

THE KUNG PAO CHICKEN
(unfinished manuscript)
August 28, 2005

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CHAPTER 1: Lizard on the Kitchen Floor (Monday, November 29, 2004 11:10 PM)

Found a lizard running across my kitchen floor. I thought they were all gone now since the weather's cold now, but I guess they're hardier than I thought.

CHAPTER 2: Dog Meat (Tuesday, November 30, 2004-2:19 PM)

"Today I heard someone say that people who comes from USA or EU, when they have dinner, they don't eat dog-meat. It's that turth?" (Question from a student)

CHAPTER 3: Short Hair (Tuesday, November 30, 2004-10:46 PM)

I was hoping to get a good haircut today. I demonstrated to the lady who cut my hair how long I wanted her to cut it by running my fingers through my hair. I had intended that she use the tops of my fingers as a reference point, but apparently, she thought I wanted her to use the bottom and took off about two centimeters too much.

I'll be looking like a Buddhist monk for a couple days until my hair grows out.

CHAPTER 4: Flip-Flop, You Don't Stop (Wednesday, December 1, 2004-11:58 PM)

I still haven't completely adjusted to walking around full-time wearing flip-flops. I cut my big toe again this evening climbing some stairs. The wound was so severe, the flip-flops had to be destroyed.

CHAPTER 5: Tom Brokaw Signs Off (Thursday, December 2, 2004-10:41 PM)

Where Have You Gone, Tom Brokaw?

Tom Brokaw ended his tenure as anchor of NBC's Nightly News, and I think it's appropriate to take a few minutes to look back at his career.

I remember when Tom made his debut broadcast. I was four.

The next day, everyone at preschool was talking. Even among preschoolers, it was immediately clear that he was "the man to beat". Dan Rather hadn't yet appeared, and we all knew Peter Jennings probably had no friends.

The face of broadcast journalism is undergoing a dramatic makeover in the next few years. Let's pray that losers like Brian Williams don't ruin it for everybody.

CHAPTER 6: Finding the Post Office (Friday, December 3, 2004-5:33 PM)

It took me about two hours to find the post office today. I asked everyone for help, including two girls I ran into on the street.

They didn't know where the post office was, but they offered to sell me a notebook computer out of their backpack.

CHAPTER 7: Priceless Rice Cooker (Saturday, December 4, 2004-7:11 PM)

I've discovered how to use the rice cooker to steam food and have effectively tripled the number of different kinds of food I can prepare in my apartment. I've also learned some valuable lessons the hard way.

Today I was eating some steamed bread with Natasha. A few seconds after swallowing one, she quickly jumped to attention and began examining the remaining bread, peeling the paper from the bottom of the bread that prevents the bread from sticking.

I realized what she was looking at and asked her, "I just ate paper, didn't I?"

"No," she answered. "Just a little."

CHAPTER 8: Finding Sichuan (Sunday, December 5, 2004-6:22 PM)

We finally found a Sichuan restaurant nearby, and the food was very good. We had Kung Pao Chicken and Fried Green Beans.

The Sichuan version of Kung Pao Chicken has a very distinct flavor. It tastes a little like it's made with some sort of artificial cleaning agent.

What I didn't like, however, was the second floor bathroom. It offered plenty of privacy from other restaurant patrons, but not so much from passerbys on the street below.

CHAPTER 9: Kung Fu Hair Pulling (Monday, December 6, 2004-2:10 PM)

On the bus on my way back from teaching this morning, I saw a full out fight. Middle of a bright sunny day, on a street full of pedestrians, these guys are going at it with a vengeance.

I only saw it for a couple seconds, but I can tell you it didn't have any of the graceful choreography of a Jackie Chan movie. The way the one guy fought, he looked more like Charlie Chaplin would have looked if he were Asian and really pissed off.

There are so many people crammed in such a small area, that people are constantly tripping over each other and getting mad at each other.

CHAPTER 10: Hong Kong Immigration (Tuesday, December 7, 2004-10:20 PM)

Even though Hong Kong is part of China and is no longer being leased to the British, it's still a lot easier for an American to go there than it is for a Chinese.

Actually, I don't need anything at all to go there. But, to get back into Mainland China, I need another re-entry visa. That's no problem though, since my visa is a multiple entry visa good for a year.

Natasha, on the other hand, needs to take a day off of work, travel to another city, wait several different lines for an entire afternoon with thousands of other people, and, after paying the fee (10 or 20 bucks), submitting the necessary photographs, and waiting two or three weeks for the papers to come, she can get the necessary documents for two entries into Hong Kong (or Macau) each with a maximum stay of one week.

As difficult as that is, it's easier than before. Furthermore, they just raised the limit on the amount of money Chinese can bring into Hong Kong, from six thousand yuan to twenty thousand yuan.

Hopefully, around New Year's, we'll get to Hong Kong.

CHAPTER 11: Post Office Problems II (Monday, December 13, 2004-4:45 PM)

I wasted another afternoon trying to get a package from the post office.

My problems actually started last week, when I heard I had an "urgent" package for me waiting at the post office. When I went to retrieve the notice (the notice I needed to go to the post office and get the package) from the office, David (the guy who works in the office) wasn't around. That right there was about two hours down the drain.

So, I had to try again today. First, I got on the wrong bus and had to take an extra SLOW city bus to go David's office to get the notice. Then, I had to wait for him since I arrived during his lunch. I resolved not to resort to my usual tactic for killing time in China, getting lunch at Kentucky Fried Chicken. Instead I just walked around.

I finally got the notice and headed to the post office. Fortunately, I knew where it was this time. I got there, filled out my name and passport number, and showed the lady my passport. Then, she went in the back to get my package.

She came back a few minutes later with no package and explained something to me in Chinese which was very difficult for me to understand. I think I've put together what she said. It was something like, "You got your package two weeks ago".

I think the notice I received was the second of two reminders to pick up a package I already got. Unfortunately, I only received it after I got the package and thought it was a different package.

In total, including the time I spent two weeks ago, this one parcel took me about eight hours to pick up. China is not a "tipping" country. You pay exactly what the bill comes to for cabs, haircuts and restaurant tabs.

But restaurants have different ways to squeeze money out of their customers. Today, we ate at a Vietnamese Restaurant on Tian He Dong Lu. The bill we got was about 30% over what it should have been according to the menu.

How did they do this? They did a few things, some I've seen before, some I haven't. First, they charged us for the napkins and tea. That's nothing new. But, what I really didn't like, was they charged us five yuan for some cheap chips they brought us before the meal.

The rest of the overcharge came from charging us different prices than were on the menu.

Natasha made a fuss, and they did reduce our bill by about ten yuan, but we probably won't be going back.

CHAPTER 12: Mu Qing Lei's Email (Tuesday, December 14, 2004-12:18 PM)

An email from a student from Yantai, Mu Qing Lei, who also goes by the name "God". What I think he's trying to say is "Merry Christmas".

"Have not get to the Internet to just answer the letter for you to turn the eye now to will affirm and will get lost in the past right away will go to Christmas festival, you that certainly very noisy, now school neighborhoods all attire of very beautiful, next time you at in 2004 for a long time of, liked to say not much that wish the happy work of your Christmas festival smooth!"

CHAPTER 13: Doing Laundry (Wednesday, December 15, 2004-1:42 PM)

I learned a valuable lesson yesterday: Remove the fire extinguisher from the drain before washing clothes.

CHAPTER 14: A Little Bit of Macgyver (Sunday, December 19, 2004-4:21 PM)

In a move pulled straight from the pages of Macgyver, I fixed my wristwatch this afternoon with ordinary dental floss and a scissors.

As a sidenote, the lack of a screwdriver is hampering an effort to fix the door on my closet.

CHAPTER 15: No Snow On Beijing Road (Friday, December 24, 2004-11:53 PM)

We headed down to Beijing Road this evening because I heard at school they were gonna have artificial snow.

The traffic on the way there was terrible. The bus is always slow, but usually gets there in an hour or so. Today it took two.

We got there and saw some people waiting for the snow. We waited a little bit ourselves before the police came and informed everyone it was just a rumor.

CHAPTER 16: Socks in the Microwave (Sunday, December 26, 2004-8:09 PM)

I burnt my socks in the microwave this afternoon.

CHAPTER 17: Taxi Chinese Tutor (Monday, December 27, 2004-8:09 AM)

Taking a taxi isn't only a good way to get around. It's also a good place to practice Chinese.

My driver today told me some things that you might want to know if you're interested in becoming a taxi driver in China.

Like the other taxi drivers I talked to, he doesn't originally come from Guangzhou. He came to Guangzhou from some place near Shantou (another city in Guangdong) 15 years ago.

In China, it's a lot more common to talk about salaries. He asked about mine and told me he works about ten hours a day and makes six to seven thousand RMB a month. (That's about eight hundred dollars.) Of

that, he spends a little less than half on him (and his family?).

In the end, I paid 30 RMB for a 30 minute cab ride and a 30 minute Chinese lesson.

CHAPTER 18: No Water (Monday, December 27, 2004-1:35 AM)

A notice posted in the building today says that the water will be on and off today. Natasha read this and had the wisdom (some say vision) to stockpile some water in plastic buckets.

I think it's a good exercise for people to try once and a while. When you have a limited amount of water you start asking yourself questions you don't think about, like "How dirty are my hands really?" and "Is it that necessary to flush the toilet every time?".

CHAPTER 19: Cold in Guangzhou (Monday, December 27, 2004-5:49 PM)

It's freezing here. And not just by Guangzhou standards. I'm shivering in the apartment. It's probably warmer outside.

There is an electric heater in the apartment. But, I found out a couple weeks ago that it doesn't actually "work".

CHAPTER 20: Electric Heater (Thursday, December 30, 2004-6:31 PM)

Finally, we have an electric heater.

Jingle, a guy who named himself after a Christmas carol, just dropped off new electric heaters for us. The cold weather is really making it hard to get anything done, from typing an email to drying clothes.

I hope it gets warm soon.

CHAPTER 21: Weekend Trip to Xiamen (Tuesday, January 4, 2005-7:12 PM)

Xiamen, located in Fujian province, can best be described as "The Wisconsin Dells of the East" due to the abundance of boat rides, scenic rocks, and souvenir shops. That stuff I didn't mind.

A couple things I did mind were the overly aggressive/dishonest tactics to sell you stuff you didn't want or to sell you more of something than you did want, and the strand of hair we found in our food.

We got a discount sleeper bus on the way back. That didn't make me feel better. The bus driver was smoking under the no smoking sign. The bus stopped frequently including stops for maintenance.

To give you an idea of the atmosphere on the bus, the driver at one point stopped driving after one of the passengers informed him that he left the door open.

Here is a short (90 second) video from Xiamen called [Sunlight Rock and the Lost City of Xiamen](movs/sunlightrock.mov).

CHAPTER 22: Food Poisoning (Tuesday, January 4, 2005-8:56 PM)

I'm slowly recovering from what is most likely "food poisoning by expired coconut juice" after a weekend trip to Xiamen. I woke up this morning with an upset stomach. Eventually I had a high fever and was essentially bedridden.

It wasn't only the coconut juice that did me in. The apartments here are still very cold, and there's no way to get warm besides laying in bed.

I don't know if our weekend trip to Xiamen was worth it.

Yesterday, on the Chinese news, the tsunami story was pre-empted by some official visit Hu Jintao made to some place.

I was mad watching five minutes of Hu Jintao smiling and shaking hands with scientists or students or whatever while I was waiting to learn more about what happened in South Asia.

That kind of stuff happens a lot. Because of that, I get most of my news from the internet.

CHAPTER 23: Chinese Toilet Plunger (Monday, January 10, 2005-9:33 PM)

A modest crisis in the bathroom several days ago had me scrambling for a toilet plunger.

I'm hesitant to make a public account of this ordeal, but I think what I learned is far too valuable not to share.

Whenever anything new happens to me in China, I seize the opportunity to enlarge my vocabulary. That's how I learn words like "da kong" (paper punch). I thought this was a great chance to learn something new.

I asked Natasha, "How do you say 'toilet plunger' in Chinese?"

She answered, "I don't know."

I really wanted to know so I tried to make my question a little more clear. "What's the word in Chinese for the thing you use if the toilet doesn't work?"

She told me there wasn't a word in Chinese for it.

I knew that this kind of thing happened in China and asked her again, "What do you say if you need that thing for the toilet?"

This time she answered my question.

"We say, 'Get me that thing for the toilet.'"

CHAPTER 24: Pirated DVDs (Friday, January 14, 2005-3:16 PM)

I bought a DVD of "The Bourne Identity" from a guy on the street for five renminbi (\$0.60). I flipped it over and started reading the English description.

"First, there's the author herself in 1923, struggling with depression and thoughts of suicide..."

"Wow," I thought to myself, "I didn't know the movie was about a writer. I thought the movie 'The Hours' with Nicole Kidman was about a depressed author."

What I noticed at the bottom was even more shocking.

"The Bourne Identity" is apparently "based on the book by J.R.R. Tolkien".

(Here is the [theatrical trailer](movs/bourne.mov).)

CHAPTER 25: Human Rights Report (Saturday, January 15, 2005-10:46 AM)

The news from Hong Kong yesterday had a story about that group Human Rights group in New York that issues a report about which countries were the greatest human rights violators over the past year.

A few seconds after the reporter came to the part about China, the program suddenly cut to a commercial. After a single commercial, the news returned with the anchor this time in the middle of the next story.

An hour later, another news program came on, and they eventually got to the same story about human rights violators. First they talked at length about the U.S. Then, they came to China. I was surprised that it wasn't immediately interrupted.

I don't know if the censor was sleeping and then just woke up, but just as I heard the reporter say something about China and Sudan and being "criticized for using its veto power", the TV cut to another commercial.

CHAPTER 26: Fishing for Crabs (Thursday, January 20, 2005-6:00 PM)

On January 14, Synthia (Peter's girlfriend) asked if we wanted to go to Tianhe Park with them the next day. She said, "Come on. It'll be fun. You can crap there."

Of course I was confused. "You can crap there?"

She didn't pick up on my confusion. "Yeah! You can crap right in the park. It's so much fun. We went crapping there before."

It turns out, she was saying "crabbing" as in fishing for crabs.This is where you do it. You pay twenty or so kuai for an hour, and with a hook and some bait, you pull out as many crabs as you can and then barbecue them.

CHAPTER 27: Hong Kong and Guangzhou (Monday, January 24, 2005-9:52 PM)

I was surprised how different Hong Kong is from Guangzhou. After Natasha received the necessary documents to travel to Hong Kong, we finally went last weekend.

Just to get to Hong Kong, you have to take a bus to Huanggang and pass through Mainland immigration. Next you board a second bus to pass through Hong Kong immigration. Finally, you take a third bus into Hong Kong.

Here are a few differences I noticed between Guangzhou and Hong Kong:

Hong Kong: People speak English as a second language.

Guangzhou: People speak Mandarin as a second language.

Hong Kong: Driver's side is on the right side, not the left side.

Guangzhou: Driver's side is on the right side, not the wrong side.

Hong Kong: Pedestrians wait at crosswalks for the signal.

Guangzhou: Pedestrians cross anywhere and anytime the benefits weighed against the chance of getting hurt works out in their favor.

Hong Kong: Fake goods are hard to find.

Guangzhou: Real goods are hard to find.

Hong Kong: McDonalds at every corner.

Guangzhou: McDonalds at every other corner.

If you have Quicktime on your computer, you can see one of the tourist sites in Hong Kong in this short movie, Kowloonywood.

CHAPTER 28: Teaching Little Kids (Thursday, January 27, 2005-12:26 AM)

Since the original plan to go to Tibet got nixed, I took on a little extra work at a primary school. They told me I'd be teaching English. But after Natasha observed for one day, she described it as "bao hu"---babysitting.

The youngest kid is three years old. He mostly wanders around the room. When he notices the other kids writing at the chalkboard, he'll walk up to me and say, "Wo mei you qu hei ban"... "I didn't go to the chalkboard".

The other little girl, who I think is four, mostly entertains herself drawing. She has a pretty large English vocabulary and can, if she wants to, pronounce words correctly. But, when I ask her to say something, she almost always does one of two things: ignore me or say some gibberish, laugh, then continue drawing.

The two middle kids, a boy and a girl between six and eight, are the most out of control. The girl climbs on my back and pulls on my shirt while the boy runs around screaming and making enemies with the other students.

The oldest three, an introverted girl, and two boys don't have much patience while I'm trying to control the younger ones and end up being just as bad.

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The first day I couldn't find anything to keep them busy. They were much more interested in my hairy arms than anything else.

Then, I remembered a drinking game I learned in Prague. I adapted it to the environment (removed the drinking element), and it turned out to be very successful.

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Later that day, I ate lunch with the kids. I sat on a plastic chair made for a person between two and a half and three and a half feet tall at a table that went up to a few inches below my knees.

They started asking me how to say words like "spoon" and "carrot" in English.

Pretty soon, they got bored and started asking me how to say stuff like "pee" and "poop". At that point, I couldn't be sure if they were asking me real questions or not. For example, I sometimes confuse the word "fang qi" (to give up) with the word "fang pi" (to fart).

So, when the little girl asked me how to say "fang pi niu" in English, I didn't know if I should refuse to tell her because she was asking how to say "farting cow" or if all she wanted to know was how to say, "the cow that gave up."

I started to feel uncomfortable. The other Chinese teachers could hear the conversation. These little kids were in complete control. My size advantage was useless against their home court advantage.

The kids have since learned how to exploit language in their favor. They know what they can and cannot say in front of me. That makes the job even more difficult.

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Today, I taught the kids how to buy stuff in English. As usual, they weren't listening. The other Chinese teacher tried to persuade them to behave by offering to take them to the grocery store the next day to buy something on the condition that they use English to buy it.

One girl immediately pointed out a fundamental problem with the proposal.

"But teacher, will they be able to understand?"

CHAPTER 29: Direct Flights From China to Taiwan (Monday, January 31, 2005-1:25 PM)

Two days ago the first direct commercial flight from Mainland China to Taiwan since 1949 occurred. The plane took off from Guangzhou and landed on Taipei. There will be more flights from in the coming weeks from Beijing, Shanghai, Xiamen, and Guangzhou.

There are several restrictions on these flights including that so far they are only scheduled to happen during the Chinese New Year holiday season and that they must fly through Hong Kong airspace to Taiwan.

Therefore, most people travelling from Mainland China to Hong Kong still have to travel the traditional way, transferring in Hong Kong, Macau, or South Korea.

CHAPTER 30: Jobs For Foreigners in China (Monday, January 31, 2005-7:05 PM)

I found a website with job postings in China. The website invites you to either do on search on some criteria or "take your time and sift through the entire database". I chose the latter.

It took me approximately twenty seconds to sift through the four postings.

(Note: Two of the four were teaching positions.)

CHAPTER 31: Salary Cut (Wednesday, February 2, 2005-3:23 PM)

The Maple Leaf English School for Kids gave me another chance to show that I have no spine. They reduced my daily pay from 300 to 240 renminbi because the class size is getting smaller and smaller since more and more students leaving to start their Spring Festival vacation.

Of course it doesn't make sense to pay me less. I never knew how many students there'd be to begin with. And anyways, three hours is three hours whether they can fill the class or not.

In fact, the original deal that I changed my schedule to accomodate was to teach six hours a day for 600 renminbi. This was cut in half on the first day since they didn't have enough students signed up.

Natasha actually anticipated this happening. When she asked me what I'd do, I was honest and said I'd probably just accept it.

CHAPTER 32: Majority Rules (Saturday, February 5, 2005-2:28 PM)

The seeds of genuine democracy have been sown in China's youth. The students at the Maple Leaf English School for Kids time and again demonstrate a keen interest in decision making through majority rule.

If I suggest we sit down and review some stuff I taught them, someone (usually Paul) immediately calls a referendum.

"Tou Piao! Tou Piao!" or "Vote! Vote!" Then he says, "Fan Dui?" or "Opposed?" Four tiny hands (one for each student) dart into the air.

If I don't recognize the results, someone comes up with a slogan to rally around (one of the most popular slogans is "Candy!") and they have an impromptu protest, chanting in unison.

CHAPTER 33: Advice From National Geographic (Saturday, February 5, 2005-11:04 PM)

A little advice I picked up from a National Geographic special I want to pass on. It doesn't apply to a whole lot of people, but to those it does apply to, it's very important.

"You have to keep your guard up when you're living on an island where bears come to eat walruses."

CHAPTER 34: Computer Problems (Sunday, February 6, 2005-11:09 PM)

The desktop computer the school provided me with is a piece of junk. Today I think it finally died.

The latest problem, I think, is a bad hard drive. Most of the problems have been viruses/worms. I've also had passwords that I don't know expire; I've had the computer crash because I think the guy who used the computer before me (who, incidentally, didn't clean up the hard drive before he left and left some choice material on it) decided to install Windows XP even though there isn't enough memory to run it.

The technician, who I'm getting to know well, leaves with part of the computer every time he comes here. (Once he left with the cooling fan, the other time with the 'main board'.) I was getting suspicious that instead of trying to fix anything, he was coming up with more things to bill the school for.

Other annoyances include not having a word processor or spreadsheet program to use, printer drivers not being installed, and a bad physical connection to the internet. (That problem was addressed with a butter knife.)

And the worst part is sitting around all day, waiting for someone to come and fix the computer, and then having them not show up or show up and not be able to resolve the problem.

(Note: After several restarts, the computer is up.)

CHAPTER 35: Sichuan Hot Pot (Monday, February 7, 2005-10:07 AM)

The [hot pot](hotpot02062005.html) we had at the Sichuan restaurant was unbearably spicy.

At a hot pot restaurant, you cook your own food in a pot of boiling water in the middle of your table. Usually, you can either have water with lots of chilis in it, water with no chilis in it, or two different pots, one with chilis, one with no chilis.

We errantly chose to have one pot with lots of chilis in it. After last night, Natasha and I vowed not to have hot pot again if it was just the two of us.

CHAPTER 36: Chinese New Year's Day (Wednesday, February 9, 2005-8:31 PM)

Chinese New Year's Day. The last couple days have been spent in Nanfeng, Jiangxi Province, Natasha's hometown. Natasha calls Nanfeng a county, but actually it's a small city. To give you some idea of the size, it only has one McDonalds, and it's fake.

Natasha's family (now just her parents since her and her brother live in Guangzhou) live in a two bedroom flat. They've bought another place that's 50% bigger that's being built now, but I'm not sure if they plan to live there in the future or not.

Natasha's mother has been cooking for us. Some items on the menu include chicken, pork, frog, and fish balls (balls made of fish, not fish testicles).

Last night firecrackers went off almost constantly throughout the night. The fireworks set off the car alarms and made sleeping difficult.

I asked Natasha if a lot of people get hurt with all the explosives around. She told me, "Only once a year."

Everyone speaks the local dialect. The only time I heard them speak standard Chinese was when there was a guest at the table from Wuhan. Even if I listen very carefully, I can't understand anything.

I'll spend a little more than a week here before I go back to Guangzhou.

CHAPTER 37: Jiangxi Villa (Thursday, February 10, 2005-3:43 PM)

It's cold here, but there's no snow on the ground. Natasha, her brother, mother and I went to visit her uncle (actually her father's cousin) this morning.

My brother and I shared a bicycle taxi on the way over there. The three-wheeled, single-gear bikes are only a little faster than walking, unless you're going up hill, but your shoes don't get as dirty.

The building her uncle's flat is in has just been built, and on the way up, it looked like the other units weren't yet completed. All of the units seemed very big. Her uncle's had a (relatively) large kitchen, dining room, office, living room, and at least two or three bedrooms that I didn't see.

Even though it's spacious, it feels a bit cold inside. The floor is some sort of marble/stone tile that seems like it belongs in a bank lobby. The living room looks like it was cleared out in anticipation of a party with the couches sitting fifteen to twenty feet away from a large screen TV that isn't large enough for the room. The ceiling was very high, but there wasn't much decorating the big white walls.

It started to rain while we were there, so we waited for her uncle's personal chauffeur. The chauffeur pulled up in a black Honda Accord (a favorite of Chinese who are driven around by chauffeurs) with Natasha's uncle. The four of us crammed in the back seat. The car was the only place I've been in here so far that I didn't need a jacket to keep warm.

CHAPTER 38: Cold Weather in Jiangxi (Saturday, February 12, 2005-8:46 PM)

There are two places I can go to keep warm here; my bed, heated by an electric blanket, and the shower.

I got out of bed this morning only when I had to. Right after I put my contact lenses in, I headed for the shower in the bathroom.

The bathroom is right next to the kitchen, and the water for the shower is heated by a gas heater hung on the wall in the kitchen. It's a little touchy to get the hot water running, so someone from the family usually starts the shower for me.

I was showering for a couple of minutes when suddenly there was no water pressure. I prayed that Natasha was close to the bathroom door, because I wasn't keen on the idea of running around the apartment half naked and covered in lather.

Natasha came a minute or two later. I could barely hear her quiet voice through the bathroom door. She let me know there was no hot water, and that I'd have to finish with water from the sink.

My feet were ice cold on the bathroom tiles. I gave in and put on the plastic sandals their family had given me even though they're a little bit too small.

The water from the sink was equally cold. Moreover, there was no mechanism for getting the water from the faucet to my body. I had to cup my hands together and see how much I could splash on my body. Slowly, I rinsed the lather from my body.

Apparently, the hose to the heater in the kitchen had ruptured and flooded the kitchen with water. Natasha's father was already at the store getting a replacement.

Natasha solved the cold water problem by bringing me a thermos of hot water. She poored it in a small tub for me to use.

The water was too precious to squander, so I used it sparingly. In spite of the water shortage, I decided I had enough to shampoo my hair.

I lathered up my hair, then tried to wash as much of the shampoo out under the faucet, without wasting the rest of the hot water.

When I was ready to finish, I poored the rest of the hot water over my body for a few seconds of relative comfort.

As I was drying myself off, Natasha let me know that her father had returned and the hot water was fixed, and I could use the shower if I wanted.

CHAPTER 39: Under the Weather (Monday, February 14, 2005-9:24 AM)

Valentine's Day. It's 9:30 in the morning and I'm still in bed. A horrible sore throat and intermittent firecrackers kept me up most of the night. The firecrackers sounded like people hammering a piece of sheet metal right outside my window. It took me a long time to figure out what they were.

Yesterday we went to Natasha's father's uncle's 70th birthday party. Originally, I was told he lived in a village, but actually it wasn't remote or rural enough to be considered a proper Chinese village.

The five of us, Natasha, her parents, her brother, and I, traveled part of the way there by three-wheeled taxi. The seats on the taxi are arranged in a triangle: one in the front for the driver and two benches in the back facing each other, the middle one big enough to squeeze two people on, and the rear one big enough for three.

Natasha's brother and I sat on the middle bench. Until I figured out how to prop my leg against the door, I felt like I was going to fall out every time we made a right turn.

We stopped at a bridge that is only passable by foot, bicycle, or motorcycle and walked the rest of the way.

The birthday party was held in an empty barn about 70 meters long and 20 meters wide. About a hundred people were there.

Surprise. I was the only foreigner.

CHAPTER 40: Scalp Massage (Tuesday, February 15, 2005-5:11 AM)

Natasha, her mother, her aunt, and I visited the hair salon this afternoon. Instead of just waiting for Natasha and her aunt to have their hair shampooed, I got a shampoo, scalp massage, ear cleaning, and shave.

I didn't expect the scalp massage. About fifteen minutes into the shampoo, the woman started using some advanced scalp massage techniques that I've assigned Chinese names to including:

Shaolin Temple Forehead Massage-Using the index finger and middle finger of both hands, she massaged my temples.

Flying Dragon Thunder Thumb Jab #1-Resting her finger tips on the side of my head, she gently but rapidly jabbed the back of my head with her thumbs.

Flying Dragon Thunder Thumb Jab #2-Similar to FDTTJ#1. Instead of using both thumbs, she only used one to massage the back of my head in a circular motion.

Lotus Flower Silent Finger Snap-She put both her hands on the top of my head, with the index finger above the middle finger. Then she built up pressure on her index finger until it slipped off her middle finger and hit the top of my head.

After she finished the shampoo, massage, and ear cleaning, a guy, about my age wearing a jean jacket, black-framed glasses, and a baseball hat on backwards gave me a shave while two or three underlings observed.

He didn't use any lather. He (or one of his assistants) intermittently applied a moist towel (like the one they gave you on airplanes). He had a lot of trouble with the area below my nose.

I knew this part would be difficult. When he started to shave it, it had already dried out, so he had one of his apprentices reapply the moist towel.

I was struggling to maintain my composure. As he got closer and closer to the center, my eyes started tearing up until I had to close them because I could barely see.

When he finished, he left one small cut below my nose. Finally, he applied some sort of moisturizing cream to my face (with his bare finger, right over the cut), and it was over.

CHAPTER 41: CCTV (Wednesday, February 16, 2005-6:17 AM)

I've seen enough Chinese television in the last week to last a man a lifetime. This is what people do over the holiday season, watch lots and lots and lots of T.V.

There is one game show I have an especially low affinity towards. Hosted by Li Yong, an omnipresent figure on game shows, awards ceremonies, and other special television events, the basic premise is making people's dreams come true.

Li Yong, with his long hair, flamboyant tuxedos, and perpetual caffeine buzz, is an especially talented man. He could make reading the book of Genesis sound exciting.

That's exactly what this show needs because for about half the show the game works like this: Li Yong and a Chinese Vanna White stand on a stage next to several oversized eggs. Li Yong telephones someone and asks them to choose one of the eggs. The woman walks the egg over to Li Yong who breaks it with a large hammer. If there's glitter inside, the person's dream comes true.

CHAPTER 42: Waiting for the MONSOON (Saturday, February 26, 2005-10:03 PM)

Waiting For The MONSOON

The weather people said yesterday that the thick, heavy fog that was blanketing Hong Kong (and to a lesser extent Guangzhou), disrupting ferry and air traffic in and out of the city wouldn't change until the monsoon came through.

The freezing cold weather is apparently gone. On the first of the month, the high temperature was 50 deg. F. Yesterday the high was 75. But, now there's constant rain or fog and overcast skies.

Laundry stays just as wet three days after it's been hanging as it is straight out of the laundry machine. The film of moisture on the blackboards in the classroom makes them chalk-resistant. Even the paper quickly absorbs the water from the air or the surface it's placed on.

I heard from another teacher (who heard from her students) that we should get used to this for a while.

CHAPTER 43: No Shoes, No Service (Monday, February 28, 2005-12:43 PM)

My nascent ambition to enter the quality footwear industry was extinguished with the words, "You were not shortlisted", and watching celebrities answer questions like "How important is breathing?" on the Pre-Oscar programming isn't providing much of a distraction.

Looking for a job in China is difficult. Useful resources on the internet are scarce. A website I found with job postings was full of pyramid scams and jokes and other similar wastes of my time. An article I came across advising people on the prospects of finding a job in China could have been distilled down to the single sentence, "Keep trying because there's stuff out there."

Apparently, the primary obstacle to being "shortlisted" appears to have been a timing thing. Next time maybe it will be my qualifications that keep me from the job.

CHAPTER 44: Back to School (Thursday, March 3, 2005-8:57 PM)

Natasha's brother is finally back in school. This afternoon the three of us took bus 885 and enrolled Wan Wan in the computer program at lingnandaxue03032005.html Lingnan College.

After we got there, Wan Wan had second thoughts, and there were some tense minutes while Natasha tried to persuade him to start school. Eventually he came around and agreed to start classes as soon as possible.

Besides the nearby Guangzhou Fruit World, there isn't much out there. Outside of the school's gates, there are a few small restaurants and further down the road, you can find a few more businesses. But besides having your bike repaired, they don't offer many useful services.

Inside the gates, on the other hand, the campus that the school's three thousand students study at is pretty nice. Clean classrooms, basketball courts, all surrounding a lake. All the buildings are very new and in good repair. (The school is less than ten years old). It's quite the contrast to the crowded, noisy Guangzhou.

(Note: One minor mistake I noticed was a sign with English idioms on one of the classroom walls which included "Do to hell!")

I was surprised when we went to pick up his blankets and pillows for his room. The warehouse was very large and quite tidy, but the building itself was constructed on a frame made completely from bamboo poles lashed together.

The four-year curriculum for computer majors includes math, physics, chemistry, an assortment of programming classes (eg C, C++, Java), English, and physical education classes.

Tuition is 3600 renminbi per semester (or about \$450) and room is 600 renminbi per semester (less than \$100). Add on a few administration fees and deposits and the total comes to a little less than 6000 renminbi (or around \$700) for the semester).

Wan Wan starts class tomorrow.

CHAPTER 45: Lhasa and Anxiety (Sunday, March 6, 2005-2:29 PM)

The anxiety over not knowing what to do next year is only heightened by my approaching birthday. The school called last week and asked me if I planned to continue teaching here next year. That's the only thing I'm sure I'm not going to do.

As it stands now, I think my Chinese is inadequate for any expatriate job that requires a great deal of fluency. And, when I write my resume, I'm getting tired of trying to describe how well I speak with words like "intermediate", "conversational", "working knowledge", and so on.

To that end, the one proactive measure I've taken is to get ready to take the HSK Exam (Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi) in May at Jinan University here in Guangzhou. The HSK Exam is the standard exam for assessing student's Chinese for entrance into Chinese Universities.

But the real problem is I'm not too thrilled about the idea of working. My schedule now amounts to around 10 hours a week of actual teaching when school is in session.

That schedule leaves a lot of time for traveling. And I still have a lot of places I want to get to before I commit to any real, permanent job, including Tibet, Thailand, and Vietnam.

After all, if you can't find time to go to Lhasa when you only work about nine months a year and live just a thousand miles away, when can you find time to go to Lhasa?

CHAPTER 46: Macau, City of God or Shithole (Monday, March 7, 2005-9:09 PM)

City of the Name of God

This Saturday, finally, we're going to Macau. In Chinese, it's called "Au Men" which I used to get confused with European Union, "Ou Meng". But that doesn't matter.

What matters is that Natasha has her papers to get into Macau, and I have my visa to get back into China. We're gonna get on a bus and three hours later, be in the Special Administrative Region Macau, famous for its casinos and "racy" nightlife.

A brief history of Macau:

1513-Portuguese come to Macau.

1999-Macau returns to the PRC.

Last weekend, after our plans to go to Macau had to be canceled, and I was feeling very disappointed, an Australian girl tried to console me.

"Don't worry. I've heard it's a shithole."

Well, shithole or no shithole, that's where we're going.

CHAPTER 47: Taiwan Anti-secession Law (Tuesday, March 8, 2005-4:08 PM)

Dude, if I were Chen Shui-Bian, and my advisors just told me that Beijing was about to pass legislation permitting a military response to any move by Taiwan towards independence, I'd be like, "What the ----, Hu Jintao?"

Isn't this the same political rhetoric we've been hearing since 1949? For crying outloud, over 50 years.

What are you gonna do, Hu, after you've destroyed part of China with half the unemployment of that on the mainland and ten times fewer people living under the poverty line? Apply your brilliant economic policies that are only starting to get traction in your own country? Please.

Wen Jiabao, could you talk some sense into Hu and, while you're at it address the People's National Congress and tell them what an incredibly misguided exercise this is?

I haven't even mentioned the U.S. who is gonna be absolutely pissed because they, despite their support of the One China Policy are gonna have to stand by the tiny renegade province in case of attack.

Don't get me wrong. There will be no beatification ceremony for Chen Shui-bian anytime soon. Even some of those sympathetic to him might find his push for a referendum on a new constitution for Taiwan too provocative.

But a referendum, that's one thing. Military action? Come on.

CHAPTER 48: Millionaires or Morons (Wednesday, March 9, 2005-7:36 PM)

An article on cnn.com today ("Millionaires in the making") outlining a young married couple's "solid long-term plan" to become "the millionaires next door".

The article describes familiar techniques to save money: shopping out-of-season, contributing to 401K's, refinancing their mortgage and so on.

If you ask me their plan has one obvious oversight worth mentioning. What are they gonna spend all that money on after they've grown accustomed to clipping coupons?

CHAPTER 49: Five Week Rule (Thursday, March 10, 2005-4:00 PM)

Anyone interested in teaching English in China may be interested in this anecdote that sheds a little light at how organized Chinese universities can be.

The Foreign Affairs Office sent me an email this afternoon telling me they "forgot" to tell me that I'm supposed to teach two classes Thursday afternoons. It's already the third week of the semester, and nobody figured this out until today.

Two classes is about a third of my schedule. Even if I start teaching next week, I will only give these students seven out of the ten lessons I was originally slated to.

I haven't been told yet if they expect me to make up the first three classes.

CHAPTER 50: Conserving Electricity (Friday, March 11, 2005-11:13 AM)

Guangzhou manages their electricity by occasionally asking a business to take a weekday off and make it up the following weekend.

That's why Natasha doesn't have to work this Tuesday. This system is usually a real pain, because we only find out a few days before. It's exactly why we didn't go to Macau last weekend.

But in this case it works out okay. Natasha and I will visit the passport office in Dongguan (only open on weekdays) to see if Natasha can get her passport so, if we choose to, we can visit Thailand or Vietnam later this year.

CHAPTER 51: Two Ends of China, Tibet and Macau (Friday, March 11, 2005-1:13 PM)

Yesterday we got some information about tours to Tibet. The company we visited offers two seven-day trips. Each costs a little less than seven thousand renminbi (\$850) per person.

Tibet will have to wait until May. Tomorrow we're heading to Macau. A couple items on our itinerary include: Ruins of Saint Paul, the casino in the Pujing Hotel, and Leal Senado Square.

CHAPTER 52: How to Spend One Day in Macau (Sunday, March 13, 2005-8:54 PM)

Macau was good. The only problem was the rain. It was raining more or less the whole time we were there.

We met a brother and sister from France at immigration in Zhuhai on the way in. I didn't notice any other

foreigners until we got into Macau.

Our day was divided into two parts. One, in the city, near the Ruins of St. Paul and A Ma Temple. Even though it was raining, I enjoyed this part. We ate Milk with Paste and coconut toast.

The other part was at the casinos. I'm glad I saw the casino but didn't find them all that exciting. Since we weren't gambling (besides the 10 macau dollars we put in the slot machines), there wasn't much to do.

The only thing notable about the casinos was the abundance of young, suspiciously scantily clad women in the Pujing Hotel.

On the way back into China, still in Macau, we bumped into the French guy we met in the morning. He couldn't find his sister.

We found her a couple minutes later, in line at the Chinese immigration. We told her where her brother was, and she took off back into Macau looking for him.

Here's the short video we took, ["One Day, Zero Nights in Macau"](movs/macao.mov). It's a Quicktime movie.

CHAPTER 53: Wen Jia Bao, You Animal! (Monday, March 14, 2005-6:14 PM)
"We don't wish for foreign intervention, but we don't fear foreign intervention."

That's how China's Prime Minister Wen Jiabao answered a potentially incendiary question about the recently ratified Taiwan Anti-Secession Law from a Western journalist at a press conference this afternoon.

A couple observations about WJB. First, he talks slow. Even I speak faster than him when I speak Chinese. (In his defense, people probably understand him better.)

Second, WJB comes to these press conferences prepared. In his answer to that question, WJB alluded to an Anti-session Law in the U.S. from around 1861. He went on to say, "In that case, there was a civil war. We hope that will not happen in this case."

WJB 1, Western journalist, 0.

You can accuse WJB of a lot of things (not the least of which is smiling too much), but you can't call him a dumbass.

CHAPTER 54: Bitten by the Bungee Bug (Wednesday, March 16, 2005-11:28 AM)
Last week Natasha told me one of her friends went bungee jumping at Baiyun (White Cloud) Mountain. I've always wanted to go bungee jumping and think it'd be a great way to celebrate my approaching birthday.

If indeed I can go bungee jumping, the weather cooperates, and I don't chicken out, I'm gonna try it this Sunday.

I must admit, a quick glance at some videos of jumps I found on the internet has me a little nervous.

CHAPTER 55: Getting Ready to Bungee Jump (Thursday, March 17, 2005-12:34 PM)
St. Patrick's Day. I'm trying to mentally prepare myself to go bungee jumping. I imagine myself walking to the edge of a platform, counting backwards from ten, and jumping without hesitation. It doesn't seem so difficult from the edge of my bed.

I'm trying to incorporate the lessons I learned skydiving into bungee jumping. The most important thing I remember from that experience is not to tense up when you jump.

So far I haven't experienced any of the anxiety I did before I jumped out of a plane. Maybe it's just because the free fall is so short (only a couple seconds). I probably should be worried. Everybody says bungee jumping is much scarier than skydiving.

God willing on Sunday, Natasha, some of her friends and I will make it to Baiyun Mountain.

CHAPTER 56: Bungee Anxiety (Saturday, March 19, 2005-12:34 PM)

The anticipation over bungee jumping is killing me. The deferred anxiety finally set in a couple days ago before I fell asleep.

I had been peeking out the window of my classroom on the seventh floor to get myself comfortable with the height. It didn't seem that high.

Then I realized if every story were 10 feet, that'd only be seventy feet off the ground. The bungee platform is apparently 50 meters or over 160 feet off the ground. That's quite a bit higher.

It's too late to back out now. Unless the weather doesn't cooperate, I'm gonna do it.

CHAPTER 57: Bungee Jumping in China (Sunday, March 20, 2005-10:31 PM)

(The video of my jump is a quicktime movie. It's 10 megabytes and a couple minutes long and is called ["Bungee Cord Jumping or How I Cheated Death and Got Away With It"](movs/bungeejump.mov).)

Bungee jumping is not for people who don't like to jump off of elevated platforms tethered to safety by an elastic cord. This morning, I found out I could count myself among those people, but I had told too many people I'd jump to back out.

In order to make myself feel more comfortable, I asked the lady who sold me the 150 renminbi (\$18) ticket if anyone had ever been injured there before.

"No. If anyone had been injured here, do you think we'd still be operating this?"

In fact, I could imagine that happening but didn't say anything to her. The second step I took to gain peace of mind was asking everyone who helped me how many years they worked there. One girl ignored my question twice. I think she just started.

Two guys helped me put on the harness. After they finished it felt a little loose around the shoulders. I wasn't sure how to say, "Is this tight enough?" in Chinese and was too self-conscious about my Chinese to ask. I figured they knew what they were doing and just let it go at that.

When they were satisfied with their work, they told me to walk out to the jumping point where two more guys were waiting to attach the bungee cord to me.

As I walked out to meet them, I could look down and see the ground below me. Even though I had anticipated making a higher jump than 42 meters (137 feet), it still seemed pretty high, and I was having seconds thoughts.

I didn't feel any better when they told me I was the first person to jump that day. The two men then instructed me to take off my shoes (in hindsight, I should have taken off my socks as well), attached the bungee cord to me, and explained how I would be lifted back up after the jump. Then they motioned me over to the ledge.

They told me to let go off the wooden beam and before I knew it they were counting down from three.

This isn't how I'd imagined myself jumping. I thought it'd be a little more dramatic, like maybe I'd be standing on the edge for fifteen or twenty seconds debating whether to jump or not.

When they hit one, I thought I'd better just jump. I didn't want to muck anything up with impromptu ideas. I've heard that's how accidents happened.

The dive wasn't the eagle soar I wanted to do. It was just a feet first rapid decent, and it was only the first second or so that had me worried.

I bounced around for a bit then looked up at the gallery of Chinese faces observing my jump.

They pulled me up, gave me a bravery certificate, made me bump noses with someone that worked there (apparently simulating some African bravery ritual) and a woman with a microphone tried to use my jump to encourage other people to jump by saying things like, "If a foreigner can jump, a Chinese should jump, too."

CHAPTER 58: Cottage Cheese (Tuesday, March 22, 2005-5:21 PM)

A few days ago, the Russian teacher Seriozha gave me some home made Ukranian-style cottage cheese. I was embarrassed that all ethnic food I had to offer him was a Butterfinger bar (actually made by Nestle) and some Jello that Natasha made.

[Here is the video of Natasha's first stab at making Jello.](movs/chinesecook.mov)

CHAPTER 59: Running and Meditating (Wednesday, March 23, 2005-11:34 AM)

Last night, my evening jog was interrupted by a downpour. At least it wasn't a hailstorm like we had earlier in the day. I use the run to meditate about what I have going on and what I need to get ready for in the future.

Now I need to prepare for three things: 1) a trip to Lhasa in May (if anyone wants to visit Tibet on May 1st, [email me](mailto:michael@thekungpaochicken.com)), 2) taking the HSK exam in May (which unfortunately may conflict with Tibet), and 3) what to do next year (which worries me the most at this point).

CHAPTER 60: Kekexili Review (Friday, March 25, 2005-10:33 AM)

This morning I revisited parts of one of my favorite Chinese movies this year, *Kekexili*. Even though *Kekexili* doesn't benefit from names like Wong Kar-Wai or Zhang Yimou in its credits, it turns out to be more interesting than *2046* or even *House of Flying Daggers*.

Before seeing the movie, I was afraid it was going to end up being just an excuse to make a movie in Tibet. After I saw the opening sequence, which explained how a vigilante group had been established to stop the poaching of Tibetan Antelope in the wilderness region of Kekexili, I thought it might be a campaign to save endangered animals.

What it turned out to be was a story set up a lot like *Apocalypse Now*, one guy obsessed in his hunt for a criminal, heading deeper and deeper into a war zone.

CHAPTER 61: Guangzhou Zoological Garden (Sunday, March 27, 2005-12:48 AM)

Natasha visited a zoo for the first time this afternoon. The Guangzhou Zoological Garden is one of the biggest zoos in China. Admission is 20 renminbi, and there are enough animals to keep you busy for an afternoon.

My worst fears about what I might find in a Chinese zoo weren't realized, but there were a few things I noticed that go beyond the usual criticisms leveled at zoos.

These include patron's blatant disregard for "Do not feed the animals" signs, litter in and around the cages, at least one rat running around the some of the bird exhibits, and animals on display tethered to very short chains.

A couple more noteworthy things that I wouldn't have expected were a three-legged jaguar and chicks being fed live to snakes.

On a lighter note, the insect exhibition didn't look much more interesting than what I find on my kitchen floor at midnight. And, I was treated like an exhibit by some of the visitors.

Natasha had a more positive impression of the zoo, particularly of the peacock. She didn't want to leave until we saw one of the colorful peacocks open his feathers. (She wasn't satisfied when we saw the white peafowl open his feathers.)

After we had waited several minutes several times and were heading out of the zoo, we heard a cheer by the peacock cage and saw from a distance the peacock strutting around with his feathers fully extended. Natasha sprinted back to the cage.

Unfortunately, we didn't have any photographs left. That memory will just have to remain in our heads.

CHAPTER 62: The Beauty Remains Review (Tuesday, March 29, 2005)

<i>The Beauty Remains</i> concerns the relationship between an illegitimate daughter of a wealthy man and her half-sister in the aftermath of their father's death at a time when "the leveling influence of communism" was sweeping through the China.

Sounds like the material for lots of drama and excitement, but instead of pulling each other's hair and throwing antique Chinese vases at each other, the women mostly just stared at each other with vacant expressions and occasional tears while they plotted and schemed for money and the affection of the same man.

Maybe I missed something because I couldn't understand all the language, but my verdict is this movie should be categorized along with <i>In the Mood For Love</i> as one of those movies that looks beautiful and has a great soundtrack (1949 Qingdao looks like Shanghai at the height of the Jazz age) but doesn't deliver an interesting story.

CHAPTER 63: How Mount Everest Was Made (Wednesday, March 30, 2005-10:45 PM)

TIBETAN PRIMER: Practical information for first-time visitors to the Himalayan Kingdom

Forward:

Since I usually travel to places ignorant of local customs, history, and geography and consequently end up wasting most or all of my time trying to figure out what I'm supposed to be doing so I don't wind up going home and having to confess that I spent all my time wandering through industrial parks and eating fast food because I forgot my guidebook and the taxi driver couldn't understand anything I said, I decided to do a little research before visiting Tibet.

But, I tend to forget everything I read unless I highlight, underline, rewrite, and recite important passages and phrases. To the end, I've decided to publish all the information I gather here so that 1) I have better chances of retaining important facts 2) it's available to other people and 3) it's available to me in case I fail to retain or want to revisit some trivia I discovered either during or after my trip to Lhasa.

Michael Mooney

Dedicated to Richard Gere

PART 1: Raising the Roof: How Chomo-Lungma was made

Tibet covers an area of about 471,700 square miles (around 80% the size of Alaska). The eastern part of Tibet is forest. The northern part is grassland. And the southern part (where Lhasa is) is the agricultural region.

Mount Everest lies near the border between Nepal and Tibet. The mountain (known in Tibet as Chomo-Lungma) was created by the collision between the Indian crustal plate and the Asian crustal plate. It's summit reaches 29,035 feet.

Most of Tibet is actually a plateau with an average altitude of around 13,000 feet. Lhasa sits on the northern bank of the Kyichu River. According to Yahoo, the average temperature there during May is between 40 and 65 degrees Fahrenheit.

CHAPTER 64: Bargaining in China (Thursday, March 31, 2005-10:45 PM)

I can't negotiate a good price for anything either as a buyer or a seller. In a country where everything is

negotiable, that's a big disadvantage.

The women who sell me fruit routinely sell me twice as much as I want. Schools I've taught at have cut my pay when they can't recruit enough students.

I've overpaid for everything for bus tickets to button-down shirts. But the most heartbreaking story is what happened when I went looking for the memory card for my digital camera. It's about how business can get in the way of friendship.

About 25 minutes from my apartment there are three huge, multilevel computer markets where you can buy everything from high-end broadcast-quality camcorders to pink iPods.

It's a great place to bargain for things. Vendor after vendor offers the exact same merchandise. Not happy with one guy, there are still twenty or thirty people within the same building (or at least the same block) selling the exact same thing.

But visiting lots of shops can be a time consuming process. In order to save time, I developed a business relationship with one of the merchants. I thought we had a tacit agreement. In exchange for my repeat business and my referral of his business to other foreigners, he would give me competitive prices without too much haggling. It's a deal I thought we cemented the day he offered me a cigarette (which I declined because I don't smoke).

However, the other day I walked over to his booth and asked him about a memory card. He quoted me a price which I might have (if I had enough money on me) just accepted. Instead, I decided to come back later.

In the meantime, I decided to shop around and see what price the other guys could give me. Without even attempting to negotiate anything, I was unable to find anyone who couldn't beat his price by a considerable margin.

I was devastated. Didn't our friendship mean anything to this guy? Why spoil everything over a few kuai? Isn't anything more important than the almighty yuan?

Moral of the story: Shop around for memory cards.

(Note: There might be a more general lesson to be drawn from this anecdote, but I can't come up with anything.)

CHAPTER 65: Altitude Sickness (Sunday, April 3, 2005-8:54 AM)

TIBETAN PRIMER: Practical information for first-time visitors to the Himalayan Kingdom

PART 2: Two Miles High: How to deal with altitude sickness

(Note: The following information was gleaned from various internet sources, and does not substitute for the advice of a doctor.)

At ten thousand feet above sea level 75% of people experience mild symptoms of altitude sickness. Lhasa sits at around 12,000 feet above sea level, an altitude officially considered "very high".

Altitude sickness, the result of decreased air pressure and decreased oxygen levels, manifests itself in the following symptoms: headache, insomnia, dizziness, shortness of breath, fatigue, and nausea. There are two approaches to mitigating the effects of altitude sickness.

The first is proper acclimatization. Some suggestions in order to properly acclimatize to high altitudes include not flying to destinations. But because some land routes to Lhasa pass through altitudes 16,000 feet above sea level this might just make things worse. More suitable advice is to take it easy (but don't just sleep) the first day after arrival, keep hydrated, and avoid alcohol.

The second approach to dealing with altitude sickness is through medicine, the most common being Diamox (Acetazolamide) to increase respiration. Typically this is taken beginning 1 day before arrival and continuing for six days. The typical dosage is 250 mg twice a day, but the Himalayan Rescue Association Medical Clinic recommends 125 mg twice a day.

Be forewarned though: Acetazolamide has diuretic effects.

CHAPTER 66: The Day the Pontiff Died (Sunday, April 3, 2005-3:16 PM)
Saturday, April 3, 2005, The day the pontiff died.

I told Natasha the Pope died Saturday.

"Which Pope?"

"THE Pope," I told her. "There's only one."

"Oh." A few moments passed. "So that's a very important office."

CHAPTER 67: Tibetan History (Tuesday, April 5, 2005-12:26 PM)
TIBETAN PRIMER: Practical information for first-time visitors to the Himalayan Kingdom

PART 3: THE CHINESE, BRITISH, AND MONGOLIANS: A Brief History of Tibet

Tibetan history doesn't follow a straight line. Monks, kings, generals, and Hollywood film stars have pulled the country in many different directions.

During most of the first millennium Tibet was divided into many independent entities. The ruling classes practiced the indigenous religion Boen even though Buddhism had been imported from India as early as 173 AD.

In the seventh century King Songtsen Gampo unified Tibet, married a Chinese princess, and established a capital in Lhasa. Two centuries later the dynasty he established fell victim to rising tensions between the people and their religion of Buddhism and the leadership, who still practiced Boen. Buddhists steadily gained more and more power.

In the thirteenth century Genghis Khan took control of Tibet. Centuries later Altyn Khan, whose grandson eventually became the next Dalai Lama himself, first used the Mongolian word *dalai* to designate Sonam Gyatso of the Gelug sect of Buddhism the Dalai Lama.

Later conflicts between the Mongolians and Dalai Lama resulted in the sixth Dalai Lama being driven into exile and caused a rival Mongolian tribe, the Dzungars, to take up the Gelug cause. The Dzungars gained control of Lhasa.

But that only aggravated the Qing dynasty in China, who had sour relations with the Dzungars. The Chinese responded by seizing Tibet and establishing suzerainty there that lasted until 1911.

In 1904 the British Colonel Younghusband used force to turn Tibet into a British protectorate in order to protect Britain's trade interests. A couple years later, Britain changed course and supported China's claim to Tibet. After the Chinese revolution of 1911, Tibet declared independence. Tibet managed it's own affairs despite the fact that their independence claims were disputed.

In 1950, the PLA entered Tibet and made Tibet an autonomous region of China. By the end of the decade, a rebellion supported by the CIA provoked a response from China that resulted in the Dalai Lama being implored by his people to flee to India. Martial law was declared.

Martial law ended in 1990, but the situation is far from resolved.

CHAPTER 68: Foreigners who want to study Chinese (Wednesday, April 6, 2005-10:59 AM)

Advice for foreigners who wish to study Chinese while in China: If possible, audit a class for one lesson before paying for it.

The month long HSK training class I wanted to take was cancelled because of low enrollment. Instead they had two semester long evening courses I could take if I wanted.

Natasha and I walked to the university after dinner Monday evening. On the classroom doors we saw two registers each with about twenty students' names and across from each name the student's home country.

Natasha noted that if they had this many students, they should have been able to find the minimum number of students (five) for the HSK training class.

The problem was that turn out was a fraction of enrollment. That evening there were two classes, beginning and advanced. The beginning class had three students. The advanced had two.

I sat in on the advanced class for one hour. During that hour, the teacher reviewed under twenty vocabulary words using a method I've seen before in China: reading the word several times with students, defining the word, and demonstrating how to use the word in as many different contexts as the teacher can think of.

Natasha and I figured class costs around fifty renminbi per student per hour. That's far too much for that kind of instruction.

An alternative I recommend if you want to study Chinese in China is to find a student you can trust and pay him or her twenty to fifty renminbi per hour for personal instruction.

CHAPTER 69: Tibetan Top Ten (Friday, April 8, 2005-11:05 PM)

TIBETAN PRIMER: Practical information for first-time visitors to the Himalayan Kingdom

PART 4: TEN THINGS TO DO IN TIBET: Lhasa's Hotspots

10. Sera Monastery

Witness exciting Buddhist debates at the Sera monastery founded by Sakya Yeshe.

9. Dralhalupuk Temple

King Songsten Gampo's temple getaway, the Dralhalupuk cave temple has restored cave paintings dating back a thousand years.

8. Drepung Monastery

Tibet's largest monastery, the Drepung Monastery is nicknamed the "rice pile" because it apparently looks like a pile of rice.

7. Ganden Monastery

The premiere monastery of Tibet's yellow hat Buddhists who brought about a pivotal reform in Tibetan Buddhism centuries ago.

6. Norbulingka

Three palaces that served as summer palaces for various of Tibet's Dalai Lamas. The palaces include the Daktonmiju Palace, Gesang Palace, and Jianse Palace.

5. Ramoche Temple

Built on the site where the Chinese Princess Wenchang's carriage got stuck on its way to Lhasa.

4. Barkhor Market

Make sure to walk around this temple that surrounds the Jokhang Temple in a CLOCKWISE fashion.

3. Jokhang Temple

The Chinese Princess Wenchang used astrology to pinpoint the location of this temple such that it would lie exactly on the heart of an evil demon in the hopes that the temple would subdue the demon.

2. Namtso Lake

The second largest lake in China and the highest lake in the world at an altitude of 4627 meters above sea level, Namtso lake is a few hour's drive Northwest of Lhasa.

1. Potala Palace

Built in the seventh century, the thousand-room hilltop Potala Palace in the center of Lhasa was divided into a Red Palace for political affairs and a White Palace for religious matters in the seventeenth century.

CHAPTER 70: Anti-Japanese Demonstration in Guangzhou (Sunday, April 10, 2004-3:49 PM)

Following a massive demonstration in Beijing on Saturday, protesters called for a boycott of Japanese goods and wanted Japan's effort to become a permanent UN Security Council member rejected.

At around noontime Natasha and I were on a bus heading home. At Xiao Bei Zhan, traffic came to a complete stop. After the bus only managed to move 20 feet in 15 minutes, we decided to walk.

Outside we saw taxi drivers temporarily abandoning their taxis to have cigarettes, entire buses vacated, and a mass of people walking in the direction traffic should have been moving.

A bit farther up the road, we noticed a convey of military vehicles. Later I counted at least 15, but that was just a fraction of the total amount. Each vehicle looked like it had about 40 riot police decked out in full riot gear sitting in the covered cargo bays of the trucks.

We arrived at the Garden Hotel (which houses the Japanese Consulate) and finally saw the demonstration. It was a sea of people: young protesters wrapped in Chinese flags (CNN put the number of protesters at around 3,000), military personnel, police, tourists, and journalists.

I walked up to a blockade where the attention was focused. Riot police were standing shoulder to shoulder holding shields while protesters chanted anti-Japanese slogans and sang patriotic songs.

I noticed some of the photographers had turned their cameras on me. I guess they had enough pictures of the police and protesters and were looking for something new.

One of the ringleaders in the front, a tiny woman, asked me, "Where are you from?"

I was a little surprised. She was sandwiched between a row of military police and thousands of protesters and was talking to me like she just wanted to practice her English.

I walked away to the area where the convoy of military vehicles had assembled and began taking more pictures (like everyone else with a cell phone, digital camera, or camcorder). A few girls began to follow Natasha and I around.

Natasha told me they were accusing us of being spies and wanted me to stop taking pictures.

As we left the area the police were using recorded messages to tell the protesters to disperse and assuring them that the government would handle the situation properly.

The anti-Japanese sentiment in China is frustrating. Last year during a class I taught, a student gave a presentation relating in some fashion to Japan. At the end of the speech another student asked him a question about Japan, baiting him to say something bad about the Japanese.

The student picked up on what his classmate was doing and avoided giving him the answer he wanted. I was happy he handled the matter like this but wish the question had been never asked in the first place.

CHAPTER 71: Dry Vegetable from Ningxia (Monday, April 11, 2004-7:38 PM)

Sunday morning Natasha and I walked past three people selling what looked to me like [steel wool or asbestos](chide04102005.html). I wanted to figure out what it was they were selling.

"Sugar," the guy told me.

Sugar? That's a strange word for him to know. Anyways, it doesn't look like anything made from sugar. I asked him again.

Turns out he wasn't saying "sugar", he was saying "chi de" or "something you eat".

What they were selling is called "gan cai" in Chinese or "dry vegetable". It actually looks like big wads of hair.

The three people selling the dry vegetable (two men and a woman) were from the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region in northwest China. One third of the population in Ningxia belong to the Muslim Hui minority group.

"How do you eat it?" Natasha asked.

"You put it in soup."

"What does it taste like?"

"It doesn't taste like anything. It tastes like the soup."

At first he quoted me a price of one hundred-sixty renminbi per jin. That's \$85 a pound.

Eight-five dollars per pound for something that doesn't taste like anything? Didn't sound like a good deal.

But I wanted to make a token purchase before we left. I asked him how much was the smallest amount he would sell me. He told me he'd sell me sixteen renminbi's worth.

I offered to buy five renminbi's worth, which was overly generous. He initially refused, but as we walked away he grabbed a handful and agreed to give it to me for five renminbi.

The next time Natasha and I have soup, we'll try it.

[Footnote: Additional research has revealed that this vegetable is actually a type of fresh water alga (Nostic flagelliforme). In Cantonese it is called fat choy or "hair vegetable".

It's popular around lunar New Year because the name in Cantonese sounds similar to a Cantonese expression meaning "to strike it rich".

The steep price is the result of limits placed on the harvesting of this vegetable (which grows best in places like Ningxia) due to the negative effects harvesting causes to the environment.]

[Correction: A reader has informed me that the Mandarin word for this food is "Fa Cai" and is only eaten on account of its name.]

CHAPTER 72: Christianity in China (Tuesday, April 12, 2005-6:06 PM)

Last Sunday Natasha and I visited the [Sacred Heart of Jesus Christ](sacredheart04102005.html)

Catholic Church on Yide Lu near Jiefang Nan Lu in Guangzhou's Yuexiu District.

Construction on the Sacred Heart of Jesus Christ Church (also known as the "Stone House") began in 1863 and lasted 25 years. It is the largest Catholic church in southern China.

Unfortunately we were not able to go inside. The church, which has been undergoing renovations since July of 2004, is completely surrounded by scaffolding. The initial renovation won't be complete until some time in 2006.

China's rocky history with the Vatican has actually brought about two separate Catholic Churches in China. In 1951 the official Catholic Church in China cut ties with the Vatican.

The state-sanctioned Catholic Church is administered by the China Patriotic Catholic Association. It has around four million members.

It's been estimated that there are as many as twelve million Catholics who practice their religion in China's underground, illegal Catholic church.

The main sticking point today between China and the Vatican is Taiwan. China refuses to consider opening relations with the Vatican before the Vatican cuts ties with Taiwan.

Several historical events are often cited as the reason why China feels so threatened by Christianity. China claims western missionaries plotted the Opium War of 1840 and were subsequently involved in the opium trade which had devastating effects on China.

China has even had homegrown Christian movements. In 1851, Hong Xiuquan kicked off the Taiping rebellion. Claiming to be Jesus's younger brother, Hong Xiquan declared himself Heavenly King of Great Peace. The movement was suppressed in 1864.

CHAPTER 73: HSK Exam (Thursday, April 14, 2005-9:48 PM)

I registered for the <http://www.hsk.org.cn> HSK exam this morning at The College of Chinese Language and Culture Jinan University in Guangzhou this morning.

The HSK (Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi) is the official exam in China to assess Chinese proficiency in non-native speakers for people who want to or are studying in China and for people who want to work in China.

I got a little scared when the woman handed me the application. I guess I shouldn't have been that surprised that there was no English on it, but I still felt worried that I wouldn't be able to read it or, worse yet, would read it wrong.

At first, I avoided looking at the paper because I thought not knowing if I could read it was better than knowing I couldn't read it. I began looking at the application, slowly and meticulously, space by space.

I discovered I could read it, but it didn't take me long to discover my next problem. I had to write in Chinese on the application.

I haven't written Chinese characters in a long time. Even the ones I do know how to write, don't look very nice since I never learned the proper way to write Chinese characters.

I finished the form and returned it to the lady. Next she handed me an envelope and told me to write my name on it.

"Is my English name okay?" I asked her. I have a Chinese name, but don't like to use it very much. I still think of myself as a "Michael", not as a "Mu Mai Ke".

"No. I can't read it if it's in English."

I wrote my name, trying best to disguise my poor penmanship. That was it. I take the exam in the middle of

May.

Some basic information on the HSK exam. There are three groups of people who take the exam: foreigners, overseas Chinese, and minorities in China.

The basic exam is intended for people who have received 100 to 800 hours of instruction. The basic exam has three parts: listening, grammar, and reading.

The intermediate exam is intended for people who have received 400 to 2,000 hours of instruction. The intermediate exam has four parts: listening, grammar, reading, and fill-in-the-blanks.

The advanced exam is intended for people with over 3,000 hours of instruction. The advanced exam has five parts: listening, reading, fill-in-the-blanks, writing, and speaking.

The exams are given all over the world including cities in the U.S. like New York, Miami, Houston, Seattle, and San Francisco.

CHAPTER 74: Tours to Tibet (Friday, April 15, 2005-9:58 PM)

Natasha learned from a tour agency in Sichuan that it can take eight or nine days for a foreigner to get a permit to visit Tibet. That means we have to hurry up if we want to go there on May 1st.

The regulations governing travel to Tibet are confusing and "subject to change". The website of the Chinese Embassy in Washington says that in order to travel to Tibet you need to "apply for a visa with permission of the Tibet Tourism Bureau".

The travel books I read advise travelers that it is only possible to get a permit by booking a tour through a tour agency. You cannot simply purchase a plane ticket to Lhasa.

Even after you figure out how you can go to Tibet, you still need to consider the question of whether or not you should go to Tibet. The political situation means that decisions travelers make about where to go, what to see, where to spend money, and what to tell friends after returning take on extra meaning. It might be easiest to just stay home.

Concerned that if we waited too long we might not be able to receive the necessary documents in time, Natasha and I visited a travel agency earlier this evening.

I wanted to know if the travel agency accepted credit cards.

"The machine is broken," the travel agent answered in Chinese. I wasn't sure I heard her right

"Broken," I said in English. That shouldn't be a problem. Broken stuff gets fixed. We'll just pay after the machine has been fixed.

"Yes. Broken." She could speak a little English.

"When was it broken?"

She answered me in Chinese. "A very long time ago."

Even at a travel agency in Guangzhou there aren't enough customers using credit cards to make it worth their while to get a new machine.

"It's very convenient," she told me. "There's a bank next door."

That's not convenient. Being able to use a credit card at the travel agency, that would be convenient.

CHAPTER 75: Enter the Yak (Saturday, April 16, 2005-11:06 AM)

TIBETAN PRIMER: Practical information for first-time visitors to the Himalayan Kingdom

PART 5: TIBETAN CUISINE: The three basic food groups of Tibet-yak milk, yak meat, and tsampa

Tibet's high altitude limits the animals and crops Tibetans can raise to those that can handle the extreme environment.

Enter the Yak.

The yak (or long-haired cow) is ideal for Tibet. Its meat can be stewed, stir-fried, barbecued, dried, and made into yak dumplings (momos).

The yak also provides dairy food. It provides yak milk, yak butter, and yak yoghurt.

Another essential element of Tibetan food is tsampa (barley flour). Tsampa is added to salted butter tea for a quick snack and is also used to make tsampa beer.

Tibet's high altitude restricts the amount of vegetables that can be grown. Therefore vegetables don't play as great a role in the daily diet as they do in other parts of the world.

Tibetan food has nothing in common with Chinese food. Tibetan food is mild whereas certain styles of Chinese food (most notably in Sichuan) are spicy. Tibetan food is not typically eaten with chopsticks or cutlery. Finally, Tibetan food is not shared like Chinese food. One person eats one dish like in the U.S.

CHAPTER 76: The 36th Chamber of the HSK Exam (Monday, April 18, 2005-9:53 AM)

The 1978 Shaw Brothers film *The 36th Temple of Shaolin* inspired me to start a rigorous training program for the HSK exam.

Shortly before the movie began on Saturday, Natasha lodged a protest against watching it.

"My father wouldn't even watch this kind of movie."

We watched it anyway. It's about a young rebel late in the Qing (Manchu) dynasty who works his way through the various chambers of the Shaolin Temple's rigorous martial arts training regiment.

Each chamber presents the student with a new and dangerous training method that the student must master before proceeding. As the legendary University of Wisconsin African Storytelling Professor Harold Scheub would tell you, "Look for the pattern. The pattern tells the story."

What is the pattern? The young student enters a new chamber, attempts the challenge, fails, gets frustrated, gains enlightenment, succeeds, and moves to the next chamber. Using this formula, the movie feeds the audience's imagination with different kinds of training methods the monks in the Shaolin Temple might have used to train their pupils.

This movie made me take a renewed interest in preparing for the HSK exam in May.

Yesterday I took part of a practice HSK exam Natasha dug up on the Internet. As anyone who has taken the HSK exam or looked at practice material for the exam knows, one common type of question is the where-does-this-word-fit-into-the-sentence question. An English question of this variety might look like this:

The (A) monkey (B) with the telephone ate (C) the banana (D) without laughing. (again)

The test taker needs to find the correct spot (A,B,C, or D) for the word at the end, in this case "again".

I couldn't think straight after reading 30 questions like this. But the Shaw Brothers film should motivate me to study harder.

CHAPTER 77: Extra Teaching at the College of Water Resources (Tuesday, April 19, 2005-2:01 PM)

In order to defray some of the costs of the May 1st trip to Tibet, I've taken on some extra teaching at a

local college. I can use the money, but some of the arrangements are turning out to be a hassle.

I was recruited for this job by Adam, a guy whose excellent English amazingly fails to compensate for his unparalleled ability to irritate people. Even over a short phone conversation he comes across loud and clear as someone who is out for a quick buck and isn't even willing to do very much to earn it.

He schedules meetings and gives teaching assignments at the last minutes, uses other teachers as messengers and couriers to deliver information and documents to each other, and even fails to show up for appointments.

On Sunday I received a typical phone call from him. He wanted to remind me that I was supposed to teach the next day.

The problem was that he was mistaken.

I explained to him that it was a different foreign teacher, Peter, who was scheduled to teach the next day. After I made it clear to him who was teaching, he tried to shove more teaching hours on me.

In fact I wanted the extra money. It was solely on account of his behavior that I refused to teach.

The school itself is a little below average in terms of the support and resources they allocate for the foreign teachers. I teach six or so classes but only see each class once every two weeks for two hours. This year the students will have a total of about eight hours of instruction from a foreign teacher.

It's hard to see the benefit of such a miniscule amount of instruction. I guess I think it's better than nothing. But just barely.

CHAPTER 78: Lord Oh Lord (Thursday, April 21, 2005-10:41 AM)

Traveling isn't worthwhile unless you run into a couple problems every now and then. Half the reason I want to see Tibet is because geography and politics make it so difficult.

The trip to Tibet is going to be expensive. Maybe if we had more time or traveling savvy we could save some money. But at this point, I'm hellbent on visiting Lhasa, and I'll do whatever I need to to make it.

An unfortunate combination of events put Natasha and I in dire financial straits. The trip got more expensive, we couldn't access some of our own money, and money we thought we had it turns out we didn't. Tensions rose between Natasha and I as we tried to figure out how we could both finance the trip and eat.

We've since instituted several cost cutting measures. Dried sweet potatoes are bought in the 350 gram package instead of the 150 gram package. Toothpaste is used until the tube is completely exhausted. And Jell-O has become a staple of our diet.

Last Tuesday a teacher at the College of Water Resources told me I should call a guy named Mr. Zhou to see when I would get paid. The school hasn't communicated with me much. Natasha told me I should just call Adam to resolve the problem, but I despise so Adam so much I wanted to try Mr. Zhou first.

Finally, I got a hold of him. In a roundabout fashion he told me I'd get paid next Friday. Then he asked me if I could teach a few more hours Friday morning. I said I couldn't.

After I hung up the phone, I figured out who Mr. Zhou is. It's Adam. The guy who's been orchestrating this whole affair from the beginning and has managed to rub me the wrong way about it at every turn.

CHAPTER 79: Do the Chinese REALLY hate the Japanese? (Thursday, April 21, 2005-8:45 PM)

An unfortunate reality in China today is that many ordinary Chinese will without hesitation say, "I hate the Japanese".

Maybe it leaves a little room for interpretation. Does it mean the Japanese government, some war criminals, or Yoko Ono? Is the word "hate" the word they really wanted to use or could they articulate the point better

in Chinese?

No matter what your interpretation is, I still wish the statement would never be uttered again.

I don't have many beliefs that are so clear to me that I (consciously or unconsciously) avoid talking about them with friends whose opinions I can't be sure are completely congruent with mine, for fear that a candid conversation would not only reveal a difference of opinion but also a fundamental difference between myself and them that would call into question what our relationships ever were about in the first place.

That's why I don't like to talk about the recent anti-Japanese demonstrations.

I've only talked about them with a few Chinese friends, and before initiating a conversation with someone, I involuntarily filter out the people who I suspect might have an opinion inconsistent with mine.

There are a couple students who look for me between classes so they have a chance to practice English and talk to a foreigner. One such student visited me this afternoon.

He was wearing a shirt with Japanese characters on it. He let me take a picture of him, but when I told him I took the picture because of the Japanese characters he told me not to show it to anyone. It's too bad. It's a good picture.

He was worried about what would happen to him if anyone saw him wearing a Japanese shirt. I think he was exaggerating a bit, but I told him I wouldn't use the picture.

At first when I saw the demonstration near the Japanese consulate, before I knew what it was about, I assumed the people were demonstrating for a cause I could support. I'm so used to seeing protests on the news: in Iraq, the Ukraine, the former Soviet Union, Tiananmen Square. In every case the bad guys use tanks and guns. The good guys wear blue jeans and sing songs.

As long as no bottles were getting thrown or windows being broken, I believed when people spoke out they spoke out about good things, about corrupt governments taking advantage of the powerless masses.

But when I saw people wrapping themselves in Chinese flags, burning Japanese flags, waving signs with incendiary propaganda, I knew something was wrong.

Maybe the wartime atrocities and territorial disputes don't resonate with me like they do with the Chinese. Maybe the Japanese have not properly atoned for sins in the past. But I still thought the demonstrations were misguided and counterproductive.

Since then, with the help of the analysis of academics, newspaper columnists, friends, and other 'bloggers', I've become convinced that the demonstrations had little to do with righteousness or true freedom and more to do with politics, propaganda, and mass mentality.

I asked the student with the Japanese shirt what he thought about the demonstration. At first he said he didn't really care about the demonstration. I wanted him to stop talking right there. But I could tell he wanted to say more.

He had trouble finding the right words to express his meaning, but using a mixture of Chinese and English, eventually he made himself clear. He didn't exactly express solidarity with the demonstrators, but he did express some sympathy, saying he hated the Japanese "a little".

A group of five students or so had gathered in the classroom by that point. They asked me how I felt about the situation.

I tried to answer carefully. At the time, I told myself I was being cautious because their English wasn't perfect and they might misunderstand some subtle points about my what I wanted to say.

In fact, I was worried that they would understand my opinion fine, and just wouldn't agree.

CHAPTER 80: The Qingyuan Trilogy-Part 1 (Sunday, April 24, 2005-6:15 PM)
Beijiang and Waterfalls With No Water

The teachers that day came from half a dozen countries and spoke just as many languages. Chinese, Japanese, Russian, American, British, and Canadian citizens were all aboard the bus to Qingyuan in northern Guangdong Province.

And there was one guy whose origins are still a mystery. He could have held a South African, Swiss, or French passport. I never really knew and was afraid to ask.

Qingyuan has a two thousand year history. One tenth of Guangdong falls under its jurisdiction. Qingyuan has the largest population of minorities in Guangdong Province, mostly Yao and Zhuang.

The plan as it was laid out in the email had us leaving Guangzhou at eight in the morning and returning between four and five in the afternoon. Actually we wouldn't return to Guangzhou until around nine o'clock. I had something to do with that, but that comes later.

Our tour guide really wanted to do a good job. She spoke good English and from the moment the bus pulled away from the gates of Guangdong Technical University to begin its two-hour trip to Qingyuan, she started talking.

She assumed we not only knew nothing about China, but also that we nothing about anything at all. I think she thought the best tour guide is the tour guide who keeps talking.

I stopped listening when, after we pulled on the highway, she announced, "This is an expressway." I felt bad not listening, but I needed some rest. She did in fact do a good job that day.

Our first stop was the North River (Beijiang), a tributary of the Pearl River.

The water wasn't clear. It was a murky brown color. The rolling hills on each side on each bank of the river were covered with trees. There were a couple other barges ferrying tourists and other things up and down the river and smaller boats with fisherman here and there.

Beijiang doesn't quite have the dramatic impact of Lijiang in Guangxi, but it's a lot closer to Guangzhou than Guilin.

Peter walked out of the cabin on to the deck to get some fresh air. I followed him out there to take photographs. That wouldn't be the only time that day I followed Peter into trouble with the tour guide.

I walked over to the edge of the deck and noticed how easy it would have been for me to fall into the river. There was no railing and lots of things to trip over.

The tour guide walked up to us and politely said, "Safety first." Peter and I went back inside the boat.

We stopped at a Buddhist temple. The tour guide and foreign affairs office started arguing about how much time we should spend there. The tour guide suggested two hours. The foreign affairs office thought ten minutes was more appropriate. The issue was left unresolved as we started to split up and explore the temple ourselves.

I wonder when tourism replaced Buddhism as the religion practiced at these temples. Hans commented about Buddhist temples in China, "When you've seen one, you've seen 'em all."

Against the advice of the foreign affairs office, a few teachers insisted on walking up some stairs behind the main temple that led to an alleged waterfall. The foreign affairs office relented and a couple of us made our way up.

There wasn't much at the top. Just a couple more temples that looked like they didn't get visited much and

no waterfall. Where was the waterfall?

The tour guide explained that there was a waterfall, just no water. A waterfall with no water. Sounds like a clever way to market a pile of rocks as a tourist attraction.

On the way back to the boat I cut the big toe of my right foot on a step. That injury slowed me down the rest of the day.

Lunch was served on the boat. Seafood, chicken, pumpkin and soup, served on metal dishes. I hate eating seafood from metal dishes. History suggests it's a harbinger of food poisoning.

The next stop was sold as a beach. It could have been described better as a sandbar. A few minutes after we docked, a guy drifted up in a small boat and unloaded a box of fireworks. He just waits for tourists to show up and then tries to sell them fireworks.

He wasn't an aggressive salesman and didn't seem to care that nobody bought anything. As we boarded our boat to leave, he quietly packed up his things and moved on.

Peter, Hans, and I spent most of the return trip on the deck again. (The tourist guide let us sit out there.) The trip back was slow because we were going against the current.

As we got closer to the dock, we saw more and more boats, more and more tourists. Despite the serene environment, the Chinese on the boats were keeping themselves busy with Mah-jiang and Karaoke.

I had suffered a small injury and been scolded by the tour guide once. Next we were going to see more waterfalls.

CHAPTER 81: Sloppy Censorship in the PRC (Sunday, April 24, 2005-12:08 AM)

If there is anybody in China who hasn't yet learned about the anti-Japanese demonstrations from their friends or computers, they might have learned something tonight.

That is, if they speak English and happen to have been watching the late news from Hong Kong which is broadcast here in Guangzhou. Surprisingly, the anchor was able to utter the words "mob violence" without the censors pulling the plug.

I think the censors must be relaxing a little, or getting lazy. Prior to this story, an entire piece on the new Pope was broadcast uninterrupted. Maybe the Pope isn't such a big problem now that relations with Japan have capture the world's attention.

After the Pope story finished, the graphic showed a Japanese and Chinese flag. I thought for sure they were going to break into an unscheduled commercial. It didn't happen.

I guessed that was perhaps because the anchor hadn't yet referred to the China-Japan problems yet. But, eventually she started hammering away at that, and still, the broadcast carried on.

Then I heard her say the words "mob violence". "It's a done deal," I thought. "I'm not gonna see this story finished."

The seconds ticked away but the program continued.

Finally, they showed pictures of demonstrators. It only took a few seconds. The English broadcast quickly transformed into a Chinese commercial.

My advice to Hong Kong: use long English words to confuse the censors and don't show any graphic video until the end of the piece so those of us in Guangzhou can get the news.

CHAPTER 82: The Qingyuan Trilogy-Part 2 (Monday, April 25, 2005-10:06 PM)

Don't Go Chasing Waterfalls

The last thing I heard the tour guide say before I headed down the path to see the waterfalls was something about only spending half an hour there so we still had time to go grass sledding.

I assumed it was more of an optimistic conjecture than an order. Turns out I was wrong.

Peter was far ahead of everyone else. I was a couple minutes behind him. I wasn't trying to catch up with him, but did anyways after he took a wrong turn and had to backtrack a little.

I kept up with Peter. But if I had been walking by myself, I wouldn't have been walking nearly as fast. I was keeping an eye on my watch. I knew we were getting quite a bit ahead of the rest of the group. I also figured Peter had no intention of turning back unless I prompted him to.

Soon I was ahead of Peter. At first, it was only a few meters. Eventually, he was out of sight. Later he was out of earshot.

Now well ahead of the group I figured I must be nearing the end of the path. Peter was my insurance policy. As long as I kept going, I assumed he'd keep going. I knew I wouldn't end up being the last person to return to the bus.

I walked farther and farther. The farther I went, the fewer people I saw. I knew it was getting late and didn't know if I would still be able to make it back to the bus in time, even if I turned around and ran back.

I had to decide whether to turn around or keep going. I saw someone on his way back and asked him if there was anything worth seeing ahead.

There was one more waterfall ahead, but it was still fifteen minutes away. I went for it.

I was surprised when I got there. I saw an exit sign. "How could there be an exit here?" I thought to myself. The path is almost completely straight. The exit couldn't be anywhere near the entrance.

There were people working at each waterfall along the path, selling things to drink and taking photographs. I asked the woman working at this waterfall if the exit was close to the entrance. She told me it was.

Excellent. I could just walk out the exit right here instead of backtracking on the path I walked in on. I took my time taking photographs. I took a few at the bottom and a few at the top before walking out towards the exit.

I knew my time was up. I had to get back to the bus. I started jogging.

I was running pretty fast actually. It was all downhill. I thought I would see the parking lot any minute.

Not only did I not see the parking lot, I didn't see any people either. It wasn't until I had been running for ten or fifteen minutes that I saw a couple walking slowly ahead of me.

I asked them how far away the exit was. The man thought about it for a second and answered, "About half an hour."

Wow. I was screwed. He seemed pretty sure about it, too. Even if I ran fast, it'd still take me at least ten minutes. I started booking. All I could think was how everybody was gonna hate me because I was too late and they couldn't go grass sledding (whatever that was).

The flip-flops I was wearing were horrible running gear. I had a blister on my left foot and my right foot was still cut from earlier. A few times I almost fell. In addition, I felt weak. I hadn't eaten enough at lunch and felt like I could faint.

I made it to the exit about ten minutes later. David (one of our chaperones) was very relieved to see me.

"Where's Peter?" he asked.

Thank God. Peter wasn't back yet. And he wouldn't emerge for another fifteen minutes.

The tour guide scolded me. "Next time stay with the group."

Next time I did stay with the group.

CHAPTER 83: The Qingyuan Trilogy-Part 3 (Thursday, April 28, 2005-8:45 PM)
Grass Sledding

The first thing I noticed when we finally arrived at the hill to go grass sledding was that the people weren't grass sledding at all. They were grass skiing.

The second thing I noticed was that they weren't going too fast.

It took a while to find boots big enough for Peter, Hans, and my enormous western feet, and once we did we discovered the boots weren't in terribly good repair. Both the top buckles on Peter and my boots were either damaged or missing.

We put on the boots and attached the treads. We were ready to ski.

In order to move across flat ground it was easier to adapt a skate skiing technique than trying to cross country ski. Energy wasn't used as efficiently as if we were inline skating or skiing, but I was surprised considering we were on grass.

I wanted to go fast and was willing to take risks to achieve that. Nobody seemed to be climbing far enough the hill to attain any real speed. I started working my way up as fast as I could.

There was no lift or pulley. You had to ski up and ski down the hill. The hill wasn't so steep that you couldn't ski up it. But, since I didn't have top buckles on either one of my boots, they didn't fit as snugly as I wanted. Every time I picked up the heavy boots (and even heavier tread attached to the boot) the boot lining painfully rubbed against my ankles.

I got about half the way up the hill and prepared myself for the decent. I tried to point myself away from the people at the bottom of the hill.

Using the ski poles I gave myself a little push down the hill. In the beginning it was smooth and controlled.

I'm not an experienced snow skier. But even if I was, I'm not sure it would have been very useful. Completely different rules of physics apply to grass and snow skiing.

Snow skis are light, thin, and agile; Grass skis are heavy, thick, and clumsy. As I picked up speed, it was apparent I was in danger.

I began to lose my balance. I started contorting my torso and waving my arms around to right myself. But every correction seemed to bring about a greater imbalance in the opposite direction. I was still gaining speed.

I tried shifting my skis to make myself more stable. But the skis were too big and heavy. Every time I got close to lifting one off the ground, I could feel that if I did lift it up completely, it would be like pulling a leg out from a table.

I saw a few people looking at me, just waiting for me to fall. For maybe ten or fifteen seconds it carried on like this. I was teetering on the edge of disaster.

For the safety of myself and those in my path, I decided the best course of action was a controlled fall. From experience as well as several hours of skydiving and Ju-Jitsu training, I knew the best way to take a fall was by exposing as big a surface area to the ground as you could, and rolling.

Unfortunately, this kind of fall can also look a more comical than the more dangerous approach of just catching yourself with an arm.

Safety won out. I forced myself to fall, absorbing the impact mostly with my back. No bruises, no scratches, no sprains. Didn't even have any grass stains. But I did manage to achieve the distinction of being the only one to fall that day.

I didn't fall any more after that. But, my feet took a beating in those heavy, oversized ski boots.

CHAPTER 84: Tibetan Buddhism (Friday, April 29, 2005-11:09 AM)

A Very Brief Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism-Hinayana, Mahayana, and Viaryana

Tibet's indigenous religion Boen was replaced by Buddhism imported from India beginning as early as the 8th century.

One school of Buddhism was replaced by another through a lengthy process of reform and persecution.

The Indian monk Padmasambhava is credited with introducing Buddhism to Tibet when he founded a monastery near Lhasa and created the Nyingma or Red Hat sect of Buddhism.

Eventually his movement was suppressed by practitioners of Tibetan's Boen religion. In 1042 another monk from India, Atisa founded the Kadampa sect. Yet another influential school was introduced a short time later, the Kargyupa sect by a translator named Marpa and his disciple Milarepa.

The Mongolians also influenced the face of Buddhism in Tibet. Kublai Khan installed the abbots of the Sas-kya monastery as the rulers of Tibet in the late 13th century.

In 1491 Tsong-kha-pa launched another reform aimed at cleaning up the internal conflicts that existed in the other Buddhist schools. It became known as the Gelukpa or Yellow Hat sect. One hundred fifty years later, the Mongolians made the Dalai Lama the ruler of Tibet. The Panchen Lama eventually became the chief spiritual leader.

The Dalai Lama and Panchen Lama are both believed to be the reincarnations of former Lamas. This faith in reincarnation was originally an element of Boen that became incorporated into Tibetan Buddhism.

Slowly Tibetans are regaining the rights to practice religion freely. The authorities, however, still exert a lot of control over what happens.

CHAPTER 85: Empty Classroom (Saturday, April 30, 2005-11:22 PM)

A few months ago a clerical mistake left a room full of students without a teacher for three weeks. Today another mistake left a teacher in an otherwise empty room.

At 2:19 PM this afternoon I was the only person in a classroom hoping thirty students would run through the door before class was supposed to begin at 2:20. This didn't happen.

After a few rounds of explanations and re-explanations between administration, teachers, and students, it became clear why my classroom was empty. A different teacher had scheduled an exam that conflicted with my class. That and a few other extenuating circumstances I won't go into now meant nobody thought they had to come to my class.

Next the finger pointing and apologizing began.

Nobody blamed me. That should have been because it wasn't my fault. But it might actually have been because I was a foreigner.

If you want to see who does the apologizing, start at the bottom of the totem pole, in this case the students.

The conversation up to that point had been in Chinese and for the most part I understood.

But under the impression that I was still clueless, or perhaps to teach a lesson, a student was instructed to tell me what went wrong. She began by saying she was sorry.

In fairness the students weren't the only ones to take the fall. The director apologized as well. But if you ask me, this kind of mistake is, to use hardass parlance, "unacceptable" and will continue happening until the university's culture and policies change.

Classes are freely scheduled and rescheduled at the whims of teachers and to compensate for classes that fall on holidays. It's not hard to see why there is so much confusion.

These problems can be avoided. If you want, teach students about responsibility and have them apologize for everything. But that won't fix the problem.

CHAPTER 86: Thieves and Swindlers (Sunday, May 1, 2005-12:45 PM)

It looked like someone was going to get hurt. A young kid, presumably from Xinjiang, was getting pushed around by someone I mistakenly thought was a Han Chinese. They were shouting but they weren't speaking Mandarin or Cantonese.

Eventually the kid ran off. The older guy who had been pushing him around and another guy followed him a few seconds later.

I happened to be walking in the same direction as they ran and was in the unfortunate position of observing all their suspicious behavior.

The three of them almost certainly were from Xinjiang. The two young ones looked like they were around twelve or thirteen years old. The older of the two had bleached hair that made him stick out almost as much as me.

The two walked down the street while the older one kept looking back over his shoulder. It was a bright sunny day on a moderately busy street. Didn't seem like an ideal place to commit a crime.

In the back of my mind I thought it might be unfair of me to be observing these guys so closely. I thought maybe it was the fact that they were a minority that had me on high alert.

But I knew that their behavior had made it difficult for anyone not to notice them. They were attracting attention to themselves in just about every conceivable fashion.

The youngest of the three started walking right behind a short woman with a purse wrapped around her body. He was following so closely it looked like he might trip over her heels.

There was no way he could get away with anything. The strap of the woman's purse was wrapped around her body, and it looked like she was holding it with her right arm.

The boy kept following her with the other two behind him. The oldest was still monitoring the situation behind them every few yards.

I was mad. I couldn't be sure what they were doing, but it didn't look like a wholesome activity. What should I do?

I decided it was time to prevent the possibility of anything happening. I was going to attract as much attention to those three as I could.

I shouted a few times loud enough for anyone within thirty feet of me to hear, and ran towards the the three, my flip-flops pounding the pavement.

My heart was pounding. Why did I seem it necessary to meddle in other people's affairs? Was I only going to end up making myself a target of crime? What if these three kids were indeed just out for a morning

walk? In spite of those thoughts, I thought I did the right thing.

The three made eye contact with me. I looked back at them, confident that they knew I knew what they were doing. At first they tried to look shocked at what I was doing, but they weren't very convincing, especially the dim-witted one with bleach blonde hair.

The three of them walked away and I walked up to the woman they had been following. More to put on a show for the the three kids, I started talking to the woman.

I told her to be careful and watch her purse. I don't think she had any idea what I was talking about. My Chinese wasn't clear, and she had been oblivious to the situation the entire time.

A half hour or an hour later I returned to the block I originally encountered the gang on. They were still there, near the gates to a hotel that has frequent foreign guests.

I can't be sure what they were up to, but I do know crime is common in Guangzhou. Natasha's brother has been mugged; I was present during someone's failed attempt to pickpocket Natasha; I've seen guys on motorcycles grab bags from pedestrians; and I've seen street justice administered to what I assume were unsuccessful thieves.

If you come to Guangzhou, don't ignore the signs at McDonald's that warn of "thieves and swindlers".

(Footnote: Upon returning from my trip to Lhasa, I found the Russian teacher who lives across from me standing outside her door with a group of people with hammers and flashlights and other tools trying to pound open her door. What happened? Her purse was stolen by someone on a motorcycle.)

CHAPTER 87: Flying to Chengdu (Sunday, May 1, 2005-10:37 PM)

Natasha's first flight couldn't have been more uneventful. I practically begged her to be excited while we were waiting at the gate.

The flight from Guangzhou to Chengdu takes less than two hours. It took us longer to get from the apartment to the airport.

The only hint Natasha gave that she was nervous was when she inquired about the safety of flying. She was much more worried about the effects of changes in air pressure on her airs than she was about any accident happening.

I warned her ahead of time we might experience a little bit of turbulence. As we taxied over the tarmac to the runway and she felt the plane shake on the surface she asked me if that was the turbulence I was talking about.

The plane was a Boeing 777. I was jealous Natasha got to take her first flight on a 777. I made countless trips of 767's while 777's were being phased in before finally getting lucky enough to get a ticket on one.

Unfortunately, our seats were in the middle of the plane. Moreover, the flight was at night, so we didn't get to enjoy any of the scenery.

About the only interesting thing that happened was when Natasha ripped the top off of the roll that was part of the in flight meal. She replaced the bread with a huge pat of butter making the roll look like a tiny butter volcano.

Finally, near the end of the flight, we hit some minor turbulence. It wasn't enough to make the flight attendant sit down, but it did make Natasha grab my arm.

But it was too little too late.

CHAPTER 88: Altitude Sickness (Monday, May 2, 2005-8:23 PM)

The altitude sickness didn't set in until around 5:00 in the evening. Up until then Natasha and I had had a

fulfilling day, beginning when we met our tour group at the airport.

There are two other foreigners besides me in the group, Laro from Spain and Edward from Venezuela. The two speak perfect English with North American accents. Laro sports a beard that is thicker than the carpet in my parent's home.

The way Laro told me they work for the UNDP in Hangzhou it sounded like I should know exactly what UNDP stands for. I nodded when the letters UN registered as United Nations, but I couldn't figure out what DP stood for. I swallowed my pride and asked.

UNDP stands for the United Nations Development Program. Volunteers spend at least six months working on various projects in developing nations.

Eventually another acronym worked its way into our conversation when Laro told me he'd consider working for an NGO. I knew I should know what an NGO was, but the more I thought about it the more I couldn't remember what it meant. I didn't want to come across as stupid, so I just kept thinking while Laro continued the conversation.

The first thing that came to mind was the president of South Vietnam during the Vietnam War. But I figured he Laro wasn't interested in working for him, and he was probably dead anyway.

Damn it. This guy who speaks English as a second language has a bigger vocabulary than me. The meaning emerged slowly. Non...Governmental...Organization.

A huge wave of relief swept over me when I finally figured it out. That was the last acronym that I had to worry about.

Lhasa's airport is the farthest airport from the municipality it serves in the world. It was a long bus ride.

We drove along the Lhasa river for a while. The mountains behind the river look just like in the postcards.

Traffic didn't get any more congested when we were in Lhasa than it was on the way to Lhasa. The city is tiny. I didn't see any of the huge towering residential buildings that are so common in other parts of China.

The first mistake we made that led to altitude sickness was not resting upon arriving in Lhasa. An hour after we checked into the hotel, Natasha and I headed out to see the city. I could feel myself breathing deeper and my heart beating harder to compensate for the thin air.

The second mistake was drinking Lhasa beer. A group of Tibetan drivers we met in a park invited Natasha and I to sit with them for a while. Since the beer was only 3.4% alcohol and we weren't planning on drinking much anyway, we accepted when they offered us some.

I was thrilled to be sitting with real Tibetans. They spoke Tibetan to each other and Chinese to Natasha and I. Their clothes were just like everybody else in China. A couple of them looked more Chinese than Tibetan to me.

Every time my cup was anywhere near half empty they topped it off. That's what did me in.

Back at the hotel after taking an hourlong nap, I woke up feeling sick. I began wondering why I even came to such a hostile environment to begin with.

I felt like I was on the verge of passing out. I was light-headed and nauseous.

When Natasha woke up, she was on the verge of running a fever. She was shaking and had a head ache.

This evening we stayed in while the others went out for dinner. The symptoms of altitude sickness have mostly subsided.

CHAPTER 89: Sky Pearls and the Yang Ba Jing Springs (Tuesday, May 3, 2005-9:00 PM)

It takes almost two hours to reach the Yang Ba Jing springs from Lhasa. Our guide, Xiao Dong, told us the two-lane highway we took to get there was one of the best in Tibet. The bus, however, was not, and maybe that's why our ride was so bumpy.

Our group budgeted two hours once we got to the springs to look around. Two hours would have been an appropriate time if you planned to go in, but since we didn't have our swimming suits and didn't want to shell out the money to go in anyways, we were left to our own devices to entertain ourselves.

Loads of Tibetans from a nearby village converge on the springs and the tourists and the tourist's money every day. Xiao Dong told us that they might not be as poor as they look. I don't know how true that is, but the kids who were there begging for money and food didn't arouse the same feelings of sympathy that the kids in Guangzhou do. They looked almost like they came to the springs just to meet foreigners, and if they got any money that was just icing on the cake.

The adult's (as well as a few children's) primary method of earning money was offering horseback rides. Natasha has never ridden a horse and wanted to try.

She negotiated a price of five renminbi and mounted a little horse. The Tibetan woman with the horse walked the horse a few feet. Every time Natasha asked to walk a little further, the woman asked for a little more money. In total, Natasha got to ride the horse around 30 or 40 feet.

On the way back we stopped at a store selling expensive Tibetan antiques and souvenirs. It must have been a nice store, they had their own living Buddha.

His job was to sit in the corner of the store and, when anyone bought anything, they could bring it over to him and he would bless it.

The chief product at the store was "sky pearls". Not sure if that's the proper English name for them though.

They explained how to tell the difference between real sky pearls and fake ones. Since real sky pearls can sell for upwards of 1000 renminbi, Natasha and I stuck with the fake ones.

I couldn't understand from the Chinese exactly what the sky pearls were. They're some sort of fossilized sea life that was left behind when an ocean that covered the Himalayas long long ago disappeared. The Tibetans found them and used them to decorate some of their religious artwork.

Each sky pearl has a simple geometric design on it: maybe a pattern of circles or triangles or a jagged line. Apparently these designs are all natural, but I can't figure out how nature could make designs like that.

CHAPTER 90: The Jokhang Temple and Potala Palace (Thursday, May 5, 2005-9:50 PM)

The tour group had packed our itinerary with so many things to do that Natasha and I have found little time to explore Lhasa by ourselves.

It started yesterday morning with a trip to Jokhang Temple. Xiao Dong told us so much about Tibetan history and folklore it must have taken us an hour to walk around a tiny circuit I would have finished in 10 minutes if I were on my own.

One of the best things about the Jokhang Temple is the roof where we went after we looked around the temple itself. It offers an excellent view of the Potala Palace, our destination for the afternoon.

After lunch we headed there. It's a good thing we didn't visit it the first day because climbing all those stairs right after arriving would certainly have made us sick.

We breezed through the White Palace, where the Dalai Lama ate, slept, and studied, in a few minutes. But the red Palace ended up taking us around two hours.

Next we headed to what has probably been the most disappointing part of our journey, a Tibetan medicine

company. A doctor (or at least a guy in a white coat) examined Natasha by asking her a few general questions, looking at her tongue, and taking her pulse.

Two minutes after meeting Natasha, his assessment was Natasha was suffering from some ailment or disease that afflicts many women, and he recommended a some Tibetan medicine that, at first, over 300 renminbi.

When Natasha refused, he knocked the price down to 280 renminbi or so. She still declined.

When all that was finally over, we headed to the Barkhor market, the market near Jokhang Temple. I made the mistake of offering five renminbi for a piece of junk that wasn't worth one renminbi.

Originally, I reneged on my offer citing overly aggressive and dishonest tactics by the Tibetan saleswoman. She had been grabbing on to my clothes, shoving stuff in my hands, and obstructing my path to leave when I tried to get away.

But eventually I felt so guilty I just gave her the five renminbi and took the piece of junk so I could stop worrying about it.

After dinner Natasha and I finally had time to see Lhasa by ourselves. We tried, for the first time, real Tibetan food before calling it a day.

CHAPTER 91: Bus Ride to the Restricted Area and Yak Hair (Friday, May 6, 2005-9:03 PM)

(The video of our trip to Lhasa is divided into three quicktime movies, each about eight megabytes and one and a half minutes long: ["Horseback Riding in Lhasa"](movs/lhasaone.mov), ["Tibetan Medicine"](movs/lhasatwo.mov), and ["Mount Milha"](movs/lhasathree.mov).)

The ten plus hour bus ride to Linzhi was one of the most nerve-wrenching travel experiences of my life. The two-lane highway reaches an altitude of over 5,000 meters above sea level before descending to Linzhi, which sits a little lower than Lhasa.

Our bus driver from Sichuan, who looked a little younger than me, wasn't actually licensed to drive the type of bus we were on. Despite that, he handled the vehicle confidently, weaving around rocks, yaks, bicycles, tractors, and anything else in the way.

He seemed to be keeping up a good pace, too. But I couldn't tell how fast we were going because the speedometer was broken.

The most interesting place we passed on the way there was Mount Milha. It was covered with so many Tibetan prayer flags it looked like pilgrims must have been coming there since the first Dalai Lama.

As we headed further and further east, the landscape became more and more green, more and more like the rest of China I was so familiar with. Near Lhasa the hills are completely barren; they don't look like they could support a cactus.

But at Linzhi you can't see any earth. They're completely covered with trees and bushes.

Natasha and I split up from the group this evening, back in Lhasa, for dinner. The waitress gave us a pad of paper to write our order down on. I flipped the pad over and discovered a short essay in Chinese that was presumably written by a Tibetan primary or middle school student.

In Tibet, Chinese is spoken as a second language. In Lhasa, at least, nearly everyone has a very strong command of Chinese, written and spoken. Even the older Tibetans can understand Chinese well.

I felt bad that I hadn't learned any Tibetan at all to communicate with locals. I just expected them to speak Chinese, even though it isn't my or their language.

We found some hair in our food. We told the older guy there, who I guess was the owner. He said he'd

investigate.

He came back and told us it was goat or yak hair. When he said yak, he used his two index fingers to imitate a yak's horns holding them up to his forehead.

Yak hair? There was no yak meat in what we were eating?

He explained what we were eating was made from yak or goat milk (and we discovered later, tsampa or barley as well) and that was where the hair came from.

He told us not to worry about it, though. It was clean.

CHAPTER 92: HSK Exam Torture (Sunday, May 15, 2005-12:45 PM)

My anxieties about the HSK exam this morning extended far beyond what would be considered rational. Of course I was worried about how I'd do on the test. But my fears didn't end there.

Since I didn't do well on the practice exam and didn't find much time to study, I figured doing well on the exam was out of the question anyway.

I was more worried that I wouldn't be able to find the room. Or I might come too late. Or I might come too early. Maybe I'd forget my passport. Or I'd forget a pencil.

Natasha and I walked together to Jinan University to take the exam. I engaged her in conversation the entire way to avoid thinking about any of the more things that could go wrong.

When we arrived at the building, there was tons of students. I knew they must all be fluent in Chinese. No one except me would be stupid enough to sign up for this exam.

On my way into the exam room, the administrators checked our passports and exam certificates. When the woman returned my exam certificate, I took it and tried to take her name list as well. I was so absent-minded I didn't realize what I was doing until she said, "This isn't for you."

The room had space for around forty or fifty students, just about every seat was taken. There were only three non-Asian faces in the room.

The exam had 170 questions (all but the last fifteen or so were multiple choice), took two and a half hours, and was divided into four sections.

From the get-go I was confused. The first part was listening. We listened to an audio tape played on a boombox with the volume jacked just about all the way up.

The speakers spoke clearly, but every time their voices were raised, the sound became distorted and broke my concentration.

The next two parts, grammar and reading, were also difficult. My reading was so slow and so poor, I decided it might be more advantageous for me to "try to get inside the head" of the test writer instead of just focusing on the questions themselves.

Even when I was confident I knew an answer, I would become overwhelmed that perhaps I had just succumbed to a trick question.

I was almost afraid to look at the last section. That was the non-multiple choice section. We had to fill in blanks in a short article with single Chinese characters.

Surprisingly, this was one of the easiest sections of the test. I was pretty sure I knew what just about every character they were looking for was. I wasn't always so sure how to write that character, though.

The least I've gained from this experience is what it's like to take a test, a difficult test, that you're not

completely prepared for. I've given lots of tests to students and have them returned with nonsense and ridiculously low scores. Now, the tables have turned.

CHAPTER 93: CCTV English Speaking Contest (Thursday, May 19, 2005-12:50 AM)

Hosting English Speaking Competitions, like the one held yesterday at the Guangdong University of Technology, is a common tactic used to encourage students to practice and improve their English.

One by one, students stand on an otherwise empty stage in front of friends, classmates, teachers, and foreign judges and try their best to give meaningful answers to meaningless questions.

On the face of it, the whole premise seems a bit absurd. Some things lend themselves to competition like basketball, checkers, and pie-eating. Others don't, like English.

This bad fit becomes even more apparent when you're asked to be a judge. There were six judges in total. Besides me there were three other foreign teachers, and two Chinese teachers serving as judges.

We were asked to assess each of 15 contestants' English on the basis of their pronunciation, accuracy, fluency, performance, and content.

Even though a competition like this has obvious shortcomings, I do recognize its usefulness in promoting and encouraging students to improve their English. Provided students can look beyond the scores, English speaking competitions aren't completely useless.

The evening did provide some entertainment. The student who generated the most amusement was a small girl with short hair who, judging by her clothes, took the event very seriously.

She used a strategy I liked a lot. She was honest. If she was nervous, she said she was nervous. If she didn't understand, she said she didn't understand.

At one point she even said, "Could you ask the question again...in Chinese?"

Her English was every bit as intelligible as anyone else's. And she said made as much or more sense than anyone else.

But she also did some things that might have worked against her. The first everyone noticed was she spoke with an obvious Cantonese accent.

Every sentence ended with an "ah" sound, the way some people in Guangdong talk, whether they speak Mandarin, Cantonese, or English.

The second thing she did, which drew laughter from even the most stone-faced judges, was speak right through the bell signaling her time was up.

She not only spoke through the first bell (which in all honesty was very quiet), she spoke through the subsequent bells a few seconds later, this time a little louder and faster suggesting the urgency of the situation.

She just kept on speaking, completely oblivious to a situation every single member of the audience was aware of. The bell kept on ringing. The bell ringer seemed helpless.

The audience decided to help out. They gave her a round of applause letting her know it was time to finish.

Either she didn't realize they were clapping or she did realize they were clapping and that encouraged her to talk more. She just kept right on speaking, still inflecting every sentence in her uniquely Cantonese manner.

Finally, one of the hosts walked on the stage, nervously approaching her. Still, the contestant didn't pick up on the fact that it was time to go.

In the end, she was basically dragged off the stage. It took a few seconds for the laughter to die down. I think everyone was thankful that she at least made the event interesting for a few minutes.

The hosts also tried unsuccessfully to make the night interesting. They tried to engage the contestants in some light banter between rounds. Nerves and a lack of fluency led to some awkward exchanges like this exchange between a host and a contestant.

"You're so tall!"

"Thank you."

Finally, the most painful exchange took place between a brash contestant and the only British judge, Peter. The student was asked what he would do if someone were rude to him over the phone.

Either because of Peter's accent (which sometimes even I can't understand) or because the student was nervous, the student didn't understand what the word rude meant. Peter tried unsuccessfully to explain the question in different words.

At some point, the student gave up answering the question and just gave an answer that he thought would demonstrate his confidence instead of his precise knowledge of the English language.

Peter asked him another question. The question was predetermined. It didn't depend on the student's original answer at all.

But the irony was, the question was "How do you answer a question you don't know how to answer?"

You could see shame sweep over the student's face. He thought that his confidence was mistaken as arrogance, and he was being criticized. He bowed his head down, apologized, and walked off the stage.

It was too late to do anything. I wonder if that student will ever understand the true nature of that exchange.

Yesterday's winners will go to more rounds of competition. The event will culminate with an English Speaking competition on CCTV.

CHAPTER 94: Revenge of the Sith (Sunday, May 22, 2005-11:26 AM)

Hope was fading for my bright idea. I suggested we watch the new "Star Wars" movie, "Revenge of the Sith", at a movie theatre near our apartment. But when Natasha found out how expensive the tickets were, she thought it was a stupid way to spend money.

The tickets cost 60 renminbi each, a little more than \$7. Natasha pointed out that for 120 renminbi we could buy ten copies of the movie on the street.

Actually, we probably could have bought over twenty copies, but I still wasn't persuaded. What do you get when you buy movies on the street?

If you're lucky, a crisp, clear copy with the words "Do Not Duplicate" or "Property of..." embedded over the picture.

If you're not lucky, a copy filmed in a cinema, with a murky picture, barely audible sound, and other audience member's heads obscuring the picture. Or you could end up, as anyone who bought one of the initial Chinese releases of "Sin City" can attest to, with the French version.

And forget about subtitles. No matter what kind of copy you get, consider yourself lucky if you get movies with subtitles for the same movie you're watching.

At a movie theatre, you don't have to worry about any of that stuff. You can actually enjoy a movie like you're supposed to.

Moreover, you're not laden with whatever guilt you might feel if you do purchase a pirated copy. I kind of believe in Intellectual Property Rights and look forward to the day they get a foothold in China.

We were at the theatre but hadn't bought tickets yet. The movie was going to start in less than fifteen minutes. I didn't like the position I was in. I tried to tell Natasha there were six movies and this was the last one and how important seeing it in the theatres was.

But I got sidetracked when I had to explain how, yes, there were six movies and, yes, this was the last one to be released, but it was actually the third movie in the series of six.

While I was explaining something I heard George Lucas say about how he wrote all six parts at once and decided to shoot the fourth one first because it could be shot for the smallest budget, I could feel the likelihood of seeing this movie in the theatres dwindling.

Natasha reminded me how, the week before, I wasn't even able to finish "Attack of the Clones".

Yes, I did get bored watching "Attack of the Clones" and still don't think I've seen it in its entirety, but I'd heard better things about "Revenge of the Sith". I desperately wanted to see this movie.

Finally, I did something I'm not sure was the right thing. Maybe it was a little manipulative, but I felt desperate.

Without Natasha's consent, I bought two tickets.

I had no idea what kind of reception I was gonna receive when I let her know that I actually followed through with my devious plot. At first, I couldn't even find her. She had walked away to some hidden corner of the multiplex.

She wasn't a happy camper. As the few minutes before the start of the movie dwindled, I still hadn't gotten her into the theatre.

Eventually, she made her way into the theatre. Still upset about spending so much money for such a stupid movie.

The theatre was nearly empty. It was 6:20 on a Saturday Evening, the second day "Revenge of the Sith" was in theatres, and there were fewer than ten people in the theatre, which looked like it could hold two hundred.

There was one other foreigner in the theatre who made some sarcastic remark about finding a seat.

We sat through the commercials and previews, a few more people filtered in, and then the movie started.

I'd say about ten minutes into the movie, Natasha had come around. I think she enjoyed the movie.

I'm not too well-versed in "Star Wars" mythology, but I do know a few things. I knew the basic structure of the Skywalker family. So during those key moments at the end of the movie when you could see the story making its way back to the original movie in 1977 (released before I was born), I wanted to share the excitement with Natasha.

Unfortunately, she couldn't tell a Wookiee from an Ewok, so I had to keep all my excitement to myself.

CHAPTER 95: Soccer, Not So Boring After All (Thursday, May 26, 2005-10:11 PM)

"Suddenly, it's a different game all of a sudden!" The announcer redundantly expressed the excitement the crowd felt at the European Finals soccer match between Liverpool and Milan.

What happened during the final minutes of the game changed the way I look at soccer. I saw three goals scored.

Before tonight, I don't know if I've ever seen a single goal scored during a soccer match that wasn't being shown during the highlights on the evening news. This evening, I saw not one, but three goals scored during the course of about six minutes.

Teaching young Chinese students English as well as introducing them to some aspects of Western culture, the topic of soccer inevitably arises. In fact, I imagine most places in the world outside the U.S. soccer is a hot conversation topic.

But, in my home country, The United States of America, soccer sadly ranks slightly above figure skating as a socially acceptable sport for men to watch. You're better off admitting you have a poster of Katerina Witt hanging in your bedroom, than admit you watch soccer. At least the Katerina Witt poster proves you're straight.

So what's all the fuss about soccer anyways? Soccer games are fast paced and exciting just like sports are supposed to be. And what I noticed while I watched the European finals match, was that the game was actually very controlled and coordinated. It wasn't just a bunch of guys kicking a ball around a field randomly.

But the greatest advantage I think soccer has over its American counterpart, (American) Football, is simplicity. What do you try to do in soccer? Score a goal. What do you get if you score a goal? A point.

On the other hand, the rules of football defy explanation. No matter how much I try to simplify the game, I wind up pulling my hair, because there is no simple, concise, logical explanation for a game as bizarre as football.

I don't expect soccer to compete with basketball, baseball, or football as a major spectator sport in the U.S. Sports cannot rely on excitement alone. For any game to gain a foothold, there has to be some cultural or historical background before it can gain an audience. Take, for example, "American Gladiator".

All I'm saying, is give soccer a chance.

CHAPTER 96: Crossroads (Monday, May 30, 2005-11:42 AM)

Without a solid plan for next year and sick of teaching English, I can't decide in what direction to head next. Because of Natasha and because I like living in China, I haven't considered just packing up and heading back to the U.S.

Instead I'm gonna use this opportunity to be a ["rolling stone"](chinamap05282005B.html) for a few months. Before I head back to the U.S., which I will inevitably do at some point in the near future, I'm gonna pack my bags (as light as I possibly can) and head out on a solo expedition with the far western reaches of China being my ultimate goal.

In the meantime, Natasha will stay here in Guangzhou. Since she graduated she's worked at a few places in Guangzhou, and she's most satisfied by far with the place she works at now. She has no intention of quitting any time soon and would enjoy a couple months of independence.

When I thought about where to travel this summer, I considered visiting some other Asian countries, but in the end settled on staying in China for two reasons. First, I'm a little put off at the prospect of crossing international borders. There are all sorts of hassles to deal with: getting visas, going through border crossings, converting money. I don't want to deal with that stuff.

Second, I hope the next time I visit another country, Natasha can come along. Natasha has never left China, and earlier this year she finally got her first passport with the intention of visiting Vietnam or Thailand sometime in the future. We still haven't went.

Knowing that I wanted to stay inside of China and that I had plenty of time, I took out a map and my guidebook and started plotting a course.

One of the first things I noticed was Kashgar in Xinjiang province. With a name as un-Chinese as Kashgar and a geographic location so close to Pakistan and Afghanistan, I thought this must be a good place to see.

I ran my finger from Guangzhou westward, avoiding places I've already visited. The first province I came across that I thought I might want to stop in was Guizhou. It is apparently a 33 hour train ride from Guangzhou to Guizhou's capital, Guiyang. Guizhou is known as the home of a large population of China's minority population, most notably the Miao. If I travel there, I'm determined to visit a minority village.

Moving westward, the next province I bumped into was Sichuan, home of Kung Pao Chicken. One of the city's names was familiar, Leshan.

The last time I saw the name Leshan was when I visited Chengdu, Sichuan's capital last year. Leshan is known for it's Big Buddha. Leshan's Big Buddha is the largest Buddha in the world (even before the Taliban blew apart the their Big Buddha in Afghanistan it was the world's largest Buddha).

I've seen pictures of this monument in lots of places, but the place that comes to mind first is the movie "King of Masks". Ever since I saw that movie, I've wanted to catch a glimpse of the Buddha myself.

Between Leshan and Kashgar sits the province of Qinghai. Historically the Eastern part of Tibet, Qinghai, or its capital city Golmud, doesn't receive much praise from the guidebook. However, it does have at least one thing worth seeing, Qinghai Lake, the largest lake in China.

Next, I want to take the long trip to Kashgar. And it is a long trip. The only land route I was able to put together from Golmud to Kashgar using the guidebook was around 50 hours, not including the time it'd take me switch buses and trains. Maybe I'll stop and see a few places on the way.

Kashgar is basically as far west in China as you can get. It's proximity to Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Kyrgystan and it's historical significance as a major point on the Silk Road guarantee a good time. Assuming, of course, I make it.

On my way back to Guangzhou, I plan to head through Urumqi. But judging from the guidebook, the most interesting thing about Urumqi might just be the umlauts over the u's.

Other potential cities I might visit on my return trip include Dunhuang in Gansu province, known for the Buddhist Mogao Grottoes as well as Dunhuang's "Ancient City", a movie set built in 1987; Yinchuan in Ningxia province; Hohhot nestled in Inner Mongolia's grasslands; Tianjin; Zhengzhou in Henan province near Kung Fu's famous Shaolin Temple; Hefei in Anhui province so I can see the Yellow Mountains; the "Venice of the East", Suzhou in Jiangsu province; Hangzhou in Zhejiang province; and Wuhan in Hubei province.

The final stop I plan to make before returning to Guangzhou to be reunited with Natasha is Changsha in Hunan.

From Changsha, I'll make a short trip to Shaoshan, birthplace of Mao Zedong, to complete my summer tour of China.

CHAPTER 97: The Fork or the Chopstick (Tuesday, June 6, 2005-8:18 PM)

The lack of anything new on this website has led some to think that I've already started my [Summer Tour of China](http://chinamap05282005B.html). I am, in fact, still in Guangzhou contemplating deeply the age-old question: Which is better, the fork or the chopstick?

For me, of course, this question takes on added weight since the answer does not only reflect my attitude on eating. It also says a lot about my philosophy on life.

Using a fork is arguably the utilitarian approach to dining. Forks can be used to scoop, cut, and slice food without requiring too much dexterity from the user. Some people like to use a fork together with spoons and knives, but to be honest, it's a bit redundant. Depending on the design, a fork can quite capably cope with almost any eating task you throw at it.

The chopstick, on the other hand, has one primary function, grabbing food. Even though I have myself used it to poke and even slice my dinner, I only do that as a last resort. It isn't proper form.

But the critics always say, chopsticks are too difficult to use. Some restaurants in the West offer to fasten their patrons' chopsticks together with a rubber band facilitating easy use. For some people, it's hard to understand how any culture could cling to the chopstick after being exposed to the fork.

After a couple years in China, I've become convinced that with a little investment up front getting comfortable using them, chopsticks can actually be the proper, easy-to-use eating utensil for certain kinds of food. Take, for example, the peanut.

Forget about eating a dish of peanuts with a fork. A spoon might work a little better, but eating them one by one requires some awkward and difficult movements. But once you're a little comfortable using a pair of chopsticks, you can simply anchor your elbow to the table, and, using simple, independent movements of the elbow, wrist, and fingers, polish off a whole bowl quicker than you could with your fingers.

The point is not which eating utensil is the best. The point is using the right tool for the job. At my dinner table, there'll always be room for forks, spoons, knives, sporks, chopsticks, ladles, spatulas and whatever else you can dig up.

Except for salad forks. They're dumb.

CHAPTER 98: Dragon Boat Festival (Sunday, June 12, 2005-11:00 AM)

Yesterday was Dragon Boat Festival. Natasha and I celebrated by eating "zongzi", bamboo leaves packed with sticky rice and some other type of filling like meat, eggs, butts, or fruit.

Natasha and I wanted to see the dragon boats race. On a tip from Peter, we headed to a bridge over the Pearl River. However, either because we arrived too late or because we were in the wrong spot (or both) we didn't see anything.

Dragon Boat Festival is celebrated on the fifth day of the fifth month of the lunar calendar. The fifth day of the fifth month 277 years B.C. that the Chinese poet Chu Yuan drowned. Now, boats are raced in a symbolic attempt to rescue him.

Also, zongzi are thrown in the water so that fish, otherwise inclined to eat the poet, will eat the zongzi instead.

The zongzi taste good. I choose to have a couple sweet ones instead of the salty ones. In addition to the rice, they were stuffed with some sort of paste, presumably made from red beans.

The worst thing about eating zongzi is keeping your hands clean. You need to use the plastic bag and bamboo leaves to protect your hands from the sticky rice.

CHAPTER 99: Springtime in a Boring Town (Tuesday, June 14, 2005-1:10 PM)

After a nine-year hiatus from making films, Tian Zhuang Zhuang's comeback effort "Springtime in a Small Town" fell well short of my high expectations.

I picked up the movie at my favorite local DVD shop. I was worried that this particular shop had stopped selling DVD's when upon one visit I noticed that all the DVD's had been removed from the shelves. Maybe a police raid forced them to temporarily ditch their DVD stock. Nonetheless, they appear to be back in business.

The DVD's packaging made clear that "Springtime in a Small Town" was by Tian Zhuang Zhuang, the director of "The Blue Kite". Despite the fact that I was buying the DVD in China, this particular copy (or the copy it was pirated from) was obviously being marketed to a foreign audience.

Maybe that's because this film was never really intended for a domestic audience anyways. Natasha was relieved when I told her I'd watch this movie by myself if she didn't want to see it.

I don't know if she could have sat through it anyway. It took me two attempts to finish the movie. The first time I put the movie in the DVD player, I only got twenty minutes into the movie before I gave up. The second time, about an hour and a half into it, I almost gave up again until I heard one of the characters say he was heading back to Shanghai, signaling an imminent end.

The movie is a tribute to China's pioneering filmmakers. Actually, the movie itself is a remake of an older movie. But that doesn't make it interesting.

I think the name for a movie like this is a "chamber piece". With the exception of a dancing scene about an hour into the movie, only five actors appear on screen. Three of the actors are involved in the most boring love triangle in the history of cinema.

What makes this film so unbearable are all the long stretches of silence. In a film like "Yi Yi", I had a lot of patience for that sort of thing. Maybe it's because in that film, there was actually something to consider while the actors weren't saying anything.

But in this film, the long stretches of silence seem only to serve the purpose of testing how patient the audience is.

There are perhaps two reasons someone might want to see this movie. First, the dialogue is very clear, very standard, and very easy to understand. This movie is good to watch to practice your Chinese.

Second, if you're in the middle of a redecorating operation and you want some ideas about how to decorate your house to look like a traditional Chinese abode, you could get some ideas from this movie.

Other than that, if this movie does have any redeeming qualities, I missed them. "The Blue Kite" is a good movie. "Springtime in a Small Town" is torture.

CHAPTER 100: Apartment Hunting in Guangzhou (Thursday, June 16, 2005-10:58 AM)

In anticipation of her parent's arrival in Guangzhou, Natasha began her search for an apartment big enough for the three of them. I've accompanied Natasha on most of her visits to see vacant apartments.

The first thing I noticed about looking for apartments was how easy it was. There are big buildings all over the place, and these big buildings need tenants. No matter what direction we walk in, we pass three or four real estate offices with units for rent and sale.

So far, Natasha has only looked at places under a couple thousand renminbi; that's about two-hundred fifty dollars a month. In fact, most of the places we've seen have been around 1500 renminbi, or a hundred-eighty dollars.

That is still a chunk of change, but I can't imagine what kind of place my rent in the US could afford here. Considering these apartments are big enough for three people, it's a fairly reasonable price.

The places aren't palaces, but they're habitable. The kitchen is usually a wreck. I don't see many Chinese kitchens that don't have everything within two meters of the burners covered in a film of oil from cooking.

The only other problem area for myself is the bathroom. Specifically the "hole in the ground" toilets. I have adjusted to not having a separate place to take a shower, divided from the rest of the bathroom. But the toilets I just don't understand.

Even some of the nicest places have these "hole in the ground toilets". I don't get it. The comfort level of these toilets can't even compare to a western toilet. We had a conversation about this over dinner, and came to the conclusion that it's just a culture thing, not a comfort thing.

The apartment hunting will hopefully be complete soon.

CHAPTER 101: The Modern Backpacker Travel Checklist (Saturday, June 18, 2005-9:06 PM)

Time flies when you're doing nothing. Two weeks and I'll be done teaching and ready to embark on the first

trip I've ever made without a return date. Who knows how long I'll be able to tolerate life without a fixed address.

I am trying to do some preparation for this trip, starting by making a list of things to travel with. Deciding what to bring with myself is always a difficult process that I usually put off until the last evening before departing on a journey.

In order to make the process a little bit easier and in order to gain a little peace of mind that I didn't forget anything important, I break down the list of things to bring traveling into four groups: the bathroom stuff, the clothes, the electronics, and the paper stuff.

The Bathroom Stuff.

Originally, I referred to "the bathroom stuff" as "toiletries". But since I could never remember how to spell "toiletries", I stopped using that name.

This stuff is especially important in China, since if you forget something (like dental floss, deodorant, or saline solution), you might not be able to find it where you visit.

A couple more good ideas that I often forget are band-aids, aspirin, and pre-moistened napkins. What a huge difference it makes to have a bandage available after you cut your foot on a jagged stone.

Clothes.

The next group, clothes, is pretty easy to account for. A couple pointers learned over the years. Bring one set to wear, one set to wash. Bring clothes you can layer. And, remember, dark colors don't get dirty.

Electronics.

The third group, electronics, is probably the one I could cut back on. All I need now is a pocket camera and battery charger. With the memory cards that are on the market now, I can put about a thousand pictures on a piece of silicon the size of my thumbnail.

Traveling with more than this seems anathema to the whole backpacking philosophy. But I probably will still find room for a camcorder, a couple batteries, a bulky charger, and a few miniDV tapes.

Paper Stuff.

The final group, the paper stuff, is pretty all encompassing: passports, money, travel guides, reading material, a notebook to write in, and pens and pencils. Having a couple pens always available I've always found is very convenient.

The one thing noticeably absent from my list of things to bring is an iPod. Despite my enthusiasm for the Apple company (actually I'm using a Macintosh to write this right now) I still haven't found it necessary to purchase an mp3 player.

Any more suggestions, you can click on the "comments" button at the bottom of this entry and include them.

CHAPTER 102: No Lights in the Apartment (Monday, June 20, 2005-10:32 AM)

Imagine the apartment owner's embarrassment when he arranged for around 10 or 15 potential tenants to tour one of his properties and the power goes out just when everyone's ready to go inside.

We all stood at the foot of the building hoping against hope that the power would come back. Because of its prime location and reasonable rent, Natasha was optimistic that this would be the apartment for her parents, her brother, and her this summer.

The owner remained in high spirits while he tried to come up with a plan B.

A few minutes later, everyone was sick of waiting. Everyone collectively decided to tour the apartment by the light of their cell phones.

We walked up the stairs. About seven people had their cell phones open and turned on, creating enough light to get a rough idea where the walls and the person in front of you was.

Under the light of the cell phones, the owner tried to open the door with the key. Then, there was a flash of light.

Everyone was excited. "The electricity's back!" But they must have been asking themselves, "Why was the flash of light so short?"

It was so short because the electricity wasn't back. The light was from my camera. The flash from my camera had for a split second illuminated everything.

And that's how Natasha and I saw the apartment. We managed to see each room for about a tenth of a second. And when we got home, we were able to get a better idea of the apartment by looking at the pictures.

CHAPTER 103: Postmen in the Mountains (Tuesday, June 21, 2005-9:52 PM)

Before the opening credits had even finished rolling, Natasha had her first criticism. She thought the movie's title shouldn't have been translated as "Postmen in the Mountains", but more accurately "That Mountain, That Man, That Dog".

For the first time in a long time, Natasha and I saw a Chinese movie that we could honestly say we liked. Natasha tried to remain indignant about the movie, but the scene where the son carries the father across the river was too much for her poor little soul. I looked over and saw her face soaked in tears.

A few familiar faces from Chinese television popped up as well. It was nice to see them in a good movie that makes sense rather than a non-sensical arthouse film or TV gameshow punched up with so many sound effects it sounds like a Saturday morning cartoon about a rabbit in a spring factory.

A couple scenes did break the otherwise smooth flow of the movie. Like the incredible paper airplane toss scene that made close-ups of the father and son look like blue screen shots for "Return of the Sith".

The Chinese spoken in the movie was standard Chinese. I'm not an expert, but I wonder if in a place like this, the locals might really speak such standard Chinese. I wouldn't have been surprised if they tried to give the film a little more authenticity by using a local dialect or accent.

Just because the Chinese was standard, however, it didn't make it easier to understand. I refused to use the English subtitles, but did have to lean heavily on the Chinese subtitles (in traditional characters), and my translator to catch all the details.

In all honesty, though, the language could have been in Klingon, and I probably still could have gotten the gist of it just by watching the actors.

After watching the movie, it heightened the sense of wanderlust in me. I believe places like this still do exist in China (perhaps the villages are not quite as attractive in the movie though), and I really want to see them.

The problem is getting there. I'm not sure I'm up for the walk.

CHAPTER 104: Natural Born Negotiators (Friday, June 24, 2005-1:25 AM)

I have this theory that growing up in a country like China, where everything is negotiable, as opposed to growing up in a place like America, where most prices are fixed by the seller, has a fundamental effect on one's ability to strike a deal.

Chinese are better bargainers than Americans.

Except at supermarkets, fast-food restaurants, and, usually restaurants, I assume that prices are negotiable. I force myself to approach every financial transaction with a certain amount of caution, not only to save money, but also to save face.

But for me, this is very much a conscious effort. I'd just as soon pay the asking price and be on my way than negotiate for an hour and a half over a pack of gum or a deck of playing cards.

Recently, I've gathered some anecdotal evidence that suggests that the Chinese inclination to bargain represents a process occurring at a much deeper, subconscious level.

Americans bargain with the ego. Chinese bargain with the id.

Earlier today I gave an exam to a class of mine. The classroom had plenty of room for the students to spread out such that they could leave a couple of seats between themselves so that cheating would be more difficult.

The students, however, came into the classroom and sat like they always do, clumped in groups of three, four, or five students sitting side by side.

Naturally, I told them to spread apart, a perfectly reasonable request. When I asked them, they had an instantaneous and unanimous reaction like I had just asked them to write a 10,000 word essay on The Three Represents.

I've seen this kind of knee-jerk reaction before. Like the time a seller rejected my counter offer for a purchase with a sigh like the price I offered was absolutely off the radar.

But there was a small problem. The seller let out the sigh a split second before I had even made the counter offer.

Natasha recently used her voodoo negotiating skills against me. Typically on Thursday evenings there's a debate over what to watch on television. "60 Minutes" conflicts with a horrible Chinese program, "Tiao Zhan Zhu Chi Ren".

At the time, Natasha was half finished with an ice-cream I was eyeing. She wasn't going to be able to finish it. She knew I wanted to change the channel.

We made a deal. She gave me the ice-cream on the condition we finish her show. I hastily accepted the offer despite the fact Natasha wasn't really conceding anything.

Growing up in a place where the people around you bargain for everything from broccoli to books to tennis shoes must leave a deep impression on children.

Alan Dershowitz explained how he uses this strategy negotiating in court. You don't give anything away without getting something back.

CHAPTER 105: Chinese Visas (Tuesday, June 28, 2005-2:25 PM)

Since my current visa is only good for one more month, and I want to travel in China for between two and three more months, I have a problem.

Originally, I thought that I could simply head to the PSB (Public Security Bureau) here in Guangzhou, get a new visa (or an extension to my current visa), and start traveling.

It turns out that won't work. The longest I could stay in (Mainland) China continuously would be until the end of August. In order to do that, I would have to wait until just before my current visa ends, go to the local PSB, and apply for another visa for up to 30 more days.

Right now, my plans are to start traveling around July the 10th. If I went ahead with my original itinerary, that would mean somewhere around Sichuan I would have to find the local PSB and get another visa.

A month later, probably somewhere in Northwest China like Xinjiang, Gansu, or Ningxia, I would have to either hastily exit China or start staying in China illegally and face a big fine at immigration when I did eventually leave China.

What's a brother to do?

I spent the better part of this morning thinking up different schemes to alter my travel plans such that I would exit China at some point along the way, get a new visa, and re-enter to complete my trip.

I came up with lots of exciting ideas to leave China temporarily. I could travel into Myanmar from Yunnan Province via opium smuggling routes.

Or I could exit China to India and then make my way to Nepal to see Mount Everest and bear witness to the kingdom's Maoist insurgency.

Maybe I could cross the border between Inner Mongolia and Mongolia on horseback and live for a month on wide-open grasslands in a homemade yurt.

None of these schemes made a lot of sense though. In fact, they just seemed to make my problems worse. Not only would I have to worry about monsoons and bandits, I'd just have another countries visa problems to contend with.

~~There's actually a much easier way to solve my problem.~~

I can take a day trip to Hong Kong next week and apply for a 6 month, multiple entry visa for China.

~~I can return using that visa and travel freely for the next few months, delaying the inevitable return to the U.S. just a little longer.~~

CHAPTER 106: The Visa Run (Thursday, June 30, 2005-5:39 PM)

Unless you're in China on a work visa, there are only a few ways to stay in the country continuously for more than a month, hardly any to stay in the country for more than two months, and none that I know of to stay in the country for more than three months straight.

Wishful thinking had me hoping there was a simple solution to my dilemma, but it looks like it's gonna take more than that to make my summer trip possible.

India issues six month tourist visas. Thailand doesn't even require a visa for U.S. citizens until they've stayed in the country for ninety days. But every type of Chinese business and tourist visa I know of only allows travelers 30 days per entry.

I need to travel in the country for more than a month, but I've heard of some awfully high fines for people who stay in the country after their visas expire.

There are three different strategies I've identified that might remedy the situation: make my trip shorter, travel somewhere else, or seek out places I can exit and re-enter China, gaining an exit and re-entry stamp in my passport (provided I have at least a double entry Chinese visa).

I prefer the third option: making at least one visa run during my journey. Especially, now being so close to Hong Kong, where so many countries have consulates, I can take a few days off next week, visit some Hong Kong travel agents and consulates and see what my options are.

What countries can I exit to? Of all the countries China borders, the ones that look most promising are Myanmar, Pakistan, and Mongolia.

Ever since some fellow travelers told me about their adventures in Myanmar, I've waited to go there for

myself. The problem with Myanmar is that I'm not entirely sure how the border crossing there works.

Apparently there are two international checkpoints in Yunnan Province: one in Jiegao, and one in Wanding. However, only Wanding is open to foreigners.

Since my original intention was to make it as far as Kashgar, in western China, Pakistan seems like an ideal place to make an exit and re-entry. And if Pakistan doesn't work, there are a couple other 'Stans in the vicinity I can try.

Mongolia is the most out of way place to make an exit and re-entry. But after some lackluster travel reviews of Inner Mongolia, it just might be worth my while to take a trip to Ulaan Bataar anyways.

Regardless of what I find out in Hong Kong next week, I'll allot myself enough time before my Chinese visa expires that I can make a hasty exit by plane if I find myself in a sticky situation.

(Note: If anyone else has any suggestions or corrections, feel free to add a comment to this page or send me an email. I've tried posting questions on message boards, but it turns out I'm getting a better response here. Thanks.)

CHAPTER 107: The Moses Plan (Saturday, July 2, 2005-11:45 AM)

The Hebrew prophet Moses delivered 600,000 Israelites from slavery under Egyptian oppressors into "the land of milk and honey".

If he can lead hundreds of thousands of people across a barren desert all the while being chased by the Pharaoh's army, why then is it so difficult for me to travel around China for a few months?

That isn't to say Moses's sojourn was a walk in the park. At one point, with his pursuers close behind, Moses came upon a seemingly impassable obstacle: the Red Sea.

What's a prophet to do?

He raised his staff. There was some wind, lightning, thunder, and other powerful weather phenomena, and the Red Sea is split down the middle making the rest of his journey possible.

Barring any unexpected success with a few last ditch efforts I have in place right now, I'm going to have to use what I've been calling "The Moses Plan".

"The Moses Plan" has me dividing my travels (like Moses divided the Red Sea) into two smaller trips with Guangzhou being the starting and ending point of each trip.

The first half of the trip consists of the points of interest in the Yangzi Basin and the Yangzi Delta that I originally intended to be the latter half of my trip. Cities like Changsha, Wuhan, Zhengzhou, Hefei, Suzhou, and Hangzhou. Along the way I'll have to extend my current visa or quickly exit China to Korea, Japan, Hong Kong, or Thailand.

Between the first and second half of the trip I'll visit Hong Kong and hopefully be able to get a double entry Chinese visa with 30 days per entry.

After that I'll travel in Southwest, Northwest, and maybe Central China to cities like Leshan, Guiyang, Xishuangbanna, Kashgar, Urumqi, Dunshuang, Golmud, Yinchuan, Hohhot, and Tianjin.

Also, I hope to be able to cross the border into Myanmar or Pakistan along the way.

Before I went to Tibet, I wrote that it's good to encounter problems once in a while when you travel. In this case, I really wish my plans could have been a little more straightforward.

CHAPTER 108: Eating Japanese Food (Saturday, July 2, 2005-9:43 PM)

There are two reasons I don't usually eat Japanese food: the prices and the food. Let me discuss the

second reason first.

Japanese menus, no matter how many different languages the dish names are translated into or how many photographs there are, always confuse me to the point of embarrassment. I open up the menu, flip through page after page of pictures and ask myself four questions over and over.

What is that? What's in that? What function does that serve in a meal? How do I eat that?

The only way to rid the anxiety I feel from eating a Japanese meal is to bring with me a seasoned pro to choose the dishes for me to eat and demonstrate how I'm supposed to eat them.

That's why it was great when Miyuki (also known as Da He) invited Natasha and I to have a Japanese meal with her and her husband.

But when Natasha and I were asked to pick out a few dishes, I was reminded of the second reason I don't like to go into Japanese restaurants: the prices.

I don't know how Japanese people can afford to eat. They must eat Chinese a lot. Dishes on the menu were as expensive as 500 renminbi. That's nearly 170 bowls of instant noodles.

Now I had a fifth question to contend with when looking at the menu: How much does that cost?

Now we had to start the dinner conversation, something I'm not pretty adept at anyways. But tonight, it was a little more difficult. It was in Chinese.

Natasha and Miyuki's husband are both Chinese. Miyuki speaks Chinese fluently. I was there, struggling to eat Sushi with my chopsticks and follow the conversation worried that any comment I'd try to interject into the conversation would bring the conversation to a grinding halt with the other three thinking, "What did he just say?"

Miyuki was a good host and Natasha carried most of the conversation for me. The evening was indeed quite lovely.

CHAPTER 109: White Carrots and Half Boobs (Sunday, July 3, 2005-1:00 PM)

Natasha and I don't speak the same mother language. I'd like to think we can communicate fine in English or Chinese, and every day we get by using a kind of pidgin combination of the two.

Once in a while, we do have problems because we speak different native languages. Usually it happens when we're watching T.V. or a movie. If we're watching English T.V., Natasha can't catch everything. If we're watching Chinese T.V., I can't catch much.

The problem is particularly acute in the case of "The Late Show with David Letterman". With no subtitles and without adequate knowledge of American pop culture, Natasha is at a complete loss when Dave starts talking about Martha Stewart's incarceration or George Bush's latest foible.

In Tibet, our tour group was feeding us the cheapest food they could find. One staple dish they gave us was "hu luo bo" which Natasha told me was carrot.

But carrots, as I know them, are orange. These were white. Since, I didn't know what they were, I just started thinking of them as carrots myself.

Last night, after another dish with "white carrot" I decided to figure out once and for all what these vegetables were. A little research revealed that this vegetable, similar to a radish, is popular in Asian cuisine. In English it's called a daikon.

After dinner, there was yet another reminder that Natasha and I don't speak the same native language. Natasha was trying to describe a low-cut shirt she saw a woman wearing. Natasha didn't approve of the shirt. I think the word she was looking for was "cleavage".

She explained, "You could see her half-boobs."

CHAPTER 110: Renting an Apartment in China (Sunday, July 3, 2005-8:54 PM)

Natasha is basically all moved in to her new apartment. Her apartment is better furnished than any apartment I've ever lived in. But that really doesn't do it justice since that's really just another way to say it has a couch.

Three bedrooms, a kitchen, one bathroom and a big living room. I didn't take measurements, but it looks to me like it's about eight to nine hundred square feet. All for 1500 renminbi per month (\$180).

The living room has two comfortable sofas which is exactly two more than I've ever had in the apartment. But, just in case that's not enough, there's also a wicker rocking chair, the most comfortable seat in the house.

When we toured the place, the landlord was very intent on letting us realize the living room's full potential for entertaining guests. He pointed out every piece of equipment in the entertainment center: a receiver (it cost 4000 renminbi, he pointed out), a DVD player, a 25 inch-or-so TV, and five Kenwood speakers (again he made sure we noticed they were Kenwood).

But the fun didn't stop there. He also pulled out a Karaoke microphone and encouraged us to figure out how to plug it in. Then, he went on to explain how we could rearrange the furniture for dancing.

But if guests don't want to listen to music or dance, there's always television and movies. Cable costs a paltry 17 renminbi per month (\$2), and the apartment came stocked with a library of DVDs.

The lease was written with a ballpoint pen in neat Chinese characters. He explained his printer didn't work, and Natasha offered her brother's services to type up the final copy.

This apartment is light years better than anything else we saw, even if it is a little far away.

CHAPTER 111: Human Moving Van (Wednesday, July 6, 2005-11:50 AM)

Natasha's parents will arrive in Guangzhou this evening. I spent yesterday getting ready for their arrival (and my pending departure traveling) moving stuff from my apartment to Natasha's department.

I didn't want to spend any money moving stuff though. I didn't want to take a taxi or a motorcycle or any other motorized form of transportation.

The walk from my apartment to Natasha's apartment takes around a half hour one way. I was only able to move as much as I could carry or pull. I ended up making four round trips.

It was like walking through a desert except there were lots of cars. Most of the trip is on the sidewalk next to a busy multi-lane divided highway. The exhaust just about made me sick.

At the end of the day, Natasha and I ate dinner at a little restaurant near her apartment.

Even though the tables were outside, I was nonetheless dismayed to see a rat running around while I was eating my fried rice.

CHAPTER 112: Meet the Wu's Part Two (Thursday, July 7, 2005-1:16 AM)

I met Natasha's parents for the second time, this time in Guangzhou. After a 13 hour bus ride from Nanfeng, Jiangxi, they arrived in Guangzhou at 11 o'clock in the evening.

After such a long bus ride, Natasha's mother was experiencing extreme symptoms of carsickness. The last thing she wanted to do was get in a taxi and head to the apartment.

Natasha thought about sending her home on a motorcycle instead. I didn't understand how a lousy motorcycle could be more comfortable than a car.

We nixed the motorcycle idea, and the four of us hopped in a taxi, Natasha's mother in the front with her head hanging out the window, Natasha's father, Natasha, and I in the back.

I was trying my best to make a good impression on Natasha's parents, but the situation was difficult. It was late. Everyone was tired. And they speak Chinese.

Finally, I thought of two things I could say to Natasha's father. The first was, "Are you hungry?" and the second thing I could say when we arrived at their new apartment that they had never been to before was, "It's very quiet here."

I get really nervous speaking Chinese around Natasha's father. He talks really fast, and I find it a little bit more difficult to understand someone from Jiangxi speaking Mandarin.

I never worked up the nerve to say, "It's quiet here". But I did ask about three or four times if they were hungry or not. "If you want anything, I can go buy it."

Finally, around midnight, with Natasha's mother looking like she was going to need the paramedics, they sent me to buy a watermelon.

My first test. Can I buy a watermelon?

I ran to the store and grabbed a watermelon. I toyed with the idea of buying some more fruit as well. "No," I thought. "They'll just think I'm trying to suck up if I walk back with a bunch of bananas, apples, and strawberries."

I wasn't about to just toss the watermelon to Natasha and let her prepare it for her parents, but cutting a watermelon is the closest I've been to cooking in a long time.

Moreover, I have a rocky relationship with watermelon cutting in China. The last time I tried to cut one, some of my students grabbed it away from me because I was cutting it wrong.

Before I came to China, I only knew one way to cut a watermelon, in slices. But here they insist on cutting watermelon into wedges that are terribly difficult and messy to eat.

With the watermelon on the cutting board and a meat cleaver in my right hand, I started to plan how I was going to cut with this watermelon. I decided to go with what I knew, slices.

I was afraid to make the first cut. I knew I was going to cut the slices either too thin or too thick. But I had to hurry up. I didn't want Natasha's parents to know I couldn't cut a watermelon.

The slices end up being a variety of thicknesses. But, when I saw Natasha's mother and father eating the watermelon, I felt a little more relaxed.

Maybe next time I'll make them toast.

CHAPTER 113: Lunch With Natasha's Parents (Thursday, July 7, 2005-9:01 PM)

This afternoon I ate lunch with Natasha's parents but without Natasha. Natasha was working, and I was busy moving the last few things to the new apartment.

It was pretty quiet at first. While Natasha's mother did a little cooking in the kitchen, Natasha's father and I watched televised emergency sea disaster drills performed by the Chinese Navy. The Chinese Navy is ready to cope with lots of disasters on the high seas including oil spills, fires, and men overboard.

I tried desperately to come up with something to say. I again offered my services to go out and buy anything that they needed, like cups. Natasha's father pointed out that I didn't know what they needed, and he'd just buy it himself.

The three of us sat down for lunch. I sat in the middle. Natasha's father sat to my left. Natasha's mother sat to my right.

When Natasha's father pulled out a rice bowl, I assumed it was for rice. Then he poured beer in it. I haven't drank beer out of a bowl since the last time I was with them in Jiangxi.

No one was talking when we started eating. I was dropping a lot of food with my chopsticks. Eventually we started talking.

Half the time I didn't know if they were speaking dialect or Mandarin. I just tried my best to listen closely and not pretend like I understood more than I did. Pretending to understand more than you know is fine until the speaker starts asking questions.

It's a tough call which of the two is easier to understand. Natasha's father speaks more standard Mandarin, but he talks so fast. Natasha's mother tends to use simpler sentences that I can follow easily, but sometimes her pronunciation isn't standard.

The conversation at times strayed into important topics, things I'm sure they were concerned about. They asked when I planned to go to America and what in general I planned to do in the future.

But I was devoting almost all my attention to my Chinese, not necessarily to what the best answers to their questions might be. I would stop myself mid-sentence and think, "Forget about using the right tone. Is this really something I should be saying?"

The conversation always found a way back to safer topics. They complained that air couldn't circulate through the apartment and that vegetables in Guangzhou were too expensive.

I wanted to think of something positive to say about their new home. I remembered the sentence I thought of yesterday.

"It's very quiet here."

CHAPTER 114: Ting Bu Dong (Thursday, July 7, 2005-10:00 PM)

I need one of those translators like heads of state have the next time I have dinner with Natasha and her parents. I need someone to sit behind me, out of the way, just over my shoulder, and translate what they're saying in real time without me having to divert my attention.

Before I thought I could understand what they're talking about when they speak dialect by putting together the Chinese words I recognize with their body language, facial expressions, and news of the day. Today, I didn't understand a thing.

Natasha will start off with a passionate monologue that I constantly think is two sentences from being over. Five minutes later, she's still talking like a locomotive.

Then I'll start hearing my name pop up here and there, and I get even more worried. Eventually, I just forget about it and start paying more attention to my food.

Next, I look up and see Natasha's eyes tearing up. I'll ask Natasha, "What are you crying about?"

After I've asked the question two or three times, she'll get around to answering me. "I'm moved."

It doesn't take much to "move" Natasha. I ask her anyways, "What are you so moved about?"

"The fish."

I know I shouldn't even ask. "What's so moving about the fish?"

"My mom made the fish."

I know her mom made the fish. Her mom made all the food. After this, I might as well not ask any more questions.

"What's so moving about your mom making fish?"

"Nothing," she'll say wiping the tears from her eyes.

I'm still not sure whether this tendency to become so moved by ordinary daily events is a blessing or a curse.

But the next time Natasha starts saying something I can't understand and tearing up, I won't get too worried. It might just be the fried rice or sweet and sour frog.

CHAPTER 115: Bowling Ball Head (Saturday, July 9, 2005-4:15 PM)

I must have went a few notches up on the dumb meter in Natasha's parents' eyes when I came back home from a haircut today with a completely bald head.

Yesterday I started considering shaving my head bald before the trip. That way I wouldn't have to worry about shampoo or combing my hair.

On the other hand, there was the increased risk of sunburn to worry about. I couldn't decide what to do.

I was still undecided when I walked into the barber shop this afternoon, but I probably already was leaning a little towards shaving my head.

Ever since I was a little baby, my head's been covered with a thick layer of hair. I wanted to know what my head looked like again.

The woman started lathering the shampoo into my hair. I had already explained I might have my head shaved completely. What good would shampooing my hair do?

I had plenty of time to consider what to do while she gave me a complete scalp and shoulder massage.

A different woman cut my hair.

I asked her at first to cut my hair very short, and I explained I might ask her to shave it completely later.

She was taking so long to cut my hair, I was going to ask her to shave my head just to speed things up.

Finally, I said what the hell. "Jian guang" or "cut bald".

Before she went ahead and cut the last centimeter of hair off my head, she double checked to see if she heard me correctly.

She did, and she started cutting. I don't think she thought it was a good idea though.

There was no turning back, and I started to doubt the wisdom of my decision. I kept thinking about Darth Vader in "Return of the Jedi" when he takes off his helmet.

I can take shampoo off of my list of things to bring on my trip. I might have to bring a hat though.

CHAPTER 116: Fried Green Amphibians (Saturday, July 9, 2005-9:53 PM)

It took only three days for Natasha's parents to find a place to buy frogs in Guangzhou. I've lived here since August, and I've never seen them for sale.

But, then again, I haven't been looking.

Natasha's brother and I took them to one of the huge western-style supermarkets in the area.

I usually don't spend too much time in the live animal department of the grocery store. In that part of the store, there are live turtles, fish, various other forms of aquatic life, and, apparently, frogs.

The frogs are all piled up on top of each other, jumping around in their aquarium. Sometimes it looks like one is on the verge of liberating itself, but none of them ever do.

I don't think frogs bite, but I'd still be nervous about sticking my hand down there and grabbing one.

Natasha's mother isn't shy though. She's been cooking frog for a long time.

While other customers bided their time trying to figure out what color was the best, Natasha's mother grabbed two frogs and threw them into a plastic bag.

Natasha's mother was probably surprised by what happened next. Usually, in Nanfeng, she takes the frogs home alive and slaughters them herself.

But this is Guangzhou. When Natasha's brother took the frogs to be weighed, the butcher slaughtered them for us.

The frog tastes fine. My only objection to eating them is that I'm not always sure what part of the frog I'm eating.

In order to complete the culture exchange, I got some western food for Natasha's parents: Cambell's Soup, Pabst Blue Ribbon Beer, instant pudding, and Kellog's Raisin Bran. Everything I gave them to eat came out of a box or a can.

It really doesn't matter anyways. Natasha's mother doesn't drink milk, so she couldn't try much of the food.

CHAPTER 117: Welcome to Changsha (Monday, July 11, 2005-8:46 PM)

After an eleven hour, overnight hard seat train ride with a few fellow passengers who I eventually partially forgave for using the train window as a garbage can when they started offering me signature Hunan food like "Bing Lang" and "Ma La Tofu", I arrived in Changsha and started looking for a hotel.

All the information I read from the internet and guide books suggested that it would be difficult to find budget accommodations.

The rain didn't make it any easier.

But I wanted to find something for 50 renminbi. I definitely didn't want to spend more than 100 renminbi a night.

I tried about seven hotels before I found a place for 90 renminbi. At around noon, I was tired of walking and decided just to take the place for 90 renminbi.

The rest of the afternoon I walked around the city. I found a street with about a dozen people selling live snakes. One guy even let me touch his snake.

I acted like a real girl when, out of genuine fear, I yanked my hand back after touching the snake.

I ate some spicy Hunan beef to pass time when I found myself stranded on the other side of the Xiang River in the middle of a downpour with no umbrella.

On my way back, I stumbled on a group of amateur Chinese opera musicians performing in a park.

Finally, I tracked down the middle school in Changsha Mao Zedong attended. But, there was another downpour. This time there was nowhere to take cover. I got soaked.

CHAPTER 118: In Mao's Hometown (Tuesday, July 12, 2005-9:19 PM)

Chairman Mao grew up in Shaoshan, a sleepy little village in Hunan Province. After Mao took on rock-star status, his hometown became a major destination for pilgrims all around China.

It took around two hours and 20 renminbi to get to the city from Changsha. I went via the road less traveled by, a bus from the west, instead of the south, bus station.

I saw a sign that said Shaoshan was 5 km away. The bus slowed down. The ticket lady got my attention and told me to get off the bus,

I thought we were all going to Shaoshan. I thought that we would all get off the bus together, and then I would navigate my way through the city with the help of Chairman Mao statues that my guide book talked about so much.

Instead, I was standing by myself on some road with only a general idea where Shaoshan was. There were no Mao statues to guide me.

A couple guys quickly set me straight, and a few minutes later I was on a local bus to "The Village".

When we got off the bus, I made a big mistake. Instead of walking around by myself, I let a fellow passenger, who I thought was a tourist herself, convince me to go into the Mao Ze Dong Memorial Park.

The entrance fee was 45 renminbi and the lady who talked me into going was the tour guide. She guided me and a few other guys from Liaoning around the park.

There were all sorts of Mao shrines in the park. I was a little surprised to see how devoted my fellow travelers were to Mao Ze Dong.

Every time we came upon a shrine, they'd bow, burn incense, and even buy flowers to pay tribute to Mr. Mao.

Finally, after we left the park, the tour guide helped me find the village where Chairman Mao grew up.

That's what I came to see. It wasn't too exciting. But then again, I didn't expect it to be.

It was free to look around though. And that's what was important to me.

CHAPTER 119: From Changsha to Wudang Mountain (Friday, July 15, 2005-10:00 PM)

The exhausting journey from Changsha could have been made under better circumstances. The weather was hot and humid. The trains were packed. And I was all the time on the verge of being seriously sick.

Wudang Mountain in Hubei province has strong connections to both Chinese Daoism and Chinese martial arts.

It also pops up in modern popular culture now and again, mostly via Kung Fu movies like "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon".

Even the hip-hop group the Wu-Tang Clan's name is derived from this legendary mountain.

Before I boarded the train in Changsha, I already had three things working against me: possible food poisoning from bad seafood, a ticket but no seat on the train, and a ticket to the wrong city.

In fact, my ticket wasn't for the wrong city, but rather there were better cities I could have headed to that would have gotten me closer to Wudang Mountain.

I thought maybe if I got on the train quickly, I might be lucky and be able to find a seat.

No way. It was difficult just to get on the train. In addition to the hundred and fifty or so seated passengers, each car held an additional fifty or so passengers standing anywhere they could.

I prepared myself for the eight hour train ride through the middle of the night, standing shoulder to shoulder with the other passengers on a hot, humid, and sometimes smoky train.

The train ride ended up being more like twelve hours.

Even standing there in extreme discomfort, I was happy I could experience China from another point of view. I've never traveled under such difficult conditions, but lots of people do every day.

There were little babies as well as senior citizens on the train traveling under the same conditions. The big difference was that I knew this was a limited experience. Someday, I'd probably be back in America where, if I ever needed to make a cross-country journey, I'd have the luxury of getting in my car or flying.

People used the tables between the seats as pillows, resting their forwards on them. The next day, after sweating on the train for an entire night, their faces would become covered in a thin film of grime.

There was a baby in our car wearing basically a bib. At one point, when his mother apparently thought he needed to urinate, she started to hold him out the train window Michael Jackson style while the train was beginning to move.

The baby didn't cooperate, and he was never more than halfway out of the train. A while later, he did need to urinate. He peed right there on the train floor, where other passengers were walking with bare feet.

The train I was on would carry on after my ticketed destination of Yichang to Xiangfan, a bit closer to Wudangshan. I upgraded my ticket and stayed on the train.

At Xiangfan I quickly boarded another train to Wudangshan. Even boarding the train to Wudangshan, I was already being approached by people with connections to the tourism industry in Wudangshan.

After the train, I hopped straight on a minibus and started to head up the mountain. Tomorrow, I'll climb to the top.

CHAPTER 120: Friends In High Places (Saturday, July 16, 2005-10:00 PM)

Wudang Mountain's "golden summit" reaches an elevation of 1,612 meters above sea level. In the tiny town that serves as its mini base camp, I made several friends who showed me around.

Peter introduced himself to me. He's a 19 year-old student who just finished high school and is helping his parents run their hotel over the summer before he enters university.

He's lived here his whole life. It's such a small, isolated community. It's a completely different lifestyle.

There are probably less than a thousand people who call this place home. Basic services are available here. There's an elementary school and a small clinic if you get sick.

But for anything else, people need to take an hour long minibus ride into the city.

Peter and I left at 6:30 in the morning to climb to the summit of Wudang Mountain. We arrived in about an hour and a half.

At the top, we met a Daoist monk that Peter recognized. He had been living there for one year, and when I asked him how long he planned to stay, he wasn't sure.

"A few years. Maybe my entire life."

In the afternoon I headed in the opposite direction, following the road down the mountain to the Purple Heaven Hall.

On the way down, I met a garbage truck driver picking up a dumpster. He offered me a lift in his truck.

Riding down the mountain in a garbage truck was more interesting than the Purple Heaven Hall.

Then again, I wouldn't know because I didn't go in. I thought the admission price of 15 renminbi was too steep.

On the walk back up, I met Batumenke, a Mongolian guy from Inner Mongolia doing a little traveling in Hubei.

He was very interesting in talking to me and thought it was destiny (yuanfen) that we would meet.

I spent the afternoon revisiting places I'd already been with him while he told me how beautiful the Inner Mongolian grasslands were and how great the Mongolian food was.

I want to go to Inner Mongolia.

CHAPTER 121: Three Buses and a Motorcycle (Sunday, July 17, 2005-10:57 PM)

On the advice of the lady at my hotel, I ditched the relative comfort and familiarity of traveling by train for the speed and convenience of buses. On my way from Wudang Mountain to Zhengzhou, two people would try to rip me off. In the end, they both probably did. But, now I've arrived safely in Zhengzhou.

The first guy that tried to rip me off was the minibus operator at the top of Wudang Mountain. His initial offer for a ride down the mountain was 50 renminbi.

I couldn't believe he made that offer with a straight face. I came back right away with my offer, 5 renminbi.

I was a bit annoyed when he tried to act surprised at my offer, like it was out of the question. In the end, we settled on 10 renminbi. Ten's a lot closer to five than it is to fifty.

I paid him in loose change.

My plan to hop on a direct bus to Zhengzhou had to be scrapped. The next direct bus wasn't until the evening, and I had no intention on killing twelve hours waiting for a bus.

Instead, on the suggestion of a guy working at the bus station, I caught a bus to Nanyang where he let me know there'd be plenty of connections to Zhengzhou.

This bus was economy class. But I didn't mind. I had a seat. It was cheap. And with the windows open, it wasn't too uncomfortable.

We were in the outskirts of Nanyang when the bus started to slow down and people who knew where I was headed told me it was time to get off.

We were still in the middle of nowhere. I didn't like the looks of this. Were they gonna ditch me next to some farm field and make me ride an ox into the city?

After I explained to them that I wanted to go to the bus station, they decided it wasn't time for me to get off yet. We'd be driving into the city in a few minutes.

I got off the bus in the city and hopped on the back of a motorcycle. The driver said he'd take me to the bus station for five renminbi. I knew he was ripping me off, and I thought I convinced him to take me there for one renminbi. But, when we arrived, he told me it was five.

I wasn't in any mood to argue over 4 renminbi. I gave him the five, but left him with the distinct impression that I was not a satisfied customer. I don't think he really cared.

The bus to Zhengzhou was a regular coach, air-conditioned with assigned seats. It drove on the highway

without picking up people along the way and played movies and karaoke songs for the passengers.

But, that kind of comfort comes at a price. It was twice as expensive as the bus I arrived in Nanyang on was.

CHAPTER 122: The Shaolin Temple (Tuesday, July 19, 2005-8:21 PM)

The Shaolin Temple near Zhengzhou in Henan province is run like the military. Thousands of Chinese teenagers and even a handful of foreigners train here so that they can balance their entire weight on a spearhead, break metal bars with their heads, and throw tiny projectiles through thick sheets of glass.

The tour book warned me that the tour buses to Shaolin Temple make what should be a two hour bus ride from Zhengzhou to the temple a five or six hour ordeal by making lots of little stops on the way.

That's exactly what they did, and it was really pissing me off.

Not only do the entrance fees to these second-rate temples add up, they're also an incredible waste of energy that would have otherwise been spent exploring what I came to see, Shaolin Temple.

I refused to go into either of the first two sites we stopped at and even skipped lunch. Instead, I explored the area on foot and waited at the bus. Finally, at the Daoist nunnery, they tricked me.

The tour group sold the last two tickets, the tickets to the Shaolin Temple and the nunnery together. I was so exhausted from trying to decipher the tour guides Chinese that I just gave up and bought the tickets from him.

Not only was his Chinese difficult to understand, he also seemed to make everything more complicated than it had to be. Every sentence was a long sentence. Every simple question had a bewildering answer.

After they wasted my entire morning, we arrive at Shaolin Temple at around 1:30 in the afternoon. The entrance ticket included one Shaolin Kung Fu performance.

The performance took place in a small auditorium in the Martial Arts Gallery. Around 30 or 40 teenagers and adolescents dressed in traditional Shaolin Temple attire put on a half an hour show.

It was fast and furious. They had swords, spears, whips, and things that I don't know the name of. They jumped, kicked, punched, flipped, rolled, and crawled.

I imagine most of the effectiveness of their techniques during actual combat would actual be more the result of intimidation than anything else. Sitting in the front row I was keenly aware that if I got in a brawl with one of these monks, I wasn't gonna stand a chance.

The rest of the day I explored the temple itself and the monastery. I was too tired to pay as much attention to all the details as I should have. I know I have a long day ahead of me tomorrow.

On the way back to the bus, I saw the students practicing, hundreds of them dressed in athletic uniforms on dirt fields with coaches pushing them to their limits.

This is what high school athletics looks like in China.

CHAPTER 123: To Bu Or Not To Bu (Wednesday, July 20, 2005-10:00 PM)

It was four o'clock in the afternoon. The train from Zhengzhou wouldn't arrive in Hohhot until almost noon the next day. Like several times before, I had a ticket but no seat on the train.

The train was packed near the desk where passengers upgrade (in Chinese "bu") their tickets. In fact, it was packed everywhere, but there it was even more severe.

People were stepping on each other's toes, literally. I really made a lady upset when I stepped on her sandals with my sneakers while trying to stow my bag up top to accomodate another passenger who wanted

me to make room for her friends.

After stowing my bag, I came back to find the woman and her friends not only occupied the space vacated by my bag, they also occupied the space vacated by me. I had nowhere to stand.

I asked the lady about this unintended turn of events.

"But there are six of us," she told me.

What difference did that make? "There's one of me," I told her. I need a place to stand, too.

I did not feel sorry for the lady whose toe I stepped on earlier. The accident wouldn't have happened if she had given me an inch of room. But she and the other passengers were jockeying for position to upgrade their tickets.

Only ten days into my summer traveling, and I'm already feeling the strain of traveling by oneself. Every day I'm either sight-seeing, making arrangements for the next city, or traveling by bus or train. There's little time to just rest.

In ten days, I've already blown through three cities in three provinces. I keep telling myself to stop and hang out for a few extra days somewhere, but, when it comes down to it, I always choose to just keep moving.

In the end, I upgraded my ticket. Now I'm lying in a sleeper car on the train on a bed more comfortable than the one's at my hotels.

This would be a good time to get some rest.

CHAPTER 124: Elton John on the Grasslands (Saturday, July 23, 2005-10:00 PM)

I'm in a yurt in Inner Mongolia about 90 km north of Hohhot. Any stress from traveling has disappeared since I handed over all decision making responsibilities to a tour group.

Afer a lunch of hot pot, the group took us to the Shawan Desert where a host of activities were available, from camel riding to sand sledding to dune buggy driving to fourwheeling and ATV-ing.

I, of course, wasn't gonna pay extra to do any of it. I was content to just walk around.

Until a couple with a ten year old kid told me to take their kid on an ATV ride.

After the ATV ride and we got back in the bus, the adult passengers engaged in adult conversation while I sat in back with the ten year old kid. He quizzed me about the price of everything in the United States, from ballpoint pens to sports cars.

We even talked a little about music, specifically Michael Jackson, or, as the kid described him, "the guy who was originally black, then he got whiter, and now he can't go in the sun".

Later, noting the fact that Michael Jordan and I share the first same name, he let me know that I was a little like Michael Jordan, just a little whiter.

He insisted on giving me his phone number. He asked if I wanted it in English. Confused, I said yes.

He began writing, "t-w-o s-e-v-e-n...".

After a lot more driving around, a lot of it at speeds in excess of 100 mph, we ended up in a yurt town, drinking Mongolian liquor, and listening to Chinese guys dressed in Mongolian clothes play music like "Can You Feel the Love Tonight" on saxophone.

CHAPTER 125: Grasslands Guilt Trip (Sunday, July 24, 2005-11:25 AM)

Tour groups earn their money by squeezing every penny (or jiao) out of their customers throughout the tour. They park their bus in front of random tourist spots and give their customers a choice: pay to get in or sit in the bus for an hour.

Usually this tactic doesn't work on me because I'm profoundly cheap when it comes to that sort of thing. But, some tour operators have figured out how to get money out of even people like me.

On the second day of our tour in the Inner Mongolian grasslands, our itinerary had us horseback riding and seeing a couple landmarks.

The horseback riding was not included in our tour package. We would have to pay an additional 50 renminbi per hour to ride the horses.

That much I knew before I signed up for the trip. I knew I wasn't going horseback riding.

What I didn't know was that the only way to see the landmarks was a three hour, 150 renminbi horseback ride.

That was fine. I wouldn't go to see the landmarks. I knew they probably weren't worth seeing anyways.

The tour operators had one more trick up their sleeve. In order to see the landmarks and take the horses, everyone interested would have to split the cost of a guide, another 50 renminbi per hour.

On this particular morning, there were only two of us. The other guy wanted to go.

If I didn't go, the excursion would be too expensive for him, and he wouldn't go. If I did go, he could afford it.

Somehow, I ended up making the decision whether both of us would go or not.

I'm upset that I broke in and went (at a negotiated price). Three hours on an uncomfortable horse exploring places I could have went on foot was not worth it.

CHAPTER 126: Guangzhou Bound (Monday, July 25, 2005-9:36 PM)

After spending much more money than I originally intended to in Inner Mongolia, I decided to speed up the trip back to Guangzhou. Not only will I be able to save money by hanging out in Guangzhou a few extra days or weeks, I'll also have more time to spend with Natasha and her parents.

I asked the tour group to take me straight back to the train station in Hohhot after we returned from the grasslands. I went straight in and bought a ticket to Tianjin. A few hours later, I was on the train.

Once again I was stuck on an overnight train with no seat. This time there weren't any beds available.

The train was full of Inner Mongolia residents on their way to do some sightseeing in Beijing. A lot of them aren't used to seeing foreigners.

Most of their questions, comments, and stares didn't bother me at all. But there were a few passengers that annoyed or scared me.

Among those were a group of teenagers who, after they found out I was American, found every sentence they could think of relating to Osama Bin Laden absolutely hilarious.

I slept on a seat with a nearly vertical seatback. I didn't even have a table to rest my head on, and there usually was no leg room to stretch out my legs.

It was rainy when I finally made it to Tianjin. I booked my afternoon ticket to Suzhou right away. I didn't plan to stay long in Tianjin.

In fact, I only stayed long enough to make it to the "Grand Mosque", take a quick walk down the Ancient Cultural Street, and try some "Goubuli" steamed buns. I didn't find anything special about the "Goubuli" buns.

I was lucky enough to have a bed on the train to Suzhou. When I arrived, the weather was hot and sunny. In the afternoon, I took a stroll around "The Humble Administrator's Garden" and purchased my ticket to Hangzhou.

Before then, I will enjoy one comfortable night in a decent hotel in Suzhou.

CHAPTER 127: Hangzhou Evacuation (Friday, July 29, 2005-9:07 AM)

The morning of what was supposed to be my first full day in Hangzhou, I was forced to hastily evacuate the city and return straight to Guangzhou as fast as possible. My visa was about to expire.

My plan had me extending my visa just before it expired in some city on my itinerary. I was told by a somewhat reliable source that this could be done at any PSB in China.

As I found out, since my visa is a "Z" visa, it could only be extended in Guangzhou. Fortunately, I had planned for this just in case by giving myself a couple extra days before my visa expired.

Wednesday, July 7, I set out from my hotel as early as possible to make it to the PSB in Hangzhou, China. I was still under the impression that my visa could be extended.

The map in my guide book suggested the PSB was very close to my hotel. But, when I made it to the intersection it was shown at, I couldn't find a thing.

After asking lots of questions, I found the office around a half an hour later at a nearby but different location. I thought I was all set.

There was almost no one in the office. I only had to wait a few minutes before someone helped me.

And it didn't take him too long to let me know he couldn't help me. There was nothing the office in Hangzhou could do. They couldn't issue me a tourist visa or a business visa. And they couldn't extend my work visa.

I either had to make it to Hong Kong before Sunday, the final day of my visa, or I had to make it to Guangzhou before Friday, the final day before my visa expires that the office in Guangzhou will still be open.

A couple phone calls and a short visit to an internet cafe later I decided to head to the train station to see what my options were for going back to Guangzhou.

It was ten o'clock in the morning. The sun was strong and I was sweating profusely. I hurried as quickly as I could.

There was only one way for me to make it back to Guangzhou by train before Friday. A train left from Hangzhou for Guangzhou in an hour and a half. There were no seats available, but I could still get a ticket.

I bought the ticket, ran back to my hotel, packed my things, checked out of the hotel, and ran back to the train station.

I was absolutely exhausted. My bag was getting heavier the more I was forced to carry it around, I was heading back to Guangzhou without having seen anything in Hangzhou.

The one thing my guide book is right about is the time it takes to travel from Hangzhou to Guangzhou by train, 25 hours. And this time, "no seat" was pretty accurate. The train was packed.

During the first sixteen hours, with the exception of a few minutes here and there, I stood, leaned, and squatted. A "no seat" ticket doesn't just mean you're not sitting down, it means you're constantly moving to make room for the constant flow of people walking around the train. People going to the bathroom, people

going for a smoke, attendant's sweeping and mopping the floor or selling snack's and soft drinks.

The air was stagnant. They insisted on keeping the windows shut. The air conditioner was far too weak for the large cabin.

I got a number to have my ticket upgraded to a sleeper. I was number 80. They never made it past 35.

At night it was a little more peaceful. People were everywhere, sleeping across seats, under seats, sitting on the seat backs, standing in the aisles, standing on the seats.

More people got on the train than got off at every stop. I didn't know if I could make it all the way to Guangzhou.

The next morning one of the workers on the train let me sit on his toolbox. I couldn't refuse. Eventually, I even had space on one of the benches.

More than 25 hours later, I made it to Guangzhou. I never want to travel like that again.

CHAPTER 128: Losing Weight In China (Friday, July 29, 2005-10:01 AM)

I lost over 15 pounds in 18 days. How did I do it? By burning more calories than I took in. How did I do that? That's the difficult part.

I guess I went a little too far and used a lot of tactics that might not be considered "healthy". The aim of the trip was never to lose weight, but the conditions were ripe for that happening.

Before I left for my summer travels, I set out a few guidelines for myself. No junk food, no fast food, no planes, no taxis.

Junk food I defined as anything that came pre-packaged and prepared, like Oreos and Pringles. Instead of eating that stuff, I insisted that if I needed a snack, I'd buy a mango or a banana.

Ubiquitous fast food establishments were always tempting, but it was easy enough to just stay outside. There were always plenty of Chinese alternatives serving fried dishes, noodles, or dumplings.

Originally, I planned on eating three good meals a day, one "sweet" drink with dinner, and maybe some snack in the afternoon.

I discovered I only needed around one meal and lots of water a day. Maybe sometimes I went a little too far by not eating at all for a day or so.

But when I did eat, I'd have a good, solid meal. Eggs, meat, vegetables, and rice. One good protein-rich Chinese meal could easily keep me going for 24 hours.

The next part of my plan was burning lots of calories. On days I wasn't sitting on a train or a bus, I'd walk for between five and eight hours, usually carrying my pack. I never took a taxi.

It was easy to keep myself going. I didn't have any other choice. At the end of the day, I'd be burnt out. Before recovering completely, the next day I'd be on the road again.

Keeping up this sort of lifestyle for a few weeks makes one keenly aware of why Americans are getting fatter and fatter. Most people can't afford to exercise for five hours a day, and it's difficult resist the ever-present Twinkees, Pizza, and Coca-cola over a long period of time.

If you want to lose weight, put yourself in a position where it's hard to break the rules. That's difficult to find in America. I suggest the Gobi desert in Northwestern China.

CHAPTER 129: One Night in the Chungking Mansions (Tuesday, August 2, 2005-5:58 PM)

The monstrous Chungking Mansions on Nathan Road in Hong Kong are a massive collection of hotels,

hostels, private residences, and small businesses serving people from every corner of the globe.

On the ground floor, it's impossible to avoid come-ons from people selling you food, suits, watches, accommodations, and marijuana. It's so intimidating that the first time I visited Hong Kong, I avoided the place altogether.

But this time I was intent on experiencing the legendary Chungking Mansions with an overnight stay at one of its hostels.

I was in Hong Kong on a visa run. I left mainland China the very last day my Chinese visa was valid. It was a Sunday. I couldn't get my new visa until the next afternoon. I had an entire day to kill in Hong Kong.

After wandering around Hong Kong aimlessly the entire afternoon, I returned to my hostel on the top floor of the Chungking Mansions in the evening.

The Chungking Mansions, and Hong Kong in general, has scores of westerners expressing various levels of bohemianism. You'd think they'd have interesting stories, interesting politics, or interesting observations into life.

But the more of them I met, and the more they tried to impress me by chain smoking, boasting of their ties to the Chinese mafia, and reciting familiar anti-Bush politics, the less interested in them I became.

That evening, eight of us sat there, on the sixteenth floor of the Chungking Mansions, one of the most infamous, cockroach-infested buildings in Hong Kong, and watched "America's Next Top Model". I'm in no rush to get back to Hong Kong.

CHAPTER 130: China's Northwest and the Silk Road (Wednesday, August 3, 2005-5:41 PM)

My sights have been set on the one region of China I have yet to step foot in, the Northwest. Ningxia, Gansu, Qinghai, and Xinjiang comprise this part of China, huge in area, small in population.

Perhaps the most powerful draw to this relatively inaccessible corner of China is the famous Silk Road, and I hope to make it to at least some towns along this ancient trading route like Turpan or Kuqa.

But, since I'm coming from Guangzhou on China's southern coast, I plan to first explore parts of southwestern China before reaching the Northwest, most likely via Qinghai.

The visa is the limiting factor. I have to be out of China before the end of August. After that, I can reenter China once before I need to get a new visa. Since I don't have entry visas for any other countries (and I don't plan to get any), I will probably exit to Hong Kong. However, Thailand might also be an interesting possibility.

Late this week or early next week I'll set out for Guiyang, Guizhou. The train ride from Guangzhou should take around 33 hours.

With no time to spare, I'll immediately head for Kaili, apparently a good jumping off point for exploring Guizhou's minority Miao and Dong villages. I'm embarrassed that I've lived in China for two years and haven't made it to a Miao village yet. There are around seven million Miao in China. The Miao people are related to the Hmong people of Southeast Asia.

After a few days in Guizhou, I'll head north. Most likely, I'll have to remove Leshan, Sichuan from my itinerary and instead head straight for Golmud, Qinghai.

Golmud will just be a short stop, perhaps a day or two. My real objective is Xinjiang.

Before I reach Xinjiang, however, I'll head to Dunhuang, Gansu, to see the famous Buddhist grottoes, the Buddhist art hidden inside extensive cave networks.

There probably won't be any time to visit Ningxia. Instead, I'll head straight for Xinjiang. First, I'll head

towards Urumqi. Then I'll make my way westward towards Kashgar through cities like Turpan and Kuqa.

At that point, my visa will almost be expired. Instead of wasting time taking trains and buses back to Hong Kong, I'll have to relax my "no airplanes" rule and fly either to Hong Kong or Thailand so that my Chinese visa doesn't expire.

After that, I'll have to earnestly make plans to return to the United States.

CHAPTER 131: A Train to Kaili (Tuesday, August 9, 2005-5:44 PM)

Guangzhou's main train station deserves its own circle in hell, maybe two or three. If I thought about the fact that I'd have to board a train there to travel, I might never leave Guangzhou.

Corridors and stairwells dimly lit in the evening with amber lights lead to cavernous waiting halls. Lines of people wait to get inside to wait for hours for their trains.

In the meantime, they make newspaper beds and surround themselves with their luggage packed in huge plastic bags that aren't lifted or rolled but instead just dragged across the ground.

In spite of the fact that the floors are constantly being swept, garbage covers the floors and seats.

Police send out constant warnings with bullhorns telling passengers to watch their valuables.

Moments before my train boarded, a sea of bodies moved in anticipation. People pushed, squeezed themselves through the crowd, and hopped over chairs to move closer to the front of the line.

In the beginning, the thought of a twenty-two hour train ride didn't bother me at all since I had a seat. It'd turn out to be more difficult than I expected, but in the end a stroke of good luck and a quick decision ended up saving me a few hours and a little money.

The train was too bright inside, and it was too dark outside to see out through the windows. Even when I tried, my eyes would just get tired trying to follow the lights on the buildings as they passed by the train window.

Instead, I had nothing to look at but the passengers near me, a bunch of kids, about six or so, half boys and half girls.

Their families decided to bring their Sunday shopping with them on the train. The table and even the floor was covered with enough food so the kids could perpetually drink Pepsi and eat potato chips.

At first, the three boys played cards. I didn't know the game they were playing, but I understood the outcome. The winner got to torture the losers by flicking their foreheads with his index finger.

Since there was so much food covering our table, there was nowhere for me to lay my head down and go to sleep. During the night, the air-conditioning was on full-blast. I was wearing a short-sleeved shirt. The night didn't pass quickly.

The next morning we were deep into Southwestern China. Outside the window, I could see China's characteristic southwestern landscape, hundreds of steep hills covered in lush vegetation surrounded by terraced fields. We passed rivers far from big cities with groups of kids swimming to pass time.

A woman sitting across from me noticed I wasn't eating. I almost never eat on trains. The food is terrible, and I don't use any energy sitting there, staring out the window.

She tried to get me to eat a bowl of noodles or a hard-boiled egg. Politely, I refused.

Eventually, she did manage to get me to eat an apple. She took one out of her bag and forced me to take it. Then she grabbed a pocket knife from her husband.

I've seen lots of Chinese guys do it, but I've never tried myself to cut the peel off of an apple with a pocket knife. Clumsily, I started hacking away.

Ten minutes later, half my apple was on the ground. I ate the other half and thanked her for it.

The scariest thing that happened was when a passenger in a nearby seat started having a seizure or an asthma attack, and no one seemed to know what to do.

A few passengers tried to restrain him. A lot of passengers stood up to stare. But no one was talking; no one was running for help. Everyone was just staring.

He'd calm down for a few minutes, and then the gasping for breath and shaking would start again. I couldn't see clearly what was going on.

The situation was never really resolved. After he calmed down for a few minutes, some people from the train tried to persuade him to get off the train, go to a hospital, and if everything was okay, get on the next train.

He was concerned about the money. I don't know what he eventually decided. I ended up getting off the train before him.

My ticket was for Guiyang in Guizhou, but that was not my ultimate destination. After getting to Guiyang, I planned to take another train or bus to a nearby city, Kaili, to visit some minority villages.

From the map, I didn't think the train I was on would pass through Kaili.

It did. When I heard the stop announced, I made a quick decision. There was nothing for me to see in Guiyang. I got off the train.

Without a map of Kaili, I just started walking. I had no idea where to go. I was just guessing.

The area around the train station was not developed. I'd look one way, and see nothing. I'd look the other way, and I'd see almost nothing. I kept walking in the direction I saw almost nothing.

It worked. I eventually wound up in the city center. It looked just like any other Chinese city I've visited, just perhaps a little smaller.

In China, there are two types of hotels: hotels that can rent to foreigners and hotels that can't rent to foreigners. I usually don't bother with the ones that can't rent to foreigners.

But, after walking around for an hour or so and not seeing many hotels, I decided to give it a shot. I wound up in a 30 renminbi a night room with a bathroom, a television, and a fan.

It took me a while to figure out how to flush the toilet. There's no string or handle. You just run the sink. The water makes its way down to the toilet eventually.

Tomorrow I'll try to visit a minority village.

CHAPTER 132: Shangri-Lang De (Wednesday, August 10, 2005-5:00 PM)

The rooster crowing outside my window this morning finally persuaded me to get up. The earlier I started, the better.

I needed to do two things: first, investigate the possibility of purchasing a train ticket to Xining, Qinghai; second, catch a bus to Lang De.

Lang De is a small Hua Miao village about an hour away from Kaili in Guizhou. Both Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao have visited Lang De.

I walked from my hotel to the train station, about five kilometers away, only to find there was no direct train

to Xining. I wasn't surprised but still was a little disappointed.

I walked the five kilometers back to the city center and headed to the bus station.

The bus was full, and we were picking up more passengers along the way. I sat with my bag on my lap, nervously worried the driver would forget to let me off in Lang De.

He didn't. And once we arrived it was easy to get my bearings straight. I headed towards upper Lang De.

It was raining lightly, and the road was almost empty. A car or motorcycle passed now and then. The road ran next to a small stream. Rice paddies lined the banks of the stream.

Upper Lang De is comprised of lots of wooden houses built on the side of a hill. About 600 people from 130 or so families live here.

The first thing I saw was something not uncommon in China, German tourists. I walked past them and went towards the village.

There were very few people walking around. Just a few chickens here and there. I expected to be attacked by women selling handicrafts. Instead, I was alone and unsure what direction to go.

Eventually, I found the women selling souvenirs. One of the women operated a guesthouse out of her home.

She lives with her husband and son, who is home from school for summer vacation, in a three-story wooden house. The dining room is an open-air room next to the kitchen decorated with Chairman Mao posters and certificates from her son's school.

After eating, I left to explore the village. My host gave me a pass to watch a performance that afternoon and explained what I needed to say to avoid paying for it.

Instead, I went to the river. At first, I just waded in the shallow parts with my pants rolled up. But I couldn't resist the temptation to go for a swim.

After the swim, I tried to return to the guest house. But two things made that very difficult: one, every house and path between the houses look the same; two, there was some sort of fowl guarding the entrance to the guesthouse that attacked me whenever I tried to walk past.

But, otherwise, I like it so much here, I just might stay an extra day.

CHAPTER 133: A Miao Family and a Heaven-Sent Tour Guide (Friday, August 12, 2005-7:11 AM)

I stayed with a Miao family of four in Upper Lang De that opens its doors to visitors to earn a little extra money.

The oldest son was not there. Eight months ago, shortly after he turned 18, he enlisted in the army and is now stationed in Tibet.

The younger son was at home. During the school year, he lived at his school in Kai Li. In the summer he came home.

The younger son told me that later he doesn't want to live in the village. It's too poor.

Their wooden house was originally built in 1945. In the 1980's an addition was added where I stayed.

The structure has three floors, the lowest floor for their chickens and pigs, the middle floor has their living quarters, and the upper floor is where guests stay.

There's no bathroom in the house. Outside the entrance, there's an outhouse style facility. My hosts made sure to give me a flashlight before going to sleep in case I needed to use the bathroom at night. Of course,

there are no street lights here.

They only charged 10 renminbi for the bed per night. But, they also charged 10 renminbi for every meal. Room and board ended up being 40 renminbi per day.

I planned to stay two nights at their home. But, late in the afternoon on the second day, someone came looking for me.

It was a tour-guide who noticed I was in the village by myself. She thought it might be difficult to make my way back to the city alone and offered me a free seat in her tour bus back to Guiyang.

It was a great deal. A free ticket to Guiyang in a comfortable tour bus and a free dinner at a nice restaurant in Kaili.

The tour group was a group of government workers from Guangzhou. The only bad part was listening to a group of middle-aged Chinese men sing Karaoke on the bus.

The tour guide continued to help me. She telephoned somebody to inquire about train tickets and agreed to find a cheap hotel for me to stay in once we got to Guiyang.

When we got to Guiyang, it was too late to go to a different hotel. Instead she negotiated an excellent price, 65 renminbi, for a huge suite at a nice hotel.

The only bad part is I only have a few hours to enjoy the room.

CHAPTER 134: Another Train Ride (Sunday, August 14, 2005-10:25 PM)

I wish I could be writing about something other than long train rides, but after I found out I needed to curtail my travel plans since my visa would not be valid long enough to visit all the places I wanted to visit for as long as I visited, I chose to shorten the duration of my stay at each destination rather than to remove destinations from my itinerary.

Unfortunately, the time it takes to travel from one place doesn't change according to my whims. Consequently, I'm spending a greater percentage of my time aboard trains than I anticipated.

The trip from Guizhou to Qinghai I hoped would only take a day or so. As it turned out, it took me over 50 hours from the time I left Guiyang to reach Xining.

Since there was no direct train to Xining from Guiyang, I had to switch trains in Chengdu. Reaching Chengdu was quick and painless.

The train routes don't run in a straight line from Chengdu to Xining. They head considerably far west, into Shanxi province and pass through Lanzhou in Gansu province before reaching Xining.

At the time I started the journey, my back and arms were painfully sunburnt. By the time I reaching Xining, I hardly noticed anything.

What was painful however, was the train constantly stopping to let other trains pass.

The train arrived late. I checked into a room near the hotel, ate some barbecue at a small stand run by a Muslim woman, and am getting ready to go to bed.

Tomorrow, I'll either visit a Tibetan monastery, a small Tu village, or go to see China's largest lake, Qinghai Lake.

CHAPTER 135: From Xining to the Kumbum Lamasery (Monday, August 15, 2005-7:27 PM)

The Kumbum lamasery just outside of Xining in Qinghai province is one of, if not the most important lamasery in Tibetan Buddhism outside of Tibet. It was founded to pay tribute to Tsong Khapa, the founder of the Yellow Hat Sect of Tibetan Buddhism.

In order to get to the lamasery from Xining, you can take bus three from the train station and get off at Guan Li Zhan and then hop on a minibus to the lamasery.

Or, if you're like me, you can hop on bus three at the train station, stay on until the last stop, get back on bus three heading in the opposite direction, get off a few stops past Guan Li Zhan, ask directions, get back onto bus three, take it to Guan Li Zhan, and then take a minibus to the lamasery.

Either way, if you do go, I hope it doesn't rain on the day you choose to visit.

It took me an hour or two more than it should have to get to the lamasery. Xining itself doesn't have an especially Tibetan feel to it. There are a few Tibetan shops here and there, but city feels more Muslim than Buddhist. The area around the lamasery, on the other hand, feels just like Lhasa.

Except for the rain.

I was invited to join a Chinese language tour of the monastery by somebody who recognized me from the bus. I was well aware my Chinese probably wasn't up to the task of capturing all the details of the history of the lamasery, but I gave it a shot anyways.

I was able to put together what the tour guide was talking about by piecing together what I could understand with what the English signs said. I don't know enough about Tibetan Buddhist to attach much significance to what I learned. It just sounded like more stories about sacred trees, prophetic dreams, and antique art.

On the way back to the bus to Xining, I looked around at a few Tibetan shops that line the road.

The shops had all sorts of cool Tibetan stuff. But I couldn't find much I wanted to buy. Whenever I found something I liked and something that was small enough to fit in my bag, the price was prohibitively expensive.

I'm not sure how long the rainy weather will last. I don't have the time to sit around and wait for a sunny day, so tomorrow I'll probably leave for Dunhuang, Gansu, a little unsatisfied that I wasn't able to explore more of the area around Xining.

CHAPTER 136: Where's a Tibetan Buddhist Monk When You Need One? (Tuesday, August 16, 2005-6:58 PM)

Bad luck, wrong decisions, and the stress of traveling alone had put me in a less than perfect mood on my second day in Xining. I was ready to leave and hoped things would be better in Dunhuang.

It started with the train ride from Chegdu to Xining, that, for every two miles we traveled, only put us one mile closer to our destination.

The train arrived two hours late to Xining. The weather was cold and rainy.

The shower and toilet in my fleabag hotel barely functioned. The latter would turn out to be a great inconvenience.

The next day I had trouble finding the lamasery I wanted to visit and even more trouble understanding my tour guide's Chinese.

I desperately wanted to buy some interesting souvenirs, but nothing I found in my price range impressed me.

What probably was the greatest drain on my spirit, however, was the lack of human interaction. I talked to the people on the train, the people at the reception desk of my hotel, the tour guide, the street vendors, but didn't really get to know anyone like I did in Guiyang.

In the morning I bought a train ticket out of Xining. After checking out of my hotel, I had six hours to kill before my train left. I decided to explore the city.

Of course, now that I was ready to leave, the weather cleared up.

I had eaten so much the previous day in the area across the street from my hotel where Muslim street vendors sell barbecue and noodles that I decided I would skip breakfast and lunch.

That's too bad, not because I was hungry, but because eating is one of the most pleasant ways to kill time.

I walked and walked and walked. I passed mosques, pedestrian markets, big open squares, and countless hotels.

My bag was getting heavier and heavier. I constantly adjusted it on my shoulders to relieve the pressure.

Two Buddhist monks in their late teens or early twenties were sitting on the steps outside a hotel playing with a tiny camcorder. They started taping me.

I took that as an invitation to take a picture of them. Soon, I was sitting next to them having a conversation.

After the hotel staff kicked us off the steps in front of the entrance to the hotel, we walked to a small restaurant and drank "eight treasure tea".

"Eight treasure tea" is made with eight ingredients but derives most of its flavor from a big clump of sugar that dissolves as you drink the tea.

The two monks' Chinese was nowhere near as standard as the Tibetans I met in Lhasa. That probably facilitated conversation more than hindered it since it put us on equal ground speaking Chinese.

I kept my guard up. Sometimes the better strangers treat you, the more base their motives are.

In this case, I never detected any base intentions. We talked for over an hour, at times drawing a crowd of Chinese who treated two Tibetan monks and an American speaking non-standard Chinese to each other and playing with their camcorders as theatre.

I was interested to see how approachable and easy to talk to these two monks were. In this part of China, there are lots of devoutly religious people, mostly Buddhist and Muslim.

When I talk to anyone whose religion is evident from the clothes they wear, I'm always a little nervous about offending them.

But talking to these monks was just like talking to anyone else. I was even surprised when they complained bitterly that they were being ripped off for the tea.

They insisted on paying. After we finished our tea, they walked with me to the train station and said goodbye.

CHAPTER 137: Aliens' Travel Permit (Wednesday, August 17, 2005-12:47 PM)

Two things prevented me from immediately leaving for Dunhuang after I arrived in Golmud this morning. First, the tickets were sold out. Second, I need an Aliens' Travel Permit to travel to Dunhuang from Golmud.

Travel permits are a big, time-consuming hassle for foreigners traveling in Tibet and discourage lots of people from doing so. But Tibet isn't the only place that sometimes requires travelers to attain additional permits to travel.

Dunhuang, an old outpost on the Silk Road in Northwestern China's Gansu province, is famous for one thing, the Mogao Grottoes, hundreds of caves decorated by Buddhist monks with elaborate frescoes and stucco figurines.

My trip to Dunhuang started yesterday in Xining. I left in the early evening on a train bound for Golmud. But, I planned to get off about half way there, in Delinghu, and from there take a bus to Dunhuang.

A Qinghai native was in the bunk below mine.

The two of us sat in the seats next to the train window. He let me know when we passed Qinghai Lake, the largest lake in China.

He convinced me to upgrade my ticket to Golmud and stay on the bus. I took his advice. The roads connecting Golmud and Dunhuang were probably a little better, and, more importantly, the train arrived in Delinghu at 2:30 in the morning.

I couldn't upgrade my ticket until we passed Delinghu. That meant, at three in the morning one of the train attendant's would wake me up, and then I'd have to head to the end of the train to upgrade the ticket.

At the bus station in Golmud I crossed my fingers that I would simply be issued a ticket without a travel permit. I wasn't. I hopped on a motorcycle, headed to the Public Security Bureau, and waited for someone to show up.

Forty-five minutes later someone came. I followed him inside the dilapidated building into a big office with seats lined around the perimeter of the room and a huge desk in the middle. We were the only two there. He never even turned on the lights. I paid him 50 renminbi, and he filled out the permit for me.

The next bus to Dunhuang doesn't leave until six in the evening. I have five more hours to kill in one of China's least interesting cities.

CHAPTER 138: On the Silk Road (and not alone) (Thursday, August 18, 2005-11:18 PM)

Dunhuang, once a trading post on the Silk Road, today looks a lot like other places in China that attract a steady stream of backpackers. The center of the small city in Northwestern China has dozens of restaurants and hotels competing for the business of English speaking tourists.

The restaurants serve coffee and hamburgers. The hotels book train and bus tickets. Whether they can speak Chinese or not, Westerners know they don't have a whole lot to worry about when they're in Dunhuang.

But for every tourist drinking a smoothie and asking about buses to the Mogao Grottoes, there's probably someone else out there who has made it a point to avoid places like this. What a blow to come all the way to an exotic place like China and find out it might not be so exotic after all.

The ride from Golmud to Dunhuang on a sleeper bus was the worst bus ride I've taken in China yet. The bus only had beds for about 40 people, but an additional 20 or so passengers filled the aisles for the 13 hour trip.

The road from Golmud runs through landscape that looks like surface of Mars, rocky and completely barren. Around nine o'clock it becomes dark.

But there was no way to sleep. Other passengers were smoking and talking. The bus stopped for bathroom breaks and repairs just about every hour. Movies were playing on the television sets.

I was in the heart of the bus, in a bottom bunk in the middle row. I couldn't look out the windows. I could barely stretch my legs. I just stared at the television a foot in front of my face praying we'd arrive in Dunhuang soon.

At 7:30 in the morning we rolled into town.

After purchasing a plane ticket back to Guangzhou for the 29th and a train ticket onward to Urumqi for the 20th, I started looking for a place to have lunch.

Near my hotel were lots of restaurants: Sichuan, Muslim, and Western. My first instinct was to avoid the Western places.

But I reconsidered. Today the real Dunhuang is about backpackers and tour groups. I can eat Sichuan food anywhere.

I cautiously walked into "Shirley's Cafe". Inside were three Europeans and one Chinese.

In this kind of situation, it's easy to fall into the trap of competing with the other tourists, trying to demonstrate that there's some difference between yourself and the other Westerners in China.

I consciously tried not to fall into this trap. Since the waitress spoke to me in English, I spoke to her in English.

I looked over the menu. Part of me was trying to find the most authentic Chinese dishes. Part of me was trying to avoid coming off as arrogant by ordering Chicken Feet when what I really wanted was a hamburger.

I settled on something that you'd expect a stupid foreigner to order, Sweet and Sour Chicken.

In all honesty, the foreigners I've met so far in Dunhuang are friendly and helpful and have lots of travel experience. But, in the back of my mind, I still would like to know there's something different about me and them.

But I try not to look too hard for it. I should just concentrate on the Mogao Grottoes.

CHAPTER 139: The Mogao Grottoes (Friday, August 19, 2005-2:56 PM)

In 366 AD a tired and hungry Buddhist monk, Le Zun, traveling in present day Gansu province saw the images of thousands of Buddhas in the sky. Immediately he got to work on a cave to honor the Buddhas.

Other monks followed and, over the course of hundreds of years, around a thousand caves were built, each decorated with frescoes and sculptures made from wood, rock, and clay.

Only 492 of the Mogao Grottoes remain today. The rest eroded away. On any given day only a handful of caves are open to the public. Today there were eleven open for viewing.

Most of the caves we saw looked similar to each other. The natural light coming in through the entrance and the few fluorescent bulbs in each cave were not enough to see everything clearly. The guides and well-prepared tourists carried flashlights with them.

The caves were about the size of a large hotel room. The cave walls and ceilings were covered with elaborate paintings, usually thousands of identical Buddhas.

In the center were statues of androgynous Buddhas and disciples. Most of the statues were not the originals, but were rebuilt around the year 1900.

Some cave walls had paintings on the wall that told famous Buddhist stories in the form of comics. For example, the story of Sakyamuni sacrificing his body to a hungry tigress and her cubs, and subsequently being honored by his brothers and father with a temple was told in about ten frames.

The three most impressive caves we saw were numbers 96, 130, and 148.

Cave 96 houses the third largest Buddha statue in China. The 35 meter tall Buddha of the future is in excellent condition, but the statue is so tall it's difficult to appreciate it squeezed into a cave.

Cave 130 features three Buddhist statues. A huge statue of the Buddhist of the present is lying in the center with 70 Buddhist disciples and Bodhisattvas behind him. A smaller statue of the Buddha of the past sits to the left, and another small statue of the Buddha of the future sits to the right.

Cave 148 features another huge Buddha statue, nearly as big as the statue in cave 96 but not in as good condition. This statue took 29 years to complete.

No photography is allowed inside the caves. A Belgian in our group got away with a few photos and Chinese tourists were also snapping photos with their cell phones, but when our guide caught another guest trying to snap a photo, she threatened to call the police if he didn't immediately check his camera at the gate.

The caves can easily be seen in one morning leaving the afternoon to relax in Dunhuang.

CHAPTER 140: Hamburgers, Coffee, and Geopolitics (Friday, August 19, 2005-11:56 PM)

A few minutes north of the long distance Dunhuang's long distance bus station are a slew of cafes catering to foreign tourists including one called Shirley's cafe where customers eat hamburgers, drink coffee, and rent bikes by the hour.

Shirley's Cafe has become my favorite place to eat food and meet other foreigners traveling along the Silk Road.

Earlier this evening the cafe had three American customers, including myself. We all sat at separate tables, eating our meals, and talking. At first, we talked about traveling, but after we ran out of things to say about Turpan and Kashgar, the topics became more and more political.

Even though the three of us were all Americans, we didn't, by any means, share the same American experience.

Mazdi was born in British India (present day Pakistan) and looked to be from my parent's generation. He was educated in Missouri, lived in San Francisco for 30 years, and right now is on a several year odyssey traveling around the world.

Ty was born in China but his parents immigrated to New York when he was six months old. After a few more weeks in China, he'll return to his family in San Francisco.

I was the third leg of the conversation, a young, American born, caucasian from the Midwest.

Mazdi dominated the conversation. He expanded on all sorts of left-leaning theories and positions, mostly regarding U.S. foreign policy. Sometimes I agreed with him. Sometimes he made me think. Sometimes I think he went too far.

His language was provocative, and he frequently emphasized his points with expletives. Nonetheless, I liked him, even if I did feel he went once in a while over the edge.

When he labeled the Bush administration's decision to occupy Iraq "Gringo Naziism" I wasn't sure exactly how to react, being the only gringo in the room.

And I refused to accept his theory that the Soviet Union lost the Cold War because they launched the Sputnik satellite into orbit before the U.S. launched a satellite into orbit.

I myself even treaded on thin ice when I expressed my dissatisfaction with the China's manipulation of the media and with the anti-Japanese sentiment in China.

A Singaporean woman sitting near us jumped to the defense of the way China handles the media explaining that China's issues were "bread and butter" issues, not free press issues. A controlled media, she believed, was necessary in order to improve the situation in China.

Moreover, she mentioned several examples of the Chinese media reporting stories of corruption and other social ills in the country.

She also emphasized Japan's wartime atrocities as well the recent, well-covered conflicts between Japanese and Chinese that sparked outrage among "patriotic" Chinese.

The conversation was civil and orderly. I didn't leave that evening with different opinions than I came in with. But I did leave with an awareness that sometimes people I like, respect, and get along with can have fundamentally different opinions than me and can offer me different perspectives and insight into current events.

I promised Mazdi I'd read *Rogue Nation* but asked him to give me some more time before I dove into Noam Chomsky.

CHAPTER 141: The Unprepared Traveler (Sunday, August 21, 2005-12:45 PM)

I've heard stories here and there about travelers on the verge of being stranded in a foreign country because they suddenly found out that they might not have enough money for the plane ticket home, but, up until now I've never met one.

In Dunhuang I met Charles, a Belgian who made his way from Beijing to Gansu through Eastern, Southern, and Southwestern China.

Charles' has some difficulty expressing himself in English, and French speakers are difficult to find in China. In Dunhuang, he had trouble making his intentions clear even to other foreigners. I can't imagine how he communicated with the Chinese.

Eventually I understood his situation, although I'm still not sure if I appreciate the depth of his problems. He intended to head west from Beijing all the way back to Belgium.

But in Gansu he discovered the most convenient and perhaps the only feasible way to get back to Europe is by first flying to Beijing. He doesn't have enough money to fly to Beijing.

And compounding his problems, he's spending more money than he has to on train tickets and hotel rooms. He purchased a soft sleeper for 262 renminbi to Urumqi from Dunhuang instead of a hard seat for 97 renminbi, then, at the last minute desperately looked for someone who wanted to swap tickets with him.

(I'm proud to say I eventually found someone with whom he could swap tickets.)

On the train to Urumqi he asked Chinese passengers (or asked me to ask Chinese passengers) to write down a litany of questions and locations in Chinese so that once he got to Urumqi he could hopefully find his way around.

Charles and I have become friends, and, despite the glaring oversights he made in arranging his vacation, I respect his courage to travel to a foreign country without a safety net. I'm really happy to be able to serve as his translator and guide. I don't get this opportunity often.

But, soon I'm heading to Kashgar. He's made it this far. I hope he makes it back to Belgium.

CHAPTER 142: Central Asia, Here I Am (Monday, August 22, 2005-10:00 PM)

It's after ten in the evening, and cars here in Kashgar in China's far west have just begun to use their headlights.

This isn't a cafe of "white nights" like they experience in St. Petersburg, Russia. We're too far south for that. This is the effect of China placing itself entirely in one time zone despite the vast distance it spans from east to west.

But some people here tell time in Xinjiang time, in which case, it's only seven or eight.

Kashgar, in terms of history and culture, is more closely related to its nearby Central Asian neighbors than it is to China.

I met William, a recent college graduate doing translation work in Tianjin, and his mother on the 23 hour train ride from Urumqi.

William and his parents were born in Kashgar. William's grandparents were born in Eastern China.

Out of Kashgar's nearly three million residents (including the surrounding areas) perhaps a fifth are "Han" Chinese. Han immigration to the area didn't pick up steam until after 1949.

The rest of the people are Uighur. The Uighur people have maintained their cultural identity.

After being here a few hours, I wonder how the Uighur and Han people communicate. Many Uighurs can't speak Chinese, and I imagine only a handful of Chinese speak Uighur. William's Uighur vocabulary doesn't go beyond "good morning" and a few swear words.

In Kashgar there are Han and Uighur schools. The Han schools have some Uighur students. The Uighur schools have don't have any Han students.

One reason I haven't left China to travel in other Asian countries is because I'm afraid of the language barrier. Though my Chinese isn't perfect, here in China I know it can always get me out of a jam.

But Kashgar might be the exception. Even when I do meet Uighurs who speak Chinese, they usually have a stronger command of English than they do of Chinese.

Moreover, my Chinese might be steering me towards Kashgar's Han population and away from the Uighurs, even though it's the Uighur culture I came to see.

I'm close to about half a dozen countries that end in "stan" including Afghanistan. So far, people have asked if I'm Pakistani or Tajikstani. No one's asked if I'm American.

Train tickets to Urumqi are sold out, mostly going to students on their way back to school for the Fall semester. It looks like when I leave Kashgar, I'll be on a long bus ride to Urumqi.

CHAPTER 143: Uighur Town (Tuesday, August 23, 2005-3:53 PM)

Kashgar is neither backwards nor crowded. Not many cities in China as small as Kashgar can offer foreign visitors as many conveniences as Kashgar can.

But then again, comparing Kashgar to other Chinese cities might be misleading. Kashgar is a Uighur city. Visiting Kashgar is like exiting China without having to go through customs.

The Uighurs are Muslims, but perhaps not as devout as I might have expected. They don't eat pork, but according to William, my Chinese friend from the train, they drink alcohol. Some women wear veils in public. Most simply put a scarf over their head. Many don't wear anything on their head at all.

With a few extra days, a little extra money, and a travel companion I would appreciate Kashgar much more. Day trips to near by central Asian countries are available that pass through impressive mountain scenery but time and money put them out of reach for me.

My Chinese gets me as far here as Spanish might in San Diego. Moreover, there are enough foreigners here that no one goes out of there way to talk to one, but not enough to easily meet other travelers.

This morning, desperate to buy some souvenir from Kashgar that was both packable and cheap, I ended up walking away from a small souvenir shop with a cheap pillow case that, on second thought, isn't going to be worth the space it takes up in my bag.

Later, a helpful waiter at a Uighur restaurant noticed me looking for sugar for a cup of coffee. He walked over, grabbed a small jar of something, and handed it to me.

After I dumped it in my coffee, he tasted the mystery substance with his finger and made a face that suggested it might not be sugar.

I tasted my coffee to discover I had just dumped the equivalent of two cubes of salt in it.

They got me another cup of coffee.

CHAPTER 144: Trading On the Silk Road (Tuesday, August 23, 2005-10:00 PM)

After my embarrassing pillow case purchase yesterday, I decided I need to buy something worthwhile while I'm in Kashgar.

Kashgar has plenty of things worthwhile to buy, oriental rugs. Problem is they're expensive, heavy, and I don't know how to shop for them.

Ilam, a 23 year old Uighur whose name means "encouragement" or "inspiration", served as my translator at a oriental rug shop near the Idkah Mosque. His English was excellent. Maybe it shouldn't surprise me that so many people here speak English so fluently given Kashgar's proximity to Pakistan.

I asked him if his teachers were native speakers or not. He told me they weren't. Native speakers teaching English in China are often Christian missionaries. Christian missionaries don't go over well in this part of the world.

Eventually I found some square camel hair rugs from Afghanistan, each a little over two square meters in area.

Bargaining started at 1000 renminbi each.

I tried to use their weight as a bargaining chip, claiming they were too heavy to carry back to Guangzhou. If I was gonna lug a rug all the way across China, I needed to get a good deal.

But these rugs were thin (which is why they were relatively cheap) and, consequently, not very heavy. Ilam let me pick one up to see how light it was.

Next I tried to claim that they were prohibitively large. It'd be difficult and awkward to carry a rug along with my luggage.

The shopkeeper demonstrated how small they could be folded.

They started lowering the price and explaining how, if it were a weekend, prices would be higher, and telling me that they were giving me such a good deal that it wouldn't be "proper" to tell other foreigners how much I paid.

I remembered a rug I bought at IKEA, maybe thicker than these, but much smaller and lacking all the character these Afghanistani camel hair rugs had.

That rug cost me nearly a hundred dollars. The price for these was already much lower.

I left with two camel hair Afghanistani rugs and virtually no money in my wallet.

CHAPTER 145: Long and Bumpy Bus Ride From Kashgar (Saturday, August 27, 2005-1:22 PM)

During the last week in August, Chinese university students pack the trains to go back to school. Train tickets are difficult if not impossible to come by.

The earliest train ticket I could get back to Urumqi from Kashgar was for the 28th of August, too late for me to be able to catch my flight to Guangzhou.

Flights to Urumqi from Kashgar, I heard, cost around a thousand renminbi. I decided to take the bus.

I went to the long distance bus station three times to see if I could purchase a ticket a few days ahead of time. The first I visited the bus station, I thought the woman was helpful. She spoke to me in English and

told me to come back the day before I wanted to go to Urumqi.

I went back on the 25th so that I could buy a ticket for the 26th. This time, the same woman, after ignoring me for some time, told me I needed to come back the following morning. She was a Uighur. Her English was good, maybe as good as her Chinese, but after this little mix up I only spoke to her in Chinese.

The third day, the 26th of August, the day I wanted to leave, I arrived early at the train station. The lines were long, but not so long that I thought I would never make it to the front. I got in the back of the line.

The long distance bus station in Kashgar has the most inefficient, chaotic system of distributing bus tickets I've ever seen. People skip, push, shove, and cry trying to make it to the front of the line. Money constantly changes hands from people who have just arrived at the bus station to people in the front of the line so the newly arrived passengers don't themselves have to wait in line.

Almost every word spoken is Uighur. I was at a complete loss for what was going on around me. I waited and waited.

Usually, no tickets were sold to people in front of the line. Instead, two security guards would shout out destinations. Anyone going to one of those destinations could run towards the front of the line and buy a ticket.

They never shouted out "Urumqi".

The woman behind the desk (the same woman I talked to before) was seldom busy. She just sat there, sitting beside a computer, waiting for some signal to sell tickets. Hundreds of people were on the other side of the glass waiting for hours.

After two or three hours, I got a ticket for Urumqi. The bus boarded immediately.

The bus was dirty. The blanket on my bed in the back of the bus looked like it had been rolled around in a pile of dirt prior to making its way onto the bus.

Tickets were not oversold. There was only one person per bed. On this bus, there were only 30 beds, six fewer than most sleeper buses I've been on. That meant there was a much appreciated extra 20 percent of legroom.

The bus ride should have only taken 30 hours on mostly bumpy roads. There is a new highway that runs from Kashgar to Urumqi, but much of it is still under construction.

The bus broke down around 25 hours into the trip. The driver worked on the bus for three hours before getting it into good enough condition to limp to a garage. During that time some passengers ditched the bus and hopped on other passing buses.

At the garage, something was replaced. This took another three hours.

The driver stopped the bus a couple more times to make sure the bus was still operational.

At around one in the morning, 36 hours after we left, we arrived in Urumqi. I broke my rule about not taking taxis and got in a cab and headed to the Xinjiang Hotel. My room was overpriced and not in terribly good condition, but I was exhausted. I slept until 10:30 the next morning.

CHAPTER 146: Diminishing Returns (Saturday, August 27, 2005-9:50 PM)

I'm in a cheap hotel room in Urumqi on the second to last evening of my summer travels through China. The day after tomorrow, I'll fly to Guangzhou where I'll hang out for or a month or so before going back to the United States to get a job and try to pick up where I left off before December, 2002, when I first came to China.

At that time the ambition to live in China and study Chinese was so strong that I couldn't imagine not going

while the time was ripe, before I had a mortgage or family of my own to worry about.

I planned to teach for one year in Yantai, Shandong province. After that, I could return to the United States knowing that I had lived abroad in a country that used to seem so far away.

But, a year passed, and I didn't want to go home. My Chinese was getting better, and it seemed like if I stayed even longer I could make the kind of progress I really wanted to make.

The number of schools looking for foreign teachers was and is overwhelming. I was confident that as long as I didn't expect a high salary I could find a job teaching English in just about any big city in China and most small ones as well.

With so many cities to choose from, the unimaginative Guangzhou sprang to mind first. At that point I had already met Natasha, and planned to be close to her the next year. When I found out she planned to work in Guangzhou, the choice was easy.

As time wears on in China I realize there's lots more for me to do in China. I want to visit more places. I want to continue studying Chinese.

But for each additional day I spend in China and for every additional ounce of energy I invest here, I'm seeing smaller and smaller returns. I've traveled as far as Kashgar to see a part of China that I was scarcely aware of before. Despite the different language, different culture, different people there, I found the experience of traveling to be much the same as other parts of China.

When I began teaching English, as each semester finished and a new one began, I saw myself becoming more and more effective as an instructor. I went to class better and better prepared. I was able to cope with difficult situations more and more efficiently. The students responded more positively as time went on as well.

And, undoubtedly, I still have lots of progress to make. But the difference between my first semester teaching and my second semester teaching is dramatically greater than the progress I've been making lately.

Time is a scarce resource. I'll never regret the decision to invest a couple years of my life in China, and hopefully this won't be my last experience with the country.

For now, the best place for me is back in the United States. There's too much I'm missing back home to justify another year in China.

CHAPTER 147: Shave Your Head and Hit the Road (Sunday, August 28, 2005-3:25 PM)

It's unclear right now how much longer I'll be completely free to do whatever I want whenever I want. I made my travel plans with precisely that in mind. It wasn't just my last chance to visit a few corners of the country I haven't seen yet.

It was also my last chance to be completely free, attached to nothing but the things in my pack, perhaps my last gasp of fresh hair before I'm burdened with a set of responsibilities and obligations I've never had before..

There are many virtues to traveling with friends. There's always somebody to wait in line with, eat dinner with, split the cost of a hotel room with, watch the luggage, and assume half of every risk associated with traveling.

Traveling by myself, on the other hand, gives me greater freedom to chart out my course without regard to anyone else. There are no compromises. I can go where I want when I want.

Even though this is the reason I often cite for traveling solo, it's probably not entirely true to say that when I travel in China by myself I do so because it's more convenient. My itinerary is usually just a series of educated guesses about what might be interesting. I'm wrong just as often as I'm right about what will be

interesting and what won't. A second opinion would probably only improve my luck in picking destinations.

And another travel would also, without doubt, ease the burden of traveling allowing me to reach more remote inaccessible destinations that I could reach alone, especially if that companion was a native speaker.

A trip like the trip I'm on now, however, is just about relying on myself and only myself as it is about seeing lamaseries and mountains and mosques. It's about keeping myself company, and, when I'm too bored of my own company, finding other people to talk to, eat dinner with, and ask for travel advice.

Late this morning I took a walk around a cold and drizzly Urumqi. The weather had done an about face from what it was yesterday. As I finished my cup of coffee from Dico's and wondered what I'd do with the rest of my day I saw a couple familiar faces.

I shouldn't have been entirely surprised to see them again, two German tourists I met in Dunhuang. Dunhuang, Urumqi, and Kashgar are three cities just about every backpacker traveling along the Silk Road stops in. Once the backpackers hit these cities, they gravitate towards the same restaurants and hotels near train and bus stations and other areas of particular use to foreigners.

These two were on an epic journey that made my travels look like a walk to the corner store. They had already been in about a half a dozen Asian countries and were still on the road.

Someday maybe I'll take a trip like these two are making, but for now I'll take the chance to be alone for awhile. If you have a chance, I can't emphasize it enough, shave your head and hit the road.

CHAPTER 148: Strangers In the Night (Monday, August 29, 2005-10:53 PM)

Three cups of Dico's coffee kept me wide awake the entire final night of my summer travels. I had a flight from Urumqi to Guangzhou at 9:30 the next morning. Even if I could have fallen asleep, I wasn't going to risk missing my flight for a quick nap.

The corridors of the Xinjiang Hotel are pretty quiet in the dead of the night. On the fifth floor, men of various ethnicities take advantage of the privacy by making quick runs to the common bathroom without getting entirely dressed.

The next morning I went to the lobby to check out. That early in the morning, the staff is still sleeping, and anybody who wants to check out has to wake someone up.

I was too shy to wake anyone up myself, but a taxi driver lingering in the lobby waiting for business did it for me.

The last week or two I had been anxious to get back to Guangzhou. I was in a strange mood, not eager to make a stunning impression on everyone I met and not wanting to come across as too indifferent either.

A man, presumably Pakistani, was sleeping in the lobby probably in a similar situation as me, not wanting to wake up the staff himself to ask for help.

He got up when he heard the taxi driver and I speaking.

As I quietly walked out of the lobby with my taxi driver, he asked for my help translating. I love being able to translate for people.

My services as a translator really weren't necessary. All I did was ask the cost of different rooms in the hotel (having stayed in the hotel three nights I knew the prices before I asked anyways) and then tell the lady he wanted a room with a bathroom.

As I walked out he gave me a firm handshake and expressed sincere thanks.

It's too bad you can't become lifelong friends with everyone you meet when you're traveling. You meet so many people, have conversations, exchange business cards or email addresses, say goodbye, and, even in

the rare circumstances that you follow up with an email or two, eventually you're lucky if experience is even a faded memory five years down the line.

My flight was an hour late, but I didn't care. It took me about five solid days of traveling to reach Urumqi from Guangzhou, the difference between arriving at two in the afternoon and three couldn't have registered less with me.

The flight was so smooth I could have built a ten story card house on my tray table. Sunny, a Hong Konger who had visited Urumqi with friends, sat next to me. He's another one of those people who came in and out of my life in the space of a few hours.

My visa expires tomorrow. Once again I'm crossing the border to Hong Kong. After that I only have one more entry on my current visa. I'm running out of visa pages as well. I need to book a ticket back to the U.S. soon.

CHAPTER 149: Updating a Travel Blog From the Road (Tuesday, August 30, 2005-1:21 PM)

While I was out traveling these past few months I documented everything I could on this website. Now, it's commonplace to have a "travel blog" that you update from Internet bars to keep friends and family posted on what you're doing.

But I wanted to see how far I could take the travel blog. I had a few goals in mind to see just what was possible.

First, I wanted new material to appear every day. Not many people do this, and perhaps in the case of this blog it's overkill, but, from my experience working in an office with nothing to do, I know how valuable websites that are frequently updated are.

I accomplished this by adding a delay between the time I add new material to the website and the time it appears. After I upload pictures or write some copy, I choose the date I want it to appear. At 12:01 AM (I'm not sure in which time zone) the server that hosts this website goes through and publishes everything I want it to publish for that day.

This procedure has been prone to error and is still improving. But it accomplishes what I want it to. At times I have lots of pictures and stories to post, I don't overwhelm anyone who reads this website. At times there's nothing new, I still have stuff in stock I can use for the lean times.

The second thing I wanted to do was post pictures from the road, not wait until after I got back home to add them to the website. This not only gives people reading the website something new to look at. It also saves me the job of going through hundreds of pictures the day I finish my travels.

But in order to add pictures to the website, I need to be able to transfer them from my camera to a computer at an Internet bar. This means I need to have access to a USB port on the computer in the Internet bar.

Sometimes this is easy. Sometimes it isn't. In some cities, I'd visit four bars before someone would let me plug something into the USB ports on the computers. The ports would often times be in the back of the computer which would be locked in a cabinet making access extremely difficult.

In other cities, I could simply pop my USB device into a port on the front and be done with it.

The third thing I wanted to do was post video, edited with Final Cut Express on the website from the road. Besides all the typical problems associated with editing video, there was one more big problem I didn't know if I could overcome: video files are huge.

In order to transfer video files to the server my website is hosted on, I need a fast internet connection, not only fast downloading stuff, but fast uploading stuff as well. Even a short thirty second video can be as big as two megabytes.

I was forced to save two copies of every video I made, a high quality copy and low quality copy video.

First, I'd upload the low quality copy. Even that wasn't always easy. After that was successful, I'd try with the high resolution copy.

I carried a digital office on my back, the three main components being a laptop (Macintosh Powerbook), digital camera, and digital camcorder. I also carried with me a host of accessories, a power supply, a surge protector, miniDV tapes, USB cable, firewire cable, optical mouse, even a wide-angle lens I almost never used.

I was anxiety-ridden about getting something stolen and kept everything as close to me as I could. I was even more worried about another thing, though. What effect would this kind of trip have on my two and half year old Powerbook?

The buses had me most concerned. The roads in the West of China were usually bumpy. I didn't know what this would do to my hard drive.

It turns out it was never a problem. I figure as long as the hard drive isn't running your computer receives a jolt, it's unlikely anything will happen.

I refrained from doing one thing that would have further tested the limits of keeping a travel blog but would have also wasted my time and added no useful content to the website. I did not produce a Podcast from my hotel rooms.

CHAPTER 150: Run To the Border (Wednesday, August 31, 2005-7:22 PM)

August 30 was the last day my visa was valid. In order to remain in China legally, I had to once again cross the border into Hong Kong and cross back into mainland China using the second and last entry of my double-entry visa.

Everyone keeps telling me there are ways to obtain visas that are valid for more than 30 days even if you are American, and I've even met Americans traveling on 60 day visas. But when it comes time to getting one myself, I never get anywhere.

After checking out a few other guest houses in the A-Block of the Chungking Mansions on Nathan Road, I decided to return to the one I stayed at before, The Traveler's Hostel on the 16th floor.

The same people that I saw a month ago were still there, still watching American T.V. and smoking cigarettes. I don't think they remembered me.

I asked the manager if he could get me a visa that was valid for more than 30 days. He told me he couldn't. He said things changed, and for the time being it's impossible.

Before I joined the others watching T.V., I took one final walk around Hong Kong, up and down Nathan Road, drinking coffee and paying no attention to anyone selling me suits, watches, or marijuana.

One young westerner, perhaps trying to impress his girlfriend, tried to give one of the Indian lads selling copy watches a piece of his mind in the most ineffectual laughable manner.

Instead of just walking on when asked if he was interested in a fake Rolex, he looked at the guy and sad flat out, "How about a real Rolex?"

No, they don't sell real Rolex's. They sell fake ones. Real Rolex's are expensive.

I went back to the Chungking Mansions. The manager explained to a fellow traveler and I what the situation was like years ago in the Chungking Mansion, when Indian and Pakistani gangs ruled the place. When the drug sale was even more lively than it is now.

I can't imagine what it was like then. Even now, it's not the most savory of places.

Another guest showed up to keep things interested. He was a Singaporean with an Algerian father. He was

intent on making conversation with anyone who would talk to him, especially foreigners.

He came up with the strangest things, anything he could think of to get a conversation going. He asked me if I was from Israel and told me I looked Jewish. He went out of his way to explain how much he hated Osama Bin Laden.

The other's were pretty much annoyed with him until he'd finally hit on something they were interested in. Then they couldn't stop talking.

I couldn't sleep because of all the coffee I drank. I was the last to go to bed.

I probably earned the ire of a fellow traveler, when I made a pit stop at the bathroom on my way to bed and, instead of turning on the light for my bathroom, turned the light off for his bathroom whilst he was, presumably, taking a crap.

I never turned the light back on, and karma caught up with me. I went into the dorm room and found another guest had laid out all his gear on my bed. I hopped onto to the top bunk and, the bed was so unstable, I thought it was going to fall right out the window, which would have been quite unfortunate since we were on the top floor.

The next morning the trip to Guangzhou couldn't have been quicker. There was virtually no one else in line at either the Hong Kong or the Mainland China border crossing checkpoints. I was back in around three hours.

CHAPTER 151: Internet Bars In China Improving (Thursday, September 1, 2005-6:31 PM)

Visitors to China in the future might not have to put up with hot, stuffy, crowded, smoky Internet bars with slow Internet connections, cigarette burnt keyboards, and indifferent staff members if my recent experiences at Internet bars are any indication.

But the new Internet bars might also be more strict about just who uses their computers.

Most of the Internet bars I visit in China are shady establishments on the second or third floors of rundown buildings. Inside, at all hours of the day, young kids, oftentimes smoking and sucking down soda, play video games, watch movies, and talk with their friends online.

The last two Internet bars I visited, one in Urumqi and the other in Guangzhou, were nothing like that. The staff at each bar must have received some training in customer service judging by the way they responded to their customers. The bars not only provided clean computers with fast Internet connections spaced a few feet from each other, they also served drinks in food from behind a counter that looked like it belonged at Starbucks.

The Internet bars weren't expensive either, around two renminbi or less each hour.

But, each bar was also much more strict about who uses their computers than other bars I've visited. In order to use a computer, I had to wait a minute or two while they entered my name and passport number into a computer.

I've heard people say China can't control the Internet, a statement I very much disagree with. I'm not how sure entering my passport number into a computer fits into that plan, but, as part of the bigger plan, I think China controls the Internet very effectively.

Anyone can put anything up on the Internet they please. This website is a testament to that. But in order to communicate, other people have to be able to read what is on the Internet, preferably a lot of people.

Websites hosted outside of China that offer a point of view not consistent with the Party's point of view are easy enough to control with China's system of firewalls. Unfortunately, this also catches a lot of benign websites, too. Maybe that's why I couldn't look at my brother's www.86stosa.com until I went to Hong Kong.

Websites hosted within China are apparently supposed to register with the government. I'm not sure what happens to them when they start propagating a message someone in a high place doesn't like.

These firewalls can be circumvented via proxy servers in foreign countries, but, a process that obtrusive means that the websites effectively aren't available in China.

Maybe someday I'll be able to read the Dalai Lama's blog from an Internet bar in Beijing.

CHAPTER 152: Top Ten Things I'll Miss About China (Sunday, September 4, 2005-11:38 PM)

10. \$0.40 haircuts.

9. Films transferred to video via camcorder.

8. Sanitized news.

7. 15 hour work week.

6. Michael Learns To Rock.

5. Inexperienced CCTV 9 presenters.

4. Public urination.

3. Fang Bian Mian.

2. Squat toilets.

1. Kung Pao Chicken.

CHAPTER 153: Fake USB Drives (Friday, September 9, 2005-9:52 PM)

In the past I was always confident in merchandise I bought at the computer market here in Guangzhou. I was confident that I would walk home with what I wanted and wouldn't pay too much for it.

At the computer market all the vendors have similar inventories and, if you're willing to shop around for a few minutes, have to offer their customers competitive prices.

Police make sweeps of the shops every now and then checking for fake goods. For these reasons, I never minded shopping at the computer markets. Yesterday that changed.

Before I even visited the store I already made my first mistake. Even I had done even a little research I would have realized that the two gigabyte Sony Flash USB drive I was being offered was both too small and too cheap to be real.

But, the packaging looked authentic, nothing like the fake DVD packages you find on the street. And the product itself looked authentic, even if the design was a bit simplistic. I bought it, a little nervous it might be too good to be true.

Even when I plugged it into my laptop, it appeared to work. But, when I used the drive to transfer files, all the data was corrupted.

Early this afternoon Natasha and I returned to the computer market. We confronted the guy.

He was a little nervous, but he pulled out his laptop, swapped the drive with a new one, demonstrated the product, and I left with a new drive.

When I got home this one didn't work either. More or less the exact same problem. I did a quick Yahoo search on fake Sony USB flash drives.

Right away I found loads of pictures and complaints about fake Sony USB flash drives. Not only were these drives fakes, but they barely worked, and the capacity was only a fraction of the advertised capacity.

I went back to the market, without Natasha to confront the guy. I tried not to over-rehearse, but to a certain extent it was unavoidable since I'd have to confront the guy in Chinese.

I found him, demanded my money back, and when he suggested other remedies, including only refunding some of my money, I raised my voice with him. The cashier was anxious to just give me my money back.

After I got all my money back, I took a stroll through the rest of the market. Vendor after vendor had the same product on sale, some branded with different manufacturers, some different colors, but all the same size and shape.

One guy even pulled one out of a drawer and tried to sell it to me. When I saw what he was trying to sell me, I walked back to him and asked him if it was fake.

"Yes," he answered.

"Pian Ren!" I told him. "You cheat people."

Whether it's counterfeit DVD's, shoes, baby food, or computer accessories, it all bothers me. This is one thing about China I don't like.

CHAPTER 154: Flaming Noodles (Sunday, September 11, 2005-8:23 PM)

I forget the exact conversation Natasha and I had this morning, but it went something like this.

First, Natasha asked me, "How long will you heat the noodles [in the microwave]?"

"Just a few minutes." I didn't know what the big deal was. There was a lot of water to heat up. I wasn't even sure a few minutes was going to be long enough.

"They're on fire."

Sure enough. They were on fire. You could see through the glass on the front of the microwave. Even before I dealt with the problem, at first instead of dealing with the problem, I tried to figure out why they started on fire.

I didn't think there was any metal in the microwave. I'm always reminding Natasha never to put metal in the microwave. I never do.

I decided it was time to put the fire out. I opened up the microwave and blew out the flame that was licking the top of the microwave like a big birthday candle.

That's when I realized that the cover of the noodles was foil

CHAPTER 155: I'd Like To Make a Toast... (Monday, September 19, 2005-5:00 PM)

I've always shirked the responsibility of toasting other guests at formal dinners and celebrations. After two years in China I can recall only one time that I proposed a toast.

At the going away dinner at the end of my year in Yantai, Shandong, I toasted the other guests at my table with the words, "Rock and roll never die".

Yesterday was Midautumn Festival, the 15th day of the 8th lunar month when friends and family get together, eat moon cakes, and stare at the moon.

Natasha, her brother, and I went to see Natasha's cousin and a few of his coworkers. Almost everyone came from Natasha's hometown, Nanfeng, in Jiangxi province.

It meant I had to venture to part of Guangzhou that doesn't get many foreign visitors. Even though I've been in Guangzhou for an entire year, traveling to a district like this is like traveling to a different country. The apartments are small and cramped. The streets are narrow and crowded. And people aren't used to seeing foreigners.

I was seriously jeopardizing my chances to see "Queer Eye For the Straight Guy" later that evening. From the commercials for that evening's show I saw that this week five fashion-savvy homosexuals were going to offer dressing, grooming, and decorating advice to a mangy heterosexual. I didn't want to miss it.

We ate at 'Xiang Cai', food from Hunan province. I've never liked Xiang Cai before, but I think I was just ordering the wrong dishes. I liked every dish with perhaps the exception of the frog.

Just about every time someone drinks at a Chinese dinner like this, they're toasting someone else. That means if you're thirsty you can either toast someone else or wait until someone toasts you. I usually wait until someone toasts me.

But I figured I've been in China long enough. It's time I started toasting other people. I started paying attention to the perfect time and person to toast.

I was looking around the circular table, trying to find someone with a full cup of beer, who hadn't taken a drink in a long time, who wasn't too far away from me, who wasn't too occupied with his or her food, and who wasn't engaged in a conversation.

Finally, I just toasted Natasha's brother.

After I toasted Natasha's brother, it was only polite to toast the other guests. One by one I toasted the other guests. I spoke so quietly that they mostly didn't realize I was toasting them until I shoved my cup right in front of their eyes.

At the end of the dinner, the other guests had drank so much (by Chinese standards) that they didn't care how weak my attempts at making toasts were. They just wanted to drink.

CHAPTER 156: Online Guide To Circumventing Censors Censored (Monday, September 26, 2005-1:17 PM)
An article at www.cnn.com points readers to a guide posted by www.rsf.org—Reporters Without Borders—advising them on how to get around the censors in places like China.

I was anxious to take a look at this guide. In the last few days the censors who watch the English news broadcast from Hong Kong have not only been cutting up the evening reports; they've been finely mincing them.

I'm sure this is because of the recent visit by Hong Kong legislatures to Guangdong. But even given that it's hard to understand why some stories are blocked.

A couple days ago I heard one of the anchors introduce a story about Hurricane Rita. Before he could finish his sentence there was an immediate cut to commercials (the same Mandarin commercials they use to replace other stories of a sensitive nature).

I couldn't figure out why they'd be worried about people in China learning about hurricanes in America.

The censors make watching the news a nervous experience. I never know when the stories are going to be cut short. And when I do hear a sensitive topic come up, I just start counting off the seconds. Almost always it takes less than ten seconds to cut to commercial.

At least the broadcasts from Hong Kong cover these stories. The mainland broadcasts omit them entirely.

I clicked on the link provided by CNN to Reporters Without Borders. The site was blocked.

I have my own suggestions that I use to beat the censors in China. First, start a blog. Second, write in English. Third, make sure no one reads it.

CHAPTER 157: The Undisputed Burning Monkey Puzzle Lab Champion of Guangzhou (Tuesday, September 27, 2005-7:42 PM)

Until a couple weeks ago Natasha showed almost no interest in my computer. That was until she saw me playing *Burning Monkey Puzzle Lab*.

Burning Monkey Puzzle Lab is a Tetris-like game. Players shift and rotate falling pieces as they fall down the screen. If the pieces are placed correctly, they vaporize. If they're placed incorrectly, they just pile up.

At first it was great that Natasha liked the game. When we couldn't agree on what T.V. show to watch, we could just play *Burning Monkey Puzzle Lab*. Then, a funny thing happened. Natasha started to beat me.

At first, I thought it was just a fluke. But she was consistent. I tried harder and harder but the more I tried, the more frustrated I got.

I tried watching the way she played. She plays the game a lot faster than me. When I play, I watch the pieces mosey down the screen. When she plays, she slams them to the bottom of the screen as quickly as she can.

I tried to copy the way she played. It didn't work. I just got worse.

Now her name occupies most of the top ten high scores including the coveted number one spot. And the more I try to dethrone her, the more I realize she is the undisputed Burning Monkey Puzzle Lab champion.