

# Reflections on Experiences Abroad

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## American Dumpling Warrior

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## American Dumpling Warrior

Benjamin D. Utter

**L**ife humbles us in many ways. Some are allotted chronic illness; some, poverty; others, toupees. Anyone spared such instructive gifts should consider giving international travel a whirl. Bewildering ignorance is, as travel writer Bill Bryson has described, one of the harrowing glories of going abroad: “Suddenly you are five years old again. You can't read anything, you have only the most rudimentary sense of how things work, you can't even reliably cross a street without endangering your life. Your whole existence becomes a series of interesting guesses” (Bryson 36).

Existence in China, where I taught English for a year at Yantai University after graduating from Ouachita, granted me many such opportunities to reconnect with my bewildered inner child. Anyone who has made the sudden shift from college student to teacher will know that the cognitive whiplash is stunning. Projecting confidence in the classroom is paramount and maintaining a “competent teacher” face isn't easy against the relentless firehose of your own inexperience. This is not made easier when conducted across a language barrier and in an unfamiliar culture. I recall well the student who greeted me one morning with, “You are getting a little fat.” She didn't mean it unkindly, and such matter-of-fact observations were not considered particularly offensive in China, but it didn't exactly focus my mind as I tried to prepare for the start of class. To be fair, I had become a great patron of a restaurant near campus called the *Da Da Jiaozi Wang*, or “Big Big Dumpling King,” and perhaps I *was* beginning to emanate a certain rotund aura of big big dumpling royalty myself.

These unsought mortifications of the ego were as nothing to one that I invited into my own life in the form of a twenty-year-old Physical Education major named Li Jiao. Jiao's folks had sent him to a Shandong province martial arts boarding school in the hopes that he would be the next Jackie Chan. Hong Kong movie stardom failed to

call, and so Jiao proceeded glumly along to college, instead, where he *did* get the honor of serving as martial arts tutor to a certain American dumpling king!

Every morning at precisely five o'clock, my alarm clock cleared its digital throat and announced to my dream-self that the time for flying, falling, playing Legos with Mr. Rogers, or what have you, was over, and the time for my morning dose of sweaty pain had once again arrived. I was not the only one to have chosen this daily destiny. Waiting in the dim hallway outside my apartment door were Nick and Akiko—a fellow teacher from Wisconsin and a Japanese exchange student, respectively. The main doors of the building housing foreign teachers and students were locked from the outside (for our “protection”) until six-thirty in the morning, so the three of us got a daily fire escape drill, easing ourselves out a side window like dyslexic cat burglars to drop with sibilant grunts onto grass aglitter with frost. Panting already, we skirted the building to where Jiao Li was waiting in the parking lot, our own little frosty tenth circle of Hell.

I had met Jiao on a snowy morning three weekends earlier, at what I had thought was to be a martial arts demonstration. A poor translation, as it turned out, for this was in fact a martial arts *class*, one at which there were to be no bystanders, but only participants. Fine, except that this particular bystander hadn't been doing too much in the way of exercise between trotting to and from the *Da Da Jiaozi Wang* since the weather had grown too cold (I thought) to continue my morning runs along the beach. And whatever coordination and elasticity of limb I might have begun to develop during an all-too-brief semester of the Tai Kwon Do class my senior year had long since wandered away, leaving me with all the flexibility of a Chinese Communist Party official. But it wouldn't do to be the only one in the square merely standing around taking pictures, so I dropped my coat beside that of the insufferably athletic and enthusiastic Nick, who was already doing warmup sprints, and wandered over to a shivering group of students under the direction of Jiao.

Life is sudden and cruel, and I wonder sometimes how words like “vicissitude” and “anomaly” ever entered into language, so routine are they. How comforting, therefore, are the little consistencies of existence: goldfish will always die within the week; keys are always in the wrong pocket when one is carrying groceries to the car; and, it turned out, coaches sound the same even on the other side of the world. Back in the days before the soft fabrics of athleisure wear, coaches could never sneak up on you. You could always hear their approach, thanks to their nylon wind pants. As a runner, I had never much cared for track suits myself—the “zip-zop zip-zop” of every step was

maddening. But there in China, I finally discovered their greater purpose. Need a little snap in your snap kick? Is your “hi-ya!” a little low? Pop on a pair of “zip-zop” pants and hear the power! WHOOSH!! WHAAPHH!!

Even without the sound effects, Jiao’s demonstration of Wushu techniques would have been nothing short of amazing, and I found myself applauding as wildly as the first-year girls standing beside me. Unfortunately, his performance was to be followed by an assessment of our abilities. Nick, who had been studying a variety of martial arts forms since childhood and had a decade’s worth of confidence and grace in his movements, soundly pummeled a sophomore in the sparring ring and so began to make a name for himself among the students. I did, too, by failing to pivot correctly while attempting a turning side kick and falling right over. Thankfully, due to my quick reflexes, I landed gracefully on my ear. Later, after weeks of pre-dawn practice with Jiao, I would mark my improvement by the fact that I hadn’t done that again. Beyond that, it was hard to see much progress. Jiao didn’t seem too impressed, either.

He had agreed to train us privately in the mornings out of sheer friendliness. Plenty of other students spent time with visiting teachers in order to practice their English, but this seemed of little interest to Jiao, whose English, so far as I could tell, did not seem to consist of much beyond “leg,” “kick,” and “Oh, no!” This last he whinnied every two minutes or so while waving his hands in front of me as if trying to stop a horrible traffic accident from occurring. This wouldn’t have bothered me so much if he didn’t accompany his every exclamation with such a startled look, as if amazed that anyone could bungle such simple maneuvers as he had just demonstrated.

Akiko, whose English was only marginally better than Jiao’s, appointed herself interpreter, which meant that she got a breather whenever she wanted to, usually so that she could squeal, “No, Ben! You . . . no this. Quick!” and similarly helpful things. I wasn’t sure what brought Akiko out to be chewed on by the wind each morning, but suspected it had more to do with our instructor than with what he was instructing. Jiao was solid and lean, with square, handsome features under boyishly curly hair. Akiko cracked easily under my interrogation, cheerfully squeaking, “Yes, I very like him!” Then, after a moment, “Oh, I very like you too!” Well, who knows?

From where we stood in the parking lot, we could look east through a line of trees and just see the morning white caps atop the dark waves of the Yellow Sea, which scorned our gaze and hurled back an eviscerating wind. Eyes and noses streamed as Jiao put us through our paces, and the very air seemed flecked with shrapnel as I

choked it down in great, gulping breaths. Even Nick, who was usually positive beyond all reason, was sometimes hard-pressed to enjoy himself during those mornings. "Look at it this way," he panted helpfully to me as we set off on our post-workout jog, "if you get pneumonia you can sleep in tomorrow."

Why did I subject myself to this? I certainly didn't harbor any illusions that I'd ever be much more than a kicker of trees where martial arts were concerned. (That particular exercise, which even I could manage, was finally denied to us one morning when an old gentleman broke off from his Tai Chi regimen to come over and give us a stern lecture about kindness to plants.) Perhaps those exhausting, demoralizing mornings served as a sort of long-delayed penance. When I was about seven years old, I saw part of *Karate Kid* at a friend's house and immediately became inspired to instruct my then five-year-old little brother in the ancient and mysterious ways of the martial arts using techniques I made up on the spot. Now, fifteen years later, I knew how he must have felt as I patiently kicked him around the living room, clucking disapprovingly over his disability to stop bruising.

And now another sharp blow, as I am confronted with the fact that a further twenty years have passed since my days of teaching at Yantai. I wish I could report that those grueling exertions in the pre-dawn serve as the origin story for the finely-tuned fighting machine I've since become, but it isn't so. The intervening years have shaped me into a more confident professor, but it's been a long time since I kicked so much as a tree, preferring these days to hug them. I hope that Jiao Li would be proud, though, that the speed and fury of his protegee's chopsticks before a bowl of dumplings remains breathtaking to behold.

## References

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