or live in a mud huts away from the cities. We live where there are people. Most rural young Chinese are leaving their roots to work in near-by cities and many children leave to live in dorms to attend schools near cities and in the cities. Today, China's mission to its people is changing and this is similar to Peace Corps. The world is a global market economy. It is competitive. It is science and technology. It is business and industry. China and Peace Corps are meeting this demand with professionals and skilled people to prepare an ever changing world. 'And it's a small world after all'- we are only hours away by airplane and our messages and pictures can be sent and seen instantly.

We travel on our own money. Peace Corps' monthly allowance is 1400RMB almost 200 American dollars. With this modest amount, we make do. We serve and teach in the developing areas of China in Sichuan Province. This is the most populist area of China. It has over 87 million people. The people here are rapidly moving into a modern age of airplanes, buses, cars, trains, and also a subway system to be completed in another year in the city of Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan Province. And with this advancement in commerce comes problems. Exhaust emissions, providing infrastructure is a catching-up and an enormous task for the amount of people who live here. There is building going on around us in which one sees new housing, stores, roads, bridges and railroad tracks. Sometimes, one is without electricity or water because of all the construction.

We hang our clothes to dry after we wash them. And many times we use the washboard sink to get our clothes clean. Most people have squat toilets but Westerners are provided a western style toilet in their apartments. Toddlers do not use diapers here. Their britches and crotches are open. The children squat where ever! And soiled toilet paper doesn't go down the toilet. It is thrown in the trash. How do you like this for going green? Peace Corps' theme for TEFL is 'GREEN ENGLISH.' It is about our environment- trash, garbage and pollution. The sun is

our friend when it is out brightly. It dries our clothes and bleaches the mold from our clothes. The weather is subtropical. It is hot, hazy, humid, cloudy, and rainy. And winters are dry and foggy with no heat inside to warm the air. The people say they are use to their winters. Ok!

Another shocker is the traffic. Hang on tight as the taxi or any vehicle seems to drive where ever it can such as driving the yellow line, (in the middle of the road) walk ways, wrong side of the road, diagonal, zigzag and the driver has the foot on the pedal, the other foot on the break and the hands on the stirring wheel and the horn. The car goes fast suddenly slows hopefully then makes its turn soon top speed. There are buses, cars, motorbikes and battery powered bikes and pedal bikes running along side of you and around you. Pedestrians do not have the right away. Wow! I am breathing. I made it back to my apartment. One crosses the street with the crowd. And people are not the only ones who use public transportation. People bring their chickens, ducks and pet dogs on board with them.

In the summer, volunteers are assigned a project with other volunteers in a designated city. The seminar was hosted in the city of Leshan. It is well known for the largest carved stone Buddha in China. Too, the Chinese see themselves as the middle kingdom country. They call their country 'Zhongguo' meaning middle kingdom. The Chinese call themselves the middle kingdom people-'Zhongguo Ren'. Our project was with teachers of the Leshan rural area to learn from them and to show the teachers how to use TEFL methods in their classroom and to give a talk on a current American topic. Since I came from a large family and have numerous pictures, I discussed the American family. American in Chinese language is 'meiguo ren' or 'beautiful people'. The Chinese really enjoy meeting Americans. Our Chinese host took us out to dinner several times. We ate mushroom hot pot in which there were nearly a dozen varieties of mushrooms to eat. We enjoyed fish hot pot on the Ming River. I learned to eat 'fish head'. Shaokao or barbecue was a favorite dinner. Too, the roast duck for lunch was a great favorite among the volunteers. The Chinese people are very generous people. We were given a traditional paper cut-out and a calligraphy stamp with our Chinese name in hanzi (Chinese Characters).

PCV must use Leave log to leave for the weekend and a detailed itinerary form to use annual leave for vacation days as Peace Corps office and Foreign Affairs office wants to know where you are in the country or if you may be traveling outside the country. Some volunteers go to Thailand because it is near. It borders China. Some 50+ volunteers went to India and Turkey. But before vacation, we are required to have our annual medical physical and dental exams. So I was off to Chengdu on a bus from Leshan to Peace Corps office at Sichuan University. With some time on my hands, I met my tutor, Huang Xiaoxi and we toured the Panda Reserve in Chengdu. It is one of a few places where pandas can breed in captivity. Hey, I eat bamboo too!

With my medical complete and the permission for my trip approved, I was to off to Shaanxi province and on to Beijing to tour and experience some of the sights previous volunteers suggested to see. Although I was in Beijing a year ago, it was only a stop over at the airport to catch another flight to Chengdu for our 8 week Pre-service training near Peace Corps Office. I did not go alone. Huang Xiaoxi accompanied me along the way. He has been tutoring me in culture and language. He gets a modest stipend from Peace Corps. Actually, we came back to Nanchong to get clothes ready to go as I was in Leshan and he was at Chengdu University working with Peace Corps model school program in TEFL. After getting ourselves ready we had to go back to Chengdu and get a night train to Xian City in Shaanxi Province. We left Chengdu just after 9pm or 21:20hrs. We arrived in Xian about 2pm the next afternoon. The train was crowded. We had a hard seater and across facing us were seated 3 people. There was a small table in which 5 people shared. On one car there were just over 100 people. The train was pulling 18 cars. We were car 17 in the back. In the morning, I could see the length of the train through the window when it went around the bend with steep mountains on both sides of us. We slept by nodding our heads forward. It was certainly uncomfortable but it was more difficult for children who tried to sleep but cried who tried to find a position to sleep. We arrived in Xian to see enormous crowds standing in and around the train station. In our face as we left the train station was one of China's oldest city walls. Xian was an ancient capital of China. The wall was large, imposing and monumental. It is one of the few city walls left from ancient China today. Xian or an earlier name Changan can trace Chinese civilization back to the Stone Age. Numerous artifacts have been found such as tools, houses, pottery kilns, graves and spinning wheels and too cooking utensils.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Xi'an>

The next day we toured the Terracotta Soldiers. The array of figures was funerary statues made of clay and fired for the tomb of Qin Shi Huang. He was the founder of the Qin Dynasty 221-207BCE. It seems to be characteristic of China to be large and enormous. This exhibit was no exception. It was massive. It was like walking into several gymnasiums to look into pits to see soldiers and horses standing in rows and columns ready to engage in battle for their emperor. It takes about 90 minutes to see the site. Of course it depends on the number of people there too as there are lines and usually there are a lot of people to see Chinese ancient treasures. Too, we stopped to see the tomb of Qin Shi Huang and a miniature model of what Xian looked like over 2000 years ago. And we stood behind hollow statues to have our pictures taken in make-believe dressed as terracotta soldiers. Now, we were set for adventure. And that night, we did set out on a 12hr train ride to Beijing. This time we were able to get a sleeper car. The trip I will not forget.

There were 6 bunk beds to a cabin with 3 beds stacked across from each other. I had a middle bunk. In my cabin, there were 4 men and 2 women. Xiaoxi was 2 cabins from me. He came in to check on me twice as I was the only foreigner. And many Chinese have never seen a western foreigner and some people like to stare. And Chinese like to belch. The one woman across from me belched for nearly an hour before the lights went out when she climbed to her bed and fell

asleep. She was very good to me offering her food and snacks. But PC rules say we are not to accept. I said politely, “Bu yaole.” It was a smooth ride as I could hear the train whistle blow a few times in the night and feel it barreling over the tracks onwards into the distance. I slept when suddenly I was awakened when a couple of conductors came into the narrow cabin. They woke up the women. It was just after 5am and their stop was at 6. And with people in other cabins getting ready to leave the train, the sun was rising too. We were in Tianjin. The train soon came to a stop at the station in which the woman and her friend said, “good bye” when getting off the car. I saw a large orange sun blazing overhead and knew it was going to be a hot day. Xiaoxi and I had another 2 hrs to ride. We got into Beijing west train station at 8am on a clear summer day. We learned directions to our youth hostel to take a bus that it would be a 15 minute ride. We saw on our way the famous picture of Mao at Tiananmen gate. We would stay about 3 blocks from there while in Beijing.

We arrived on Xitangzi Hutong at Wangtující Youth Hostel and checked into a room. Huang Xiaoxi really liked the hostel as anyone would who wants to learn about the world. Xiaoxi and I met people from around the world from Australia to Canada to Africa to Malaysia and Europe. This is why people like to stay at hostels. As a member of American Youth Hostels, one can meet people in America from all over the world at youth hostels. Too, American Cities, colleges and universities are excellent places to meet people from around the world. Peace Corps and hostelling has been a great opportunity for Xiaoxi. We both learned world friendship. We soon registered for our first tour for the next day. Meanwhile, we walked around the neighborhood we were staying. We toured Wangtující Shopping Mall which is similar to malls in the west. Later, we ate at a jiaozi restaurant. It was 33 yuan as compared to Sichuan province where it is 6 to 12 yuan a serving. But then I like cooking jiaozi at my apartment in Nanchong. There was donkey meat filled jiaozi. Jiaozi are dumplings. It is a filling inside dough boiled. Then, you topped the jiaozi with vinegar. We ate shrimp filled jiaozi. It was good. “Ta shi hen hao chi.”

We were up early to eat breakfast as this was included in our excursion tour. We left on a coach at 7:20am to pick up others at 2 other hostels. Now, we were all on our way to the Great Wall. Wow, we were so excited. In Chinese folklore it is said that ‘one who climbs the Great wall is a real man.’ This meant a lot to Xiaoxi. We arrived at Mutianyu just after 11am. The wall is about 70 kilometers from Beijing. [http://wikitravel.org/en/Great Wall of China](http://wikitravel.org/en/Great_Wall_of_China) We took a cable car to the top of the mountain and had over 2 hours to climb and hike the wall. It was hot and we drank plenty of water. It was 35 degrees Celsius. Wow! It was an experience. It was a wonder how people were able to get stone that high up to build such a monumental structure? We took lots of pictures. We saw very steep mountains all around us. The valleys were green and the scenery was beautiful. The history of the wall is over 2000 years old. We later return to the bottom of the mountain by way of a toboggan ride. One could go as fast as one wanted or a slow as one wanted. It was a breath taking ride all downhill. It was a little scary. Soon

our crew gathered after 13:30 to enjoy a lunch of many dishes. It was part of the package tour. Some people shopped. Beware! Tai guile! Things were expensive. One needs to bargain in China. The vendors want your money. We were on the bus and arrived back at the hostel around 5pm or 1700hrs. For the next 10 days we toured sites in Beijing.

We walked to Tiananmen from the hostel to visit Forbidden City. The area is large. Forbidden City was the home of many emperors of China from the Ming Dynasty to the Qing Dynasty. It includes many buildings. It is now a museum to show the treasures of the two dynasties. It takes over 2 hours to visit the many buildings that hold silk costumes and clothing, porcelain vases and dish wear, paintings and it was the architecture of the buildings in which the four corners of the roof sweeps up to a delicate graceful curve. It was mystical. I could see use of feng shui in the design. We later went to see the burial site of Mateo Ricci a Jesuit and many earlier foreigners who were buried in Beijing. It was on the campus behind the Beijing Administrative College on Chegongzhuang Road, in the Xicheng District.

Later in the evening, we went to a near-by restaurant to eat Beijing roast duck. The following days we visited the Temple of Heaven, Laoshe Teahouse in which tea houses in China are a place for socializing, playing Chinese Chess and where artist and writers gather to discuss themes of the day and of course to play mahjong. Too, we visited a friend Christine Zhang who is attending Beijing Normal University. We all had Beijing Hot Pot. We also toured Yuanmingyuan or the old Summer Palace and the new Summer Palace near Peking and Tsinghua Universities. Too, we visited the Confucius Temple. There was an exhibit on Joseph Needham, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joseph_Needham and other Westerners on the work they did in China and the influences China has had on the world. There are Confucius Institutes in the United States. We ended our Beijing trip by touring the Bird's Nest and the Water Cube at the Olympic Center. It was fun and a great ending to our trip. We saw many people flying kites in the breezy air on the Olympic grounds which were a good sign in China that things are going well. It is one of the characteristics of China to see people flying kites and soon Xiaoxi and I would be flying high. We took a flight out of Beijing the next afternoon to arrive in Nanchong in the late afternoon. I was tired. He took off to tell his friends and family that he 'was a real man!' I called PC and Foreign Affairs that I arrived back. It is in the rules!

Most of the places visited can be found on the web by using a search engine and can be learned from travel guides. I hope this finds all happy and harmonious and enjoying life. All blogs can be read on yahoo profiles. Diplomacy is delicate and good words go along way.

"The contents of this letter are mine personally and do not reflect any position of the U.S Government or the Peace Corps."

Donald 'kongzi' Coppersmith, PCV

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