

May 9 2013, WTE column. Editor's headline: "Learning Chinese the hard way"

We left Beijing by night train on Sunday, heading south to reach the famous Terracotta Warriors. An 11-hour ride would get us into Xi'an Monday morning, to a stay of four days. My friend had bought the cheapest possible train tickets, and our party of four—Qi ("Chee"), her parents, and yours truly—had been assigned random berths in 6-berth compartments. We shared cramped quarters with assorted male and female strangers. When I asked where to change into pjs, Qi answered, "You don't change. You sleep in your clothes."

Worse were the unisex toilets. Separate cubicles featured cold-water washbasins lacking soap and towels— which, like the lacking toilet paper, is common even in restaurants. At table in a Beijing classy eatery, when asking about napkins, we'd been told we'd have to pay extra for them. My friend distributed packets of tissue.

In Xi'an museums and restaurants I was to acquaint myself further with public toilets, which are little more than a hole in the ground, lined with stainless steel or porcelain, above which to squat. These, at least, were gender-segregated. As for the unisex ones in the train: since males don't deign to squat when they pee, anywhere you place your feet in the tiny cubicle, you step into urine.

Lucky for me, for the return trip the cheapest berths were no longer available. For double the price—\$80 instead of \$40 per person—we ended in a four-berth compartment of an upscale sleeping coach. Spacious, tastefully laid out and nicely decorated, the coach even featured a cubicle with sit-down toilet—though its one roll of toilet paper, soon used up, went unrefilled. Still, compared to train fare in the U.S. and Europe, even the higher prices were incredibly cheap.

In Xi'an we took the subway, then hiked to the hotel where we had reservations. To my surprise we would be using two rooms, each with two big beds.

"We ought to share one room," I said. In Qi's apartment, necessity demanded I share her sleeping arrangement, but now she shook her head. The reservations were in place. That was that.

Past experience taught me: Even when a decision materially affects certain others, my friend doesn't consult these others during decision-making. I sometimes wonder how this plays out with co-workers and subordinates. Not that Qi lacks acumen. In the States she earned an MBA, a masters in taxation, and a CPA license, sometimes working for such giants as Gibson Guitars and Deutsche Bank. In Beijing she holds a position with an international company that sends her to headquarters in Taiwan, South Korea, Holland. Still, something's missing: understanding another's feelings.

Back in the States, Qi once related an astounding family dynamic. While attending college in China she fell in love. She and the young man wanted to marry when they graduated.

“My parents were against it,” she said. “They thought he wasn’t right for me.”

“So?” Parents rarely laud their children’s choices.

“I broke up with him.”

“That’s terrible! You were in love—and of age! Weren’t you upset with your parents?”

“No,” she said. “Parents know best.”

These days, it’s the parents who defer to Qi. Following her ten-year stint in the U.S., she briefly returned home but soon headed north. Once she found a job and apartment in Beijing, her parents followed.

“The weather is terrible down south,” she said of her hometown, a thirty-three-hour train ride from Beijing. “Hot and muggy in summer; chilly, wet-cold in winter.” Her parents still own their apartment back home.

“Might they sell it to help you finance something here?” I asked.

“They haven’t kept it up. Plus, it’s stuffed full of useless junk. My mom won’t get rid of anything. Is it worth my arguing with her? No.”

So, the three of them live a make-shift existence in a one-bedroom apartment of a high-rise that looks modern from the outside—I’m told it’s less than eight years old—but features what I’d call substandard housing. While the wooden floors in living and bedroom are lovely, the sinks in kitchen and bath are ancient, far from user-friendly. Neither has hot water, apparently per government regulation. The kitchen faucet drips relentlessly. Before anyone can take a brief shower, the small boiler must be turned on for an hour. In kitchen and bath, pipes run every which way, both pvc and cast iron, including the sewage pipe from the toilet upstairs that links to their toilet.

The sole clothes closet is the size of a tall shoebox. No chest of drawers: the family’s clothes are stored in various suitcases. Per government decree, the heat was turned off March 15. When I arrived, everyone wore several layers of clothes.

“Are the apartments government-built?” I asked. “They seem poorly insulated.”

“Privately built. The walls are double cement bricks, better than in the States.”

