

A View From The Other Side Of The Globe

Heading To China To Teach? Your Miserable Life Will Soon Be Over

The lady from Shanghai asked me why I was moving to China to teach English. I listed some personal problems, the depredations of middle age, and a professional setback and concluded that I was now ready to realize a longstanding dream.

"So!" she enthused. "Your miserable life will soon be over!"

After that send-off, this summer I left Ottawa Hills, my home of 34 years, for a teaching position in Yuxi, a city of 1.5 million in the Yunnan province of south-central China. Yuxi is not a gleaming cosmopolitan city-of-the-future like Shanghai or Hong Kong, nor is it a provincial backwater. Like Toledo, it's somewhere in between.

I moved into a new 24-story apartment tower. Two dozen similar buildings dot Yuxi, all built within the last five years and consisting primarily of three-bedroom, two-bath apartments. This makes sense in a region where people generally live with their parents until they marry and start their own families. I was lucky to find a smaller two-bedroom unit that's perfect for my needs.

From my living room on the eighteenth floor, I gaze out over the mountains that mark the edge of the Tibetan highlands. Down at street level, people are friendly to me, despite the fact that we share only a few common words.

I live in a working-class neighborhood full of tiny storefront restaurants, hotels, barbershops, foot massage emporia, and convenience stores. There are raucous outdoor card and mah jong games played in front of the locksmith's shop, impromptu dinners eaten on the sidewalk, and sly courtship. Older people smile as I pass by and

the braver younger ones offer unsolicited hellos.

The sycamores and elms lining the main streets remind me of home. Just as in Ottawa Hills, trees this old and numerous take a long-term commitment to grow and maintain, which gives both communities a sense of having been thoughtfully designed and administered.

There are many old and artfully forested public parks with paths that wind their ways under canopies of leaves. I haven't

seen many beautiful buildings – maybe contemporary Chinese architecture is an acquired taste – but the trees in front of them and mountains behind soften their bland designs.

So far, the lady from Shanghai was right. I'm about as far from misery as I can be.

– James F. Trumm

You can read more about Jim's experiences of living in China and see his photos at www.jftrumm.com.

Mom-And-Pop Small Businesses And BMWs

Zhuge East Road is about as wide and long as Hempstead Road, but there are few other similarities. In addition to being an address for hundreds of people (including me), this street is home to 53 small businesses: convenience stores, restaurants, a TV repair shop, hair salons, locksmiths, a nail tech, a mother-and-baby store, a bottled water outlet, massage parlors, a fleecemaker, a women's clothing boutique, a motorcycle battery shop, a tea house, and a medical clinic.

There are also a few enterprises of questionable function and legality where tatty curtains conceal the inside goings-on from the street. Everyone's trying to make a buck on Zhuge East Road. There are few vacant storefronts here.

This is not the big-business China that we Americans are anxiously competing against in the global marketplace. It's not the sleek chrome-and-glass China of Shanghai or Guangzhou. And it's certainly not the impoverished and monochromatic China that Richard Nixon saw when he first came here in 1972.

This is the mom-and-pop China of families who live in decades-old concrete apartment blocs and work hard and late seven days a week in shops no larger than no larger than the average Ottawa Hills dining

room.

I can sense the entrepreneurial spirit here when I walk down the street. The stores' narrow aisles are packed to the ceiling with merchandise. Three-wheeled motorcycle trucks weave through the pedestrian traffic making deliveries of new stock. Exhausted shop owners sit catnapping at their tills in mid-afternoon.

In the evenings, families sit together on low stools in their stores and eat dinner together under dangling fluorescent lights. The life of a small business owner, whether in Yuxi or the U.S., is not easy or glamorous.

And yet, the other day I had scarcely walked out my door when a well-dressed young woman pressed a flyer into my hand: special financing offers on new BMWs. Considering the work ethic demonstrated by my neighbors, I wasn't surprised. BMWs are aspirational vehicles and the German company that makes them is clearly betting on Chinese upward mobility.

Yuxi already has the second-highest per-capita rate of automobile ownership in all of China. Today, BMWs are almost as common in Yuxi as they are in Toledo. Given what I see every day on Zhuge East Road, I'd give good odds that tomorrow there will be a lot more of them.

– James F. Trumm

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