

The Foreign Expert

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My wife is in business. The business is unimportant, but the business has taken her to China. I am fifty and unemployed, so I follow, Mei telling me that worst comes to worst I can be a spoken-English teacher: what's called a foreign expert. All you have to do is to repeat some catchy English idioms, like "same old, same old," and smile a lot. "You can do the job," Mei says. I agree, and in another week, Mei's mom comes up with a connection. A daughter of an old neighbor, a Miss Luo, has the job of finding foreign experts, so Mei's mom calls Miss Luo's mom. The interview is set. I can show any time on Wednesday. The time doesn't matter. I can show up on Thursday, but I must let my wife know. She will pass on the update to the Luos.

First, I have to solve the problem of finding the company office. The addresses are not in any recognizable pattern. Number 112 is next to number 44, number 33 wedged between 99 and 5. "At first, the whole thing makes sense," Mei explains. "The alley is made of a few tin huts. Then, the Italians take over, burn down half a block's worth and start in with the pillars. The British kick them out and

add some neat colonial jobs, and there's the park, though to be fair, some farmers plant bok choy in one spot, but the British finish the thing off with a stone circle table. That's the key."

"Why can't the driver drop me off in front?" I interrupt Mei's progress.

Mei has slender fingers, which she uses to tap on the wooden foldout in the middle of her mom's kitchen, "The alleyway is only partly done and is a tight fit for any vehicle. Nobody risks it. Don't worry. It's only a few buildings in, and if you get lost, you can find a mahjong game. It's a constant game. Mom misses it. It belongs to the Neighborhood Watch. They were big during the terrible time, but now it's a harmless club. That Mrs. Chi's the leader. She plants a little rouge on her cheeks. It really stinks. Mr. Cheng will help. He's Miss Luo's uncle and has helped any number of lost experts, don't worry."

With that, my mother-in-law comes in, serves us black sesame soup, and when I'm done, she flashes me a nearly angelic smile and starts again with the soup until I motion her to stop. Mom looks hurt and leaves. My wife shakes her head disapprovingly. The next day, Mom (she insists I call her Mom) meets me at the kitchen table and before I can say no, is pressing a metal spoon filled with steaming black sesame soup against my fragile lips. The soup is thick and sticks to my throat and lips. I finish the bowl and then another until my throat burns with sweetness, but Mom is happy and hands me a scrap of paper, which I assume contains the directions to the New China Language Service. I hand the scrap to the driver. Thirty minutes later, the two of us reach the park at the start of the alley.

Four players are seated around a stone circle table at the near center of the park. One player has rouge, caked to her chin and cheeks, and is wearing a delicately frayed red armband. That must be Mrs. Chi. To her right, a fellow with pencil thin eyebrows lounges on a seat that looks like a flattened mushroom. I'm guessing that player is Mr. Cheng though any other three players are as likely. Then, I see a butcher shop with a live dog in front of 92 Goubuli Alley, so I start in with Mei's directions. Take a catty corner from a foreign pillar towards the smudged glass doors obscured by a pile of milk containers; cross over the containers and walk towards an elevator. Don't press the button. If you press the button, you will be there forever. Climb up the stairs. Do not linger on any one stair as you may soon find yourself in an uncomfortable position unless

you are transfixed by a yellow day glow. Then open a narrow door that leads to an office overwhelmed by one desk with a plastic sheet extending beyond its front drawers.

Be careful. Miss Luo sits to the side of the desk and faces the window. That window is the only window of the office. Listen to her questions. Do not worry about your answers. She only knows a few words of English and is an avid mahjong watcher so most likely will not see you. But check the application. Make sure she has filled in the box for “adult” and not “juvenile” or “child.” Then, flag down a taxi. Show the back of the sheet whose front has the directions for the New China Language Service. Remember the fare should be no more than 70 bucks. Otherwise, don’t leave the cab. Call me. I will kill the driver.

The interview goes as predicted. I check off the box for “adult.” The driver does the trip for 65 and some change, and Mom serves me the black sesame. The black sesame sticks to my tongue and throat and weighs down my belly like a brick. Two days later, I have my first customer. I ask Mei what their level of English is. “How should I know,” she replies. “You are the foreign expert.”

Mei writes out my students’ address and tells me a foreign expert is expected to swallow the fare just like an expert is expected to swallow mom’s black sesame. But the driver is pleasant enough and drops me off in front of a tall building erected from an army of tinted cubes. The security desk blocks the elevator, and I give the guard the office number of my students. The guard has a left ear that sticks out of a neatly shaped cap and leads me along a luminously tiled floor until the two of us reach an elevator. Inside the elevator is a small television. On the screen is a dating show where a bachelor stands in front of twenty or so prospective dates. The host wears a tux and exchanges banter with some middle-aged and teenaged women, all in neat outfits, some with reflecting sparkles, some wearing business attire; all courteously smiling at his jokes.

The elevator opens. The guard has a walkie-talkie and uses the antennae of the walkie-talkie to motion me past a series of doors whose numbering pattern is easily discernible. The odds are on the right side, the evens the left except that there’s no 504 or 514: the reasoning for that oversight easy to follow, four being the sign of death. I start past 536, the number on the slip of paper given to me by New China Language Service, but the guard tugs at my sleeve,

and I meet at the door a middle-aged woman who points at a line of children and says, "They're yours."

I look down at four very young children; one boy, three girls. They smile at me. None have teeth. I clasp my fingers together and smile. Then, we study each other for five minutes until the older woman, dressed in a flowered blouse, adds, "I have to go."

I cup my hands over my lips, though it's unlikely the toddlers understand a word of English, and ask, "Where?"

She takes a deep breath, "Gentleman, I have to work."

"What am I to do with them?"

"To do with them?"

"Yes, to do with them...for the next two hours."

"You are the foreign expert."

"I teach adults."

She wrinkles her forehead, "You are the expert."

Before I can grab hold of the frilled sleeves to her blouse, she disappears, leaving behind a momentary burst of wind. Then, the burst is gone, and I turn to face my class.

I must admit the three girls start off remarkably well behaved, sitting cross-legged (like little Buddha's) on a small circular carpet at the near center of the gray tiled room. The boy I feel is going to be a bit more of a challenge. He takes me to a window that is stuck open with a small broomstick and points at either the gray broomstick or the turn of the century European cathedral bordering the apartment building. I sit the toothless boy down inside our circle and ask in English for my students' names. There is silence. Then, one of the girls starts to giggle. She has a very flat nose that may add a faint hissing noise to her laughter. The other looks like a leader type. She has her shoulders straight back and for a four or three year old, walks with a confident strut. The third turns her back away from me, burying her head in the leader's belly.

Immediately, I realize the futility of my efforts: in order to teach my students English, they have to have a sampling of my language or I have to know some Chinese, and though my wife is Chinese, her English is very good, and I am lazy so sit quietly hoping that my students will confuse a foreign expert with a zombie. Instead the leader uses her right palm to signal the other two girls in action, and the three of them charge ensemble towards the window half held open by a metal broom. I recognize the immediate danger and

can see the headline the next day in the city newspaper: *A foreign expert pushes young females out the fifth floor of the only hyper modernist cubic structure in the Goubuli District. Toddlers pancaked near a neo-renaissance church, relic of a cruel imperialist occupation, execution of expert at 3*, so I rush to block the open window with my outstretched arms, the boy sticking his knee out, and I fall on the shiny tile while extending my right hand in the manner of the leader to check for any blood, and when I spot a stain splotching up the hyper modernist tile, I take out a tissue and wipe away the trace before coming face-to-face with the leader who directs the other two girls to stretch out each of my arms, the boy assuming a prominent position on my back.

At first I resist. I may be slightly shiftless with the same skill set as a zombie, but I am a foreign expert so believe in free will until the leader points her neatly tied together ponytail at the half open window. I consider trying to unloosen the broom handle so as to secure the hyper modern office space. Then, it occurs to me that while solving both the safety concern as well as temporarily eliminating the capital punishment alternative, the bolting of the window still does not solve my essential concern: what to do with my four toddlers for the next 104 minutes. So I let one girl stretch one arm out until the arm falls nearly out the socket and when the others want to do the same, I let my arm go limp while watching my leader's ponytail flutter in a slight breeze. The boy, though, is not interested in my arms. He navigates his way down my lower spine and when he finds the nub of my lower back, taps at my spine before jumping up and landing on the exact spot to maximize my pain.

I let out a gasp, but the leader puts her small finger to her lips and breathes what I feel to be a word of English, though I recognize it's highly unlikely over the last fifteen minutes that she's absorbed even that much. But before I can meditate on the infinite possibilities of teaching a language to students who do not know a word, the boy lands again on the crawl of my back, thereby providing an effective test of my threshold for pain. The boy giggles, finds some skin between my shoulder blades, and pinches the skin very hard. Not satisfied with the boy's work, our leader digs her nails into a birthmark cresting my left shoulder until I become sure she has left a thick red scar. Then, she gives a nearly angelic smile while pointing her braid at the window jammed open by a metal broom. I

close my eyes and put my nose against the tile. The class repeats the lesson. I never do get used to the exercise but, after a while, am able to take respites between when the boy lands again on the nub of my lower back and when the leader presses a nail into the birthmark on my shoulder, so as a responsible foreign expert, I start to worry whether my class will become bored by the lesson. No worries.

My students remain fully preoccupied with the game until the Assistant shows up. She stands over me, her high heels next to my semi-clenched fist. I look up her blouse and observe sweaty underwear. She glares at me, but the leader runs up to kiss me on the cheek. The toothless boy pats me on the head, ruffling my grayish balding scalp. Then, the three of them wave good-bye to me. They are waving at me angelically. The Assistant comes back with an envelope with 400 bucks inside. I stare at the smiling pink faces of Mao and take a taxi home with two questions front and center: have I been fated to receive a weekly lesson on suffering from four very young children and will I survive my time as the foreign expert?

When I get back to my in-laws' apartment, I am determined to find my answer, but Mei inserts her thin fingers into the scars burning in my shoulders and reminds me tonight is her turn for making black sesame soup. The kitchen of my in-law's villa is a simple square. It has a window out over an unused field. There is a wok on top of a stainless steel stove. The stove is electric. The kitchen sink has a special faucet, which serves filtered water. The Formica tile is shined a sparkling clean. There is some staining on the wall nearest a foldout kitchen table, as my mother-in-law's younger sister likes to smoke there and talk to my mother-in-law who, like my wife, has learned to speak without using words. The rice is soaking in cold water, the black sesame in a glass jar in a cabinet above the wok. The air clothed in a stinky fragrance, the sesame blackened by a gas flame. As the smoke fills the kitchen, Mei takes out a pestle and grinds the sesame into a paste; then, adds the paste in water and brings the water to a boil before she allows the mix to simmer.

Mei serves me a cup of black sesame soup, and, while I sip on the soup, inspects my scars, "Your students did a job on you."

"Can you call Miss Luo," I ask.

"I will, but we'll also have her family over."

"Is that necessary? I may have checked off the wrong box. Who

knows, but that would give her a way out.”

“Probably, but here’s the thing; most likely it is nothing to do anything.

“Still you might want to know.”

Mei fills a spoon with black sesame soup. “My mom was the no. 2.”

“Yes, I know, Miss Luo’s uncle also plays at the same table,” I say, proud of the knowledge that I have gained as a foreign expert.

“Well, he was,” Mei says, “until he wasn’t. Then he was again.”

“What do you mean?” I stop smiling.

“Well,” Mei says, “Mrs. Chi found out, probably told by some other big shot Mr. Cheng has a great-grandfather who had a *li* of tea near Suzhou—probably lost it. His kitchen was empty as ours.”

“So.”

“If you had a relation with land, even as far back as a great-grandfather, you’re a target. The Chairman believed only a family, whose kitchen had been empty like our kitchen’s been for generations, could be trusted. One night, Mrs. Chi held a meeting. Every week, we had a meeting. I was very young at the time of Mr. Cheng’s meeting so don’t remember but mom and dad brought me to many struggles. It’s part of my education. Dad stretched out the guy’s arms (I think he delivered coal to us) until the guy’s arm was nearly out of the guy’s shoulder socket. Mom tossed one cup of glass and helps me and younger brother jam glass in the guy’s back and shoulders. The target smiled at me. I remember that. He looked like an angel. Mom and a couple of the neighbors dumped some ink on the fellow, and suddenly, I wanted to pet the angel, thinking how cute our angel was and was about to do so until the guy shouted something about how he’s a stinking ally of the foreigners. The talk only got Mrs. Chi angry.”

“Wasn’t that what she wanted?” I ask.

Mei puts the spoon of black sesame in my mouth, “Mrs. Chi didn’t believe an angel could be sincere. She told dad and some of the others to yank harder until our angel was about to fly above 97 Goubuli. Dad’s sweating, trying to pull out the angel’s arm when Mrs. Chi let the angel finish his talk.

“That’s not really a big deal.”

“What do you mean,” I say, feeling a sharp swelling against my lower back.

“It happened every week. Everybody knew the struggle was our duty, and Mr. Cheng definitely didn’t get the worst of it. He and Mrs. Chi remain friends, and though he leaves the Committee for a while, he never got kicked out of the game.

“It’s possible, though like I said, highly unlikely.”

“That Miss Luo is trying to revenge her family. You could have told me before. I might have been able to latch onto a different language service. They’re not so rare.”

“Don’t be silly,” Mei takes a cloth and wipes away a stain from my lips. “Miss Luo is from the 90s generation. I doubt she cares about that nonsense. My mistake was forgetting the *guan xi*. The Luo’s expect payback for making you an expert. Anyways, they see no reason to help you, and the company sees a way to make a quick buck. Those *ya pi shi* are willing pay anything to have their brats to hear English from a live foreigner.

“Don’t worry. I’ll invite those guys over for some steamed fish and black sesame soup. The Luo’s are known to prefer their soup thick,” and two nights later, the Luo’s come over to my parents’ apartment in the Olympic District. Miss Luo wears high heels and carries a plastic sealed tray of Goubuli buns, which Mom takes to the kitchen. Mr. Luo has with him a bottle of Moutai with a red and gold label, looking like it contains motor oil, and which fills the dining room with the aroma of soy sauce. Mom brings out some black sesame while Mei sets down a fresh river bass with enough ginger to burn a hole in our bellies. After that, we have no problems.