



# A tale of a Malaysian lecturer teaching in a Kazakhstan university

Recently I was working in S. Seifullin Kazakh Agro Technical University (KATU) in Astana, Kazakhstan from Oct 14-31, 2012. I was invited to give a two-week lecture on “Soil Conservation” to KATU’s undergraduates and postgraduate students. This was a unique invitation too valuable of an experience to pass up. Rarely are foreign guest lecturers invited to teach any more than a few days in any university in any part of the world.



I am sitting beside the statue of the famous Kazakh writer, S. Seifullin, in front of the Administration building

of KATU (S. Seifullin  
Kazakh Agro Technical  
University).

The Ministry of Education of Kazakhstan have some funds to invite guest lecturers from various universities in the world to come to teach in Kazakhstan universities. This is part of the country's efforts to bring in foreign expertise into their universities as well as to promote usage of English in the nation. The ministers and university Rectors in Kazakhstan, for instance, have to attend English classes twice a week.

I was the first batch of foreign lecturers invited to Kazakhstan. Together with me were Prof. Gerkin and Prof. Hristina who are the Rector and Vice Rector of Plodiv Agriculture University in Bulgaria, respectively. Prof. Ken Gray, representing University of Minnesota, was also invited at the same time as us.

I was sent to the Agronomy Faculty, which is housed in an old but functional building. The building even has a dark and narrow stairway leading to the basement (or "bunker", as I call it) where the research labs are located! The faculty has four departments, one of which is the Dept. of Soil Science and Agrochemistry to which I was attached. The Agronomy Faculty offers five majors for the Bachelor degree, three majors for Masters, but no PhD major in soil science (only in agronomy).



The front entrance of the  
Agronomy Faculty, KATU.



I am standing near the Agronomy Faculty. The place looks deserted at the moment because the students are all inside having their classes.

That there is only PhD major is perhaps not surprising. I noticed that most of the staff here are involved heavily in teaching but little in research. Only the professors are more involved in research here.



A fume hood in a research lab in the Agronomy Faculty.



Some of KATU's research equipment.



Standing with me is Prof. Valentine (in red) and Mr. Saken (in light blue suit) who is the Head of Department of Soil Science and Agrochemistry.

Nonetheless, I am impressed by their Soil Museum, the only one in North and Central Kazakhstan. This museum exhibits the profile and characteristics of several soil types found mostly in northern Kazakhstan. Also displayed are various kinds of rocks and minerals. This is something my department should emulate - only if we can find a place large enough in our new faculty building to house a soil museum. Alas.



The only Soil Museum in Northern and Central Kazakhstan.

My first class was on Oct 15, and I was a little nervous. How different are the mentality of Kazakh students from Malaysian students? Would my class be overrun by unruly students? Or would my lectures be too simple-or too difficult-that my students soon become bored and loathe coming to my class?

Fret not. My first day actually started very well! I started by introducing myself and my university, UPM, to these students. I showed plenty of pictures of UPM as well as a video on UPM. Wow, the students were very impressed about UPM! What begun as an introduction about me and my university soon turned into a Q&A session on how they might go about registering to study in UPM!

I was given a wonderful Russian-English translator for my classes. Her name is Madina Zhenisovna, who works in the English Department in KATU. Her help in translation was priceless. Without her, I would really be in trouble because Kazakh students understand Russian and little, if at all, English. There were a few students in my class who could speak a little English, but the majority had very poor command in English.

In a little more than two weeks I was with them, I grew increasingly impressed of my Kazakh students. Unlike Malaysian students, these Kazakh students are much more active participants in class. They would answer my questions without coercion. But what impressed me the most is they would give me better answers than Malaysian students would! These are the same soil science questions I would ask my Malaysian students back home.

My Kazakh students would also participate much more readily in group discussions. They would ask one another questions or make comments after a

group's oral presentation in class. I do not see this in Malaysian universities. Very typically, Malaysian students are very inhibited in class: they do not volunteer their opinions, questions, or comments. Malaysian students also do not learn to ask questions even to their own colleagues during class presentations.



My all-girls class and I posing for one of many group photos.



On my last day of class, we took many group photos. Standing just to my right is Mr. Saken (Head of Dept.) and to my left is my Russian-English translator, Mrs. Madina. Standing behind me are my pretty students!

And one more special feature is my class is mostly made up of girls! And they are pretty too! They are also very friendly, respectful, and nice. I was wonderfully surprised on one Sunday when they invited me out for lunch. There I experienced

wonderful Kazakh food and desert. Alas, the poor weather that day prevented us from going on the planned horse riding after lunch. Nonetheless, we spent four to five hours at the table just talking.



I was wonderfully surprised when five of my students invited me for lunch on one Sunday. We are standing just outside the restaurant. Left to right: Zarina, Ainur, Gulmira, and Aigul. Standing just next to me on my left is Saken then Madina. Ainura, another of my student, is taking this photo.



Madina, Saken, and I are standing just outside the yurt, a traditional home to Kazakh nomads.

My last class with them was spent by me giving them a written test. They did

well, even though they had little time to prepare for it. The course I gave them was the same course I gave back in UPM but spread out over 14 weeks. Here, they only had two weeks. In my last days there, my students and I took many group photos as a memoir of my short visit. They also presented me with two gifts. I was very touched.



I gave a written test on my last class. Pictured here are my students, all thinking hard!



A group presentation in one of my classes. My students presented on soil conservation methods in Kazakhstan.

My students explained to me that how I taught them was very different from what they experienced. Where I used easy words in my lecture slides, their own lecturers used dense and difficult words. My teaching also had many practical examples and photos to fortify their learning experience. Where my class was

calm and easy going, and with me asking them many questions, their professors would instead shout at them during classes.



I was touched when my class presented me with two gifts (a coin box and a Baiterek Tower pen holder) on my last day there with them. Simple gifts, but I'll treasure them.

The Vice Rector of KATU, Prof. Yerkin, once attended one of my classes. She later remarked to the faculty members that she found my teaching refreshingly unusual. She said that they treat their students like empty vessels that need to be filled with knowledge. In contrast, my teaching is more aimed at making "intelligent students more intelligent". Prof. Yerkin stressed on the importance of them being exposed to more Western-style teaching methods.

Although I was in Kazakhstan mainly to teach, I unexpectedly found myself having to speak for UPM as well. Together with the Bulgarian lecturers, I visited the Rector (Prof. Kurishbaev) and Vice Rector (Prof. Yerkin) as many as three times about MOU between our universities. Of course, being a mere senior lecturer, I told them I cannot agree or disagree to any proposals. Nonetheless, I invited any forms of collaboration between our universities. They later presented me with a pre-approved MOU that I would have to present to UPM when I returned home.



I was involved in a faculty meeting on ways both our universities can collaborate. Here, I am presenting some information about UPM for the faculty members.

My visit also coincided with the university's 55th anniversary (KATU was established in 1957). There was a scientific conference and a concert celebration in conjunction with this anniversary. The scientific conference was held on Oct. 26. I found out that I was to do more than just to attend the conference. I had to give a plenary paper! I gave a hastily prepared plenary paper entitled, "Being a research-based university; University's Putra Malaysia's experience", but I doubt many of the audience members understood because of the language barrier. There was a Russian-English translation service available through the headphones given to the audience, but the translation was unfortunately erratic.



I presented a plenary paper in the scientific conference held in conjunction with KATU's 55th

anniversary. Looking on are some serious-looking VIPs including the Rector of KATU and the Vice Minister of the Ministry of Education.

The highlight of the anniversary was the concert at the Pyramid, or otherwise known as the Palace of Peace and Reconciliation, which was held in the afternoon of Oct. 27. This was a wonderful opportunity to experience Kazakhstan's traditional and modern music, singing, and dancing. The performances were by KATU's students as well as a few professionals. I thoroughly enjoyed the show, although some of the invited ministers left well before the show ended.



55th Anniversary celebration: Shiny and beautiful professional singer, Madina Sadvakasova, singing two songs during the concert celebration.



55th Anniversary celebration: Another professional singer, Nurlan Onerbaev, belting out several songs.



55th Anniversary celebration: Students singing a fast and modern song.



55th Anniversary celebration: The university band performing some marching numbers.



55th Anniversary celebration: Dancing and singing, accompanied by the zither harp.



55th Anniversary celebration: A singer playing the traditional

instrument dombra.



55th Anniversary celebration: A band playing all traditional instruments including the dombra and kobyz.

Unfortunately, after the concert, I felt faint due to drinking too much vodka on an empty stomach. An ambulance was called, and they found my blood pressure a tad high, so I was given magnesium sulfate injection to lower my blood pressure. I returned to the hotel and rested the whole of Sunday the next day. I am no drinker, but Kazakhs love to toast, and coupled with KATU's auspicious 55th anniversary, vodka (not wine) flowed more freely than usual. It is pretty hard to decline them topping up your cup with more vodka without hurting their feelings.

Although I was in Astana, Kazakhstan for slightly more than two weeks, I actually had little free time during the day. I was kept busy by the university. I had little time to sightsee, shop, or interact with my students outside the class (except for that one Sunday for lunch). There was, however, the Saturday on my first week that they took the Bulgarian lecturers and me out to sightsee major sights in Astana. I visited the Baiterek Tower, Kazakh Eli, Palace of Independence, Palace of Peace and Reconciliation, and Hazrat Sultan Mosque.



Baiterek Tower, standing slightly over 100 m, in Astana.



Placing my hand on the gold handprint template where the President of Kazakhstan placed his hands here during the opening ceremony of the Baiterek Tower.

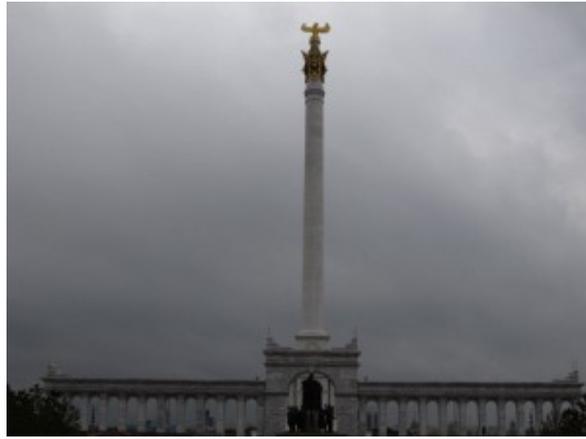


A bride in a traditional wedding attire and her bridegroom during a wedding photo shoot on top of Baiterek Tower.

Astana is a beautiful city with several unique and awe-inspiring building architecture. Astana is also located on steppe, which means the landscape here is majestically flat. Look hard enough, and you can actually see the city boundaries in the far distance from where you are standing. There are no hills or undulating landscape to block your view in any direction.



No, you don't have to go to Egypt to see pyramids...there's one in Kazakhstan! This is the Palace of Peace and Reconciliation.



A cold and windy day at the Kazakh Eli monument.



Kazakh Eli monument is to symbolize unity among the various Kazakh peoples.



The impressive Hazrat Sultan mosque.



The Palace of Independence.



Shatbyr Palace of Arts.



The world's largest tent, Khan Satyr, which is actually a shopping mall. This building was designed

by the famous British architect, Lord Foster.



Inside the impressive Khan Satyr.  
Many high-end western shops here.

On Oct 31, I left Kazakhstan, eager to return home but sad at the same time. I hated to leave my wonderful students and the faculty staff members (such as Mr. Saken, the Head of Dept. of Soil Science and Agrochemistry; my Russian-English translator, Mrs. Madina; and the hardworking Ms. Aliya, the Vice Dean of Agronomy Faculty, who made sure I was comfortable while in Kazakhstan and that I was paid on time).



Two gold-coloured buildings in front of Ak Orda (also informally called the “White House”) where the President of Kazakhstan works. Ak Orda is the blue-domed building in the background. No photography

allowed near Ak Orda.



The Triumphant Arch.

I came to Kazakhstan to teach, but in the end, I left this country having learned much about myself as a teacher and my relationship to my students. Thank you for all the memories. Until we will meet again.



When in Kazakhstan...eat horse meat! I found it tough and dry.



When in Kazakhstan...drink horse  
milk! Very sour and  
strong...urgh...pass.