

Wah!

By Laura Oh

One of the unexpected side effects of my eight weeks in Hong Kong was that my Cantonese improved. I don't doubt the efficacy of foreign language study abroad programs in general, but for me this was unexpected because I came to Hong Kong for an entirely different purpose, not knowing a single Chinese word, and not intending to learn one.

I believe my very first new word was "wah." It was repeated so many times by the Chinese University students on our three day Adventure Ship trip together, that it was impossible not to catch the drift. Every time Captain Ming would tell us to do something: walk the plank, swing on a trapeze, or jump overboard from the highest point on the ship, choruses of half-protest and half-amazement would break out. "Wah," or "That's impossible, quite unbelievable."

And yet we did walk that plank, swing on the trapeze, and jump overboard, gripping each other's hands for support. I hadn't tried to climb a knotted rope since gym class in junior high, but when shown a rope I somehow did what I didn't think I could do. This in part, is what Adventure Ship is about: challenging assumptions about what you are capable of.

On-shore, my learning continued as I completed three projects for my internship: producing a volunteer pamphlet for the Buddies Program, a research kit for on-shore training officers, and an English Powerpoint presentation for the pre-trip volunteer briefing session.

The volunteer pamphlet was the heart of my work this summer. In the initial part of the kit I explain Adventure Ship's philosophy of service or more simply, why volunteers do community service in the first place. My starting point (but a quote that ultimately did not figure into the final version of the kit) was a saying by Marian Wright Edelman, "Service is the rent we pay for living." Edelman is the founder of Children's Defense Fund, and this motto had been a shaping influence in the way I had approached community service from high school onwards.

Reflecting on the nature of service while working on the pamphlet, however, I came to realize that you cannot do service to be free. Service is like paying rent because it is something that needs to be done on a regular basis out of a sense of societal obligation, but implicit in this comparison is the dangerous idea of a quid pro quo. I think we often use the busyness with which we engage in volunteer activities to cloak areas of self-improvement that we would like to ignore. In our false assumptions that community service changes someone else for the better, we miss opportunities to change ourselves. I appreciated the unexpected opportunity to explore my personal thoughts on volunteerism as I worked on the kit and it has made me value my current community service experiences even more.

The latter part of my kit had sections on physical, mental, and sensory disabilities that gave a description of what it might be like to have a particular disability and tips for volunteers on how to be a good buddy. When I was a buddy to a girl who has autism, I found to my surprise that on the ship I seemed to have a greater disability than she. As the only person aboard the ship who didn't speak Cantonese, I found myself wanting to participate in discussion, but unable, and invisible to others although I was visible to

myself. I had written about the intolerable frustration that those with a hearing impairment feel when they cannot communicate with others, yet never had experienced anything similar for myself until that time. Once my buddy and I were in the water, however, I found to my delight that language became unnecessary as we swam in the marvelously big ocean.

Back on land, after a few weeks of watching the television news in Putonghua, celebrating World Cup victories in Lan Kwai Fong, and watching Fong Sai Yuk II twice, I understood enough about native language and culture to carry on Chinese-English conversations with Steve, our on-shore training officer. He would speak in Chinese and I would reply in English, sensing what he was asking. I found that I didn't need to have an extensive Cantonese vocabulary to understand him because as soon as I knew him as a person I could anticipate what his thoughts were. Even outside the office, when people would stop and ask me for directions (because I am Asian and sometimes mistaken as Chinese) I found that I could communicate what I wanted to say in an increasingly understandable way because I had to use, and be more sensitive to, nonverbal cues.

I read an amazing quote by Helen Keller this summer, relating what she felt when she first spoke aloud. She said her words were winged. There was a thrill she experienced when she found a new way to communicate (other than sign language). My Adventure-Ship experience was about making contact through alternate means of communication – with another culture and with individuals who have different abilities. In doing so I learned that we all have abilities and disabilities, some are just more visible than others. To sum up my feelings about my internship: “Wah” or “amazing.”