

Once a UN Tour Guide, always a UN Tour Guide!

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I write this during my last week as a tour guide at the United Nations in New York. Indeed, I will move on to a different assignment with different responsibilities starting next week. I have been giving tours in Mandarin Chinese and English since September 2011.

On Friday, 17 May 2013 (my last day at work as a United Nations Tour Guide), at the end of a Chinese tour, which consisted of tourists from China and other Mandarin-speaking countries, as well as a few America-Born Chinese (ABC) who chose my tour to practice their Chinese listening skills, a young ABC college student told me in English, “You have such a meaningful job. Keep it up!” My eyes suddenly began to swell with tears. Her encouraging words not only made my day, but also made me begin to miss the Guided Tours Unit (GTU) even before my departure.

I clearly remember my first day of joining GTU. It was Monday, 19 September 2011, the first week of the high-level meetings of the 66th session of the General Assembly. Instead of checking in with the security desk like other people, I was escorted by a Human Resources staff member to cross the NYPD’s barricades and enter the compound. Instead of dampening my spirits, this made my first day even more special and exciting. I hadn’t imagined that my first day at the United Nations would coincide with the largest yearly gathering of Heads of

States and Governments — it couldn’t have been better.

I wanted to become a United Nations tour guide because I like talking to people and thought that I would be good at public speaking. However, excelling at this job requires much more than talking, and it is much more challenging than I had originally imagined or expected. Unlike other tourist attractions, the United Nations is a working institution with staff deployed virtually everywhere.



Feifei guides her group through the Millennium Development Goals exhibit.

It is also an Organization composed of 193 different member states, which means that a United Nations tour guide must deliver the information responsibly and from a “neutral” stance, must use United Nations terminology, and answer questions diplomatically. It’s much easier said than done!

Each tour has a maximum of 20 visitors (soon to be 15, starting in June) who come from all over the world with different backgrounds and different interests. Some visitors want to know everything and wish the tour would never end; while others are simply interested in taking pictures (and my monologue makes them sleepy). The tour could consist of a group of 20 five-year-olds who believe Africa is a just one country, or 20 law professionals who question the terminology of legally binding resolutions in the Security Council—every tour is a brand new episode and each visitor is unique. Indeed, that’s why I never got bored with this job. I have always adapted my tour to meet the needs of the different groups, because as a United Nations tour guide, I know the importance of what I

say and how I deliver this information.

After wearing my tour guide uniform for almost 20 months, I have learned that a typical day for a United Nations tour guide is not always full of excitement. Each tour has the potential to be fun, boring, touching or disappointing. Of course, I am not perfect and I can’t know everything. However, each day that I have served as a guide, I feel I have gained at least one more bit of knowledge about the United Nations; with each tour that I have given, I feel that I have done one more bit of good.

During the first week of giving tours, I said to my visitors, “My badge is my best accessory, and I am so proud of my uniform.” I will leave this job in a few days and I will miss it, but I will still wear my United Nations badge to serve in my new position. Just as the ABC student said, this job is very significant. If I had not served as a guide, I would not have gained such a well-rounded view of the United Nations; if I had not served as a guide, I would not have established such a strong belief in the mission of the United Nations; if I had not served as a guide, I would not have been told by a tourist, “You talk a lot, but you talk well.”

Guides give tours to about 300 visitors per week on average—I would never hope to be remembered by each one of them. However, from their applause, laughter and even tears, I feel my talk must have touched, affected or changed some of them in some way, and I believe they will spread the message of what they have heard from me further down the road. This is the impact, the domino effect that comes from the United Nations Guided Tour, and I believe the significance of being a United Nations tour guide lies in serving as the first domino in this chain.

As they say, “Once a United Nations tour guide, always a United Nations tour guide.” Thank you, GTU, for raising me up to a level beyond my expectations! Thank you, my dear colleagues. I will miss you all. Love & Peace! ◆



On tour route, Feifei gives her talk on the work and mandate of the Security Council.