

Facing up to the Challenges: Review of Philip E. Franz, *Walking in China: a Westerner's Cultural Challenges While Teaching in China*

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After 33 years of police service, Philip E. Franz retired as a sergeant. Being in good health and remaining energetic, he wanted to do something productive. As a big fan of traveling, he enjoyed Asia more than any other country because of the big differences of cultures. Moreover, Philip finds that there is a big difference between visiting another country as a tourist and living in that country. He wanted to contribute something to the society in another country. So teaching became a good choice for him.

Philip first came to China through a summer program of three weeks in China, at Huazhong University of Science and Technology (HUST), organized by the Teach for Friendship Foundation(TFF), which was created in 2002 in response to requests from Chinese educational institutions for native English speakers to strengthen Chinese students' ability to converse in English and to build bridges of friendship between China and the United States. Philip found this program, which can meet his interests at the same time: traveling, volunteering and teaching, is exactly what he was looking for. As an experienced sergeant who is good at dealing with all kinds of people and as a travel lover with great cultural sensitivity, his first teaching experience in China proved to be successful and rewarding. Before came to China, Philip spent several months preparing the lessons in hopes that the course could continue without any interruption. Once arrived, he found HUST one of best universities in China, but the students still suffered the same shyness when practising oral English. Philip tried his best to pronounce the students' Chinese names, which made the students feel funny and relaxed and quickly broke the silence in the classroom. In the following classes, the well-planned class activities, like showing visual ads, one-minute presentations, telephone games, all proved to be interesting and engaging. Philip became a popular English teacher in HUST and the Chinese Program Director even invited him to be a full time teacher for a contract of two-year. Speaking no Chinese, Philip thought the two-year contract commitment was too challenging. On further thinking, he applied for a full-time teaching position with a short-term contract in Huaihua University in Hunan Province of China and arrived there in 2013.

From Hubei to Hunan, it as a even bigger challenge for Philip to encourage the Chinese students to speak English openly in the class. Luckily, his experience in Wuhan helped and pronouncing his students' Chinese names again proved to be a funny thing which engaged the students. However, as time went on, more and more culture shocks came, which proved to be difficult to adjust both physically and psychologically. For the first few weeks, Philip had to adjust to the food and time differences. What's more, Huaihua in February is pretty cold with the temperature around 30F overnight. His apartment had only a heating unit in the bedroom but the other rooms, including the bathroom, were as cold as the outside. Philip found "standing in a cold tiled room at 5am in the morning with a temperature of 35F surely waking him up in a hurry" and he could "accomplish the shower within 30 seconds".¹

What's worse, due to underestimation of the traveling expenses and daily costs, Philip ran into financial difficulties. But he received his first month payment almost a week later than the required time in his working contract for no clear reason, which he considered an obvious breach of contract. He complained several times to the International Office of the university but without a clear reply. Coming from a strict working environment in the US, Philip recalled his responsibility as a sergeant to confirm his team members working hours and their honoring of working contracts with providing payment as a first priority. He even considered this laid-back attitude a common trait in China and time management was nonexistent there.²

¹Philip E. Franz, *Walking in China: a Westerner's Cultural Challenges While Teaching in China*, Independently published,2020, p93.

² *Ibid.*, p96.

Then after a few months of living in Huaihua, he found himself starting to settle in. He learned how to deal with vendors, how to go shopping in the outdoor market and how to travel by bus. He no longer saw the people around him as Chinese but just as people. There were more communications and interactions between Philip and his students and colleagues. They had QQ chat, went out eating and travelling, building the friendship Philip considered “so important in his life”.³ However, long and thorough immersion in Chinese culture posed more challenges. Some of them was easier to adjust but some of them proved to be too difficult to overcome. Huahua’s winter was too cold for Philip and one morning he woke up with a terrible headache and a sore throat. He felt so bad that he was even barely able to talk. His co-teacher Rosy offered to take him to the pharmacy. Philip thought they were just going to purchase a flu and cold medicine. But to his surprise, Rosy took him to a traditional Chinese medicine doctor, who prescribed a group of herbs in a square of paper and asked Philip to make a tea several times a day with the herbs. At first, Philip found an odd odor of the herb mixture and hesitated to taste the medicine, and the first slurps were disgusting. It took him great courage to finish the tea and by the next morning, miraculously, he found his sore throat and headache were gone.

Chinese traditional medicine proved to be bad to the taste but effective and costless. But other challenges were more difficult for Philip to deal with. For example, Chinese food, as one of the most important symbol of Chinese culture, brought him mixed feelings. Sometimes, he found himself “fascinated with an item he had never eaten before”, and for other times he was nauseated by the smell or texture of the food.”⁴ So “Chinese food is like eating secret flavor packages, you must taste the dish to find out what the main ingredient is and whether you like the way the dish was prepared”⁵. Chinese food proved to be not only disagreeable to his taste sometimes, but more seriously, to his stomach. Several times, he had food poisoning in China even without a clear reason for all the rest people eating the same meal had no problem at all. Once Philip kept vomiting after eating a bag of potato chips in which the oil had gone rancid. He got better after taking some medicine but the following month, he found himself sick again without knowing the real reason. Later the problem became more and more serious. Once after Philip had lunch with his Vice-Dean, he had a very serious food poison. He started to vomit uncontrollably and had cycles of stomach spasms and the cramping in his abdomen was so painful that he was struggling to breath.⁶ On knowing that, his student sent him to the hospital. But the experience in the hospital proved to be a even more severe challenge than his illness. Lying in the hospital on a gurney, he was greatly shocked when the nurse loosened his belt, pulled down his pants exposing him from the waist down with his female student named Shuang standing close with a big smile!⁷ Shuang became tired and crawled up on a gurney. But to Philip’s great surprise, the nurse pushed Shuang’s gurney next to him. This is something Philip didn’t expect that he would experience in China . He recalled, “in the US, there are privacy laws preventing others from knowing your medical information, and treatment is always performed in private rooms with only medical staff present. I was so embarrassed over the whole situation.”⁸

Philip felt even more seriously offended when he was accused of a spy by his Chinese co-teacher Rosy. Rosy used to call Philip late at night for no clear reason, which made him upset. One day, Rosy invited him to take a walk near the university. When Philip was sightseeing and taking pictures, he was suddenly accused of a spy when they were near a military base. Philip didn’t know anything about the military operation and later he realized that Rosy was trying to monitor him on behalf of the university and the late call was part of it. What made him feel even more embarrassed and offended was that he was suspected of setting cameras in his eyes. Actually Philip had a cataract surgery before came to China to have the natural lens removed with a synthetic lens. But Rosy felt something unusual in his eyes and thought there are cameras in his eyes. The espionage paranoia annoyed him greatly at first but the accusation didn’t stop him from enjoying teaching in China. The following year, he found another chance to return to China once again, first to Huazhong University of Science and Technology, then to Hunan University of Science and Technology and Huaihua University. Meeting old friend and knowing new friends, Philip’s third trip to China found him to be a more mature and experienced foreign teacher who could make a good comment of the cultural differences adeptly such as privacy and personal space. Cultural shocks could be handled calmly this time and he treated it as a two-way phenomena: “Just as I faced many cultural challenges in China, I felt my friends,colleagues and leaders also had their share of culture challenges about me as a foreign teacher on their campus. Hopefully we have grown closer together

³ Ibid., p141.

⁴ Ibid., p144.

⁵ Ibid., p145.

⁶ Ibid., p183.

⁷ Ibid., p186.

⁸ Ibid., p187.

from our friendships.”⁹ Travelling and teaching in China has proved to be a new world of incredible experiences and Philip still kept in touch with his favorite students and colleagues after six years.

Recent years, travel writings about China become more and more prolific as China becomes more and more crucial in the world stage. Travel writing as a broad genre may include many possible forms such as travel memoir, journalistic account, missionary writing, anthropologists’ fieldwork notes. So with different styles, many recent published books may focus on different themes in China, such as migrant workers, demolition of the suburban houses, the resurgence of gender inequality in China etc.. Most of the works are recording a changing China with the authors’ long time investigation and rich personal experiences. There are a few of them concentrating or involving the author’s experiences as a foreign teacher in China, such as Peter Hessler’s *River Town*, Michael Meyer’s *The Road to Sleeping Dragon*, Caroline Depalatis’s *Jumping Out of the Mainstream*. Philip’s work is a recent one recording his teaching experience in China. What makes his work a bit special is the autobiographic nature of the book. Even as a well-trained military man and a tough sergeant who traveled the world, the cross-cultural experiences could be challenging with unexpected incidents and obstacles. But with humors and an unyielding spirit, Philip adapted and the cross-cultural experience became a personal growth process for an old retired American sergeant. In the end, he realized that to survive in the Chinese society one must remember the challenges of the cultural differences and getting offended and complaining is not good manners. One has to just appreciate the cultural differences and adapt. For example, he realized that the Chinese people cherish their personal space as much as he does, but they had to adapt to the crowded conditions in order to live harmony with each other. The book is highly readable for anyone interested in contemporary China, cross-cultural communications, travelling, and even for China’s English teachers. The book has a Chinese Mandarin translation along with the English version. Unfortunately, there are some translation and printing mistakes in the Chinese version. It could be in a better quality if the mistakes could be corrected.

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⁹ibid., p274.