Chapter 28
Shanghai 2009



Sunday, July 19, 2009, Shanghai, China

Several months ago, I got an e-mail from a graduate student in Shanghai asking both if he could visit me at the University of Michigan and if he could invite me on behalf of the Dean of his school, the Shanghai Institute of Foreign Trade (SIFT), to give lectures there on international trade. I declined the first and said that I'd welcome such an invitation from his dean. I never did hear directly from the dean, but I had dinner with him this evening here in Shanghai, where I am in fact visiting for the coming week and giving several lectures. As I might have guessed, the dean does not speak English, and the dinner this evening included two younger faculty who translated. One, who goes by the name Herbert, has been my caretaker since I arrived yesterday evening.



Herbert (?), from trip

It was a long drive in from the airport yesterday, during which Herbert kept the conversation going with all sorts of questions. He, it turns out, is a specialist doing research on trade, but on the law of trade, not the economics. I've now learned that the Institute specializes in studying the GATT and WTO, and I wonder whether the lectures I've planned to give are appropriate. I'm certainly capable of talking about the GATT and WTO, but I've

prepared instead to devote all my lectures to rather technical economic theory. I'll find out tomorrow morning how well this will be received. I may have to adjust.

I'm staying at the International Exchange Center of SIFT. I had little idea what to expect of it, and I could only imagine that it might be like the housing for foreign students where I was lodged when I visited Renmin University in Beijing. As our car entered the campus last night, I was not very hopeful. The place looked dark and run down. We entered a reception area that was nice enough, but once we had my key, we left that building and walked between another building and a construction site to another entrance, where we took an elevator to the second floor. That's where we found my room, which is a suite and is extremely nice. There's a large living room with wide-screen TV and a long comfortable couch (I'm on it now), a bedroom with a king-size bed, a dining area, kitchen, and of course a bathroom. All of it is modern, clean, and attractive. I feel very lucky. Outside it's extremely hot, even in the evening, but in here the air conditioner works well and it is neither too hot nor too cool.

The room key looks like an ordinary plastic card, like a credit card. But instead of inserting it or swiping it on the door, you hold it against a small sensor on the wall next to the door. It beeps, signaling that the door will open. Once inside, a similar sensor turns everything electric on and off. Oddly, there is a separate electrical switch on the wall that you press if you want to unlock the door from the inside. I've wondered how one would get out if the power were cut off. All more modern than I've seen elsewhere.

An odd feature of the room is that the shower is built into the wall between the bathroom and bedroom, with the bedroom side being a solid glass wall that is frosted up to about eye level and clear above that. If there were two of us, one could lie in bed and watch the other showering, and vice versa. I have no idea why.

They explained that the shower would take some time to warm up, and that I should turn it on some minutes before I want to use it. I don't know whether that is just because it is a long distance from the water heater, or if it's because the water doesn't start heating until you turn it on. Either way, I was expecting only cold water to appear at first, when I turned it on this morning. Instead, what I got was lukewarm water. This was confusing, until I realized that it is so hot outside that water in the pipes would be lukewarm. I'd have had to wait just as long if what I wanted was water that was really cold.

Breakfast this morning was provided in the dining room off the reception area, and it was purely Chinese. I had fried rice, stir-fried vegetables, and a dumpling. I asked for coffee, and it was provided, but only by making a fresh pot since I was the only one drinking coffee instead of tea. Later I went back there for lunch as well, as I'd been told I could, and found no evidence that the place was open for lunch. When I asked, the same woman who'd made the coffee gave me an English menu from which I selected a fixed-price lunch of several dishes. They came in a rectangular tray with compartments filled with a scrambled egg mixture, beef and peppers, and green beans, plus a bowl of rice. All very good.

I had plenty of time today that I could have walked around and explored the neighborhood, but I didn't do it. It's just too hot, and the neighborhood that I can see from here doesn't look interesting. I holed up in my comfortable room and did some work.

At 6:00 Herbert and his colleague – a woman whose name I didn't catch but who was also along to pick me up at the airport – collected me from my room and took me to dinner with the dean. This was not far away, on an upper floor of a high-rise building. The restaurant had a corridor fronting rooms for private dining, and we ate in one of them. A table for four was set, and they started by showing me the items from the menu that they had already ordered, to get my approval. I, of course, said that it all looked good, although that was not honest since the first thing they showed me was the head of a jellyfish. Herbert pointed to its picture and commented how beautiful it looked. My opinion, privately, was different.

I never knew whether I ate the jellyfish. Perhaps they saw through my lies and decided it was a bad idea. Or perhaps it was one of the dishes that I did attempt to eat, although if it was, then jellyfish isn't jelly-like at all. It's more like a flat piece of cartilage. Whatever that was, I only ate a couple of small bites.

One of the items was "bamboo fish," which the group enjoyed explaining wasn't really made of bamboo. It was just a rather large fish like any other, as far as I could see. The waiter brought it in to display, then took it back out of the room to portion it into servings. The custom is that one always gives the head of a fish to the person of honor, which in this case was me. The look on my face when it was presented to me, however, prompted Herbert to ask, don't you like fish? I do, I said, but I prefer the middle part. So, Herbert got the head. He was still picking at it after dessert.

For dessert we first had dumplings that, I was told, would have a surprise inside. When they arrived, I was now told to eat them very carefully, as there was something hot inside. Sure enough, the dumplings were hollow, and in the hollow was a small meatball and a sauce that was very hot. It was very good, but you did have to be careful until it cooled. [Also for dessert, and I later learned for every dessert, were slices of watermelon. This time and sometimes later, this was accompanied by other fruits such as grapes, cantaloupe, and small tomatoes. Yes, tomatoes are fruit, and they treat it as such.]

Throughout dinner, the dean and I conversed, with Herbert and sometimes the woman doing the translating. Occasionally they all drifted off into conversation in Chinese that I didn't get to follow, which was fine with me. But it's a very awkward way to communicate.

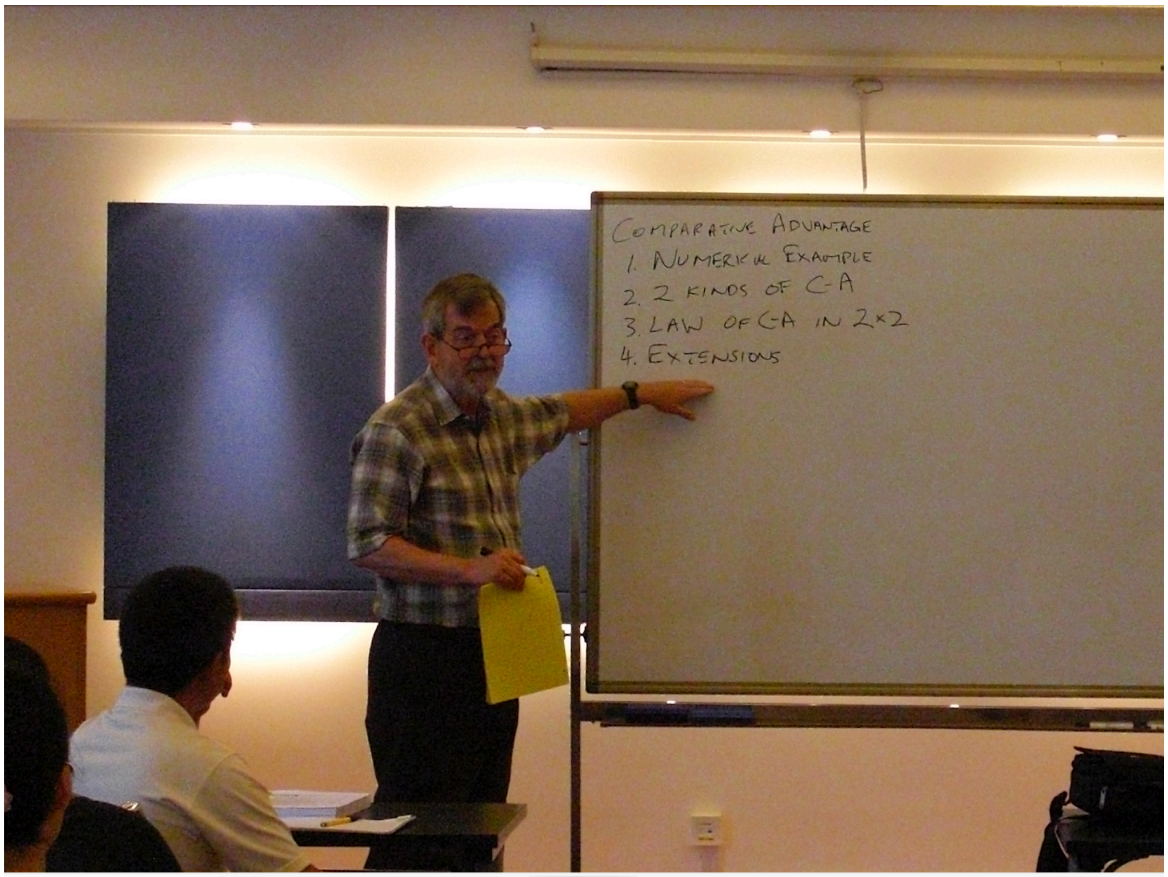
Friday, July 24

I woke up early today and couldn't get back to sleep, so I'll work on this until my alarm at 6:00. I've finished my teaching now, with two-and-a-half-hour lectures each morning Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday; a research seminar yesterday morning; and an extra

lecture yesterday afternoon on a topic that I hadn't planned, but that they wanted. It was quite a bit of work. After each morning lecture, we'd have lunch in the restaurant in the same building; then I'd be free in the afternoon until dinner.

All of that was routine. The one thing that was not routine came Wednesday morning. I was supposed to teach at 9:00, but shortly before that I got a call that class would be delayed because of the eclipse. Turns out that July 22 was a very rare total eclipse of the sun, seen across the full width of China and India, and Shanghai was right in the path of the moon shadow. As it started to get dark, I went outside and stood with a group of Chinese, absorbing the rarity of the mid-day darkness. It came and went in about five or six minutes. It was raining at the time, and very cloudy, so there was no question of seeing it. But the experience was still unusual.

My teaching these last four days has consisted of lectures each morning on topics that I had selected in trade theory. One, yesterday morning, was a recent research paper, but the rest were based mostly on my notes from teaching graduate trade over the years, focusing on my own early work. This means that there are lots of diagrams, which I drew on a movable white board that they had in the room. After filling one side, I would turn it around and write on the other, while one of the students came up and erased the backside for further use. The audience was about a dozen, mostly students working on master's degrees on the economics of international trade. I spoke in English, of course,



Teaching, from trip

and was assured that they understood it, though there was very little response from most of them to tell me if they were following at all what I was saying. There was one student in the front row, however, who asked questions that showed he was following, and I was very impressed with him. I never learned his name, however.

After my second lecture I was asked to do one additional one on a topic that I've written about but that I had not planned to present, so I did a second lecture yesterday afternoon. That was a very full day.

On Monday I finally met the man who had invited me, whose name is Churen Sun, and whom I'll call Sun. As near as I can tell, he is a graduate student somewhere else, but on the faculty of SIFT, and most of those who attended my lectures were his students. I've now also learned that the woman who was with us over the weekend is not a faculty member, but is rather a secretary in the institute, and her name is Meina Xu. I've spent a good deal of time now with Sun, Xu, and Herbert, including most of yesterday when we went by taxi into the center of the city, and I'm getting to know them. Herbert is rather pedantic and talks a lot but quietly. Sun seems young and enthusiastic, and he too talks a good deal, often speaking faster than his mind can form the thoughts in English, so he's less easy to understand. But when I do understand him, he's most interesting. He's usually smiling; Herbert is not. Miss Xu is the most reserved and quiet, but she too participates plenty in the conversation and seems very pleasant and happy.



Sun and Xu, I think, from from trip

At lunch yesterday, Sun asked a question that surprised me: Did I think, from the perspective of an American, that Xu is beautiful? Since she was sitting right there, this was a surprising thing to say. In fact, Xu is very nice looking, but not a striking beauty. My answer, though, was yes, at which of course she blushed. And I went on to explain the reason: In the West, I said, I often hear women praised for their beauty because of their high cheekbones, and Xu has that feature (which was true). I was rather pleased with my answer.

However, I was a little peeved with Sun for asking the question, which could have been very difficult. So, I went on to say what I thought of his looks. "You," I said, "are not handsome. You are cute. Like a puppy." This was also true. Everyone found that funny, and Sun acted offended, although I'm sure he was not. Now, however, I had to say something about Herbert. This was a problem. Herbert is certainly not an attractive

man, with a narrow, pointy face, glasses, and bald back to the top of his head. So, I turned to him and said that he, on the other hand, looked "distinguished" and "wise." This too I explained as being due to his high forehead, which we in the west think is a sign of wisdom.

I've gradually learned that I'll be happier if I take an interest in what food is being ordered. My inclination is to leave it to others, but that often results in foods that I find close to inedible. I have, now, had jellyfish, and it was indeed jelly-like, and not quite as revolting as it looked. I've had bits of various creatures that were almost all bone or some other hard substance, things that others simply put into their mouths, chewed and sucked to get the meat off, and then spit out. That seems to be standard procedure, and when I've tried it, I've had to agree that the flavors were excellent. But sometimes it took control to spit out only the bad bits, rather than throw up what I'd previously eaten.

Chinese people like to eat pretty much every part of any creature. They must think that we are incredibly wasteful because of all the parts of animals that we disdain. I presume that this is mainly a difference in income, and that western society probably ate more creatures, and a larger fraction of each, than we do today, back when we too were much poorer.

Anyhow, they are eager to have my opinion about what to order at each meal, and now I do look at the pictures that they show me and try to make selections that will appeal to me. I did not choose goose tongue (who knew they had tongues!) when it was offered, for example. And anything that said it was "feet" I passed over. Also, anything where I could see the eyes. As a result, I've managed to steer us toward dishes that I have increasingly enjoyed.

I've mentioned that it's been hot. For the first few days, it was hot even for Shanghai, apparently, with the temperature hovering just above and below 100. Then on Tuesday night it stormed, and the temperature dropped to the mid- or high-80s, but with more humidity. Since then, it has often been rainy, and I've carried an umbrella that the hotel provided. Today we are going to a nearby town that is supposed to be pretty. I just looked out the window, though, and it's raining, so I don't know how well this will work.

Yesterday, after my second lecture in the afternoon, the four of us took a taxi into the center of Shanghai. I'd mentioned that I wanted to see again the Pu Dong area, which I recalled from my visit in 2007 as having something major still under construction, and I wanted to see how it all looked now. It turns out that what was under construction then was the Shanghai World Financial Center, and it is indeed completed. It is now (I think, until someone else passes it) the world's tallest building. That is what we visited.

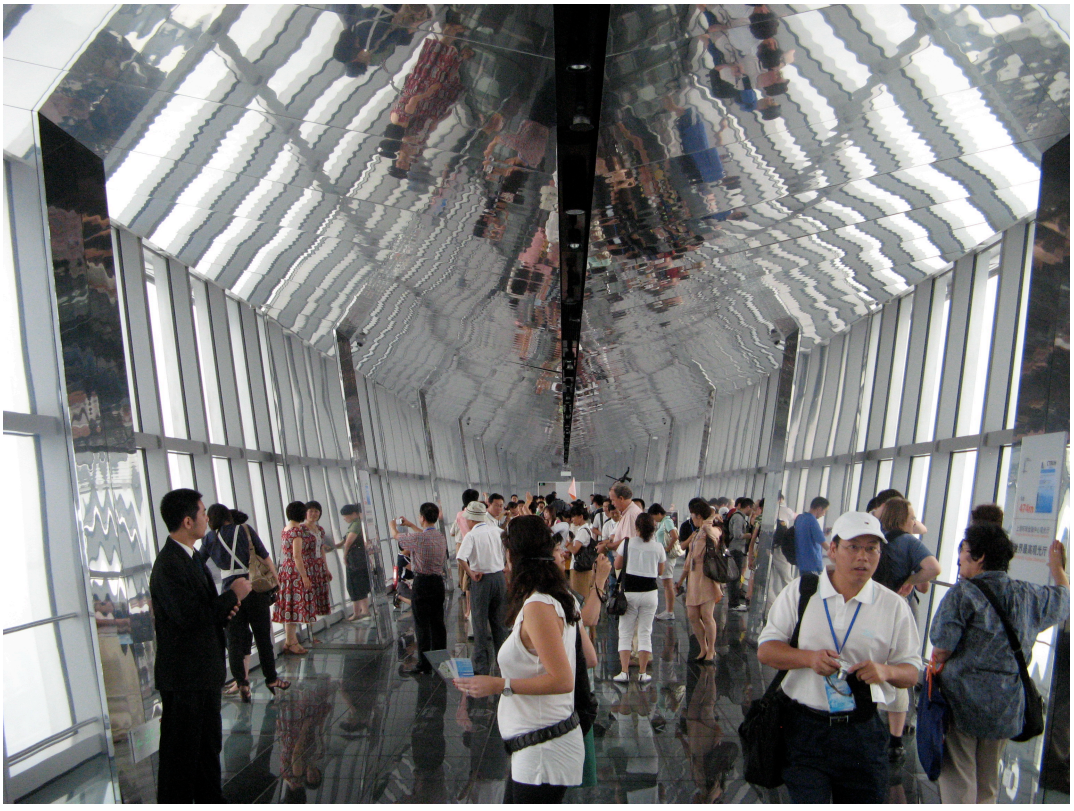
It is a very striking and beautiful structure, soaring to its extreme height in a couple of gentle curves. At the top its distinctive feature is a large rectangular hole. And the highest observation deck, on the 100th floor, is across the top of this hole, with glass



Shanghai World Financial Center, from trip



Shanghai World Financial Center, from Web 2025



Atop Shanghai World Financial Center, from trip

panels in the floor so that you can look down as well as out the windows at the side. The

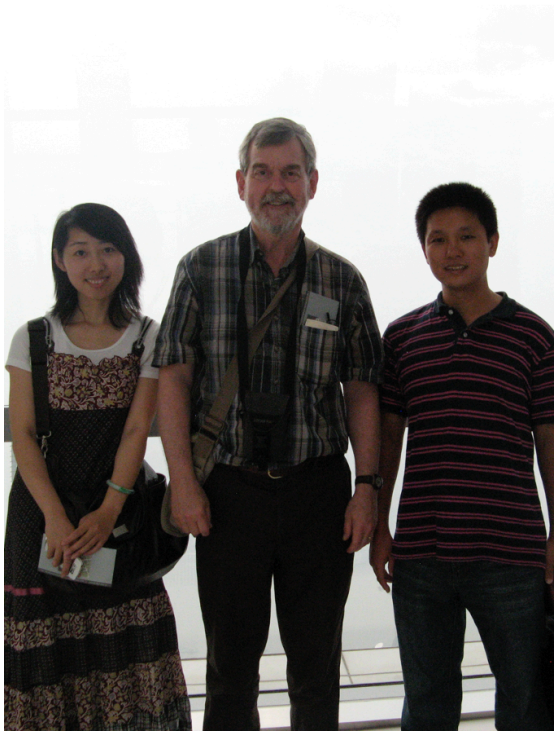
weather made the view far less good than it might have been, but despite that it was a wonderful experience.



From above, from trip



Pudong, from trip



With hosts, from trip



Me, somehow, from trip

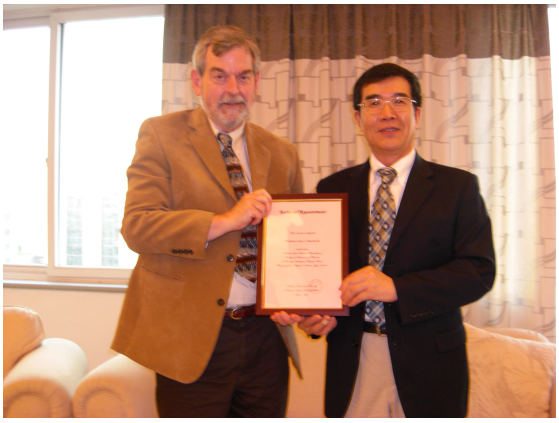
Saturday, July 25, Over the Pacific

The plan for yesterday was to drive about an hour away to a small village that was supposed to be pretty. As I wrote in this journal, however, I noticed it was raining, and so I was not surprised when Mr. Sun phoned and cancelled that. He made no mention of doing anything else instead, which was fine with me as I wanted to stay inside and work. He did ask if I wanted to come to the institute to work, but my hotel room was so nice and well equipped – with couch, desk, and internet – that I said I would not. I ended up spending all morning and afternoon, except for lunch, in my room. I was quite happy with that.

For lunch, Herbert and Miss Xu came and joined me in the hotel dining room. It turned out that they had a purpose. The Institute wants me to become a member of their "Academic Committee," and they spent part of the lunch explaining that to me and persuading me to agree. I told them that I'm not looking for more work to do, but they convinced me that this would be largely honorary only, with the potential for many more trips to Shanghai if I want them. I agreed to this, and I hope I have not raised expectations that I will regret.

I'd been told way back on Sunday evening that on Friday evening I would attend a more formal dinner. That is, I asked before dinner on Sunday if I should wear a tie, and was told no, but that on Friday I would need to, as I'd be dining with the institute's Vice President. I planned for that, keeping a shirt in reserve that would be appropriate for my coat and tie. However, at lunch yesterday Herbert said that the tie would not after all be necessary, since it was just too hot for that. Shortly before I was supposed to meet the Vice President, however, Herbert called my room in what sounded like a panic to say that I must wear a tie. I suspect that he had just seen the Vice President, who comes in from another campus, and saw that he was wearing a tie.

This was appropriate, it turned out, since the purpose of my meeting with him was for him to welcome me to the Academic Committee. They had even prepared a framed document announcing this, and they took photos of him handing this to me. I do wonder what I've gotten into.



Being welcomed to Committee, from trip

From there we walked a few blocks to a restaurant for dinner. Once again, we were in a room to ourselves, with waitresses coming in and out frequently to bring our food and bring, then remove, a great many plates and dishes. There were six of us: the same four of us who had eaten together previously, plus the Vice President and another professor who seemed not to speak English. As at many other meals, far more Chinese was spoken

than English, leaving me free to pursue my own thoughts when nobody was speaking to me.

Miss Xu had apparently selected the dishes that were served, and by now she had gotten very good at finding things I would enjoy. The fish, when it came, was as usual whole, but then the staff served it up in separate bowls to each of us, and mine had no bones. Like any fish there could be a random small bone, and Miss Xu warned me of that, but it was fine.

The most interesting dish was shark fin soup. From what I've heard, I do not approve of that, since I understand the desire for shark fin soup among Asians is so great that many sharks are slaughtered just for their fins, which is terrible. But I wasn't about to point that out.

When it arrived, the soup was a wide bowl of broth with what I suppose was the inside of the fin immersed in it, two triangles of fibrous material. It was accompanied by a plate of thin, white sticks of some sort of vegetable. As I watched, the Vice President put all those sticks on top of his soup, then pushed them vigorously down into the shark meat which he also pulled apart with his chopsticks and stirred up. As he did this, the waitress also brought each of us a bowl of white rice, and the Vice President then used his spoon to put about half of the rice into the soup as well. Then he really got to work, mixing it up, thoroughly intermingling the rice, the vegetable, and the shark fin. I did the same, and when it was done it looked like more of a white porridge than a soup, and it was pretty thick, with all that rice. Only then did we eat it, and it was delicious.

Using that word, by the way, reminds me of a sign that I saw on a shop along the street: "Delicious Gruel". I found that funny, since we don't usually think of gruel as anything wonderful. But as I think about it now, that wouldn't be a bad description of shark fin soup once everything has been added.

When we arrived at dinner, I was of course asked what I wanted to drink. As usual, I said I don't drink wine or spirits, and I'd prefer beer. They seemed surprised at that, even the ones who'd heard me say the same thing previously during the week. But then, to my surprise, once the drinks had been brought, everybody was having beer. I can't believe that was their choice; it must have been politeness to me.

Throughout the dinner our beer glasses were kept full by the waitresses. Frequently, one or another of the people present would raise their glasses to one or more others in a toast. They never said anything special when they did this. The purpose seemed to be just to get them to drink. In fact, they explained to me that in different parts of China these customs of toasting differ. In some places, the one who offers the toast is expected to drain his glass. In others, it is the toastee who must drain his glass. Or so I think I understood.

I found this custom difficult to deal with. If somebody toasted me, then I'd drink, although I certainly didn't empty the glass unless it was already almost gone. But I

didn't initiate any toasts myself. And yet I drank. If I'm thirsty, and it comes naturally to drink, I do it. After a while I began to wonder if I was being rude to drink without offering a toast. I never did figure out if that was the case, despite asking. I didn't get an answer.

That has been a familiar experience all week. My Chinese colleagues very seldom acknowledge not understanding what I've said. But very often, their response makes clear that they misunderstood completely. I can't recall examples of that specifically, but today at the airport I asked a clerk where I could find magazines. She nodded and took me to a display of refrigerator magnets.

On the way to dinner, one of my colleagues told me that they had ordered a car to take me to the airport today at 7:00 AM. It's quite a long drive – at least an hour – and my recollection was that my flight was at 9:30, so I objected that this was later than I'd like. Miss Xu assured me that my flight wasn't until 9:50 (she was right), and that this would be plenty early. Later, as Herbert walked me back to my hotel, we talked about this, and I again said that I'd be more comfortable leaving earlier. He said he'd look into it. But later he phoned me and said he was assured that the trip to the airport was at most an hour, so 7:00 would be fine. He'd come for me then.

He phoned me at 6:40 to ask if I was ready, but that was because he wanted us to have some breakfast before we left, which we did. Our car was waiting, and we left for the airport just a bit after 7:00. After twenty minutes or so, he commented on how little traffic there was. That was true; being Saturday morning, the streets were empty, and we were making good time. Until then. Suddenly we found ourselves in a traffic jam. There are two highways to the airport, but the other was under construction diverting most traffic to this one. After going slowly for a while, we more or less stopped, as there was construction here as well. I restrained myself from commenting that this would be less of a problem if we'd left earlier, as I wanted to. But I thought it. Over and over. I presume that something of the sort was going through Herbert's mind as well, although he didn't say.

In the end, we got to the airport at 8:20, which I admit was in plenty of time. But I still don't understand the purpose of not leaving early for the airport.



The class, from trip