

# Eating Dim Sum with Di

*by* Steven Blum

"That sounds great!" I say to Di when she proposes going to lunch. I do my best impression of someone who isn't me who looks happy and wants to communicate their happiness to everyone around them. "When were you a thinkin'?"

"How about tomorrow?" Di asks. "Yeah! That sounds fun!" I don't mean to look like I'm talking to an autistic person when I talk to Di but I probably do.

I also comment on every mundane thoughts that pop into my head because I think, well, the thought occurred in English. On the bus to Chinatown with Di and my boss, I stare at a couple in front of us who are eating chocolate and say "MMMMM chocolate" to Di. I think: this is just sad Steven. You feel more comfortable talking to Di than half your friends.

Di and I get off the bus and it smells like buckets of years-old urine have been poured over the sidewalk. I make a very dramatic facial expression and start batting at the air in front of me. Di laughs and says something I can't write down without making me look like I'm culturally-insensitive. It was something like "MMM, smells like cooking," or something, which was obviously not what Di meant to say. I feel bad for her, and then I feel bad for feeling bad for her. It's multi-layers of confusing cultural guilt.

We get to the restaurant, and Lindsey, my boss, pulls out this list of antiquated slang words she thought we could use over lunch for fun. Just to give you a sense of how useless and culturally inappropriate these slang words are: the first two are "amigo" and "airhead." Maybe these words would be helpful to Di if she ever found herself watching a movie with an inaccurate re-enactment of the way teenagers talk to each other and she really really wanted to figure

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out what was going on, but I can't see her whipping them out while talking to someone on the metro. I also have this nagging annoying thought: why does Di need to learn English in the first place? This seems unfair.

The waitress brings us the food, which is more like actual Chinese food than the food I usually eat at Chinese restaurants (I like the crappy General Tso's). Lindsey and I are both talking loudly about things we would never talk about in real life, under the impression that this is all somehow instructional for Di. But I think it's really more about us. Di gives us an excuse to talk like two people unjustifiably fascinated by the world around us. I also give Di "insider information" about Seattle culture which comes across as bitter cultural criticism. I say things like "In Seattle, no one talks to each other on the bus. We're very anti-social. Is it like that in China?" I have this weird urge to turn Di into a critic of America, and this underlies all of my teaching.

Lindsey tries to change the subject and begins to read the words on her slang list. One of the words on the list is poop. "Poop?" asks Di. "Yeah, you know, like when you're in the bathroom, you know, and you sit down and out comes stuff?" I move my hand between my butt and the seat cushion. "Oh yes. Cushion." "No, not cushion," This next sentence that comes out of my mouth is literally the highlight of my day, which is sad for so many reasons: "It's food that comes out of your butt," I say. Di looks back at me like she only heard the word food. I make this grunting noise, shut my eyes and clench my fists. I think: this would be unbearable to watch if I were watching me right now. It's almost unbearable just being me right now. "Oh, yes, poop!" Di says and she grunts and closes her eyes, too. Later we teach her "shit."

I tell Di I'm a writer and she tells me she thinks artists are "crazy." I feel like that would be a serious road block to us becoming close if I didn't also harbor the fear that artists are completely crazy, and that

I will one day go insane trying to write a book no one will read.

After our meal, Lindsey and I wave to Di as we walk away. We wave very fast, like we're trying to shoo away insects that are attacking us. When we get back on to the bus, the conversation still feels bright and airy, like we're tourists looking at everything around us from far away. It's a much more comfortable way of looking, but it only lasts a few moments.

