

## Airport Interlude

by John De Mado

The Chinese man presented himself to the employee in the Airport Information booth. He had just flown halfway around the world, anticipating an arrival in Cincinnati; or, at the very least, in Ohio. Instead, he found himself somewhere in Northern Kentucky.

Slowly looking up from his Louis L'Amour paperback novel, the Airport Information employee peered over his glasses at the beleaguered traveler and fired out the following perfunctory phrase in a most recognizable, indigenous Northern Kentucky accent... “Hep ‘ya?”

Waiting as well at the booth for my chauffeur (*French for van driver*), I could not help but think to myself that the ensuing exchange between the Chinese national and the airport employee was going to be a hoot!

It was...

Miraculously enough, the Chinese man understood the question posed by the indigenous Northern Kentucky type. This gave me pause to believe that perhaps there are audio cassettes of indigenous Northern Kentucky pronunciation floating about in Beijing.

As is the custom, the Chinese man graciously bowed to the Airport Information employee and said in his best English, “*I need mop...*”

The airport employee's eyes narrowed. Leaning forward, he said *"What in hell 'ya need a mop for?"*

Sensing that he might not have delivered his message, the Chinese man regrouped and tried to renegotiate his phrase. *"I need mop airport... I need mop airport..."*

Now, overtly irritated by what he found to be a complete waste of his time and talents, the indigenous Northern Kentucky type brusquely shot back *"Mop the airport? What in hell 'ya need to mop the airport for?"*

That's when I jumped into the exchange. *"He doesn't need a mop!"* I said with exasperation. *"He needs a map! Does he look like he mops airports for a living? Do you normally stock mops in your booth? Why would he fly all the way from China to mop your airport?"*

In retrospect, I should have given the Airport Information employee a quick lesson in 'negotiation of meaning'. I should have said *"What are the things that this man could possibly need? A mip? A mep? How about a mup? The only choices left are map and mop. And, given the context, why would someone come to an information booth for a mop?"*

This airport scene simply underscores what I have always known intuitively about people who are multilingual... They simply make better listeners than monolinguals because they are willing to negotiate meaning and are well-practiced at the art.