

A Journey to Qinghai: Tutoring in Tibetan China

Yining Bao

Introduction

This paper is a narrative of my summer travelling to and teaching English in one of the Tibetan autonomous regions of China. Last summer I went to Qinghai Province, one province in the west of China, traveling around and tutoring in a middle school. I want to show you my experiences in Qinghai Province, where I have been, what I have seen, and what I have felt. The journey to Qinghai was really significant and also helpful for me to know other parts of our country China. It was a journey full of culture. It was a journey full of fun.

Start of Our Journey

We were on the flight from Nanjing, Jiangsu Province, China. It took about five hours then we would come to an inland place of China -- Qinghai Province. I wondered how was the Tibetan Plateau like, would I have some kind of altitude stress at this high sea level, what wild animals would I meet through the trip... As this is a place I had never been to, everything I experienced there would be a surprise! For the second part, I would tutor in a junior middle school in the Tibetan autonomous region. I wondered what reaction those students would show us. Hope I could enjoy the whole journey!



1 A Trip around Qinghai

After about five hours' flight, we finally arrived at Xining's airport. Xining is the central city of the capital of Qinghai province, and it's the largest city on the Tibetan Plateau. This city was a commercial hub along the Northern Silk Road's Hexi Corridor, which was very important in the history. Our traveling would set out from here from here, Xining -- a city used in ancient

China for foreign trade. Although it was just the beginning of summer, the weather in Xining was still a little cold. Of course, more than three thousand meters above sea level could also be one of the reasons. But still, this trip made me feel excited that I had never been somewhere very inland. We reserved a guide before coming, in order to introduce us to some special things or animals like the yak and sand in five colors, some interesting stories or legends, the traditional food of several places, and some best places to take pictures. When we picked up all the luggage, he was already waiting outside. After loading our luggage into his car, we started our "real" journey.

We traveled two weeks with guide and saw many historical scenic spots. Some were related to the local traditional religion, some were built for cultural retention or economic intercourse. In the Mogao Grottoes, which are also called "Thousand Buddha Caves", ancient craftsmen built by hand grand murals, including thousands of Buddha murals, Buddhist legends and historical stories. As to the biggest religion in this area, Tibetan Buddhism has flourished in this region. Kumbum Monastery, built to memorialize the founder of this religion, is very magnificent and viewed as the center of Tibetan Buddhism in northwest China. And the picture here was one of the most important scenic spots in the Kumbum Monastery, which is called "The Eight Pagodas of Buddha Sakyamuni", built in 1776. These eight pagodas have kept standing in a neat line in the square of Kumbum Monastery for hundreds of years. These eight



pagodas, each of which has its symbolic meaning, are used to extol the eight great virtues of the founder of Buddhism, Sakyamuni. Besides, in the ancient times, people designed the silk road for import and export trade, and the starting point of this road is the Jade Gate. Jade Gate, the city of

frontier fortress, is one kind of solitary and desolate scene. It is also known as the "lonely" city. As one of the frontier barriers of ancient China, there is not only the vast and desolate desert

here, but also the sense of garrisoned soldiers' lonely danger in the ancient times. In one ancient Chinese poem, there is this description: "the spring breeze won't pass the gate". This is the Jade Gate.

In addition to the human-made scenery, in this northwest area there are also many wonders created by the "skillful craftsman" -- nature. Surrounded by snow mountains, the Saka Salt Lake, known as the "mirror of the sky", reflects a beautiful breathtaking blue. In the world of salt, walking on the lake was just like walking on the clouds, as if flying in a heaven. Years of wind and rain have turned the stones into a city, which is called "Ghost City". It's miraculous. There's also Echo Sand Mountain. Together with wind, the sand could make a pleasant sound. The crescent spring is an oasis that has been in this desert throughout history, together with a legend of lovers, beautiful and hopeful.



Apart from sightseeing and hotel breaks, most of our time was just spent in the car in these first two weeks. Qinghai Province is within the scope of the plateau, its terrain is complex and landform is diverse. Many highways there are built on mountains and landscapes. In our trip, it's like, when we finished one part of sightseeing, we needed to drive two to three, or more hours to get to another spot. Our guide drove for us, so that long-time driving everyday within a week really made him tired. We drove across an "unmanned" highway. On the long and straight road, there was no car and no one with us.

If looking around, there was not a single plant around the road. This was a desolate place. This was the Gobi Desert.



This road made me a little bored at first, because the scenery was almost the same, but all of the sudden I was shocked! Because I saw several small tornadoes one by one! I screamed "Look! Tornadoes!" and let others take photos. The guide explained to us that these kinds of small tornadoes are very common to see around this road, but they were basically harmless to people and cars. We were relieved a lot when hearing this. After about one hour, we were still on this road. The long drive really tired the guide out. He began to nod off and was about to fall asleep. Fortunately, my father noticed his situation



quickly and woke him up. With this opportunity, he stopped the car and let us take a rest. We had also been sitting in the car for several hours, so we got out to stretch a little. On this road without others, my father was suddenly in the mood to take some photos. The guide found some good angles for us, so my

parents jumped up then he took the photos. And my friend and I made a pose that we sat back to back in the middle of the road, looking up at the sky.

These first two weeks travelling with my parents and friend, I don't know how to say, it might be like getting pain together with happiness. We were excited and curious before, when, and after at what we had experienced, like the special taste of Moslem food, the traditional yogurt they make by hand, and so on. In our hometown Suzhou, a city located in the south of China, maybe because our city is coastal, tall buildings are everywhere in our city, so are the cities nearby. And each city in our region would have some large shopping malls for people to shop and entertain, which are also similar. These made me feel there's nothing new in the urban cities. But when we came to this highland, although their economy is not so good, their buildings are historic, their city makes me feel the real and nature of this land. When driving on the highway, we sometimes even saw some sheep across the road, and cattle and sheep rushed from the top of mountains, without "fearing" danger. There were so many interesting and amazing things there, like the tornadoes, the snow mountains due to the high altitude, many small bushes in order to prevent further desertification, and a lot of dense grids on the sand slope to reduce dust. For differences between this region and my home town, such as the landform, religions, tradition, environment and something else, all of what I saw was enjoyable.

2 Arriving Daowei

I woke up and found that the landscape in my eyes had changed from dunes to rolling mountains with a little green. I just thought of our next destination-- Daowei Junior Middle School. I was going to learn and volunteer teaching English in this school! Daowei Township, its exact address is Daowei Tibetan township, Xunhua Salar Autonomous Region, Qinghai Province. This is a place where Tibetans live in groups. Similarly, students in this school are all Tibetan. After thinking of it, I felt a little nervous to think about how their people are, but

at the same time, I was thrilled imagining what kind of students I would teach and what I needed to teach them.

Over the mountains, we had been on the winding road for a long time. My friend saw a clear green river at the foot of one mountain, so she asked the guide what's the name of this river. Unexpectedly, the guide's answer surprised us a lot -- "This is the Yellow River". In my impression, "Yellow River", just as its name implies, the water in this river is yellow and mixed with a great number of sediment. If we google "Yellow River" online, we will always see a either raging or quiet but wide river in yellow. But the river we saw at this time was very clear. As we were wondering why the Yellow River here was so beautiful and clear, guide told us that it's only when the Yellow River flows into Gansu Province that it begins to carry large quantities of sediment. We wanted to stop the car to take some photos, but we were on the highway and there was no stopping place permitted nearby, so we had to give up.



After a while, we were close to our destination, reaching the town. There were also some small restaurants and supermarkets nearby. Daowei Junior Middle School was built on a hillside. The car crossed a little potholed road and finally arrived at the school gate. Their gate was closed at this time, and it was very quiet inside. We stood in front of the gate, wondering how to enter. Just at this time, one teacher came out to ask about us. As we had contacted the headmaster before coming, the teacher knew this situation and led us in to see the headmaster. When walking from the gate to opposite teaching buildings, I found the students were attending outdoor activities. Their activities varied, including basketball, table tennis, running, and so on. I also heard some students were reading aloud their textbook in Mandarin.

We were invited into a conference room, then the headmaster came to introduce us to some information about this school. Actually in this school English is not one major subject for students. Because of the specificity of Qinghai Province, many ethnic minorities live in groups in this area. And in Daowei township, as a township in the Tibetan autonomous region, the home language of people here is Tibetan. As a result, students need to learn three languages at school, which are Mandarin, Tibetan, and English. Apart from the differences in language learning, other classes are almost the same as ours.

In addition to study, the headmaster and another teacher came to introduce us to some information about students' life at school. They told us that few years before, Daowei Junior Middle School was very simple and poorly equipped, with only two teaching buildings and insufficient student dormitories. But currently, through multiple donations, they have one more teaching building and one new bathroom for students to use. Because of the government's subsidies, students' school accommodation, food, washing and other basic problems have been almost solved. Because most of students live far away, might need an hour to walk to school, so the school provided a school dormitory life. Students live in dormitories from Monday to Friday and return home on weekends. The number of students were about 400, but as the headmaster said, they only had 3 English teachers right now, one for each grade.

After getting a basic understanding of this school and students, the headmaster started assigning work to me and my friends. We would teach students for two weeks as volunteer teachers. I would work in Grade 8 and my friend would be in Grade 7. It was already dark by this time. We went and got a little acquainted with the corresponding teachers we would work with, then we went back to dormitory to pack up, and prepare materials for the next day's class.

In the early morning of next day, we got up very early to catch the breakfast and the work time from morning self-study. We ran to the canteen and saw almost all the students were

standing in lines and chatting. They stopped talking and kept staring at us as we suddenly appeared. I thought it was because we were actually strangers for them and quite different from them. We looked very different from them just at the first sight. My friends and I had a relatively white skin; but their skin shows black and red. This made me, a newcomer for them,

feel that they are modest, hospitality. Actually they characteristics in the them in the rest of time. It's smile to me, asking me if And if they got something and share with me. I was a



very real and full of did show these kinds of process I got along with like they would always there are any problems. good, they would show me little nervous about their

staring and didn't know where should I go. We then met the teacher we had met yesterday and other teachers. They led us into the canteen and invited us to have breakfast with them.

After breakfast, I came to the office and said hello to all the teachers there. During this whole day, when I was free, I would help the English teacher Walmer to review students' homework together. When there were English classes, I would follow Walmer to the classes and study the teacher's class. Actually I think his class was very simple, completely based on the textbook. Before coming to the classroom Walmer had told me this class would focus on the present perfect tense. As the class started, he first let students write words and phrases from memory. After collecting all of their dictation books, Walmer started teaching. The textbook is designed to teach in units. Walmer just started from the topic of one unit, in which the present perfect tense is included. He didn't explain much, only read the definition of this tense then just asked students to remember the structure of this sentence. After that, Walmer and students spent a long time reading and translating the meaning of some dialogues and articles in the textbook. Through the translation, students were all following the teacher. Their translation

was so perfect that I was a little skeptical about this. When Walmer asked one student to say the meaning of the sentence, it was still perfect. However he wanted to continually let this student say one word's meaning in this sentence. Walmer didn't force him to answer, as this student kept silent for a while, Walmer let him sit down.

After class, I borrowed one student's book to read, and immediately found out why they had such a big change in the translation of sentences and words. Before class, students marked all the Chinese translation of the articles in the book. Everyone has the same tutorial book, no wonder their sentences' translation were almost the same. It was so neat when they read the translation together! However, as to the specific words (except those basic words "is", "can", "my", etc.), they almost didn't know, only to guess from the whole sentences' translation. In addition, through the whole class I noticed that there was not any extension of the knowledge they learnt, even there were some exercises that Walmer hasn't mentioned in class. From my perspective this was completely not enough for students to "learn" English.

For this problem I asked him once after class, is this too little for students to learn? Walmer described there were no other ways for them to learn English. As he said, there was a situation that, when these students were in Grade 7, the school didn't recruit enough English teachers, so these students got a substitute teacher, who was not a professional English teacher. As a result, these students nearly didn't learn English that year. Also English was taught as a minor language in this region, so when students moved from Grade 7 to 8, one English lesson a week was cut. So it was really hard for Walmer to help students catch up in a limited time. Walmer himself also felt helpless to teach English to Grade 8 students with zero foundation. He had spent great efforts encouraging students to learn the vocabulary from textbooks as much as possible, and as to set phrases and the grammar part, he could only let them recite fixed

phrases and sentences patterns, hoping the students would remember some of them during practices and exams.

After listening to his explanation, I think I could understand Walmer's current teaching mode. The most essential task currently was to get these students to learn basic vocabulary and grammar mentioned in the textbooks in a limited time, as much as possible. At the end of the day, Walmer asked me to give students lessons tomorrow. I suddenly felt nervous as I had almost never given a formal lesson to a big group of students, but he comforted me a lot. I felt it would be really challenging then said I would try.

So in the next two weeks, I got the parts of teaching materials from Walmer, previewing at first and trying to design some examples that students maybe interested in answering and filling in the blanks with correct phrases or sentences. At first I was still a little nervous, but gradually I became more and more confident when facing them. The only problem was most of the time when I wanted to hear them answer something, I only got silence. I always wanted to get some more interactions from them, so I tried to ask them more to consolidate what they learned in one unit, but their slow reactions made me a little unsatisfied. The only thing I could do was to keep more and more patience and explain again to them. For example, one of the units I taught the comparative degree. There was an article about pandas, and there were some exercises about comparative degree after this. As we finished the exercises on the book, I tried to say a new sentence and wanted to let them try a little. For I had already written the structure of comparative degree on the blackboard, I felt it might be easy for them to just fill in some nouns and adjectives in the sentence. But what answered me was still silence. Then I tried to split all words up and asked them one by one, like "which is the subject? which animal is being compared? what's the adjective?" I finally got a little response from them, but most were

answered by the best student in this class. If I asked another student, like the best student's deskmate, he did what I saw a lot, standing up, reading the book, and saying nothing extra.

One day of the first week, Walmer wanted me to supervise students in class 3 who came to the office to recite vocabulary during the self-study sessions at night. I thought they would come and recite, then I could finish this work, so that I stayed in the office after dinner. However, I waited from that time to 9pm, which is the end time of their self-study session at night. I wondered why nobody came to recite vocabulary as this session was time for English. There were 2 students in that class who came to submit some assignments of other subjects, so I asked them about the reason. They said their Tibetan teacher asked them to read aloud their textbook in class, so they did not have enough time to recite English. I felt shocked again by their answer. The students left, then I asked the teachers in the office is there any reason for this. One intern teacher came to tell me this is kind of their tradition that focuses on their *own* language, tradition, and religion.

In general, the whole two weeks' English teaching and learning was very fulfilling. Together with schools' unique conditions in this autonomous region, I had a quite different experience in this summer vacation. On the last night I taught them, there was a sudden hail storm which led to a power failure in the classroom. We had fortunately finished the learning part of textbook, as it was the last several minutes of the class, I changed the class into a meeting of "Q&A". They asked many questions they were interested in, like where and how is my hometown. Also they heard that I have studied in the United States, so they asked questions about this part. We finally spent the last time happily together.

3 Children's Day!

During this teaching period, it was just in time for Children's Day. What was very surprising was that, Children's Day in this area was celebrated with great pomp! On this day, June 1st,

students start a holiday for three days. With more than ten kindergartens, primary schools and junior middle schools around, all the students put on ethnic costumes and paraded through the streets. Some of them even danced together. Neighbors and residents in this township came to see these students' parade and celebrate with them together.

On this day the teachers were also happy, wearing their traditional costumes. I don't know how to describe their costumes. Well, it was quite different and like the ancient clothes, it was a long robe with one sleeve, and underneath was a plain shirt. They told us it would be a busy day and recommended us to go and see it. As we came out of the school gate, we found the road full of people. Students in each class of the schools were walking along the street one by one. Some classes wore their traditional costumes and came to us with drums in their hands and folk dances. Some wore school uniforms and shouted their class slogan. There were some children from kindergartens, they wore red clothes, holding a red flag and keeping it waving.



They were so cute.

After the parade, all people gathered in a big square. There were also many colorful flags. These flags might be important as I had seen these kind of flags in many places, like the Kumbum Monastery. I wondered if these flags were used in all the important days for Tibetans. Parents were watching their children nearby, and the teachers, school leaders, and other



representatives of these towns declared "Happy Children's Day!" with students. Everyone celebrated the same thing together. There was nothing better than this.

Reflection

Overall, the whole trip was really meaningful and fulfilling for me. In this region, the natural wonders, historical sites, religious sites--each place has its own unique legends and stories. Some may make people feel lonely, like the Jade Gate, but some may let people feel romantic, such as the legend of lovers in the Crescent Spring.

And for the tutoring in the Daowei Junior Middle School: although I was a little nervous at first, but the whole process of learning their teaching mode was really significant. They have one more language that they need to learn at school, which is quite different from my hometown. Also Tibetan is their home language, the language they mainly use in daily life. Their Tibetan identity led to the formation of a trilingual learning environment. However, the

lack of resources makes it difficult for students to learn three languages at the same time in this region.

When I studied in my hometown, I have never thought about problems like this before. As thinking back why the western cities like my hometown have many good resources, I feel there are many reasons, like the good economic development. Then because of the economy, many people gather in these cities, which leads to a great number of residents. A number of residents leads to a great number of students that need to go to school, so the schools and universities were built. Large number of schools and universities need enough staffs (teachers) to support, so they recruit from the whole country. I feel this whole chain, which is very complicated, is the main reason that our city would have many good resources in education.

With this thinking, I feel myself so lucky to be born in a city that has enough good resources to support my growth. And at the same time, I think it's a little pity that students in some region, like those in Daowei Junior Middle School, might get low grades just because the educational resources in the whole country are unbalanced. I hope educators can find effective strategies to fix this problem in the future.

Conclusion

As I look back to my journey to Qinghai, I assume traveling to different places would really be something! You may feel fantastic from what is happening in front of you, you may see the most beautiful scenery in your life. While appreciating the beauty of the world, we can also appreciate the culture and learn the tradition of different places. Because the language is different, perhaps the style of education will also change. You may also see the innovation of one country's culture, after all, nothing is set in stone. An ancient Chinese saying goes, "Read ten thousand books and travel ten thousand miles". I hope in the next journey we will face different surprise!