

Up-Sale

When I first lived in Shanghai, barbers offered a haircut and a head, shoulder and back massage, together lasting an hour, for ¥40. That was value for money.

This time in Beijing, after a long week of work filled with anxiety, I was in the mood for a massage again. Since I was unfamiliar with the area of Beijing I stayed in, I inquired at the hotel front desk: head, shoulder, back, 1 hour, where can I get this hereabouts? “Right in the hotel, on the 5th floor, we have a spa. They can provide this service.” Excellent.

As the elevator door opened, I was greeted by the chloride fumes of the spa. I turned left toward the reception. On the wall behind it was the price list: a 45 minute massage could be had for ¥88. For an hour, that would be ¥110. I knew prices had gone up in the intervening years, but still, this was rather expensive. Then I considered that I wouldn't have to go out of the hotel and resigned myself to it.

“I'd like an hour.”

“That's RMB176,” came the reply. “We only charge in multiples of 45 minutes.”

“Huh? You can't pro-rate?”

“No, we can't.”

“Surely, you're joking. There's nobody here. You aren't busy. Give me a break.”

“Sorry, that's our policy. There are no partial periods. ¥88 or ¥176. That's all there is.”

“Where is your general manager? I'd like to talk to him.”

“He’s gone out.”

“Well, so will I,” I replied, confident that I could most certainly find a better deal outside the hotel.

With that thought in mind, I returned to the hotel front desk, shared my plight with the duty manager, expressing in no uncertain terms that I didn’t care for such inflexibility. He told me not to worry since there is a place called “Da Dong Hai” (Great Eastern Ocean) only a short walk from here. It’s a large building which offers massage services. “At the front of the driveway, turn left, then cross the bridge, keep going in the same direction for five minutes until you get to Da Dong Hai,” is how he explained the way.

Piece of cake. Coming out of the driveway, I saw the bridge. I crossed under it and, as I emerged on the other side, I immediately spotted a large, square, brightly lit building in the near distance sporting a neon-glowing name “Great Eastern Ocean Health Club”. I arrived within the predicted five minutes.

It was a grand affair, this building, resembling a sizeable Roman *Thermae* I had seen in the definitive source book of Roman architecture, *Asterix the Gladiator*. The Grand Eastern Ocean Health Club’s atrium was elevated about five meters above the street level. Leading up to it were a series of stupendous stone steps, befitting such a fine historical establishment. I stood on the street level for a while, gazing upward. In my cartoon-inspired imagination I visualised myself in the midst of heavy-bellied, skinny-legged centurions striding up this magnificent staircase in search of an hour of leisure. Except that something had clearly gone wrong here in Beijing at the Great Eastern Ocean Health Club: the first step of the staircase was about as tall as the Eiger Nordwand. Apparently the architects somehow got the ratio between height and width of the steps of the staircase terribly wrong with the

lamentable effect that the first step completely defied heavy-bellied, skinny-legged centurions. But not to worry. A narrow, shaky, card-board like 4-step step stool was placed at one spot so that the pleasure seekers could gain access to their paradise. It served the purpose, but wrought havoc with the otherwise majestic appearance of the entrance.

Once I reached the level of the atrium, I saw a large hall with brightly lit balustrades and columns, more evidence of the health club's source of inspiration. I approached the front desk to ask what services were on offer, but was instead ushered to a side room where my shoes were exchanged for oversized, rubber sandals and a bracelet attached to my wrist: No. 377. I was checked-in.

“What service would you like?” asked the maitre de service.

“An hour massage of my head, shoulders, back and, if it would be alright, my feet,” I declared.

In response, I heard what I wanted to hear: ¥68. That's quite reasonable for such a high-class establishment, I said to myself, and never mind the narrow, shaking, card-board like 4-step step stool.

After check-in, I was moved to the men's changing room. There I was greeted by another usher in funny clothes: yellow-green, cotton shorts and short-sleeved shirt, resembling a Roman tunic, and oversized sandals like mine. Right out of *Asterix the Gladiator*, page 20. The usher rushed me into the heart of the health club. It was a gigantic spa with twirling, steaming pools from which rose walls of tiles coloured with pastel paintings of motives gay, but unhealthy: young, buxom women making great efforts to comfort fat, middle-aged men. Speaking of which, the spa was full of them. Even though I had a reason to keep striding straight and focus my eyes in search of locker 377, I couldn't help but notice the many men's flaccid

penises, embedded in bushy patches of pelvic hair. I also couldn't help but come to the conclusion that penile size was inversely related to belly circumference, at least here at Great Eastern Ocean. Locker 377, where are you?

Finding locker 377 was a source of both relief as well as anxiety: its contents left no doubt that I would soon be looking like the usher, clad in the same yellow-green, genuine imitation Roman tunic of sorts. Who said they looked funny?

As soon as I had changed, I was shuttled to room 425 on the fourth floor. It was a small room, appropriate for massages. It was clean, sported a TV, an air conditioner and, somewhat ominously, a double-bed with 4 cushions. The usher left. A captain in a black suit and white shirt arrived.

“Which type of massage would you like?” he asked.

“The one hour-one for ¥68.”

“Sorry to say,” he replied, “the ¥68 is head-only for 30 minutes.”

So much for my comprehension of Chinese. “Can I see the menu, please?”

He reached for the massage menu and showed me the services on offer. “I'd recommend the ‘Tai Shen’ whole body massage for ¥198,” he confided.

“¥198? You must be joking. Is there nothing in between ¥68 and ¥198?”

I studied the menu myself. The choices at the lower-end of the price range were limited. I could do two ¥68 massages, but that would only give me an hour-long head scratch.

“¥198, are you sure? That's an awful lot of money for an hour body massage, you know,” I finally said to the captain.

He assured me that it was worth it. “It's a whole-body massage, starting from my feet all the way to my head. And they have extraordinary skills. Just wait and see,” he added.

I considered my options. About an hour ago, I could have staid at the hotel and paid ¥176 for an hour and a half. But that was water under the bridge. I could walk out. Yes I could, but would I? No, walking past the bush-tailed, fat-bellied men in the men's changing room one more time without having had beforehand a relaxing massage would be too big a shock to my system. Ok, so be it, ¥198 for an hour-long whole-body massage, but it better be good. The usher nodded, smiled and left.

While I waited for the masseuse and wondered what was in store for me, I was reassured by a sign on the door: "Strictly Forbidden: Sex, Betting, Drugs." Within a few minutes the masseuse announced herself with a knock on the door. I asked her to come in. She was tall and lanky, had long hair and a narrow face. Not bad looking, but not worthy a second glance either. She wore a black mini-skirt, but no pantyhose, and a white blouse underneath which were harnessed two sizeable breasts (by Chinese standards). I considered my options again: stay or run. I decided to stay, by now driven as much by curiosity as by a desire to have my massage. Surely for ¥198 I wouldn't get more than I had bargained for? In any case, running away still remained an option should it come to that.

The masseuse bade me to lie on my back. This made me nervous right away since all massages I've ever had started by my lying on my stomach. But ok. Once I was in place, she climbed onto the bed and positioned herself between my legs. As promised, she began by working my feet. But that lasted for only about 30 seconds. Then she moved to massaging my thighs. As she moved higher and higher, on occasion she brushed against my private parts, but with such commensurate skill that it felt entirely as if it was an accident – surely that's all it was. (We love children for their naivety. In adults it is called stupidity.) After a few "accidents", she stopped the kneading of my thighs and proceeded to bend my legs into all sorts of directions.

I wasn't receiving a massage, I said to myself, but instead a first lesson in becoming a contortionist.

Soon she resumed the kneading of my highs which resulted in further accidental encounters with my increasingly enthusiastic member. I willed it down, but it was difficult. She and I were at war. Up! Down! Before long she was confident that she could go for the jugular: she stopped kneading, pointed at my yellow-green, now somewhat strapped tunic pants and asked, "Do you want me to take on this part?" It was, as far as I could tell, the world's cleverest "up-sale". I once again considered my options: run or say "no" and see what would happen next. I decided to stay put, but firmly declined her offer. For some reason I trusted her that she would take "no" for an answer. And so it was. She continued to bend my body out of shape, but stopped prepping me for further up-, on- or cross-sale opportunities. After a few minutes I couldn't help but ask her, "It would be more expensive, yes?" "Sure, about ¥500+." Then she became curious: "Is it because it's too expensive?" "No, not at all", I replied and pointed to my ring finger whereupon she smiled a forlorn smile that said "How nice".

Soon it was half time. She asked me to turn onto my stomach and busied herself with my back for a while. This was accompanied by a conversation about banalities: where she is from, where I am from, what I am doing here, what she is doing here ("in marketing and sales"). This went on until the hour was almost up which was when she asked me turn around once more to finish up by kneading my chest and stomach. When she undid my tunic shirt, she showed surprise at my furry belly and approached it with some hesitation, but after a few strokes she concluded that massaging my stomach and belly felt as soft as massaging that of a baby. Given

that this came from a lady of such experience and sensitivity, I took this as a compliment.