

In the spring of 2003, I was approached by a Korean businessman named Mike, who wanted a Chinese-English interpreter for his meetings. He was in his 40s and an army veteran from the war with America, and he was well-travelled and much exposed to the world. He had also been to Africa, specifically to Uganda, and had even met with President Museveni. We used to meet at my favourite bar, called G-life, to talk business and, eventually, he convinced me to do business with him and become partners. He was promising quick money and connections to important people whom he was in contact with. I thought this could be a good opportunity to learn a new business type and at the same time make some money.

Mike was importing leather from different countries and wanted me to partner with him on the African ground. He was into importing wet-blue leather, specifically cow's, goat's and sheep skin. He started teaching me how it worked and took me to a Chinese-owned factory at Pangyu to give me a glimpse of what the business involved.

Then he gave me money: 20,000 yuan (2,500 US dollars) to be exact, to work on my appearance, since I was going to be in a professional work setting. The meetings were with important business associates so I had to look responsible and presentable: my wardrobe had to be upgraded to business style. He introduced me to his American business colleague, an English teacher in China, called Christopher. We met and talked and got along well. We talked about almost everything from our personal life: women, work, and so on.

We went to meet some other Korean people who owned a big wet-blue leather company in Qingdao in the north of China. Before we met them, Mike asked for the remainder of his money back, saying he didn't have enough money left on him, even though he had a container to clear with revenue and taxes. Moreover, he

said that if I had more money, I should lend it to him, and that he would give it back as soon as things had been sorted.

We flew out of Guangzhou in the south of China for Qingdao in the north, to meet some prominent business people who owned a big wet-blue leather company. We were picked up from the airport in Mercedes-Benz cars, like rich people, and taken to our hotel, that had already been paid for. For Chinese or Koreans, this was more like a cultural habit than a sign of particular thoughtfulness. The next day we met those business associates who welcomed us with respect.

Our meetings were short, and afterwards we would always end up going to grab a drink or something to eat. Mike and his colleagues took us out for breakfast, lunch and dinner for two days. Over breakfast, they were already planning or thinking of what our next meals would be, and where we were going to have them. We went around shopping and they showed us around the city. After dinner we would have plenty to drink, and after drinking ourselves silly, we would head out for karaoke.

This whole situation was completely new to me, this way we did nothing but eating, drinking and singing karaoke. When I look back on this now, I see how much of a lifestyle change this was, so different from what I had ever experienced. This trip opened my eyes to a new understanding of how rich people lead their lives. We had our own driver, taking us around in a black Mercedes-Benz, and they even bought me my own golf set. Can you imagine? I had played many times in Guangzhou but It was not my cup of tea. However, I felt good, leading such a luxury life for a time, and being surrounded by important people and businessmen. The only problem was that at the end of the day I would return to my dormitory at the university and sleep on my hard mattress after spending nights in a five stars hotel, having waitresses and people to serve me.

Mike was actually running his own private meetings with these guys without us and without our knowledge. We wouldn't have asked them about any of that, however, since we had never met

them before, and it never crossed my mind. One night while we were there, Mike came to us with a lot of money. He handed both me and Chris 30,000 yuan each. We were surprised and wondered where he had got that kind of money from, and what we had been paid for, but since we didn't want to miss out on all the fun and 'free money', our questions didn't stick. Later we learned that he was actually exploiting us, but at the time we couldn't figure out how.

After a few days, we went back to Guangzhou and Mike suggested we should have three days' rest. Two days later, Mike came to my place and begged me to lend him more money, to clear his goods sent from Venezuela. I gave him back all the money he had given me, plus all the money I had saved for so long — I drained my account dry because I thought that I could trust him.

After that day, there was no communication. Later I called his American colleague and asked him if he had heard from Mike. He told me no and I asked him when he had last seen Mike. He said that a few days ago Mike had asked him for money, just the same way he had done with me, saying that he would pay it back in a few weeks. We kept calling his number but it never went through.

Weeks went by, with no communication from Mike, and even though we kept hoping for a positive response, we kind of came to accept that we had been cheated. We reached Mike's colleagues in the north and asked if they had seen or heard from Mike and they also said no! We told them what had happened to us, and to our surprise, they said Mike had cheated them, too. Many Chinese people contacted me and asked for Mike; I told them the story and they told me theirs and we all found out that we had been used by him.