

*Prayer flags in Gansu Province.*



## 7 [PERSEVERANCE]

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I'll try my best to set the scene. It's Tuesday, June 6th, and the members of my study abroad trip and I just got to the city of Dunhuang. If you've never heard of it (I hadn't until I went there), it's a small city in China outside of the Gobi Desert. Comparatively speaking, the windy, arid climate of the area was much nicer than the moist heat of the cities in the eastern half of China, which was a relief. To be quite honest, China was getting the best of me at that point. I had just shaken off a case of dysentery that I picked up in Xi'an, the result of either unsanitized tap water or a less-than-reliable buffet I ate at in Beijing a week prior. (It could have been food poisoning, but dysentery sounds more distinguished and after all, it's my story.) At this point I had been abroad for over a month, and was just a week into the Journey to China Program (I spent the spring intersession in Italy). However, throughout that travel I had washed my clothes maybe twice, a problem that was becoming hard to ignore.

At that point, I made it my mission to return to clothing that was somewhat clean. No hotels I had stayed in thus far had an operating laundry system, so I was an expert at "bathroom sink" laundry. The problem was that I had nothing to hang up clothes with — I needed a clothesline. The city of Dunhuang was small in comparison to the other cities we had seen so far, and I had already been around town. With this in mind, I decided to go out and try to find a string or rope suitable for the task. I grabbed my phone and my earbuds, and I was on my way.

I began walking down a street, hoping to come across a store that looked like it had rope inside. My presence on the street was quite fascinating to locals, and most walking on the sidewalk would either stare as I passed or ask to take a picture with me (during my three weeks in China, I took no less than 150-250 pictures with locals). When I found a possible rope vendor, I would walk around the store and try to find the goods. If I was unsuccessful, I would find an employee

*McGill at the MuTianYu section of The Great Wall of China.*







*Sunrise in Xiahe county, Gansu Province.*

and ask “你们有没有串?” which translates to “Do you all sell string?” This question was usually met by confusion, and the employee would ask me to repeat myself. I would then say “我需要挂衣服” (I need to hang clothes), and the employee would usually lead me to the area where stores sold clothes hangers. At that point, I would assume the store didn’t sell what I was looking for and move on to the next store. This process continued for about 90 minutes, and the cycle became more than monotonous. It felt like I had been everywhere in the city by the time I finished.

The most taxing aspect of the process was the language barrier and how tough it was to maneuver. Chinese is a tonal language, which basically means your vocal pitch changes the meaning of the syllable you’re speaking. This makes for a hard transition for American students when communicating with native speakers. It’s more than just learning words; it’s trying to restructure the cognition process English creates. So, despite my understanding of how to format my speech and what I was trying to say, I’m sure at times I simply misspoke.

It was getting late and I was a decent walk from the hotel when I decided to throw in the (unwashed) towel. I began walking back, and before long the hotel was within view. As I was about to walk through the revolving door, I noticed a back alley with vendors and shop owners I hadn’t seen previously. I decided to give it one last shot and check it out. I saw a small shop that looked like a junk store — the kind of establishment well represented in Oklahoma. I walked directly to the store owner and said my usual line, which was again met with immediate rejection. I decided to at least look around before returning home, but couldn’t find anything worthwhile.

As I was walking out of the store, however, the lady I had spoken to earlier came up to me with a dog leash. She said in Chinese, “Is this what you wanted?” I looked at her and realized I didn’t need to give a grammatically flawless monologue about my need for laundry, I just had to use what words I knew well to the best of my ability. I began to simply describe aspects of the close line to her “更长” (longer), “小一点” (smaller). She seemed to understand what I said,



and returned with my prize. In an instant, the hour and a half I spent walking around the city of Dunhuang was all worth it. I had my clothesline; the mission was completed. Ironically enough, the store owner informed me that I had been mispronouncing the word for string and my sentence was transformed into “你们有没有穿” (do you all sell wear?). Priceless.

I visited five countries last summer, but of all the souvenirs I brought back to the states, the clothesline is easily my favorite — I even keep a portion of it in my wallet. People tend to think about perseverance as working toward a goal

in a straight line. You may get knocked down, but you can stand up and continue walking on the same trail you were on. I think in many instances it's a matter of “working smarter, not harder.” Sometimes when you get knocked down, you get the best angle of a problem and realize the situation requires a crawl instead of a walk. The pursuit of a clothesline may seem like a trivial allegory for perseverance, but it taught me something invaluable. Even in the face of constant rejection, the slightest change in approach may lead to success.



Summer Palace, Beijing.