

THIS IS THE PART WHERE I TALK ABOUT MONEY

I've been a pretty big cheapskate in the past. I would fuss and stew over a \$5 purchase, lament any time I had to spend more than \$5 on something, and intentionally order less than I could eat just to save a couple bucks (and I'm talking about eating out at McDonald's and Burger King). I wasn't like this growing up, though. I had a hard time saving any money as a kid, because it all went towards video games. I attended a birthday party at the bowling alley once and blew the money my parents gave me to bowl playing a *Street Fighter II* arcade cabinet.

I think my attitude towards money changed when I realized I was too poor to go to game design school. I knew skimping wasn't going to build up to the \$50,000 I needed, but progress was progress, and maybe in twenty years, I'd eventually have enough. I never worked full-time during college, either, so it was easy to gauge—and depressing to watch—how fast my savings depleted.

When I went to China as a paid teacher, all my apprehensions about spending money disappeared. At the time, the exchange rate was one US dollar to seven Chinese yuan. While I only got about \$700 a month, this translated to 5,000 yuan, which was five times more than the average Chinese worker. Comparatively, I was rich, and the low cost of Chinese commodities meant that my salary could get me quite far. A bowl of noodles was less than \$1. A bus ride was only twenty cents. A haircut? Three dollars. A bad haircut? Fifty cents. I took a three-day vacation to Harbin in Northern China, rode the train both ways, went snowboarding while I was there, saw several big attractions, stayed in my own hotel room, and the total cost of the trip was under \$400.

But I was experiencing China as a foreign teacher who had every intention to pack up and leave someday. The more I got to know the people who lived in Changzhou, the more I realized just how far out of reach things like cars and apartments were. In the

US, I bounced between five different apartments while going to college. My Chinese friends had to give up their parents' life savings for their very first (and probably only) apartment or condominium. An actual house with a yard was reserved for the richest of the rich. Not EFL rich, either. To live like an American, I'd have to do better than English as a Foreign Language.

Nonetheless, I was still able to be the big spender I couldn't be back home. My apartment and utilities (and disgusting food Mondays through Fridays) were covered by the school. I could spend my cozy teacher's wages on whatever I wanted. I never felt guilty about going on trips or going to a different entertainment venue every night, because I had no financial obligations. The school always paid me in 100 yuan bills, too, which just added to my false sense of prosperity.

Few of the smaller shops, however, liked to do business with someone who only carried the highest denomination. In Harbin, on my way to the train station to go back to Changzhou, I tried to give the taxi driver a 100 yuan bill. He wouldn't take it. He didn't have enough change for me. So he pulled up next to a line of shops and told me to go buy something. Come on! I didn't need anything! Running out of time, though, I went to one of the grocery shops and tried to buy a banana. When I handed the owner my 100, he scrunched up his face and said, "No."

The only place that was willing to break a 100 for me was what looked like a brothel. It was secretive and shady on the outside and vibrantly pink on the inside, full of casually-dressed women lounging around the front room. The mistress was pretty eager to help me when I stepped in. When I told her I was only interested in exchanging money, she looked disappointed but gladly gave me a handful of twenties and patted me on the bum on my way out. Sorry, ladies. I had a train to catch.

Another amusing aspect about money in China was how people didn't like picking up neglected bills off the ground. This was just the opposite from US culture, where a penny was considered good luck and a bill of any sort was the best day ever. In China,

discarded money was no good and would bring nothing but bad luck. I found fifty yuan in the rain one day and brought it inside the school to dry off. Everyone who inquired why I was holding money up to the vent exclaimed, "You found that outside? Oh, you should get rid of it. It is bad!"

Lost money, then, just got kicked around and trampled on until it fell into the hands of a foreign teacher... or a beggar, someone who no longer gave a damn about good or bad luck. Beggars were everywhere in China, and most of them looked like crap. They looked like what happened when a crap took a crap. The beggars had deformities, missing limbs, burned skinned, gigantic tumors, crooked backs, and often traveled by scooting around on a plank of wood with wheels on the bottom. Oddly, each kind of beggar (the single mom with a baby, the legless guy on a plank) looked and dressed exactly the same, like there was a factory pumping these people out.

A common type of beggar was the flower girl. Flower girls were children who traveled in packs and tried to get people to buy flowers from them. Their sales tactic was pure brute force, and they'd latch onto people, grab their shirts, wrap around their legs, and pout and cry until the person either gave them money or knocked them to the ground and ran away. It tore me up inside to see people treat these girls like this, but at the same time, it wasn't like the girls gave them much of a choice.

I was sitting in the park one day with a Chinese friend when two flower girls accosted us. My friend was allergic to flowers and, as she started to cough and her eyes started to water, tried to tell them so. The girls didn't believe her and thought she was faking it. They wouldn't budge and continued to pester us while my friend grew sicker and sicker. I was so conflicted. The flower girls looked sad and pathetic. They had the hands of a forty-year old woman, dried and cracked and bruised, but it was hard to feel bad for them when they wouldn't take their flowers out of my friend's face.

I always felt conflicted over beggars. I didn't like seeing them out on the streets, wearing dirty clothes and in obvious need of medical attention. I wanted to help. But

when they approached me and demanded money, all that sorrow turned to irritation. Beggars saw foreigners as gold mines and would rush over to me and get in my face and chant, "Hello. Thank you. Hello. Thank you." It was embarrassing to be with friends and have a beggar cut into the middle of our group so they could harass the white guy for money. I didn't appreciate it and couldn't bring myself to reward their obnoxiousness.

My mantra had been that if someone wanted to sit off to the side of the walkway with a tin, I'd gladly put something in it. But even then, it was hard for me to follow through on this when I was with other people. I gave out a lot of money when I was by myself, but if I was with a friend, I felt very self-conscious about being charitable. Maybe it was because my Chinese friends were always talking about how beggars couldn't be trusted, how many of the people on the street were actually working for someone else. One friend said she came across a beggar who was willing to break a 100 yuan bill for her. Considering shopkeepers wouldn't even do that, you know there's something fishy going on there.

Any time I think of beggars and China, I always come back to an incident in Hefei. Some of the ILP teachers and I had gone downtown to retrieve a package from the post office. On our way, we passed a small, homeless girl crouched in the rain. A large, white sign sat at her feet. I couldn't read it, but I was sure it said something along the lines that her father was dead, and her mother was sick. She looked terrible, a frozen, lifeless figure just waiting for somebody to give her something... anything. I looked at my umbrella, and my heart started pounding with compassion. I felt the urge to give her the umbrella. It wasn't much, but it would at least keep her from getting soaked.

I didn't.

I stopped for about two seconds, then kept walking to catch up with the other teachers who didn't pay the girl any attention. But I wanted to go back. I wanted to go back to that little girl and give her my umbrella. I kept telling myself I should, but then I

just kept walking forward like an emotionless lemming. We came to the bus stop and waited. I really wanted to run back and hand over the umbrella, and yet I stayed put. What was wrong with me? Why couldn't I move? Why didn't I just go?!

The bus arrived. We climbed on and left the girl to her fate. When I sat down, I felt sick. I was a horrible person. I thought I needed this umbrella more than that poor, little girl did, and now I'd have to live with that for the rest of my life. What reason did I have to keep this crummy umbrella, anyway? Because the thought of having to buy a new one was just too unappealing? Was that it?

I always wanted to be that guy who jumped at the chance to do a good deed for someone else, who didn't care if he gave something he needed away, who relinquished his umbrella to a total stranger on the street without hesitation. Apparently, though, I wasn't that guy, and I hated myself for it.