

Shanghai -- My Dinner with Mr. Wu

by: Savio Wong

I was lying on a firm bed resting my tired feet and sore muscles after a long day of walking in downtown Shanghai. It had been a great day. The weather was lovely and it was unseasonably warm for the beginning of February. Having spent most of the afternoon browsing from book-store to book-store, I had picked up some real bargains. Just when I was dosing off, the phone rang.

"Hello, my name is Mr. Wu. I am looking for Savo Wong." Like many people, Mr. Wu had difficulty with my unusual first name.

"This is Savio. Yes, Mr. Wu, I am glad that you called. You must have received my letter then." For some strange reason, I decided to articulate each word carefully. A couple I met recently in Hong Kong had given me Mr. Wu's address. They had met him while travelling in China the previous summer. Knowing that I would probably not be able to find his apartment in Shanghai, I had sent a letter ahead just before I left for China and invited Mr. Wu to call on me.

"Yes, I came earlier this afternoon but you were not in."

"Where are you now? ... Yes, just downstairs, I'll come down and meet you." Mr. Wu's English was really quite good, I didn't know why I chose to continue to speak in such deliberate fashion.

"Good. I will meet you soon."

"Oh, Mr. Wu. I will be wearing a blue coat." As I was saying that, the movie scenes where blind dates met at street corners with over-sized pink carnation pinned on their coats flashed through my mind. I grabbed my coat and hurried to the lobby on the ground floor. There were several people in front of the reception desk, I picked out a man carrying a letter that resembled the one I sent a few days ago. He had a grey winter coat on and his new-looking Nike running shoes really stood out. For some strange reason, I thought he would be younger and taller.

"Mr. Wu, how are you? Thank you very much for coming." I waved my blue coat which I was holding and extended my hand to him. He returned his hand with a very firm handshake.

"Oh, you know Putonghua. Very well ... I received the letter earlier this morning." He showed me the letter as if to confirm he was the right person. "You misspelled one of the words on the envelope. It should be Dong Liu Jia Loug and not Dong Lin Jia Loug."

"I'm glad you still received the letter. Sorry that we missed each other earlier. Please, let's go to my room for some tea or coffee." I really had to struggle to put these sentences in Putonghua.

Putonghua literally means the common dialect. Although it was really the Beijing dialect, it was designated as the official spoken language in China after the liberation in 1949. Unfortunately for me, having grown up in Hong Kong which uses Cantonese, my knowledge of the common dialect was learnt entirely from watching Chinese movies when I was young. Since there are few similarities between the two dialects, I could only comprehend some very basic Putonghua.

As we made our way back to my room, he explained to me he had come earlier and returned home by bus. He stated that the bus ride home was not long and it became apparent that he doesn't own a phone. He wrote out his address in Chinese for me in case I sent him letters again. I was glad that I didn't have to find him since it would have been impossible for me to

locate the street. Maybe he realized I was struggling to understand his Putonghua, he switched back to English after a few exchanges.

After we entered to my room, I asked him, "What would you like to drink, coffee? Or would you like a beer? Please, please make yourself at home." I also switched to English.

"I only had coffee once in my life and I couldn't sleep for the whole night. Maybe a beer will be better." He replied as he examined the room. "This is a very nice room and it must be very expensive."

"Well, I don't normally travel in such grand style. A good friend of mine told me that the Peace Hotel refused him entry into the building back in 1981 just because he is Chinese. I don't know why, but I thought I ought to stay here. Have you been to this hotel before?" The rate of this double room was about HK\$360 (~Can. \$70) which was quite reasonable for a four-star hotel. But I decided not to tell him about the price.

"Oh, no. This is the first time that I have seen a room here." I didn't know if Mr. Wu meant he has never been to the Peace Hotel or inside one of its rooms.

After some more pleasantries, it was time to go for dinner. I had insisted that it would be my treat. Earlier today, I had seen a restaurant that advertised Western food which is not too far from the hotel, I suggested we walked there. Maybe because I was with a local, none of the money-changers harassed me. Previously, they have pestered me every time I walked out the hotel door. One of the most universal phrases in China had to be 'changing money'. I am particularly annoyed by their habit of pulling my sleeves or hovering over me.

In China, the number of legal or acceptable currencies is mind boggling. Renminbi (RMB) is the local money and because of its poor quality, I often refer to it as Monopoly money. The word Renminbi means the People's Money. It is the legal tender for the locals and foreigners who live in China. A parallel currency is called Foreign Exchange Certificate (FEC) which is issued to foreigners and compatriots from Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan visiting China. Because of its intended users, I like to call it tourist money. Originally, FEC was introduced by the government to earn the badly needed convertible hard currency. It is the official policy to charge visitors more money than the locals for the same service. For example, foreigners will have to pay at least 100% more for train or plane tickets. In addition, FECs are required to purchase expensive foreign-made goods in government-owned friendship stores.

But, nothing is that simple in China. Recently, I was able to make purchase using RMBs in a friendship store in Nanjing but not in Beijing. Sometimes, taxi drivers and shopkeepers will demand FEC even though they are supposed to take RMB. And although RMB and FEC are officially traded at par, they are not. In reality, FEC has a much higher value. When I was in Shanghai, the black market rate was 130 RMBs to 100 FECs. The rate went as high as 145 RMBs to 100 FECs in some small stores in Beijing. This policy seems very bizarre since the black market is probably hurting the local citizens, the very people the government is supposedly protecting. To add to the confusion, about 30% of Hong Kong's dollars are circulating in China. And to top it off, the American dollar is the preferred currency for many shopkeepers.

Mr. Wu followed me as I walked briskly to the traffic light to cross to the south side of the ever busy Nanjing Donglu. Today being Saturday and the warmest day this winter, the street was packed with people. I had proposed that we would have dinner at the Deda Western Food restaurant which is not too far from the hotel. Unfortunately, the place was crowded and it would be a long wait before we would get a table. After failing to secure an empty table in a couple more places, we settled for a Chinese Seafood restaurant on a side street. The restaurant has several floors and since the main dining hall on the ground floor was full, we were sent to the

third floor. As we were climbing the stairs, I remembered reading my tour guide which recommended against dining on the upper floors of a restaurant since they are usually reserved for foreign friends, which means higher prices.

We were led to a room with rather elegant decor and antique-looking furniture. The waiters and waitresses were dressed in sharp uniforms. Although the room had about ten tables and was almost full, it was not as noisy as one would expect from a Chinese restaurant. One of the waiters showed us to a small table at the corner of the room and presented us with two large menus.

After studying the menu for a few minutes, Mr. Wu commented, "This is very expensive. Maybe we should go somewhere else."

"No, it is alright. Once in a while, we should treat ourselves to a nice meal." Although the prices were high by local standards, it is still quite inexpensive to eat in China outside the tourist hotels. "Please, this will be my treat, what should we order?"

Together, we picked out a few local favourites: drunken chicken, braised beef, garlic eggplant, and tofu in a spicy brown sauce. I noticed the dishes Mr. Wu suggested were the less expensive ones. After reciting our list to a waitress, she said it would not be enough and recommended one of the house specialities - steam fillets of boneless halibut.

"How much is that?" Mr. Wu asked the waitress directly.

"70 RMBs," she replied.

"Okay. We will have that too." I responded before Mr. Wu had a chance to say anything.

As we were waiting for the food to arrive, I managed to find out a bit more about his life. Having graduated from one of the universities in Shanghai with a degree in geography in 1968, he was sent to work as a weather forecaster in the country side near the city of Guilin in the province of Guangxi, miles away from his family. During that time, he taught himself English by listening to the BBC World Service and the Voice of America ceaselessly. After that tour of duty, he returned to Shanghai and has been teaching English in a Middle School. He has two large classes, both over fifty students. To supplement his income, he also teaches night school from time to time. Although he has been assigned a very small apartment in the staff quarters, he travels to stay with his mother several times a week. His mother lives with her sister in a small flat about a thirty-minutes bus ride from his school.

"How long did you stay in Guangxi, and how do you manage to return to Shanghai?"

"I was there for ten years. I kept applying to return here and my work unit finally granted me the permission when my mother became ill. My ability in English probably helps since they lack teachers here."

"Ten years. You spent ten years of your life in Guangxi." I was thinking out aloud.

"It was a terrible time. We didn't have enough to eat. Meat was rationed and we got only a few ounces of that once in a while. Sometimes, the only thing to eat was some vegetable roots. Because of that period, my health is not good. I have stomach problems. But I can endure."

"Yes, endurance -- one of the wonderful oriental virtues." I decided to keep this thought to myself.

After what seemed a long time of silence, I began again, "so, do you still listen to BBC or VOA?"

"No, I don't have time anymore. After school, I go to watch the stock market. I have put my entire life saving in the stock market and I want to make lots of money. You know, teacher's salary is the second lowest in the scale."

"What is the lowest on the scale?" I didn't know what scale he was referring to since I knew teacher's income in China is definitely above average.

"The lowest in the scale..." After thinking for a moment, "I don't know what the lowest is. But to make money, you have to be in business. Things are different now. It is possible for us to make money. With Deng Xiaoping's economical policies, there is no return for China. We are building a socialist market economy. Of course, it would help if one gets 'guanxi', the right connection."

I think there is really no better oxymoron than 'socialist market economy'. Although Mr. Wu was giving the official party's line, I could sense his genuine respect and admiration towards China's patriarch, Deng Xiaoping. Although no major party decisions can be made without his blessing, Mr. Deng has officially retired from all government and party posts several years ago. Presently, the only titles Deng holds are the President of the All China Bridge Association and the Chairman of the Song Qingling Foundation, a charity named after the wife of Dr. Sun Yatsen.

"Well, Mr. Deng said to get rich is glorious. Since he is in Shanghai now, Mr. Wu, maybe you and I will look him up tomorrow and we can have tea with him." Mr. Wu must have missed my joke since he looked puzzled by my remark.

Mr. Wu ordered some rice for us when the food arrived. The fish dish was particularly delicious and we chatted more as we ate. We talked about the common problem of motivating our students, the spirit of the youths, and the demanding life of a teacher. When I told him I would be taking a train to Nanjing on the following day, Mr. Wu insisted that he should come to send me off. I declined his offer since I was to meet some foreign friends I met in the boat from Hong Kong for breakfast the following morning. I told him I planned to take a taxi from the hotel to the train station.

"How much would the taxi fare be?" I enquired.

"I have no idea, I have never taken a taxi in my life. You know, you can take bus 104 or 109 and it will only cost you 0.20 RMB."

"Thank you, I will keep that in mind." I was actually thinking about the idea of never taking a taxi in one's life. "Do you ride the bike to get around town then?"

"No, I don't own a bike. I just walk or take the bus. See this pair of shoes, it costs 100 RMBs." He pointed to his Nike with pride.

In many ways, Mr. Wu did not fit into the picture of a 'typical' Chinese. About half the adult male population in China are smokers, Mr. Wu does not smoke. For his age, which I figured to be around forty-two, he remains single. And he must be one of the few ordinary citizens in China who does not own a bicycle.

"Mr. Wu, have you ever travelled outside of China?" I decided to change the topic.

"No. Maybe someday I will go to Hong Kong."

"How about China? Have you been to Nanjing, or Beijing?"

"I rode the train to Beijing in 1966 and heard Chairman Mao spoke in Tiananmen Square. There had to be one million students in the square. It was a very festive time. We were very young and only doing what we were told. At that time, we students were allowed to travel around the country by train free. We just had to wear the red arm band."

For many Chinese people, the Great Proletarian Culture Revolution has become a reference point for their lives. They spoke about the madness that happened during that time and the recovery since. Although people only speak of foolishness and mistakes, I am certain the

psychological scars are much deeper. Sadly, the ideological dogma of the communist party necessitates the denial of history since the party is forever taking the correct road to socialism.

I had had a very long day, and talking with Mr. Wu for several hours added to my fatigue. He, on the other hand, had become more and more excited. In order to make a graceful exit, I suggested we would take a walk along the Bund. He could accompany me to the Pujiang Hotel where I would pay a friend a quick visit. I had met Norma in the boat from Hong Kong and she was sick, possibly a mild case of food poisoning from eating lunch at the Kentucky Fried Chicken in Shanghai. Earlier that day, I had called her and said I might stop by to see how she was doing.

"Certainly, I will walk you there. It's right next to the Shanghai Stock Exchange. We can say goodbye there." Mr. Wu was very agreeable.

When the waitress brought us the bill, I tried not to let Mr. Wu see the amount. He asked me how much the dinner cost directly anyway.

"It is about 150 RMBs. Not a bad price by Canadian standard." I tried to reassure him.

"150 RMBs! That is about half a month of my salary." He proceeded to show me his pay slip which was a strip of paper with 354 hand-written on the bottom of it.

I have read many stories about a good dinner in China could cost an ordinary citizen half a month of salary, but to have someone telling me directly was still surreal. After a few minutes of silence, I didn't know why, but I repeated my remark, "Once in a while, we should treat ourselves to a nice dinner."

Under state's subsidy, Mr. Wu is probably paying about 3% of his income towards rent, he told me lunch at the school costs 1.20 RMBs and dinner just a few cents more. He also enjoys free health care, subsidized public transportation, various allowances, and of course no personal income tax. It is only when one looks at the price of high-quality commercial goods, the gap between the wages and buying power becomes obvious.

About half way between the restaurant and the Pujiang Hotel, we ran into Norma and her roommate. It was actually amazing that we saw each other considered the large number of people on the street.

"Hi, I was just on the way to visit you." I greeted Norma. "This is Mr. Wu, we just had dinner together."

Norma introduced her roommate to us but I failed to catch her name. In China, it is common to rent a bed in a budget hotel and you will never know who else may show up. Norma is a Canadian who is teaching English at an engineering institute in Harbin, one of the more remote cities near Russia. She had spent a few days of her Lunar New Year's holidays in Hong Kong.

"Are both of you from Shanghai?" Her roommate, who I found out later, is a Briton teaching in the province of Qinghai in Western China near Tibet.

"Mr. Wu is from Shanghai but I am just travelling in China." For some reason, I didn't think she cared much about my answer.

I began to walk with Norma and telling her my day and asking how she was feeling. Meanwhile, Mr. Wu was trying to strike up a conversation with Norma's roommate. I noticed Mr. Wu was asking a lot of questions and he was particularly impressed when Norma's roommate responded in Putonghua.

For about ten minutes, everything seemed went smoothly as we weaved through thousands of people on the Bund. Suddenly, Norma's roommate stopped abruptly and announced, "I don't want to walk with a lot of people any more. I would like to walk alone."

"What is this woman talking about? There must be thousands of people around us. Is she going mad?" I was thinking to myself and it became clear when she pointed at Norma and said, "I will like to walk with you." Turning to me she extended her hand and said, "goodbye and it is very nice meeting you."

"It is not." I wished I said what was in my mind even though I remained quiet and shook her hand.

"I'm not feeling very well. I think I should head back soon." Norma said to her roommate.

"Maybe we can walk you back to your hotel." I suggested.

"No, no. I don't want any of you in the room when I return." Her roommate seemed to be getting annoyed.

"No, it is quite alright. I will walk for a bit before I go back ... You are leaving tomorrow ... early in the afternoon, I thought it was later ... Maybe we can have breakfast in the morning ... I will call." After saying that to me, Norma turned and shook Mr. Wu's hand.

Feeling strange about the encounter, I realized I could not just leave Mr. Wu. "Let's walk to the other side of the street, it is not as packed." I mumbled to Mr. Wu.

"Are all the British so conservative?" He asked.

I didn't think 'conservative' was the term he had in mind. "Definitely not. You know Julian and Margreet, we both know they are very kind-hearted." Julian and Margreet are the couple who gave me Mr. Wu's address.

"Sometimes I just don't understand foreigners."

"Well...." I couldn't think of anything to add.

We sat on the steps of a building for about half an hour. I spent more time watching the people walked by than talking. I was trying to hide my dismay at the way both Mr. Wu and I were treated by Norma's roommate. Finally, the gusty wind and cold air gave me an excuse to call it the night. Mr. Wu walked me back to the Peace Hotel and we bid farewell in the lobby.

"Next time when you come to Shanghai, you must come to my house. ... I am very pleased to meet you ... Please give my best regards to Julian and Margreet."

"Certainly, I shall see them in about two weeks. I like to thank you again for coming. Maybe next time we meet, we will have coffee in Hong Kong." After watching Mr. Wu's back disappeared through the revolving front door, I dragged my tired body back to my room.