Weeks 8 and 9 in China

A Reflection of Another Week in Zeng Jia Yan and Continuing Adventures in Chongqing

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Monday, May 1st, 2017:

 I slept in today until nine in the morning, which felt wonderful to do. After eating a bun and banana for breakfast, I spent the rest of my morning finishing my reflections for the last two weeks. I surprised myself with how much I was able to get done. I guess work is distracting me from the grief of losing my grandmother.

 Around a quarter after noon, Alaura and I left the dorms to head to the cafeteria nearby for lunch (I ate beef, eggplant, green peppers, tofu, and rice). Afterwards, we took a walk over to the park near Gate 5 to begin our outdoor photoshoot. It was such a sunny day today and we wanted to take advantage of that.

 The photoshoot continued near a water lily pond and a quaint little wooden bridge over a pond, both located near the soccer field. We alternated between being the model and the camerawoman as we immersed ourselves in the leaves and embraced the beauty of Southwest University. I felt beautiful in my new royal blue and floral sundress with cut-out shoulders, flip flops, wavy locks, and flawless makeup. I frolicked amongst the leaves, gazed over the bridge, perched on top of large rocks, and looked out from behind balustrades. The whole experience brought me so much joy during a period of grief and put a smile back on my face.

 After grabbing drinks to celebrate a successful photoshoot (iced tea for me and lemonade for Alaura), we caught a shuttle bus back to our dorms. There, I received an invitation from Ms. Gong through Minghua for diner. Michael and I accepted, but Alaura declined due to the lesson planning that she had to do. Minghua met us in the lobby at half past five and we caught a shuttle bus to Gate 3 to meet up with Ms. Gong and a Southwest University student. Ms. Gong took us to a rooftop garden restaurant nearby where she treated us to pork ribs, spicy noodles with rabbit, veggies drenched in garlic sauce, beef and tofu stew, scrambled egg and tomato soup, and deep fried breaded and stuffed eggplant smothered in sweet and sour sauce. Ms. Gong did not take no for an answer whenever Michael declined another refill of beer, but at least Chongqing beer is light, so while Michael did not get wasted, he did get full really quickly.

 Once Ms. Gong paid the bill, we returned to campus where Ju gave Michael and me a ride back to our dorms. We retired for the night and tried to get more work done before bed; however, the sudden lack of Wi-Fi made that and communication between us and Alaura just impossible. Good thing I already submitted my weekly reflections before dinner!

Tuesday, May 2nd, 2017:

 Whoever had the audacity to wake me up at ten to six with a phone call should realize that I’m not going to pick up while I’m in China. On top of that, a mosquito bite on my left eyelid has swollen to the point that I can barely open it. Fortunately, a little eyeliner has helped to make it less noticeable.

 Alaura, Michael, and I left the dorms at quarter to eight (Michael was, once again, running late) and we secured seats on the pink line leaving Beibei station. I managed to get some shut-eye during the ride until we transferred over to the blue line where some girl gave me attitude for squishing her as we boarded.

 When we arrived at Zeng Jia Yan, we immediately headed to our office where we could access Wi-Fi. Unfortunately, it only lasted for a few minutes before it, too, disappeared on us, halting any lesson planning amongst us. Around the same time, it started working again and that is when I discovered a WeChat message from Ms. Wang whose son had fallen ill. She told me to teach the first class of Grade 5 students without her and that she would come to school as soon as she could. I told her not to rush and not to worry, that her son is her first priority, and that I would be alright to teach the Grade 5 students by myself, both sections if need be. I quickly fetched the Grade 5 English textbook’s CD from her desk and went over the material that I would be covering during both lessons.

 The first lesson of the day was going smoothly with me teaching the second section of Grade 5 students how to state the time and the activity done during that time. I was in the middle of teaching the students how to properly pronounce the words of a dialogue when Ms. Wang walked in. She watched me for a bit before she left me to continue teaching the class alone, which must show that she trusts me and my teaching strategies. Once the students nailed the pronunciations, I had them pair up to practise reading the dialogue and ten called up a few pairs of volunteers to present the dialogue in front of the class. Not many students volunteered, which has lead me to consider using candy as motivation for the next time they read a dialogue. With a few minutes remaining, I introduced them to the two different pronunciations for ‘wh’, which they seemed to have nailed.

 The second lesson with the first section of Grade 5 students also covered the dialogue. I noticed during both lessons that there were some students who had some difficulty pronouncing words that I thought would be simple for them to pronounce such as ‘bamboo’ and ‘little’; however, it was nothing a little writing on the chalkboard and emphasis on syllables could not fix. Ms. Wang observed the second lesson for a bit before she left me alone to teach once more. She did, however, return halfway into the lesson and taught for the last ten minutes, so she could assign the students some homework from their workbook. Overall, everything went smoothly, so much so that Ms. Wang asked me if I would be interested in teaching the Grade 5 students again on Thursday, which I responded affirmatively. I see it as a sign that she likes me as a teacher and I’m honoured to have her respect.

 After lunch (chicken, cabbage, eggplant, and rice) and a quick bathroom break, we participated in an art class and painted cherry blossoms on branches, which allowed us to further develop our Chinese painting skills.

 Once Michael finished teaching his last class of the day, we all caught the subway back to Southwest University, grabbed drinks outside of Tiansheng station (lemonades for Alaura and me and iced tea for Michael), ate dinner in the cafeteria nearest to our dorms (pea pods, pork ribs with potatoes, and rice), and retired for the night. Thanks to the user ID and password provided to us near the beginning of our time in Chongqing, which I remembered, my evening was far from boring.

Wednesday, May 3rd, 2017:

 Really loud slamming from down the hallway jerked me awake from a much-needed sleep ten minutes before my alarm was scheduled to sound. At first, I thought it was one of my floor’s obnoxious neighbours who did not bother going to bed the night before, but it turns out it was actually the door to the laundry room down the hallway that had been left open and was banging incessantly due to the winds of the storm from the night before. Since going back to bed was not an option, I ate a banana, drank some juice, got dressed, packed, and was ready to go at twenty to eight with Alaura. Michael, to my surprise, was out the door on time with us, but I think it was because he was determined to find out the source of the incessant banging.

 When we arrived at Beibei station, we were amongst the first passengers to board the train that had arrived, so we were able to secure seats on the edges of benches. I slipped in my ear buds, put my music on shuffle, closed my eyes, and leaned against the armrest of the bench that I was sitting on for some shut-eye. I must have been out cold because I woke up as the train arrived at Ranjiaba station at the fifteenth stop on the pink line (Beibei station is the twenty-eighth station on the same line). Michael only confirmed this after he bought a bun with meet inside at Niujaotuo station and told me that my mouth was hanging open. He even went as far as to imitate my sleeping look, which I found both funny and embarrassing.

 I spent my morning in the office tweaking my lesson plan for my third section of Grade 2 students. In addition to teaching them about feet, tummy, arms, and chin, I was going to also teach them about hands, fingers, legs, and lips; however, I decided to postpone teaching the last four to next week, so I would not overwhelm the students with new vocabulary. When it came time to teach the lesson, I began by reviewing head, shoulders, knees, toes, eyes, ears, mouth, and nose, which I was pleased to see they remembered given how they could point to them when I called out each one. I then introduced feet, tummy, arms, and chin, one by one, and having them point to them repeatedly whenever I ordered them to touch them. I even added eyes, ears, and mouth to the mix since the song in the music video that followed included them. Although the students struggled a bit to keep up with the song and touch the appropriate body parts, I was very impressed by their determination to succeed and were eager to have me play the video again, so they could have another chance to practise and get it right. I concluded the lesson with three rounds of my modified body part game, with the winners of each round getting a Canada pencil and a candy. I even had students volunteer to call out orders as Ms. Wang suggested, which panned out nicely. She even suggested that I give the two finalists prizes, so the loser is not upset, but I’m hesitant to do so the next time I teach the lesson because I do not want to teach the students that everyone can always be winners. That is not life. On another note, Ms. Wang asked me if I would be interested in teaching my second section of Grade 2 students tomorrow morning rather than teach my Grade 5 students who are scheduled to take exams. Although it would require me to catch the subway earlier than usual and commute to Zeng Jia Yan by myself, I loved teaching so much that I agreed without hesitation.

 Lunch was spent feasting on cabbage, rice, and a heaping amount of my favourite ground pork and tofu. After our post-lunch bathroom break, we returned to our office to do work. We left once Michael finished teaching his last class of the day and caught the subway back to Southwest University. We did not buy drinks this time as we were in a hurry to grab dinner in the cafeteria nearest to our dorms (I scarfed down tofu, veggies, and rice). Upon returning to our dorms, we had learned from messages from Mr. Deng that not only was our Wi-Fi up and running again (the staff thought we were only living in the dorms until the end of April), but that a room was available for me to move into. However, Ju soon arrived to take us for a walk along the Jialing River, so the move would have to wait.

 After picking up Lisa, Ju, Alaura, Michael, and I made our way over to the Jialing River where we leaped from rock to rock, took pictures of the beautiful sunset and scenery, and just chatted about topics ranging from how our classes went at Zeng Jia Yan to Disney Worlds and Lands around the world to life in Windsor. It was a nice evening out and very much needed.

 Upon returning to our dorms, I immediately packed up my things by hastily throwing them into my suitcases and into any bags that I had and Alaura helped me move everything from my current room, nine seventeen, to nine twenty-one, which happens to be the room on the other side of Michael’s (Michael remarked that the room was available the entire time because he never heard anyone living in it). Why I had to wait for a few days before moving is beyond me.

Thursday, May 4th, 2017:

 My alarm sounded at six, but I rolled around for another ten minutes before getting out of it and eating a banana. I got ready, packed my backpack, and was out the door of my dorm by ten after seven. Alaura and Michael planned to leave around quarter to eight as usual because I told them that they did not have to leave early just because I was. Besides, I knew how to commute to Zeng Jia Yan on my own if I ever had to and me leaving first, solo, would allow me to pull off a surprise for Alaura and Michael as a way of thanking them for their kindness when I was mourning Grandma’s passing and for offering to help me move my things to another dorm room.

 After a peaceful ride on the pink line and a less-chaotic-than-usual ride on the blue line, I arrived at Niujaotuo station with plenty of time on my hands. I stopped by a vendor in the station who sold hot snacks to buy a pork-stuffed bun for breakfast for only three yuan. In the station was also a Qinyuan bakery where I bought a package of green tea chiffon cake that Michael likes and a package of red velvet cake for Alaura. I then boarded the green line to Zengjiayan station, eating my delicious breakfast along the way. With my breakfast in one hand and my subway card in the other, I felt like an independent adult!

 I arrived at Zeng Jia Yan at five to nine, five minutes before the time when I planned to arrive. I wrote thank you cards for Alaura and Michael and left them on their respective desks with their cakes. My plan was to have them find the surprises when they first arrive during which I would be in class with my second section of Grade 2 students. However, Ms. Wang messaged me via WeChat to tell me that the new summer schedule has postponed my class to five to ten in the morning. I did not want to be in the office when they arrived around half past nine, so I parked myself by the window in the hallway where I had a good view of the school’s front gate, the only entrance to the school. When I spotted Alaura and Michael arriving, I hurried down the hallway to the staircase on the other side of the school and hid by it until a heard Alaura and Michael enter the office. I gave them about thirty seconds to themselves before I causally strolled in and greeted them cheerfully. They responded with joyful expressions of gratitude, which made me smile.

 My lesson for the Grade 2 students today was pretty good. It did take more practise with them to nail head, shoulders, knees, toes, eyes, ears, mouth, and nose compared to my third section of Grade 2 students, but they seemed to have enjoyed learning. There were some students that chose to not participate in the lesson, not even during the singing of the music video, but I just let them do other work because it would be their fault for not learning and, thus, killing their chances of winning a Canada pencil and candy. I managed to get through three rounds of the game with the students with the two finalists of each round each winning a pencil and a candy (the only exception was the first round where two of the three finalists were eliminated due to incorrect pointing, leaving only one winner). Overall, it was another good class!

 After a light lunch (roast beef, cabbage, cucumber salad, and rice) and a quick bathroom break, we spent the rest of the early afternoon working. Around four o’clock, we accompanied one of Michael’s Grade 4 students to her apartment for dinner, joined by Miss Song, Mr. Wang, and another teacher. The walk to the apartment was relatively sort, but could have been more enjoyable without the scorching heat.

 Upon arriving at the apartment, I was surprised by how misleading the exterior was; its dull and rocky appearance concealed a roomy residence with two bedrooms, a kitchen, a bathroom, a dining area, and a spacious living room, all neatly decorated and tidy. Photos of the student, an only child, adorned the walls and I learned that her family viewed her as a treasure.

 Alaura, Michael, and I were greeted by the student’s mother, father, and paternal grandparents (I learned that, in Chinese families, the grandparents cooked because the parents worked and the child studied). We were entertained by the grandpa’s talent for calligraphy, piano, and singing, as well as the student’s solo performance of her hulusi. We even got to make dumplings to go with our dinner of what seemed like dozens of dishes. There was so much food that the mother and grandmother began piling dishes on top of each other on the table in the dining area. As the dishes kept coming, I could not help but think that the family made way too much food.

 Once everything was laid out, Alaura, Michael, and I were told to grab food first because we were the guests. The only problem was figuring out which dishes to try first because it all looked delicious. Miss Song pointed out a pork dish, so I ate a piece and felt that it tasted like cartilage, but I ate a few more pieces anyway. Turns out I was on point with my guess because Miss Song told me that it was pig ears and tails. I was not too surprised since I have eaten some pretty strange things here in China that have turned out to be delicious and it did not stop at the pig ears and tails. I scooped some noodles into a bowl and, waiting a piece of meat to go with it, reach for some on a plate nearby. I tasted it and thought it to be some of the best duck that I have ever eaten. Although I was wrong, turns out it was the best goose I have ever eaten. I just shook my head with a laugh and made my way through the other dishes of tofu, green beans, wonton soup, and steamed buns while making conversation with everyone. The mother pointed out the string of maple leaves hanging around the dining area and said that she looked up that they were from Canada and bought them to make us feel at home. The grandpa, who painted us ‘Chongqing welcomes you’ and ‘Canada and China are family’ banners to take home, invited us to come over again, so he can make us hot pot and teach us how to play Mahjong. As tokens of gratitude for the warm hospitality, I presented the student with a Niagara Falls postcard and an ‘I <3 Canada’ key chain, which I was pleased to hear that she loved. The mother offered us some rice, but we just looked at the dishes of food that it seemed that we barely made a dent in (even though we did eat a lot) and politely declined. We bid goodbye to the family, who walked us out, and managed to roll ourselves to Niujaotuo station to catch the subway back to Southwest University.

Friday, May 5th, 2017:

 I rolled out of bed around six, as usual, and was ready to go by twenty to eight. As I made my way out of the dorm building with Alaura and Michael, I was anticipating an uneventful day. We had no plans to go downtown after school, which was fine with me because I just wanted to teach my second section of Grade 2 students, go back to Southwest University, grab dinner, and return to my dorm to work on our second newsletter for Dr. Xu.

 After the usual subway ride to Zeng Jia Yan, we arrived at our office and pretty much spent the entire morning there finalizing lesson plans and working on our blurbs for the newsletter. Aside from the few words exchanged in a failed attempt to make conversation, the office was silent. Alaura, who is usually schedule to teach Friday mornings, had her class cancelled and Michael, w is usually scheduled to teach at the end of the day on Fridays, had a class to teach right before lunch, so they had to wait for me to be done teaching my class in the afternoon before we could leave and get a head start on the weekend.

 Once lunch was finished (fried rice with pork, veggies, and tomatoes) and we made our usual post-lunch bathroom trip, we returned to our office to resume our work. When the time came for me to teach, I left with my teaching materials and headed down to the classroom of my second section of Grade 2 students. Turns out about half of them were standing outside of the classroom waiting for me. I barely made it off the stairs when I was swarmed by the group, some wanting to hug me, others wanting to high five me, and others wanting to say hello and ask me questions. They got excited when they saw the Canada pencils in my hands because it told them that they would get a chance to win some during class. Unfortunately, their level of excitement was off the charts because they were loudly talking to each other and doing arts and crafts while I was trying to teach them about feet, tummy, arms, and chin. I managed to cover feet and tummy before I lost it and, with the help of Ms. Wang as a translator, ordered them all to sit at their desks with their arms folded atop them for five consecutive minutes. For the first time in their presence, I did not smile. I told them that we did not have to play the game and that we would not if I could not get through the lesson with them. I did not want to be stern with them, but I knew it was necessary to regain their attention and respect. Honestly, what I did was minor compared to what Ms. Wang did; she chewed them out for disrespecting me. I had never seen her so angry before. After chewing them out, she sat back down as though nothing had happened and allowed me to resume my lesson. This time, when I was teaching them about arms and chin, they were calmer, but still looked to be having fun. Despite the delay, I managed to play two rounds of the game with the students.

 After I returned to the office and packed up, I left with Alaura and Michael to catch the subway back to Southwest University. Alaura was craving French fries, so we all agreed on some fried food for dinner at our favourite alley joint near our dorms. I chose to get a combo with a crispy chicken sandwich, fries, drink, and a box of popcorn chicken. I planned to save the popcorn chicken for a nighttime snack; however, my rumbling stomach shredded those plans. No regrets by the way!

Saturday, May 6th, 2017:

 With no early meetings of any sort requiring me to get up early, I rolled around in bed and did not bother rolling out of it until around nine in the morning. I spent the most of my morning finishing up my blurbs for the second newsletter. By the time I was done, it was one o’clock in the afternoon. Knowing that Michael was most likely out with Long Min, I asked Alaura if she wanted to grab lunch with me and she accepted. Since the cafeterias on campus close at one and do not reopen until dinner at four, Alaura and I revisited the fast food joint in the alley near our dorm where we ordered the same combos from the night before. I could not help but laugh when Alaura was about to point out what she wanted on the menu, but the owner just smiled and pointed to the combo before she could and even knew that Alaura wanted a pop instead of an orange juice. When the owner walked into the kitchen to prepare our orders, Alaura and I just looked at each other and shook our heads; we clearly eat here more often than we should.

 After taking the food back to my dorm and taking a break to enjoy it and a series of 90 Day Fiancé reruns, I got back to work on finishing my newsletter blurbs. Since my focus was on nothing but the newsletter, the afternoon flew by and I would have been late getting ready for a night out in Beibei had I not shifted my focus from the newsletter to the time on my laptop.

 Around a quarter after six, I was dressed up and ready to go. Alaura and I left the dorms and caught a shuttle bus to Gate 2 where we met up with half a dozen of Southwest University teacher candidates. Long Min and Michael were a few minutes late, having spent the day at a nearby cinema (they saw Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2) and at a local karaoke place. If I did not know any better, I would say they just finished a date.

 Once everyone was together, we caught the subway to Zhuangyuanbei station. We exited it and, after having several of the teacher candidates double check the map on their cell phones to verify the direction in which we should go, we made our way over to a plaza where a tea house was located. The owner of the establishment was very warm and welcoming and gave us a tour of his tea house. We were able to see his collection of framed sketches to all of his different Buddha statues and paintings (the distinct differences between the Buddhas tell you which country they come from (i.e. Cambodia, India, Tibet, etc.).

 We spent the next two hours sitting, drinking tea, and chatting about every topic that come to mind. As he made us teas whose leaves he cultivated himself (a black tea, a floral tea, and a mountain tea), the owner explained that the whole point of going to a tea house is to have tea and catch up with friends, both which we were doing. It felt nice to go out and enjoy a relaxing night with our friends and forget about the newsletter for just a few hours.

 Eventually, the night out came to an end. After Long Min insisted that she would be alright catching the subway back to Southwest University with her classmates, Michael joined Alaura and me in a car ride back to our dorms, courtesy of Tina, a professor and colleague of Dean Liu. I thought that I was going to be tired upon returning to my dorm; however, all of that tea I drank was keeping me awake rather than making me sleepy, so I decided to see how much of the newsletter I could get done before I went to bed.

Sunday, May 7th, 2017:

 Although I was awake until four in the morning (what the heck was in all of those teas?), I managed to insert my blurbs into the newsletter as well as Alaura’s and proofread and format both to my satisfaction before going to bed. I had trouble falling asleep (seriously, those teas work better than any coffee that I have ever had) and I probably would have considered abandoning sleep until the next night if I had Michael’s newsletter blurbs with me.

 Even though I fell asleep around five in the morning, I still managed to wake up around eight and not feel a hint of exhaustion. I had no social events scheduled for the day, which was fine with me because I had a to-do list of tasks to shorten anyway.

 Fortunately, Michael sent me his newsletter photos and blurbs before he disappeared for the rest of the day (most likely to ‘hang out’ with his ‘friend’, Long Min), so I was able to get back to work after breakfast. I managed to put three-quarters of Michael’s newsletter content into the newsletter itself before I took a break for lunch in the cafeteria nearest to our dorms with Alaura (since I did not have dinner the night before because of all the tea, I happily feasted on chicken with green peppers, chicken with mushrooms, and rice). Since we were already outside, we decided to get our weekly grocery shopping done and headed over to the mega supermarket. I did not intend to buy clothes there, but I found a Hello Kitty shirt that could serve as a night dress and a few pairs of cute, comfy, and stretchy pants that went down past my knees, all on sale for a total of about twenty-six dollars (one hundred and thirty yuan). In addition to my usual breakfast buns and bananas, I bought bags of candy and mini chocolate bars to make treat bags for all of my students as thank you gifts for allowing me to be their English teacher. It is going to take me time to make enough for about a hundred and eight students, but it is going to be worth it.

 After returning to the dorms, throwing a load of laundry in, and putting away our groceries, I resumed my work on the newsletter. I managed to finish the draft before I went back to the cafeteria with Alaura to grab dinner (beef, green peppers, eggs, tomatoes, and rice). Upon returning to my dorm, I proofread the newsletter one last time before uploading it to Blackboard and going to bed early as a reward.

Monday, May 8th, 2017:

 Fortunately, the lack of sleep from the night before caused me to crash around nine and remain asleep until my alarm sounded at six. Even after breakfast and the hustling and bustling of getting dressed and packing my teaching materials for the day ahead, I was still feeling drained, but I knew that teaching my overly-eager Grade 2 students today would wake me up.

 After a nice snooze on the pink line and the usual chaos on the blue and green lines, I arrived at Zeng Jia Yan with Alaura and Michael and we went to our office to finalize our lesson plans. Shortly after Michael left to teach his class, Miss Song entered the office to share the exam results of her Grade 6 students and told us that students need at least a sixty percent on the final exam in June in order to move on to the next grade and middle school. While flipping through the English exam papers, I noticed that one section of Grade 6 students did very well; a majority of them scored ninety percent or more, other scored somewhere in the eighties, a few scored in the seventies, and the lowest was a sixty-nine percent. The other section of Grade 6 student, meanwhile, did not perform as well. Sure, many of them scored in the eighties and nineties; however, quite a few scored in the sixties and one student actually failed with a thirty-five percent. Apparently, Miss Song had to call this student’s parents to inform them about the result and it was at this point during the conversation that I learned about the fact that this student’s parents are rarely at home because they are always working. From my experience in China, I was under the impression that parents made every effort to ensure that their children are well educated and that said responsibility falls onto the grandparents if the parents are often working. For me to learn that this is not always the case just broke my heart. Growing up, I valued education second to my family. My mom is a stay-at-home mom and purchased phonics and math workbooks, a grade ahead, so I could continue learning at home. She would always make sure that my homework was done and that I performed well academically and to the best of my ability. For me to hear about this lack of parental effort in a country that puts a lot of emphasis on education was a slap in the face in the form of a reality check.

 On another note, Miss Song told Alaura and me that we would be revisiting the farm the next day and to arrive at the school by ten to nine in the morning. Although we would be missing out on the chance to teach two more classes, at least we would be getting to spend time with the students outside of the classroom.

 When we met up with Michael for lunch, we passed on the field trip news to him, which he responded to with great excitement. After satisfying our hunger (chicken, celery, cabbage, and rice) and doing our business next door, we returned to our office to do work. Eventually, I left to go teach my first section of Grade 2 students about head, shoulders, knees, toes, eyes, ears, mouth, and nose because, according to my wonderful travel journal, I had yet to teach them about those.

 Upon entering the classroom, I was greeted by another wave of enthusiasm from my students. Once I got them to settle down, I began the lesson. To my astonishment, the majority of the students began picking up the vocabulary quickly and were easily able to remember which body parts were which when I asked them to point to specific ones. As a result, they were able to keep up with the song and accompanying music video. When it came time to play the game, I found myself having to call the orders at a faster rate because the students were on their game and made it challenging for me to eliminate them one by one. In the end, I managed to get through two rounds of the game, both won by the same student. At the end of the second round, I gave the runner-up a Canada pencil and candy too just to reward her for almost dethroning the champion.

 Once I was finished teaching, I left with Alaura and Michael to catch the subway back to Southwest University. On the way back, I was able to do something that I never thought I would be able to do while on the subway: get a seat on the blue line. As enjoyable as that was, we did have to switch trains again on the pink line because the announcement told its passengers to disembark at Guangyiandian station (I praised myself for understanding that message in Mandarin). Instead of switching trains at that station, we got off at Ranjiaba, the station before it, so we would not have to compete against large crowd of passengers for a seat on the next train.

 Upon exiting Tiansheng station, Alaura and I stopped to buy lemonades and Michael bought an ice cream in an attempt to beat the heat. We then caught a shuttle bus to the cafeteria nearest to our dorms for dinner (I ate rabbit with spicy green peppers, a fried egg, and rice) and then made a quick dash to the mega supermarket with Alaura to buy lunch for tomorrow and, for me, to pick up more of those comfy and stretchy pants.

Tuesday, May 9th, 2017:

 Even though Alaura, Michael, and I had to be on our way by seven in the morning, nothing was stopping me from sleeping until my alarm sounded at six as usual. I got ready, packed, and was ready to go on time. Alaura, Michael, and I caught a train out of Beibei station around half past seven; however, all of the traffic during the transfers between lines delayed our arrival at Zeng Jia Yan. We ended up arriving at ten to nine, the time when everyone would be leaving to board the buses to the farm. Alaura and I accompanied Ms. Wang and a class of Grade 1 students while Michael followed Miss Qin and her assigned class of students. During the bus ride, the students were not as rambunctious as they usually are, so I was able to nap the entire ride to the farm.

 When we arrived at the farm, we stopped by a bathroom break during which I noted that the combination of the hot temperature, sun, clear skies, and mountain breeze made it the perfect weather conditions for revisiting the farm. Afterwards, we were directed to an area where the students seated themselves in front of a fenced area where I expected that they would be treated to a harmless display of farm animals. To my utter shock, disgust, and horror, they were exposed to, what I put lightly, a horrendous display of heartless animal abuse. The farm’s so-called ‘performance’ kicked off with a routine by four puppies who hopped through hoops, leaped over hurdles, and jumped rope with the ringmaster. Sounds like innocent fun if it did not involve the ringmaster whipping a puppy each time it messed up. When the act was over, the puppies were crammed back into a cage the size of one belonging to a guinea pig. As disturbing as that was, it was nothing compared to the excruciating torture that the ringmaster inflicted on a monkey; he brought it out by dangling it in the air by a chain around its neck. He then proceeded to make it jump rope with him and balance on a board on a rolling can and even do somersaults around monkey bars and rings. However, what alarmed me most was when the monkey was chained to a little bicycle and ordered to ride around on it. Yes, it could do it, but it fell off at one point and was choked by its collar and chain in the process. The ringmaster simply made it get back on the bicycle and continue with the act. At one point, a goat was brought out and made to walk across a balance beam with the monkey on top of it. When they were both ushered out of the ring, I thought it could not possible get any worse, that is, until the ringmaster dragged out a baby black bear by its collar and chain leash and made it balance on the same wooden platform and can used by the monkey. The bear was so scared during the entire routine that it started pooping during the entire thing. Just when I thought my heart could not take much more of this atrocity, the show concluded with two featherless and bloody chickens who were brought out and provoked to fight each other. Fortunately, the host announced the conclusion of the spectacle soon after because I was on the verge of throwing up in disgust. I could hear the chickens squawking in pain as they were carried out of the ring. I had to fake smiles around the students and the teacher who was taking photos of Alaura and me with the students because I was so scarred from the show. I ended up walking away with clips of the performances, not to treasure them, but to prove that such animal abuse does indeed exist in China.

 Fortunately, the rest of the field trip was way less traumatizing. The students got to see the tools used to extract honey from beehives (thankfully, there were no bees in sight), observe baskets that were weaved by hand, and visit the cabbage patches (the enormous cabbages explain why I have been eating it during almost every meal). I also took great joy in helping the students plant bok choy, collect weeds, and help to feed those weeds to some baby and adult horses and donkeys. The students were worried about getting too close to the animals out of fear that they will bite their fingers, but after I showed them how to feed them carefully, they were more open to the activity.

 We took a break from the farm fun for lunch. Although we were told to bring a lunch today, Ms. Wang and a few teachers brought various homemade dishes to share with us, so we abandoned our bread and fruit in favour of roast beef, tofu, and chicken. Alaura also tried chicken feet for the first time; she was enjoying it until I told her to eat it one toe at a time. I even bought a small bucket of popcorn to share with Alaura, the teachers, and the students. The students, once again, were eager to share their snacks with us such as different-flavoured Oreos (green tea and strawberry) and a variety of chips.

 After another bathroom break, the students were treated to a science experiment presentation where the instructor used liquid nitrogen to deflate a balloon without popping or untying it. She even poured some on top of mini cookies, so students could eat them, feel the cold air, and exhale it. They enjoyed it so much that they purchased more of those liquid nitrogen-drenched cookies at the conclusion of the presentation. I had fun eating those cookies too; it felt like being a kid all over again.

 The field trip concluded with a visit over to a nearby hill where a structure that resembled several soccer goal posts were placed along the hill for students to use to climb the hill. One by one, the students started the climb and I admired how quickly they ascended the hill, especially the one girl who did it in tights and a frilly pink dress. Alaura and I were invited to climb the hill too. I was hesitant to do so at first given how hot it had gotten outside, but Alaura encouraged me to join her. Thankfully, the stretchy pants that I was wearing made the climb easier and I was very proud of myself when I made it to the top in no time at all.

 Once Alaura and I helped Ms. Wang usher the students onto the bus, we returned to Zeng Jia Yan where we dropped off the students, met up with Michael, and caught the subway back to Southwest University, but not before getting off at Guangdianyuan station, again, to change trains. After Alaura and I bought lemonades outside of Tiansheng station, we joined Michael on a shuttle bus to the cafeteria nearest to our dorms for dinner (I had rice, sausages with baked fries, and a trio of pork-filled dumplings. Given the long day that we had, we all agreed to retire for the night.

Wednesday, May 10th, 2017:

 After a long day yesterday, part of me did not want to crawl out of bed when my alarm sounded at six this morning; however, the rational part of me told me to start getting ready and reminded me that I had a lesson to teach today. As soon as I had eaten breakfast, got dressed, and packed my teaching materials, I was out the door with Alaura and Michael to catch the subway at Beibei station.

 Once we arrived at Zeng Jia Yan, we went to our office to rest and finalize our lesson plans for the day. I pretty much kept to myself by listening to music and working on my weekly reflections (my lesson was planned last week). It is not that I did not want to talk to Alaura and Michael; I just wanted to be productive with my work.

 Eventually, I left the office to teach my third section of Grade 2 students. They were ecstatic to see me again and some even greeted me as Ms. Aline, which made me smile. Once I had finished setting up my PowerPoint, I began the lesson by reviewing what the head, shoulders, knees, toes, eyes, ears, mouth, nose, feet, tummy, arms, and chin were. I was thoroughly impressed with how much my students remembered from the last two lessons; they were able to point to the body parts that I called out with very little difficulty, even when I increased the speed of the callouts. That gave me more time to spend on the part of the lesson teaching them what the hands, fingers, legs, lips, and hips were. I made sure to distinguish the hands from the fingers by having students clap their hands and touch their fingers together. I also made sure to distinguish the mouth from the lips by having students cover their mouths with their hands and circle their lips with their index fingers. I made sure that they understood what the new body parts were before I had them listen to the song and dance along to its video. I could not help but laugh at the sass that some of the students had when they rested their hands on their hips, especially the boys. It was probably one of the most hilarious and cutest things I have ever seen them do. The lesson concluded with two rounds of the body part game, both which finished with the same two finalists. Although both received a Canada pencil and a candy for the first round, I had them compete against each other at the end of the second round to see who would win the extra pencil and candy. As Ms. Wang and I returned upstairs, she told me that she had something to attend to during the last period of the day and asked if I would be interested in teaching the second section of Grade 5 students. Although I accepted, I was unsure of the ‘diction’ that she was going to have another teacher facilitate after I reviewed vocabulary with the students, but at least I would be able to see firsthand what it was.

 Once Michael was finished teaching his class, he met up with Alaura and me for lunch where we feasted on rice, cabbage, and some of the best meatballs that I have ever eaten. We then made our usual post-lunch bathroom trip next door and then returned to the office where we discussed Dr. Xu’s change of plans for us. Based on our interpretations of her WeChat messages, we would no longer be teaching at Zeng Jia Yan come next Tuesday; we would be spending the rest of our time in China observing classes at the high school affiliated with Southwest University rather than just a few days. Although such observations would be beneficial to Michael’s and my research papers as high school teachers and it would mean fewer commutes downtown, it would also mean that we would have to bid an early farewell to our students. Not only was I not ready to do that (I do not think I ever will be), but it also meant that I only had two days to put together treat bags for all of my students. Being me, I began freaking out and mentally scheduling when to make the bags and when to finish my weekly reflections. Needless to say, I was feeling extremely overwhelmed.

 After Michael finished teaching his last class of the day, we left to catch the subway back to Southwest University (not only did I snag another seat on the blue line, but we had to, once again, change trains at Guangdianyuan station). Once we arrived at Tiansheng station, we stopped by the crafts store where Alaura and Michael patiently explored while I selected packs of origami paper and two rolls of red silk ribbon to use to make the students’ treat bags. We then caught a shuttle bus to the cafeteria nearest to our dorms for dinner (more rice, baked fries with sausages, and a trio of dumplings). The remainder of my evening was spent cutting green, blue, pink, and yellow origami paper in half and folding them into origami blossom hearts for the treat bags. Alaura, bless her kind soul, finished her lesson planning and came over to take some of the paper back to her dorm to help me with the folding. What a gem she is!

Thursday, May 11th, 2017:

 Crawling out of bed at six in the morning proved to be a challenge given that I was awake until midnight folding origami blossom hearts, but what motivated me to get moving was the potential plans of going downtown after school to do some exploring. I ate breakfast, got read, and packed for the day, making sure to include my stack of half-sized origami paper, so I could do some folding on the pink line. I managed to fold about ten of them before reaching Honqihegou station and entertain several passengers during the process.

 Our morning upon arriving at Zeng Jia Yan was uneventful given that Michael and I were not scheduled to teach today. Alaura finalized her lesson plan and then left to teach her class. Michael and I, in her absence, kept to ourselves by working on reflections at our desks.

 When it came time for lunch, Michael and I met up with Alaura and we enjoyed some cabbage, rice, beef, and tofu. We then took our post-lunch bathroom trip and then returned to our office to pack up. As we were discussing what our plans for the rest of the day would be, Miss Qin and Director Yu walked in to talk to us. With Miss Qin translating, Director Yu told us that Dr. Xu confirmed our observation days at the high school affiliated with Southwest University with her and told us that we were encouraged to spend a week there. Afterwards, we would be free to decide whether to spend two weeks there, at Zeng Jia Yan, or split our time those two weeks between both schools. She also added that the school would keep our office open for us and that the staff would throw us a farewell dinner when the time comes during which we will be presented with reference letters from Principal Deng. This made me smile because not only did it mean that I had more time to put together treat bags for my students, but it also means that I will have more time to teach my precious angels after all. Once we thanked Miss Qin and Director Yu and they left, we discussed amongst ourselves what we would do with the remainder of our time in China and we agreed to spend at least one week at the high school, but that our decision in the end would involve us returning to Zeng Jia Yan either full time or part time. It is obvious that we all love being at Zeng Jia Yam and it is reassuring to know that the school loves having us. By this time next week, we hope to come to a unanimous decision.

 With Alaura done teaching for the day, we decided to take off. When it came to deciding whether to head downtown for the rest of the afternoon or return to Southwest University early, Michael left the decision to Alaura and me because he is very laid back and cool with anything. Alaura, who is usually hesitant about making group decisions, suggested that we head back to Southwest University early since Miss Song has plans to take us around Chongqing tomorrow afternoon. Michael and I agreed with her decision and we all returned to Southwest University via the subway. For the first time this week, we did not have to switch trains at Guangdianyuan station on the way back. Since it was too early for dinner when we arrived at Tiansheng station, we caught the shuttle bus back to our dorms. Alaura and I stayed in for the rest of the evening to work on our weekly reflections, leaving only to grab some crispy chicken sandwiches, fries, Cokes, and popcorn chicken from our favourite alley joint for dinner.

Friday, May 12th, 2017:

 Rolling out of bed when my alarm sounded at six this morning was a bit easier than on most mornings, maybe because I was able to go to bed early the night before. As I ate breakfast, got ready, and packed for the day, I smiled at the idea of how today would unfold: a day of teaching students and exploring Chongqing. I was definitely looking forward to it all.

 As Alaura, Michael, and I were leaving our dorms this morning, we crossed paths with Mr. Deng in his car and he offered to drive us to Tiansheng station, which we accepted since it would save us a twenty-minute walk to Beibei station and a shuttle bus ride to Tiansheng. Alaura managed to snag a seat on the pink line, but Michael and I had to stand for part of the ride until seats became available. This was not a problem as I was still able to fold origami blossom hearts while standing on a moving train and astonish passengers in the process.

 Upon arriving at Zeng Jia Yan, we went to our office where we worked on our reflections and finalized our lesson plans for the day. Alaura left at one point to teach her class and when she returned to the office, she told Michael and me that we would be leaving the school at two in the afternoon, meaning Michael and I would not be teaching this afternoon. Although I was not too fond of missing opportunities to teach my Grade 5 students yesterday afternoon (Ms. Wang ended up being free to teach them after all) and my Grade 2 students this afternoon, I was excited to see where Miss Song was going to take us today.

 Today’s lunch consisted of noodle soup with veggies, pork, and optional sauces and spices, which would require the use of bowls rather than trays. By this point, the kitchen staff know who we are because when we entered the cafeteria for lunch, we found three porcelain bowls waiting for us. This time, we got to fill them to our specifications; usually, a staff member would offer to fill them for us and they would end up giving us too much and we would not be able to finish it all. By doing it ourselves, we could take what we needed and not have to worry about wasting food. When I made my bowl of noodle soup, I threw in a huge spoonful of spicy chili oil with red peppers to add some flavour. Not only did it work, but my mouth was not on fire. It is amazing how much my spice tolerance increased in just two months.

 After our post-lunch bathroom trip and a brief rest in the office, Miss Song came to fetch us. All four of us left Zeng Jia Yan and boarded the green line at Zengjiayan station. We got off at Jiaochangkou station and transferred over to the pink line where we got off at the next station on the line: Xiaoshizi. Next to the station was the entrance to the Yangtze River Cableway, which was our first stop. As we waited in line for tickets (twenty yuan for a one-way ticket and thirty yuan for a round-trip ticket), I noticed the many movie posters that decorated the walls and I learned that many movies featured the Yangtze River Cableway. It felt awesome to know that we were about to go on the real thing. Fortunately, the wait for the elevator to the second floor was not too long and the wait for the next cable car was not too bad either. To say the view of the Chongqing skyline and the Yangtze River from the cable car was beautiful is an understatement; it was positively breathtaking! I made sure to take some video footage of the journey across the river and Alaura even engaged Michael and me in a selfie.

 Once we disembarked the cable car, we accompanied Miss Song on a walk along the Yangtze River. Conversation topics included similarities and differences between the Yangtze River and the Detroit River, the education system in Canada, and our developing careers as educators. Along the way, Alaura and I took photos of flowers, buildings, and the river itself. We came across a good number of locals fishing and one man was even showing his pals how to kill a fish after catching it. I could have done without seeing the latter.

 On the way up a flight of stairs to catch an Uber, Michael, for the first time since arriving in China, tripped. We climbed into an Uber bound for the enormous mall complex just outside Guanyinqiao station, the same mall Mr. Wang showed us when we first arrived at Zeng Jia Yan. We explored the mall for a bit, but the Uber ride made Alaura a tad carsick, so we rested inside of a McDonald’s where Miss Song treated Michael and me (Alaura politely declined) to cheesecake ice cream (Michael’s had chocolate fudge sauce drizzled over it while mine was drizzled with strawberry sauce and tasted exactly like a strawberry cheesecake). For the next hour or so, we talked about our families, career ambitions, and quirks. Talking to Miss Song felt more like talking to a friend from Southwest University than to an associate teacher. She is such great company.

 Once Alaura’s stomach was more settled, we boarded the blue line at Guanyinqiao station and got off at Niujaotuo station where we boarded the green line and got off at Daping station. Once we exited the station, we boarded a bus to a nearby hot pot restaurant where Miss Qin and one of her twin sons joined us for dinner (he did not talk much, but was able to respond to our questions in English). We feasted on delicious fish, lotus slices, noodles, and a variety of veggies and toasted fruit drinks to a successful two months in China. Near the end of the dinner, a lady who had a karaoke system strapped to her back went around to ask customers if they had any song requests. One table of tipsy men nearby made a request. I was thoroughly amused watching the men pass the microphone around and each belt out a set of lyrics to the song and not care who was watching them.

 After we exited the restaurant and thanked Miss Song and Miss Qin for treating us to dinner, Miss Qin and her son left and Miss Song accompanied Alaura, Michael, and me to a nearby mall in which a subway stop, Shiyoulu, on the red line was located. We passed by a building with go karts and bowling and we agreed to schedule a day on a weekend when we could invite Altion, Victoria, and some Southwest University teacher candidates out for an afternoon of fun here. As we walked through the humongous mall, I was astonished by how modern the stores were. Anything you need could be found in this mall from clothes to camping gear to houseware to electronics. Of course, I just had to have my picture taken in the Hello Kitty-shaped doorway of the Hello Kitty store. If we were not determined to make it back to Southwest University before curfew, I would have definitely stopped to browse the store.

 Upon arriving at Shiyoulu station, we thanked Miss Song for taking us around Chongqing and boarded the train to Xiaoshizi station where we transferred over to the pink line. Even though it was around ten in the evening, we still had to change trains at Guangdianyuan station. Since the shuttle buses to Gate 5 stopped running around ten in the evening, we all agreed to take the train to Beibei and walk back to the dorms.

Saturday, May 13th, 2017:

 With no pressing matters to attend to this morning, I slept in until about eight o’clock. The rest of my morning was spent feverishly working on my weekly reflections. I hoped to be very productive, so I could afford to spend my afternoon downtown with Alaura to get some more souvenir shopping done for our friends and families.

 Around a quarter after one, Alaura and I left the dorms and swung by a Qinyuan bakery to pick up some pastries for lunch. We ended up buying these delicious pizza-like pastries with cheese and meat on them and ate them on the way to Beibei station where we caught a train to Xiaoshizi station. During half of the ride, I managed to take a nice nap. Once we arrived at Xiaoshizi station, we transferred over to the red line and got off at the next station on the line, Jiaochangkou, where we transferred over to the green line and got off at the next station on the line, Linjiangmen. We agreed that this was a more efficient route to get to Jiefangbei because it allowed us to avoid the traffic on the blue line.

Upon exiting Linjiangmen station, Alaura and I navigated our way to Hongya Cave by following landmarks that were familiar to us such as the Chongqing Art Gallery. We descended the escalators and stairs to the fourth floor where we purchased some cold treats to beat the heat (Alaura bought a lemonade and I bought a cup of vanilla ice cream with strawberry sauce drizzled over it). From there, we spent the rest of our time alternating between the second and third floors in search of souvenir gifts for our friends and family members whom we had yet to buy things for. It took a few hours given that I like to put a lot of thought into my gifts. For the ladies on the Education Society, I bought them each an embroidered coin purse based on either their favourite colour or a colour that they seem to like wearing (my plan is to slip a 0.1 yuan coin and a Chinese candy inside before giving the coin purses to them). I also bought coin purses for my cousin and my mom. For Khatib, one of my best friends, I bought him a wooden dog keychain with Chinese writing on the back and a framed dog cut-out made out of red Chinese paper (Khatib is born in the year of the dog). For Tony, another best friend of mine, I bought him a box with two pairs of chopsticks inside with Chinese writing on it and a wooden keychain similar to Khatib’s, but with a rat on it (Tony is born in the year of the rat). Another best friend of mine, Alex, already has a box with two pairs of chopsticks inside with pandas on them that I bought him from Beijing, but I also found a delicate panda bookmark for him since he loves to read. I also bought my parents each a wooden Buddha keychain to go with their gifts from Beijing. Naturally, I could not help but buy myself a few things as well such as a beaded Hello Kitty charm to hang from my backpack, framed Chinese red paper art, a deck of Hello Kitty playing cards, and an embroidered wallet. Alaura and I celebrated our successful shopping spree by returning to the snack street on the fourth floor to sample some meat on a stick (I loved the meatballs, but the hot dog tasted a tad powdery) and explored the area behind the waterfall of the cave, which offered a beautiful view of the Jialing River.

When it came time to leave the cave, I was surprised how I was able to climb from the fourth floor to the ninth floor without breaking a sweat, something I was not able to do when I did the climb for the first time back in March, which tells me that I must be getting into good shape. On the way back to the subway, Alaura and I stopped at a nearby Subway for dinner and because we were interested in comparing their Chinese menu options with those from the Western menu. Both menus seem to offer many similar options of sandwiches; however, there were only four selections for bread on the Chinese menu compared to six on Western menus. I ended up ordering a six-inch steak and Swiss cheese on parmesan oregano bread and topped it with shredded lettuce, red onions, and mayonnaise, which turned out to be delicious.

Since we could not remember how to get back to Linjiangmen station, we walked a little further past the People’s Liberation Monument to Jiaochangkou station where we boarded the red line back to Xiaoshizi station and then transferred over to the pink line for the trip back to Southwest University. We exited at Tiansheng station and, given that it was incredibly hot outside, purchased some drinks (iced tea for me and lemonade for Alaura) and then caught a shuttle bus back to our dorms where we stayed for the rest of the evening and worked on our reflections.

Sunday, May 14th, 2017:

 I slept in until ten o’clock in the morning after which I spent the rest of my morning working on my reflections. I did take a break around half past noon to accompany Alaura to the cafeteria nearest to our dorms for lunch (I ate four meatballs, veggies, and rice). Afterwards, we made a quick run to the grocery store where I picked up some breakfast buns and bananas. We then returned to our dorms where I managed to take a nap for two hours before waking up to resume work on my reflections. Alaura and I returned to the same cafeteria for dinner (I ate baked fries with sausages, rice, and a trio of dumplings). Since we were cooped up inside for the majority of the day, we decided to take a break from working on our reflections to catch a shuttle bus to the crafts store just outside Gate 2 where I stocked up on origami paper and bought some more red silk ribbon for the treat bags for my students. We also stopped to buy some more drinks (iced tea for me and lemonade for Alaura) before returning to our dorms for the night to finish our reflections. It was not a very eventful day, but it was a very productive one.