

CULTURE SHOCK: CHINA STORIES

by

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Fairfax, VA

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DEDICATION

For Haze and Jake.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

You know who you are.

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ABSTRACT

CULTURE SHOCK: CHINA STORIES

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This thesis is a non-linear memoir and travelogue tracking the narrator's experiences moving to central China, joining the mixed community of fellow expats and Chinese locals, and meeting his wife, a fellow Chinese ESL teacher. While the main focus is on the narrator's experiences between September, 2007 and October, 2009, events that occurred before and after these dates are included to provide context of the narrator's decision to move to China, and the effects that move had following the initial two-year period living in China.

SEAT BELTS ARE OPTIONAL

June 2014

There were four of us in the car, a black Volkswagen which had seen better days, headed south on National Road 214, from the old town of Dali to the new city of Xiaguan which had sprung up along the southern tip of Erhai Lake. It's the second largest alpine lake in China and it dominated the view out of the left side of the car. On the right, a mass of green, tree-covered mountains were quickly darkening in the late afternoon as the sun set behind them. Yang Li was driving, a man none of us had met until about ten minutes earlier. I ended up calling him Buddy, in the ancient tradition of foreigners assigning absurd and generic English names to Chinese people in their own country.

Buddy worked for Zhang Lu, one of Haze's middle school friends, and had offered (been ordered) to pick us up from the old city. Haze, my wife, wanted to meet Zhang Lu's wife and twin daughters. Though he was traveling for business in Kunming, the capital of Yunnan Province and where we would be returning to by train that night, he invited us to dinner at his home.

A friend of ours, Kat, was next to me, sitting behind Buddy. She had come with us from America for the summer. Haze was in the front passenger seat while Buddy drove, the two of them speaking in rapid Mandarin tinged with a hint of the local dialect. Buddy spoke only a few words of English, and asked Kat and me the usual questions

through Haze: Did we like China? (Yes); Did we think Dali was cleaner than Kunming? (Yes, the smog was noticeably less smoggy here). None of us wore seat belts, as is the custom in China, where people regularly trust their lives to drivers who would make Bostonians cringe and possibly cause a psychotic break in those used to suburban freeways, left turn lanes, yielding, and sidewalks strictly reserved for pedestrians. I have never seen a stop sign in China, not that anyone would pay attention to one.

As we continued south into Xiaguan, Buddy started peering through the windshield in that way one does when searching for the right highway exit or an address on a building in a neighborhood where street numbers aren't displayed clearly, requiring you to squint, hunch over the steering wheel, and turn the music down because it's distracting. We were approaching an intersection between two almost-highways—National Road 214 and Yongping Road. Unlike an American highway interchange, there were no signs or other identifying markers indicating which ramp led to what road. There weren't any lanes painted on the road, either. We needed to head northeast, towards Erhai Lake and the gated community where Zhang Lu's family lived. So Buddy took the first ramp in that direction.

Unfortunately, as anyone familiar with a cloverleaf-style interchange could tell you, if you want to turn left on a highway, you have to make a giant 270 degree loop to the right to go in the direction you're aiming for. Presumably, Buddy had been driving for quite awhile. He was 30, the same age as me. His Volkswagen was not new, and buying a used car is about as common in China as a nice blue cheese dressing or potable water from the tap. So I believe the immediate spike of anxiety I experienced as I saw a line of

blue chevron arrows on dull gray metal signs pointing the opposite direction of the curve in the road was justified.

“I think we're going the wrong way,” I said, probably with a note of panic in my voice, but not enough to elicit a reaction from Buddy. Or get him to stop the car. He probably didn't understand me anyway.

As we continued forward, blind to any possible cars attempting to exit Yongping Road, the chevrons signs disappeared. My legs tensed, pushing my head up and my back against the door as I gripped Haze's seat in front of me. I lost all sense of decorum in a fit of terror and desire for self-preservation.

“Goddamn it, we're going the wrong way!” I shouted.

Unbelievably, Buddy turned to look at me, foot still on the gas. Kat's eyes widened next to me, but she had no other reaction. Haze didn't make a sound, though she later admitted she'd been a bit nervous, but thought we would be fine since people drive much slower in China than America. I think she was probably just trying to be cool.

The exit ramp Buddy was attempting to use as an entrance straightened out, and two red Chinese-made cargo trucks, black smoke pouring out of oversized exhaust pipes above their cabs, were headed straight for us. We were, indeed, heading the wrong way down Yongping Road.

I gurgled as a shriek tried to work itself from my throat. I knew it wouldn't be helpful as Buddy continued driving, seemingly puzzled as to what our next course of action should be. Then I shouted at him.

“STOP! Fucking stop goddamn it you son-of-a-bitch! Fuck!” and continued on in

that vein until, instead of stopping, Buddy drove across the oncoming traffic on the two lane highway, then parked on the narrow shoulder, inches from the concrete median, facing the wrong direction.

I was still cursing. Mostly at him, but slowly transitioning to general exclamations of relief such as, “Jesus fucking Christ!” I might have been suffering, or perhaps benefitting, from a mild case of shock at not being one of the over quarter million road fatalities that occur in China each year, about eight times as many as the United States suffers annually. Some might argue there are five times as many people in China as the United States to help explain that statistic, but keep in mind that the number of privately owned vehicles in each country is pretty much the same. That means that, with an almost equal number of drivers and cars on the road, China experiences eight times as many traffic related deaths as the United States.

We watched as the two cargo trucks, China's slightly smaller version of 18-wheelers, slowly passed us. They honked—long rumbling blasts followed by more black exhaust belching out from the top of both cabs, washing over the Volkswagen in an odorous particulate shower. A few cars followed, also honking. Chinese drivers use honking to convey a much wider range of emotions than Americans, who generally honk only in a few select situations; such as the driver of the car in front of them being too busy texting to notice a green light, or perhaps someone changed lanes without leaving enough room and/or neglected to use a turn signal. Occasionally, an American will honk outside someone's house or another location to indicate they have arrived and are awaiting a passenger.

In China, honking is a recent addition to an already complicated tonal language. All road vehicles, including cars, trucks, scooters (both electric and gas powered), and motorized rickshaws, among others, use honking to communicate various messages to other drivers, pedestrians, and bicycles. The cargo trucks' honking seemed to be conveying a surprised critique of Buddy's driving skills; they appeared to be asking, "What the hell is wrong with you, man? Are you crazy?" But there wasn't much surprise in the tone. They were long and deliberate sounds, the drivers obviously leaning on their horns, but not truly concerned; if they had been, they probably would have at least veered away from us a bit instead of coming within inches of the front left bumper of the Volkswagen.

The cars that followed seemed more friendly in their honking. They tooted happily, as if they were saying, "Yep. Been there. Good luck, folks!" Based on my experience with drivers in China, driving down the wrong way of a major thoroughfare was probably not the most uncommon experience to be had on the ever expanding system of Chinese roadways.

After the short line of cars finished passing us, Buddy slowly made a five point turn to get us heading the right direction. I don't remember the drive to Zhang Lu's family's house, probably because I had my eyes closed as I tried to calm down so as to prevent myself from hyperventilating or punching Buddy in the back of the head. Soon we were entering a beautiful gated community of townhouses with decorative copper designs accenting ivory colored walls. It was obviously a new community as the walls were unmarred by acid rain and the copper had yet to tarnish.

Small yards were surrounded by short white picket fences in front of each home, and cobblestone or brick walkways led to heavy red or black doors. All of the homes were three stories tall and some even had garages—sometimes two-car garages! All were signs of significant wealth in a country where millionaires still can find themselves living in two or three-bedroom apartments in seven story concrete blocks overlooking destitute neighborhoods of twisting alleyways where trash is piled up to be sorted by those who make a living delivering bottles and cardboard to recycling plants.

To complete the Americana-esqe experience, a small white dog with large, drooping black lips greeted us at the door with yipping barks and excessive amounts of slobber. Kat knelt down as Buddy, with a sheepish and apologetic expression on his face held the front door open for me as we were greeted by Zhang Lu's wife, Sun Jing. I glared at him, muttering dark thoughts in English to Haze about his driving ability, parentage, and general worth as a human being. Fortunately he didn't speak enough English to understand exactly what I was saying, but he caught the tone and looked properly abashed.

Inside the house, twenty-five foot ceilings created a cavernous sense of expensive beauty. There were leather couches and chairs, and a coffee table which looked to be made of petrified wood, though it was probably just well shellacked and polished. Probably. A giant flatscreen television sat in front of a real fireplace which had probably never been used.

Zhang Lu's wife, Sun Jing, was a beautiful woman in her mid twenties, and their twin daughters, a year younger than our son Jake at two years old, were disgustingly cute

with clearly different personalities. One was shy and hid behind her mother's legs while the other spent most of her time jumping and climbing on the sofa, showing off for us. I was, unfortunately, not able to appreciate the warm welcome or the cuteness of the twins. Sun Jing asked if she could get us anything.

“Baijiu,” I said. I was still shaken and shaking from our near death experience at the unsure hands of Buddy, who was preparing to head back to work while apologizing to me every thirty seconds or so in response to my glares and angry mutterings.

Baijiu is Chinese white “wine,” literally translating as white (*bai*) alcohol (*jiu*). It had taken me quite a while to acquire a taste for it. I've heard many descriptions of its taste and scent, both from Chinese friends and expats from all over the world living in China. The closest comparison I've heard was from a student who once checked his electronic dictionary for an English translation that most closely matched the Chinese word he was thinking of. He had handed me the dictionary. The word *Solvent (n.)* seemed to be an accurate description.

Sun Jing must have assumed I was joking. Possibly because it was three in the afternoon, not the usual time for drinking 100 proof grain alcohol, even in China. She brought out some cans of Coke and tamarind juice, then started chatting with Haze in Chinese. The twins were running around being cute and the family's nanny and Sun Jing's grandfather were in the kitchen preparing a huge dinner appropriate for honored guests—both because Haze was an old family friend and Kat and I were foreigners, not a normal occurrence in a family home in southwestern China, even with the large numbers of western tourists in nearby Dali.

“*Duibuqi*,” I said. Sorry. “Could I have some booze?” I asked in English.

Haze laughed at me and translated for Sun Jing. My face was paler than usual under my beard, which was long enough at that point to have developed a ginger tinge. The trimmer I had brought from America had not survived the flight to Kunming from Northern Virginia. We had flown from Washington to Kunming by way of Chicago, Seattle, Vancouver and Guangzhou. It was a long journey, especially with a three year old, and at some point during the journey the baggage handlers had apparently been a little too rough for the small appliance.

Kat was posting pictures on Instagram, taking advantage of the wifi and seemed fine with the fact that we had recently looked death and a pair of Chinese cargo trucks in the face. Haze was laughing, at ease with a woman she'd just met in the way that some people just seem to connect. I was still shaking and stared at my hands with what I considered to be impressive detachment while they vibrated as if I had just chugged a large pot of coffee.

Sun Jing guided me to a display case full of bottles of various sizes and designs. She opened one of the wood-framed glass doors and grabbed one of the smaller bottles. It had some kind of brown substance on the bottom and she held it between us and asked me something in Chinese. My Mandarin skills are, even after several years on-and-off in China, subpar. I can order a beer, ask how much a plate of dumplings cost, and even determine whether I'm eating dog or donkey (not that there's a huge difference in taste). That being said, I looked to Haze for a translation.

“She says it's baijiu with deer blood.”

“Deer blood?” I confirmed.

They conferred for a moment and then Haze turned back to me and nodded.

“Yes. She says it is good for men to be strong in bed.”

Ah, an aphrodisiac. In China, almost every traditional food or drink has some kind of secondary purpose beyond simple nourishment or intoxication. Bitter melon (which is as delicious as it sounds) is good for your blood pressure. So are stir-fried red onions. Boiled radish soothes your throat. Pears calm your lungs (a useful thing in a country with dangerous levels of air pollution and more smokers than there are people in the United States).

So a deer blood-infused liquor really wasn't a surprise. What was surprising, or at least should have been, was the fact that it didn't bother me. When I had first arrived in China seven years before, I had generally gotten over the pickiness that had defined my diet as a child. Until middle school, there were few things I would eat beyond cheese sandwiches (white bread, crust cut off, and Kraft singles—individually wrapped, of course), ice cream, Doritos, and Flintstones vitamins (which are probably the sole reason I survived the complete lack of any nutrition in my diet).

Even so, I'd still maintained the limited tastes of a middle-class white American before coming to China. Steaks and burgers were acceptable. An occasional salad or baked potato was fine. Maybe a club sandwich (no tomatoes). Normal, American fare—though I wouldn't say no to sesame chicken or Mongolian beef once in awhile. Who doesn't like traditional Chinese food? Growing up in San Antonio had also given me a great appreciation for tacos. But I'd spent several years in China by the time Sun Jing

offered me deer blood liquor, and I'd been married to Haze, an actual Chinese human who would eat whatever you put in front of her, for five years. I had learned to try something first and think about it later, if at all.

So I accepted the large shot glass of brown liquid and took a sniff. It smelled rusty, but my hand finally steadied. I suppose the very thought of alcohol, regardless of fancy infusions, calmed my nerves as I raised the glass.

“Xiexie,” I said. Thank you. “Ganbei!” Bottoms up. And I drank.

DO YOU LIKE SPICY?

September 2007

The plane was descending into a murky soup of something too thick and viscous to be clouds or fog. Vibrant green fields divided by canals and a few small rivers winding through obviously ancient, flat terrain flickered through the smog before the plane was completely immersed. The usual landing announcements were made; first in Chinese, which I didn't understand a word of, then in broken English. I was instructed to “put off my telephone and electricity device” but my cell phone was in my checked baggage, useless in China unless I wanted to pay exorbitant international rates. I only kept it for the contacts. None of the other passengers seemed to be paying any attention to the instructions of the flight crew. What had been a group of orderly, polite individuals as we boarded the plane in Hong Kong seemed to have transformed into an unruly mob the second the plane began to descend towards Wuhan.

Moments after the plane landed, the flight attendant's request that passengers “stay sit down until plane stop at gate” was difficult to hear over the din of the passengers unbuckling their seat belts and opening the overhead compartments to retrieve their carry-on luggage. I was in no hurry; I had checked a large duffle bag and a rucksack that I'd need to claim, so I watched my fellow passengers start pushing themselves into the aisle before we were even in sight of the terminal. Exhausted, disorientated, and very jet-

lagged, I did not realize at the time that this was just the tip of the iceberg as far as the cultural and behavioral differences I would experience in China.

Inside the airport, I made my way to a bored looking customs official, who flipped through my passport, found my visa, and stamped the page next to it. I thanked him in English; my preparation for moving to China was almost nonexistent and I spoke not a single word of Mandarin. My next stop was the baggage claim, where a yellow fold-out sign with some sort of black substance splattered unevenly around it greeted us with a very serious warning in English to “slip carefully” right below a series of Chinese characters. The ceilings were low and stained yellow from years of cigarette smoke. The air conditioning vents all had a single red ribbon tied to them, each fluttering as warm air was expelled, presumably to maintain air circulation. Men were smoking inside the airport as they waited for their bags to arrive, and even though there were ash trays strategically situated next to every carousel, there was no shortage of flattened cigarette butts on the floor.

I had agreed to a one-year contract with English First School in Hankou, one of the three cities that makes up the megacity of Wuhan, each of which were separated by the confluence of the Yangtze and Han rivers. I'd been told there would be a fellow foreign teacher waiting for me, along with the school's Chinese staff member in charge of assisting the foreign teachers. As I quickly collected my rucksack and duffle bag, and made my way to the welcoming area of the airport, I spotted one of my soon-to-be co-workers standing next to a Chinese woman holding a sign that read “Binjamen Liff.”

Tarubva, my new co-worker, was from Zimbabwe and her dark skin stood out in a

sea of Asian faces. She was short, just over five feet tall, and heavy-set with a chest that dwarfed those of the women around her. Grace, who was in charge of assisting the foreign teachers, was holding the sign with my misspelled name on it. Her skin was paler than I expected for a Chinese person, but I would come to find out that many Chinese, especially women, spent quite a bit of money on skin-whitening creams.

I approached them. “Hi, I’m Ben.”

“Hello, Ben. I’m Tarubva,” she said. Her accent was British and African, a mix from growing up in her home country and attending university in England. It was a bit raspy; it took effort to speak loud enough to be heard over the raucousness of the airport’s arrival area.

“My name is Grace,” said Grace. “We will take a taxi to Wuhan, okay?”

“Sure,” I agreed. I had no idea about the possible transportation options and was too discombobulated to attempt thinking about it.

We walked outside and waited in line for a taxi. It was hot and smelled of cigarettes and unfiltered exhaust. Buses and taxis crowded the loading area in front of the terminal and spewed out various shades of gray and black smoke from their tailpipes. Most of the men were still smoking as they entered their taxis, which didn’t seem to be a problem since most of the taxi drivers had cigarettes in hand as well. When it was our turn, a man in a suit with oddly shimmering silvery pants tried to cut in front of us, but was deterred when Grace hurled a stream of harsh and rapid Chinese at him. The taxi driver hopped out of his car and helped me dump my bags into the trunk. Almost all of the taxis were metallic blue-green, mostly Citroens and Peugeots.

The drive into Hankou was about half an hour, and I spent the first half of it asking Tarubva about the job and my new co-workers.

“The students are alright,” she told me. “Mostly it's kids, but John probably told you that, right?”

John was the DOS, or director of studies, and had interviewed me over Skype. He was, for all intents and purposes, our boss. A middle-aged ex-cop from New Zealand, John had been teaching English in China for several years and had started at English First only a couple of months before I'd been hired. He had indeed told me that I'd be teaching mostly children, but I hadn't cared at the time. It was the first job offer I'd had, and I took it.

“Do you have a lot of experience teaching kids?” Tarubva asked me.

“I don't have any experience teaching anyone anything,” I told her.

She nodded in understanding. “Most people we get here are like that. EF hires a lot of new teachers.”

Grace, who was sitting in the front seat, turned around. “Do you like Chinese food?” she asked.

Unprepared for the question, I shrugged. “Sure.”

“The food in Wuhan is very spicy. Do you like spicy?”

“I do. The food where I'm from is pretty spicy.” This was true. Tex-Mex is not known for being bland and, growing up in San Antonio, I'd eaten my share of jalapeños and serranos.

“Wuhan food is very spicy,” Grace repeated. “Sichuan is famous for spicy food,

but I think Wuhan is more spicy.”

I nodded as she turned forward, somewhat at a loss at how to respond. Tarubva grinned at me and tried to explain.

“There aren't that many foreigners here. You'll probably have a lot of people come up to you and ask questions that seem a little rude or personal. Don't let it bother you. If you do, you'll drive yourself crazy and start to hate it here. Black people are even more rare, and some people are scared of me.”

Tarubva was definitely not scary. She seemed, if anything, motherly. Her appearance and patient style of speaking reminded me more of a nurse or elementary school teacher.

“Is the food really that spicy?” I asked.

“It can be,” Tarubva said. “It's not like western Chinese food, though. You'll see what I mean.”

With that somewhat ominous comment, the highway we had been on since the airport merged with a city street. We were in Wuhan.

WUHAN: A BRIEF HISTORY

Wuhan is an amalgamated name, coined in 1927, combining the Wu in Wuchang with the Han in Hanyang and Hankou. When the three became a single city, Wuhan became the official name.

Wuhan is now a city of ten million people, though that number is as unreliable as any other statistic in China, where the census reports the number of people in China at around 1.3 billion, even though the true number is probably in excess of 1.5 billion, and possibly even close to 2 billion. That means it's possible there's a United States' worth of people floating around China who are unacknowledged and uncounted by the government. So, Wuhan could be assumed to actually have a population between 10-15 million. To put that in perspective, the largest city by population in the United States is, not surprisingly, New York City, with a population (as of the 2010 census) just over eight million people.

As the son of parents that worked most of their lives in media and sales, where market size and metropolitan area counted for more than the number of people living within the imaginary lines that make up city limits, the first thought that comes to mind when comparing the populations of New York City and Wuhan is, “Wait a minute, New York has way more than eight million people!”

This is true. The metro area, or the number of people living within a geographic

area that supports or identifies with a specific urban area (e.g. the suburbs surrounding New York City), can often differ greatly from the population of a city at its center. I was always perversely proud to note, when checking the latest World Almanac population tables as I was growing up (I was a strange child), that San Antonio always managed to sneak into the top 10 most populated US cities, eventually passing Dallas at some point while I was in high school. It is now the seventh most populous city in the United States and is on track to pass Phoenix (yes, Phoenix, Arizona) sometime during the next few years for spot number six.

However, San Antonio's metro area population is a different story altogether, ranking 25th, between Portland, Oregon and Orlando, Florida. It also ranks 182nd in metro area per capita income. This explains why my beloved Spurs are the only major sports franchise in the city, while other cities that don't even crack the top 50 in population (such as St. Louis, Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, and Buffalo, to name a few), but have larger or comparable metro area populations with higher per capita incomes, are home to multiple professional sports teams.

New York's metro population hovers around twenty million people. Los Angeles is closing in on fifteen million. Chicago's is about ten million. These are numbers that make more sense when we think of the three biggest cities in the United States, with their iconic skylines, extensive transportation systems, and huge cultural footprints. However, even when considering metro area populations instead of people living within the city limits, Wuhan, with its ten million people, would rank as the third largest metro area in the United States. The scary part is, Wuhan's administrative area population (about as

close as China gets to metro areas) doesn't even crack the top 10 in China. It barely breaks into the top 15, exceeded in population by, among other cities you've probably never heard of: Linyi, Baoding, Shijiazhuang, and Nanyang, along with the more familiar Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou (aka Canton, as in Cantonese), and Chongqing, which is, at least according to the Chinese government's classification, the most populous city in the world.

Chongqing is located in western China, on the Yangtze River, about four hundred miles west of the Three Gorges Dam. On March 14th, 1997, the city's administrative area was expanded to include an area about the size of Austria, almost 32,000 square miles. This gives it a population in excess of thirty million people. For comparison, the largest city in the contiguous United States is Jacksonville, Florida, which consolidated various suburbs and nearby towns in 1968 to bring the total area of the city to 874.6 square miles, or about 3% of the size of Chongqing's administrative area. Even the urban area of Chongqing measures in at just over 2,100 square miles, well more than twice that of Jacksonville's, with a population close to seven million.

Wuhan, while not nearly as large an administrative area as Chongqing, is still huge in comparison to any city in the United States, coming in at almost 3,300 square miles. The urban area, however, which is made up of the three “towns” of Hankou, Hanyang, and Wuchang have an area measuring about 157 square miles, about the same size as Wichita, Kansas. But Wichita has a population of about 385,000 people, while the three towns of Wuhan have a population of around five million. That means the population density of Wichita is around 2,400 people per square mile while Wuhan's

urban area has a density of over 30,000 people per square mile. New York is the only city in the United States that comes close to that population density, at around 27,000 people per square mile, though of course Manhattan is about twice that densely populated.

What's the point of all this number crunching? Especially from someone so uninterested in math in that he chose to see Rage Against the Machine in concert as a high school sophomore instead of studying the night before his winter algebra final?

The point is, Wuhan is crowded. And when I arrived in September of 2007, the city's transportation infrastructure was, to put it generously, not quite meeting the demand.

EXTRA LUCKY

Drivers in China are insane. It is well documented. Peter Hessler, *The New Yorker's* correspondent in China for almost a decade, wrote in his book, *Country Driving*, about the dangers, disorganization, and absurdities of the Chinese driving infrastructure. J. Maarten Troost was a bit more blunt in his book, *Lost on Planet China*:

“They are insane, these drivers; mad, crazy, dangerous. They drive angry, aggressive, pissed off. Cars, buses, trucks are just tools for them to say Fuck Off. That is how they drive in China: the Fuck Off school of driving. China has just three percent of the world's drivers, but has a quarter of all people killed each year by cars. They don't know how to drive in China. Really. Someone needs to teach them.”

As the taxi weaved through Wuhan's mid-day traffic, horn blaring, bicycles and electric scooters darted around us like small fish around an angry shark. Our driver had opened his window and had a cigarette hanging from his mouth as he shouted at the other drivers, who shouted back at him. Traffic lights were obviously only suggestions. The closer we got to downtown Hankou, the taller the buildings were and the thicker the

traffic. There were construction cranes and unfinished buildings all around us. Men on sidewalks walked around with their shirts rolled up around their chests so their stomachs were shown off. Tarubva explained it was a Wuhanese style, an attempt to stay cool in one of the “three ovens of China,” the other two being Chongqing and Nanjing.

A huge black tower loomed in front of us and Grace turned around and pointed it out to me.

“That is the Mingsheng Tower. The school building is next door.”

The tower was still under construction and only the top twenty stories or so had windows. A temporary whitewashed brick wall, about ten feet high, surrounded the base. I was noting the fact that the painted lanes on the road seemed to be ignored by everyone when our taxi darted through a group of cars and narrowly avoided hitting the metal divider in the middle of the six-lane road we were on, before blowing through a just-turned red light onto a narrow two-lane road.

“Did you see the school?” asked Grace.

I hadn't seen the school. I *had* seen the look on the face of the woman we'd almost run over as she was crossing the street, as well as a city bus taking a turn so quickly it tilted at a dangerous angle before straightening out and pulling alongside us, even though it was a two-lane road, one in each direction, its horn blaring the entire time. No, I had not seen the school.

“We will go there today, okay?” said Grace. I noticed that she had a tendency to end many sentences that should have been declarative with “okay,” as if she didn't feel confident speaking to me, except when she was describing China.

“Sure,” I said, clutching the taxi's door handle with my right hand and hugging my backpack with my left. The taxi veered into oncoming traffic for a moment to avoid a car that was pulling onto the road from a narrow alley that looked too small for it to fit. I held my breath and Tarubva laughed at me.

“You'll get used to the driving here. It can get pretty crazy, but everyone goes so slow that most accidents aren't too serious.”

The taxi turned right and pulled up to a large red apartment building accented by white metal in a pattern only understood by the architect. It was technically thirty-two stories, but as we entered the elevator Tarubva pointed out the fact that it lacked a fourth, thirteenth, fourteenth and twenty-fourth floor.

“Four is considered bad luck in Chinese. 'Four' and 'death' sound similar, so most buildings like this skip from three to five.”

“What about the thirteenth floor?” I asked.

“Ha, it's kind of strange. I guess whoever designed this building wanted to make it extra lucky.”

We got off the elevator on the seventh floor, really the sixth, and arrived at my new home. Grace dug through her purse for a minute or two and I started to fade under the weight of my luggage. After another minute she looked up with a panicked expression.

“I don't find the key,” she said, seeming close to tears. I started to lose confidence in the person who was going to be my bridge to most of my important, or at least official, interactions within China.

She went back to searching, frantically digging through her purse as I shrugged off my rucksack and placed it on the floor. Finally, after dumping the contents of her purse on the windowsill next to the door, she grabbed a key from the pile and looked up at us in triumph.

“I have it!” she exclaimed.

She unlocked the door and we entered the apartment. The living room was longer than it was wide, ending in a wall of windows with a small balcony that had several chrome metal bars hanging overhead outside two open glass doors. There was a view of a middle school's track and field next door to the apartment building, though the field wasn't so much a field as a group of cement basketball courts. Immediately after entering the front door there were entrances to the kitchen on the left and the bathroom on the right. There was a television and a L-shaped sofa in a strange shade of green. A faux-wood dining table stood in the middle of the room between the sofa and the entrance, just in front of a closed door that Tarubva informed me led to the bedroom of my roommate, Simon, who was at the school. Apparently he was the “senior teacher,” which meant he was my direct supervisor.

The kitchen was small and shaped somewhat like a triangle, narrowing as you moved further in. It had only one cabinet, to the right of the two-burner stove, underneath the microwave and toaster. The bathroom doubled as the laundry room and had no partition between the toilet, shower and washing machine. As with most Chinese homes, there was no clothes dryer; the purpose of the metal bars on the balcony was becoming clearer.

My room was furnished with a bed, a desk, a chair, and a chintzy faux-plywood wardrobe. The mattress was extremely firm and stood beneath a sliding window with a view of the Mingsheng Bank Tower in the distance, at the base of which was English First, where I would spend a good portion of my week for the next year. It was only about a kilometer away, but I could barely see it through the smog.

LOVE IS BLIND

September, 2008

It doesn't have the traditional atmosphere of a massage parlor. Relaxing music and soothing scents are replaced by the sounds of subway construction and gridlocked traffic. There are no oils or sprays or private rooms. It's also not the stereotypical "massage" parlor, where female masseuses in loose-stringed, faded and over-worn lingerie wait for customers in an awkwardly well-lit lobby. There are no curtains between the massage tables at this blind massage parlor on the corner of Kunming's main north-south artery, Beijing Road, where it intersects with an unnamed alley about two-hundred meters deep.

Across the alley from the massage parlor's always-open single window is a woman standing over a large, black metal barrel cooking fermented, "stinky" tofu. She saves money on charcoal by using some kind of flammable black paste that smells like burning plastic. The putrid, most likely toxic smoke, and the possibly even more awful odor of the tofu, blow in with the wind and swirl through the massage parlor. Just another health hazard in urban China.

Three massage tables are lined up next to each other, with two spare tables in the parlor's corners opposite the entrance. Since there are only three masseuses who work in this particular massage parlor, the spare tables are generally used by customers who choose to nap while they wait their turn.

Liwei is the owner and when you first meet him it's hard to tell that he's blind. His eyes are clear and seem to focus well, but after a few moments it's obvious he's not looking at you or at anything else. He uses his hands and fingers to feel the money people pay him and China's currency—larger-sized bills for ascending amounts—makes it easy for him to make change for customers. He's almost forty years old, but his jet-black hair and cleanly-shaven baby face give the appearance of a much younger man, especially for being a member of a group that doesn't get much support—if any—from the government, especially compared to what is often available in western nations.

As the owner, Liwei charges fifty percent more an hour than his employees. Sixty RMB, about nine dollars US, gets you a one hour full-body massage. For an additional twenty, you can have the traditional Chinese fire cups treatment to suck the negative energy out through your back. He feels his way around back and neck with sure fingers, using his thumb, elbow, and forearm to perform a deep-tissue massage that sometimes leaves bruises but always results in pained grunts and satisfied sighs from the customer on the table.

Liwei opens his massage parlor from nine in the morning until eleven at night, seven days a week, and sometimes all three masseuses are fully booked except for a one-hour break for lunch. The amount of force he places on a customer's pressure points never wavers or lessens throughout the day and it's easy to imagine bulky muscles underneath the white doctor's coat he wears all day long.

His employees are not so professionally dressed; they wear tank tops and short short-sleeved t-shirts of various and vibrant colors. The younger is Quan. He's twenty-six

and has been blind for eight years. He suffered a case of Branch Retinal Vein Occlusion at the age of eighteen and, due to a lack of proper medical facilities or trained doctors in his village, lost his sight before anything could be done. Quan's arms and forearms bulge, the veins standing out blue against his brown skin. His hands are soft but look strong enough to pop a soccer ball with little effort. His eyes are cloudy; one lazily staring up and to the right while the other moves like it's searching for something that can never be found.

Zhaohui is a few years older, in his early thirties, and has been blind for as long as he can remember. At the age of two he suffered from a terribly high fever. His village was deeply inland and hadn't yet benefited from Deng Xiaoping's modernizations, so his parents were unable to get him to a doctor before the fever stole his vision. He wears sunglasses all the time and has scarring around his eyes and on his upper cheeks that he doesn't explain and I don't ask about. He's short and has thin, wiry arms and legs with a prominent Adam's apple. A phone on his belt tells him the time in a tinny, robotic voice every fifteen minutes.

Zhaohui and Liwei are both married. Liwei has two children who live with his in-laws in the countryside so they can avoid punitive One Child Policy fines that would probably exceed his yearly income of around 100,000RMB, or about fifteen thousand US dollars. They both met their wives while attending blind massage school, a unique institution which provides one of the only opportunities for blind Chinese people to get any kind of professional training or special needs education.

“I learned Chinese braille and massage,” says Liwei, with Haze translating. In the

schools for the blind, all the students learn how to read Mandarin braille and an additional skill that will help them make a living.

“I almost learned how to play an instrument,” adds Quan, who has been blind the shortest amount of time and considered learning how to play a harp as a busker.

“They told me I wouldn't be able to make any money on the street and that somebody would probably steal it,” he says, and the three masseuses laugh.

Liwei met his wife when he was training and she came in for a massage. They hit it off and she became a regular. Eventually she asked him for a type of massage that the school didn't teach. A year later, after opening his own parlor, they were married.

Zhaohui's wife worked at a shop near the school and he used to go and buy cigarettes and drinks and snacks to the point where she started to worry he was going to run out of money.

“I told her I liked talking to her, and she told me I didn't have to buy anything to do that.”

SNAKES ON A PLATE

October, 2007

Our table, with seating for ten, was covered in a white cloth with faded stains and frayed edges. The three of us were in a private dining room, old-west saloon-style swingers at the entrance, and a too-large lazy Susan with blue-tinted glass on the table. Our plates, bowls, tea cups and chopsticks were crammed together so they wouldn't crash to the floor. Tarubva, Simon and I sat clustered on one side of the table in the far corner of the room, facing the entrance. We wanted to see our dinner coming. No one in the restaurant spoke English and Simon was the only one with enough Chinese to communicate well, though it was limited to basic request-related vocabulary such as, "I want" and "please give me."

"So, we're going to get snake?" asked Tarubva.

"Is that okay?" Simon confirmed.

"Let's do it," I said, feeling the bravery of a couple of pre-dinner beers.

The waitress entered the room, placing a single menu on the table. This is the usual style at a restaurant in China; one person, the head of the dining party, makes the decisions as to what everyone will eat. Having only arrived a few weeks earlier, I deferred to my companions. The waitress leaned away from Tarubva, assuming that a woman would not deign to choose for the men. She smiled shyly at Simon as he picked

up the menu, before leaving the room. After opening it, we flipped through the heavy, plastic-coated pages with unrecognizable characters next to small, poorly-lit, most likely untrustworthy photographs of the restaurant's offerings. After only a few weeks in Wuhan, I'd quickly learned not to trust menu pictures.

Eventually, thanks to Simon's cell phone's English-Chinese dictionary, we managed to figure out the character for snake and when the waitress returned with two small, shallow bowls—one with salted pan-fried peanuts and one with cucumber pieces soaked in vinegar—Simon pointed to his phone and said, “Ni hao. Wo men yao jiede.” Hello. We want this.

She seemed surprised and amused, not really believing the three foreigners wanted to eat snake. Simon insisted, so she nodded and grinned at us, giggling. She said something to Simon in the rapid-fire Chinese dialect of Wuhan and he shook his head, not understanding, so she grabbed his arm and pulled him towards the door.

“Wait!” I shouted in English. They both turned around. “We need beer,” I said.

“How many?” Simon asked.

I looked at Tarubva and she looked back at me. “Probably a lot, right?” she said.

Nodding, we agreed on a crate; twelve half-liter beers would probably be enough to convince us that snake was an acceptable dinner.

Simon is a posh Brit from just outside London, and along with being my roommate, was my guide during my first few months in Wuhan. He showed me where and what to eat and drink, with the disclaimer that I would surely, at some point, suffer debilitating diarrhea. He is short and thin, and jokingly blames his twin brother—who is

identical but has taken more of an interest in physical fitness—for stealing the “sporty genes.” Until snake night, I'd only seen him eat fried noodles, street barbeque, and goat cheese on toast, which he enjoyed in his room.

This toaster habit led to one of our few disagreements as roommates. Simon would take the toaster from the kitchen, along with an entire loaf of bread, then proceed to toast slice after slice, spread imported goat cheese on it, and, crumbs going everywhere, consume until he was sated. It wasn't leaving the bread open, to become stale and moldy, that bothered me. I just could never find the goddamn toaster.

Our beers arrived before Simon returned, so Tarubva and I entertained ourselves by drinking and spinning the lazy Susan around while trying to grab peanuts as they whizzed by with our chopsticks.

“This is good practice,” I said, nabbing a peanut. She agreed and we drained our beers, thirsty from anxiety, wondering when Simon would return—and with what.

Tarubva is from Zimbabwe and had already been in China for about a year when she'd met me at Wuhan's airport the month before. Between her life in Africa and London, and her time in Asia, Tarubva was already aware of many foods I'd either never been exposed to, or only heard of as something done far, far away. When she was four, Tarubva was hit by a car, which crushed her right femur and fractured her pelvis. She recovered well enough and, though she walks slowly and with a limp, had traveled more extensively than almost anyone I had met at that point.

She plucked another peanut from the bowl as it passed in front of her and I gave the lazy Susan another push. I didn't want to make it too easy for her. Simon came back

in with a small frown and returned to his seat without saying anything. He picked up his chopsticks and grabbed an orbiting peanut in one try, placed it in his mouth, then added piece of cucumber, and chewed.

“It's a good combination. You should try it,” Simon suggested at the look on our faces.

I stuck with the peanuts. Even though there were, after all the spinning and many failed attempts with the chopsticks, almost as many scattered across the table (and on the floor) as there were in the bowl.

“So, did you order the snake?” I asked.

“Yeah, I chose one downstairs,” Simon said.

“From the aquarium thing?”

Simon nodded.

When we entered the restaurant, about a block away from our apartment building, nestled between a fast food restaurant and a barber shop, we had been greeted by a huge dry terrarium filled with various reptiles of the non-poisonous variety: snakes of all sizes, several turtles, and something that resembled a large iguana. When a customer decided to order one of the reptiles, whether stir-fried snake or turtle soup or any other variation, they were brought to the aquarium and asked to choose their dinner. After Simon picked our snake, an old Chinese man—the chef, at a guess, but Simon couldn't say for sure—stood on an overturned plastic beer crate and used both hands to extract it. It was about three-feet long and had dark green, almost black, scales.

After Simon returned, we all got serious about our beers. We had no idea how

long the snake would take to prepare, but we wanted to be ready. The waitress brought us tea and Simon requested a few other dishes: fried pork with leeks, some *jiaozi* (dumplings), rice, and stir-fried vegetables. In Chinese restaurants, there's no set order as to when dishes arrive; they are brought out when they're ready.

“Which snake did you pick?” asked Tarubva.

“Just a random snake. I don't really know how to choose,” Simon muttered and took a large gulp of his beer.

We talked about work for a bit, drinking the ironically warm “Snow” beer and tried to get drunk enough to not think too much about the meal we were about to eat. Dishes began to arrive and we nibbled on them, but they weren't anything especially appetizing.

“These aren't the best jiaozi, are they?” Tarubva said, her voice was flat with alcohol and nervousness.

“No,” Simon shook his head.

“You two haven't tried snake before, right?” I asked.

They both agreed they hadn't.

“What's the weirdest thing you've ever eaten?”

“Fried caterpillar,” Tarubva answered immediately. “They're everywhere back home. I hate them, but I've tried it.”

“Dog,” Simon replied after some thought.

“You can get dog here?” I asked, having thought that the pet-eating China was a myth.

“Sure,” said Tarubva. “Every winter they have it. It's supposed to keep you warm.”

We pondered the peculiarities of the non-western diet in silence for a few moments, gulping our beers and waiting. Before long, the main course arrived. A large metal platter with raised edges and a frilly paper sheet on the bottom was placed in the center of the lazy Susan. There was no decoration other than the paper; no garnish or sauce. There were simply a number of four-to-five inch pieces of fried snake in a pile, maybe ten altogether. The meat was almost orange; the edges were browned a bit from the soy sauce and oil in which it had been fried. There were hundreds of small rib bones and it reminded me more of fish than anything else I could think of. The smell wasn't obviously snake or any unusual odor, at least in Wuhan—the spices and aromatics made sure of that.

The waitress and the young Chinese kitchen worker who had carried the platter in didn't leave. They stood at the door, obviously waiting for us to take our first bite, watching in anticipation of the foreigners' reactions. I'm sure the three of us looked stricken, our faces all drooping and tilted down at the same angle. Another waitress walked in with a small plastic tray and said something to the other two, who laughed and pointed to a spot between me and Tarubva. They carefully placed two clear plastic cups on the lazy Susan; one was full of clear liquid that I could smell from two feet away and had two small white bead-like objects floating in the center of the cup. The other was, literally, blood red. These were apparently the ritualistic drinks you were supposed to imbibe when eating snake—rice liquor with the snake's blood and testicles. Either that, or

they were fucking with us.

It didn't matter. I looked at Simon, who shrugged, and then at Tarubva, who shook her head and widened her eyes so I could see white all the way around her irises. I picked up the bloody cup and took a small sip. It smelled like rusty metal and burned on the way down so strongly that I coughed and the smell and taste got stuck in my nose. I coughed again and drank almost an entire bottle of warm beer while the workers laughed and patted me on the back. Tarubva just shook her head in dismay and amusement. The smell was still there, attached to my nose hairs, so I took another drink, and that one went down smoother. The workers cheered as Simon followed my lead, taking a small sip of the testicle-infused liquor. He coughed less than I did, but I comforted myself with the knowledge that I was drinking snake blood and smiled at the cheering workers who were standing by.

The snake, once we finally tried it, tasted like pork. It didn't have a texture distinct from any other animal flesh I'd tried over the past month, and the flavor was, like most meat in China, basically whatever the cooks chose to give it. I had trouble with the bones, and so did Simon. Tarubva, who was used to eating fish the way the rest of the world did, not in the boneless fillet American style, managed to down several pieces of snake by the time we were ready to leave. We split the bill, almost fifty US dollars—an expensive meal in Wuhan—and stumbled out the door, quite drunk on cheap beer and bloody liquor.

“That was good,” Tarubva said.

I nodded in agreement, and wished I could try snake fillet so I wouldn't have to

worry about the bones.

“We'll get dog soup next time,” Simon said.

PERSONAL HISTORY

May, 2012

Zhao Yaxin never fought back against the Japanese. She didn't sneak off in the middle of the night to plot with guerrilla bands or have forbidden trysts with a sympathetic Japanese soldier. She and her family lived their lives and survived.

She was born in northern China and most of her childhood memories are from growing up in Japanese-occupied territories. In school, Zhao Yaxin and her classmates learned Japanese; not to improve relations with a neighboring power, as when Haze's parents studied Russian during the Cold War, and not to increase economic opportunities, as people do now with English. Zhao Yaxin and her peers learned Japanese because they lived in a conquered nation.

I first met Zhao Yaxin when she was 84 years old, a few weeks before my wedding in 2009 in Kunming, which has a higher elevation than Denver, at almost seven thousand feet. The thin air, along with my pack-a-day habit at the time, meant the climb up six flights of stairs to get to Zhao Yaxin's apartment was a bit of a struggle. She was a family friend, and greeted us at the door and we left the world of colorless concrete walls and rusted metal stairs and entered an apartment home housing three generations.

Zhao Yaxin wore a red sweater she'd knitted herself. A few age spots and freckles marked an otherwise unblemished face covered in laugh lines. We were led into the

living room, where she explained her husband and daughter were sleeping, so we needed to be quiet. As we sat, she offered some of the ubiquitous fresh fruit found in almost every Chinese home.

My wife translated as Zhao Yaxin asked us questions about America and what we were planning to do when we moved there, after the wedding. She smiled often and didn't seem at all uncomfortable or overly excited at having a foreigner in her home. I was surprised when she pulled out a pack of cigarettes and offered me one, which I took, before she placed another between her lips. My pitiful Chinese skills were mentioned and we all agreed that it was fortunate that most Chinese people learned English in school.

Zhao Yaxin never learned any English, she said. The only languages she had any knowledge of beyond Mandarin were Russian and Japanese.

As an American, it's difficult to truly understand the conditions a huge percentage of the world's population lives in or has lived through. In China, anyone over the age of sixty experienced and remembers the Cultural Revolution and the Great Leap Forward. They experienced these horrors as teenagers all over China while my parents' generation, Baby Boomers in America, enjoyed one of the most prosperous periods in human history. Millions of Chinese died. Many were murdered for reasons ranging from being overly intellectual to simply being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Most just starved.

History often focuses on extremes, such as heroic deeds or inhuman acts of violence and murder. Wars between nations and diplomacy between the Great Men of their time have had countless books, journal articles, memoirs, and oral histories devoted to them. The study of history tends to magnify that which is magnified in our

imaginations, often ignoring the vast majority of human beings who simply live their lives, regardless of who is in charge of the land in which they find themselves.

But the benefits to personally knowing people who lived through these historical events, getting to know their families, watching them interact with their children and friends, discussing things that have nothing to do with the great moments of history itself; it all contributes to making them more than just historical figures or characters in a story.

When we received an invitation to Zhao Yaxin's granddaughter's wedding, I was sick in bed and unable to attend. It was held just down the street from our apartment right after Christmas on a cold, rainy day, and Haze, Mama, and Jake went without me. A few days later, Zhao Yaxin's daughter and granddaughter, the new bride, came by our apartment because they wanted to meet me, but more importantly they wanted to see Jake again. When I introduced myself to her, Zhao Yaxin's granddaughter smiled and said, in English, "Hello."

CULTURE SHOCK

September-October, 2007

The first few weeks in Wuhan had been a blur of new experiences. One phrase that is thrown around quite a bit, usually at people moving to a new country, is “Culture Shock.” The basic idea of Culture Shock is simple; adjusting to a radically new environment or culture takes place over four stages. It's almost like the stages of grief, except that instead of losing a loved one, you've lost a home, and maybe a culture, whether by choice or because of events beyond your control.

The first stage, the “Honeymoon Stage,” is exactly what it sounds like. Much like the beginning of a romantic relationship, the first weeks or months in a new place are full of exciting adventures, sights, and sounds—all unlike anything you've experienced before. While the taxi ride into Wuhan was indeed a frightening experience, my initial reaction to China followed the rubric of the Honeymoon Stage. I loved it.

Not every part of it. I was of conscious of the less-than-perfect aspects of living in Wuhan, both in general and as a foreigner. The air was smoggy and, as was explained to me by several of my fellow foreign teachers, I would need to wipe soot from my windowsill, various belongings, and apartment furniture every few days. It would, apparently, not be a good plan to let clothes hang to dry outside for too long or else they would need to be washed again.

There was also a devastating amount of poverty everywhere I looked. The separation between the rich and poor in China was, and still is, more stark than the United States except in the most extreme examples. Our apartment building, officially 32 stories but missing those unlucky floors, was mostly two bedroom apartments that rented for around 3000RMB, or \$500US, a month. China is, in general, a renter's market and Wuhan is not on the coast and so has a much lower cost of living than cities like Shanghai or Beijing. However, the average monthly income in Wuhan, when I moved there in 2007, was about the same as the rent in our apartment tower. Smaller, studio-style apartments in the building went for less, but were still not affordable to large majority of the population.

The foreign teachers at English First were provided free accommodations, which was a way to make up for monthly pay of around 5,500RMB a month, a rather low salary for foreign ESL teachers, even in central China. But 5,500RMB a month would have been a fortune to the population of the neighborhood surrounding our apartment building.

While I could see the Mingsheng Bank Tower a kilometer away, a quick glance out my bedroom window revealed a collection of twisting alleyways winding through a hodgepodge of one-to-three story concrete-brick structures with corrugated metal, and sometimes wood or bamboo, roofs. Inside these buildings were an assortment of homes and businesses where people lived in conditions that would be considered unlivable in most western countries.

But these alleyways also held some of the most interesting and useful aspects of Wuhan. Vegetable stalls and fruit stands with produce far fresher and cheaper than the

local supermarket; convenience stores with walkable aisles and an unusually large variety of honeys; and, of course, restaurants. All of these businesses, and more, lined the alleyways, interrupted only by small doorways leading to homes. The owners of the shops usually just pulled a staircase from the ceiling at night and slept in tiny apartments above. In this China, one could easily subsist on less than \$5 a day, and many of the foreign teachers did their best to save money living this lifestyle. Since EF paid for a flight back to the teacher's home country at the end of a contract, most of us dedicated our savings to travel within China and to neighboring countries. I heard tales and saw pictures of trips to the Great Wall and Beijing, Vietnam, Xian, Shanghai, and Indian beach huts.

The positivity of the Honeymoon Phase during those first few weeks in Wuhan led to me waking up early, even though I didn't teach until late afternoon when the kids got out of school. I would wander around the older sections of Hankou while it was still cool, and pick up something for breakfast—usually a bowl of “Ri Gan Mian,” Hot, Dry Noodles, or a container of “Dou pi,” a kind of sticky rice wrapped with egg, with diced mushrooms and dry tofu mixed in, then pan fried in a giant wok. These dishes were best when sold from a cart or a shop that had a decent-but-not-too-long line of waiting customers. I went to eat delicious new and strange lunches and dinners with co-workers like Simon and Tarubva, but also Archie, a photographer from Ontario; Tarubva's roommate Melissa, a recent McGill graduate from Montreal; and Chris and Nikki, a pair of backpackers who had run out of travel money in Wuhan but weren't ready to go back to Manchester; along with a whole group of various local Chinese ESL teachers that

worked at English First.

There was a new norm among our tiny expat community in Wuhan, and it's something I've seen all across China since. If everyone is already staring at you, you don't have to worry about attracting attention by not being Chinese or making a local customs faux pas. No matter how good a foreigner's Chinese is, even if they happened to be born and raised in Wuhan and spoke no other language than Chinese, someone who looks different is going to be stared at and treated as a permanent outsider. It's not done intentionally or with malice; the foreign population of Wuhan should immediately bring to mind the old mental image of a drop of ink dissolving in a glass of milk. We were, in many cases, the first foreigner someone living in Wuhan had seen or spoken to.

And they were almost uniformly friendly. The people who didn't want to talk to us, or who felt uncomfortable in our presence, rarely initiated conversation. Wuhan was, in a noisy and polluted kind of way, kind of an ideal place to live as an “other.” Instead of being isolated through repression, we were isolated on a pedestal; integration wasn't possible, but we were greeted with enthusiasm almost everywhere we met.

On that first day in September, after Grace had managed to find my apartment key and gave me a few minutes to settle in, she guided me to school while Tarubva went to her apartment, which was several stories up from mine on the 16th (really 13th) floor. We walked along Jiangnan beilu, or North Jiangnan Road, as Grace helpfully explained.

“What does 'jiangnan' mean?” I asked her.

“I do not know how to say in English,” she said. Her face turned a bit red and I realized it was probably a good idea to shut up and accept whatever information was available as it came.

We arrived at English First, which was in a six-story building faced with white tiles. The Mingsheng Bank Tower had reached its full height of just over 1,000 feet the year before, making it, at the time, one of the twenty tallest buildings in the world. It loomed over the school. The blue-white flashes of welding machines and blowtorches were visible as we walked into the lobby of the school's building.

English First took up the entire 4th floor, which for some reason was not unlucky in this building. The lobby had a desk where two young, attractive Chinese women sat to welcome the students and, in most cases, their parents. They wore identical navy blue suit jackets and matching skirts and smiled well-rehearsed smiles when Grace introduced me to them.

The second stage of Culture Shock has various names, but the one that always seemed most appropriate to me in China is termed the “Frustration Stage.” Fortunately, though it might not have seemed that way to me at the time, I was able to enter this stage, at least partially, that first day in Wuhan at English First. John, the ex-New Zealand cop who was now my boss at EF, apologetically explained to me that China had recently changed its policy for work permits. I would need to go to Hong Kong to convert my tourist visa into a work visa.

I was excited to go to Hong Kong, but the frustration began when I was told I would have to pay my own way, though the school would be happy to book a flight for me. Since my contact had stated the school would pay for all visa costs, and I was exhausted and maybe a little grouchy from traveling halfway across the world, I argued almost without thinking.

After what seemed to be an unnecessarily long and complicated conversation with John, and then both John and Jeffery, the Chinese owner of the school, they agreed to book and pay for a flight to Hong Kong and a hotel. I thought this was logical, but it turns out that a contract in China is more of a list of suggestions, and a foreign teacher keeps their visa only as long as a school sponsors them. Looking back on it, I can see that both John and Jeffery were, for China, quite focused on their workers' happiness and honoring contracts. At least for their foreign workers.

We agreed that I would begin work in a few days and observe some classes. My flight was booked before I left EF that day, and I would have three weeks in Wuhan before my visit to Hong Kong. Grace was in her shared office when my meeting with John and Jeffrey ended, and she offered to walk me back to the apartment. I have a fairly decent ability to remember directions and, even with the sensory overload of Wuhan, I felt confident in my ability to get back. Grace didn't look convinced, and handed me a business card with EF's name, phone number, and address on it in English. I wondered for a moment how that would be helpful when Grace turned it in my hand and I saw the other side was in Chinese.

“You hand this to taxi if you get lost, okay?” said Grace.

“Thanks,” I smiled.

“Xie xie, is how we say in Chinese,” said Grace.

My first Chinese words!

“Shay shay!” I said, but Grace shook her head.

“Xie xie,” she repeated, a little slower.

“She-yay she-yay?” I asked.

Grace shook her head again. “Xie xie.”

“Shea shea,” I tried, losing my smile.

“Good!” Grace lied to me. Then she made sure I had the business card and my passport, and said goodbye. In English.

The first two stages of Culture Shock are basically a first and second impression of a place. Having watched quite a few foreigners adjust to living in China, experiencing both stages simultaneously doesn't appear to be all that uncommon.

The staring began immediately. For some reason I didn't notice it when I had been with Grace, but walking around Wuhan with a beard and light brown hair, alone in the mid-afternoon, I apparently seemed like the most exotic thing possible. Children stared. Adults stared. Several people riding a bus looked out their windows in unison as I strolled by in my khaki shorts and short sleeved plaid shirt. As I veered left down Jiangnan beilu, the same road our taxi had played chicken on just a couple of hours earlier, things became even more surreal.

Instead of the usual “blocks” where there would be a crossroads every few hundred feet, or maybe a parking lot entrance, there were alleyways. Wide enough for maybe two compact cars to sneak past each other, too close together to open a door. The first few shops at the mouths of these alleys were almost always restaurants, and the people standing around cooking and eating would stare as I briefly crossed their fields of vision. Occasionally I heard a muted shout of “laowai!” or “waiguoren!” These, I learned later, are two of the polite terms for “foreigner.” I’ve been fortunate enough to only hear some of the less flattering names jokingly, and rarely in anger.

The attention bothered me much less than I’d imagined it would. None of the staring was aggressive or threatening. Many of the greetings were shouted with a smile or a wave. I was a curiosity, and no one seemed shy about expressing their interest. By the time I reached the apartment’s alleyway, I had started smiling at the starers, and many of them smiled in return.

When someone spoke to me in Chinese, I smiled back and usually said, in English, something along the lines of, “I’m sorry, I don’t have a clue what you’re saying. Hello!”

This would usually result in giggles and more smiles. I was a popular guy and hadn’t even had time to use my own bathroom. I stopped at the small convenience stand outside of the apartment building’s gate. It was an actual mom and pop operation, though sometimes their daughter or son-in-law would stop by with their grandson and help out. That first afternoon I decided to get a bottle of water and a pack of cigarettes before heading upstairs.

I approached the stand, which was housed inside an ancient looking stone building. It was the size of a small bathroom inside with cracking bamboo shingles on the roof and wood shutters which only closed from one to six in the morning. The very first item you see in most Chinese convenience shops is usually directly under the (almost always) clear glass counter. The numerous Chinese cigarette brands are displayed here, often in well-lit cases with soft blue or black shelves and faux crystal stands. Everything else in the shop might be dingy with poor, if any, lighting. The floor might be covered in sunflower seed shells, or cigarette butts and dirty tissues, but the cigarette display is always spotless and up-to-date. The display pack is the last one sold so that, when a shop is out of a particular brand, the customer is aware of this by its absence from the display.

I didn't know about the great intricacies of local level Chinese cigarette sales at the time, but I did need a pack. The husband greeted me in Chinese, to which I smiled and nodded. He asked me something, but since the only Chinese word I knew at that point was a mangled pronunciation of "Thanks," I indicated I didn't understand. He laughed and pointed at the cigarettes and then at the numbers next to them. It wasn't difficult to understand that they were the individual prices, but when I did the conversion in my head, I was shocked at how cheap cigarettes were.

The most common price seemed to be between 10 and 20RMB, or about \$1.50 to \$3.50 US. Having become used to five dollars minimum per pack in Texas, I was probably way more excited than I should have been. It's not like finding cheaper cigarettes was going to be beneficial in any way, except for smoking more cigarettes. But like an 18 year old at a gas station celebrating their birthday with cheap menthols and

low-quality pornography, I had no idea what was what, and the variety was staggering. I had always smoked Camels, but never turned my head at Marlboro or Parliament Lights. Menthols were fine, and I'd even tried Dorals and Pall Malls when money was tight. But they were all around the same price in the US, and for all I know they were rolled in the same cigarette factory. No American brands were available here, though, and the price range in the display case of this maybe-30-square-foot shop veered from 4RMB a pack (about .60 cents) to over 200RMB a pack (over \$30 US).

Of course I chose the cheapest; a pack of “Four Dragons” cigarettes cost 4RMB, and when I pointed to them (my only method of communication) the shop owner seemed doubtful.

Was I sure that was the pack I wanted, his face asked.

I nodded, then made a drinking motion and pointed at a bottle of water on a shelf behind him. He turned and pointed at a bottle of bright yellow soda with “Fanta” on the side. I shook my head. He pointed at the next bottle, recognizable as Sprite, even with the name transliterated into Chinese characters. I shook my head again. This continued for several bottles until he poked the bottle of water, and I nodded enthusiastically. He smiled and grabbed an identical bottle from the refrigerator behind him, then handed it to me. It was warm. He grabbed a pack of Four Dragons while I pulled out my wallet, which is when I realized I had no idea how much the water cost.

While I was starting to slightly panic, the shop owner took out a large calculator, turned it so I could see, and typed in, “4+1.5=5.5.”

I smiled and said something along the lines of, “Thanks. Smart!”

He smiled back and said something back in Chinese, probably, “Ting bu dong.” I don't understand what you're saying. A phrase I heard from him often after that first day, pretty much any time a foreigner spoke to him in English.

I got back to my apartment and had some delicious warm bottled water. There was an ashtray on the dining table so I took it out on the balcony and pulled my new pack of cigarettes from my pocket. The box had four stylized drawings of different dragons in each corner, and there was a gold tracing of one them on the cigarette filter. It was very handsome for a cigarette. I lit it with one of my soon-to-be-prized Bics and inhaled.

It was awful. It burned my throat and tasted like dirty ash. I coughed a little; it was just as bad as smoking for the first time. Then I thought about the price. My half-liter bottle of water had cost 1.5RMB, about .12 cents. The forty-five minute taxi ride from the airport had been less than \$10. This apartment was free. It was a short walk to and from work, and I was getting a free trip to Hong Kong soon.

I happily smoked my Four Dragons cigarette and vowed to finish the pack, and never ever buy them again.

MY FIRST SPRING FESTIVAL

January, 2008

My bedroom walls trapped the booms and crackles and pops of the explosions so that the sounds were echoing from every direction. The window thumped inward against its frame once, then rattled around as the changing pressure pushed it back and forth. A set of double curtains covered the window in my bedroom, but left a small space between the wall and the inner curtain's edge. Each booming or crackling explosion created a brilliant light and shadow show on the wall over my plain wood desk. It was the beginning of what would be almost a month of continuous Spring Festival celebrations in Wuhan and was, in the first few weeks of 2008, my first Chinese New Year experience.

Simon was on the couch in the living room, turning up the volume on the television and DVD player so he could hear whatever he was watching over the fireworks.

“What the hell is going on?” I had to ask twice so Simon could hear me over the fireworks and his movie.

“Spring Festival, right? Gets pretty loud for a couple of weeks. We went up on the roof for the fireworks last year. I'm not sure when it is this year,” said Simon, who explained that the entire city would be setting fireworks off in the streets and on the roofs of buildings all at once at midnight on the last day of the Chinese calendar to celebrate

the start of the year of the Rat. There would be no shortage of fireworks in the two weeks leading up to the big day, Simon assured me.

I hadn't considered going to the roof of our thirty-two story apartment building before, but the thought of watching everything around for miles lit up by a city-wide display of fireworks seemed like a good enough reason to check it out.

A few nights later I stood on my seventh floor balcony, which had space enough for three people at best, next to Archie. We were drinking from green half-liter bottles of Snow beer, one of the top-selling (by volume) beers in the world, though certainly not because of its taste. As soon as we'd opened the doors that had been muffling the ever-present, multi-colored explosions, we'd been unable to speak normally. When the occasional firework got a little too close, we'd curse down at the shadowy forms of our attackers, standing in two feet of black and gray streaked snow on the street below. It was loud, but we could hear each other if we were shouting, which was especially satisfying when directed in anger at distant faceless strangers in the dark below.

Almost everywhere that hadn't shut down in the days before Spring Festival had ended up closing anyway because of a series of blizzards that winter. The entire northern half of the country was suffering the worst winter in half a century while hundreds of millions of people sat on delayed trains, planes and buses, hoping to be with their families for Spring Festival.

Archie finished his beer and looked down at a group of people gathered around a fireworks box the size of a crib in what looked to be preparation for an imminent aerial barrage aimed directly in front of the balcony. Just as he was in the middle of shouting

abuse at the people below, Archie was interrupted by the latest assault as a series of lights screeched up from the ground, temporarily deafening us with their explosions. Every three or four seconds, another randomly colored ball of fire would streak towards the balcony and conclude with a sound as loud as a gunshot, but slower, like the powder was wet or the burn was delayed just a moment. I think they were simply designed to be as loud and obnoxious as possible, because the light show was not especially interesting.

We were about to go back inside when we heard cheering and laughing from the street. This enraged Archie, the stresses of fireworks-interrupted sleep and cabin fever caused by the mass snow-and-holiday-related closures in Wuhan finally taking their toll. It looked for a moment like he was going to throw his bottle at the people below us, but he paused and looked at me before reaching back and chucking it in the opposite direction, towards the middle school track next to our apartment building. We couldn't see it in the dark, or hear it break over the fireworks, but the next morning I could see shiny green specks scattered on the inside two tracks and the interior of the oval's corner nearest my balcony.

To get to the roof of our apartment building, we had to take the elevator to the thirty-second floor and walk up another flight of stairs. The access door was already open when we got there; we weren't the only people who wanted a good view. The available standing area was surrounded by a two foot high wall that led to four separate corrugated metal roof sections that slanted down towards what I can only assume were some very large gutters. Huge steel cables as thick as my arm ran from the base of the roof to various metal structures that rose into the air.

Almost all of the foreigners in our building, my fellow English teachers mostly, were there, excluding the ones who were brave or dumb enough to travel during the busiest (and most delayed) holiday season in human history. Someone had brought a crate of beers up and we huddled around smoking cigarettes and trying to stay out of the wind. Piles of filthy snow had been pushed against the barrier, though there was a smoother layer on the parts of the roof we weren't supposed to access. Everyone was checking their phones or watches as we approached midnight. But like many things in China, the scheduled start time was more of a suggestion. When the first displays were set off at four minutes to midnight, much of the rest of the city followed along.

We were lucky that night. In the midst of China's worst winter in fifty years, with Wuhan getting a record amount of snow, the sky was clear. There were no clouds and there was no smog. I could even see a few stars through the glow from the city of ten million. Any possible night vision I might have had was swiftly destroyed by the hundreds, then thousands of fireworks going off in every direction. Above us, the fireworks set off by people on neighboring rooftops, and even ours, made the same ear-splitting cracks and booms I'd grown accustomed to over the past two weeks. Below us, thousands of people stood on the sidewalks and in the streets, blocking what little vehicle traffic there was, and set off fireworks and torch cones which sat on the ground and shot up multi-colored streams of sparks that children and teenagers would jump through.

By five minutes after midnight, there was a three-hundred-and-sixty degree fireworks show surrounding our apartment. In pairs and individually, people wandered around the roof, taking in the spectacle. A row of seven-story apartments in a complex a

few blocks away had a semi-coordinated show that began at more-or-less the same time on each roof. Once in a while parts of the city would glow as if bathed in temporary sunlight, and we'd avert our eyes as stunningly bright, slow-burning shells erupted hundreds of feet in the air.

After a while, I couldn't see the sky anymore. Clouds of pungent smoke billowed, glowing unevenly along the skyline. Windows everywhere sparkled with reflections and skyscrapers were lit up by multi-colored neon LEDs that flashed up and down the length of their frames.

I stood watching it all, and noted that the smoke was getting thicker but the fireworks were, if anything, going off faster and faster.

GOLDEN, BROWN, AND DELICIOUS

March, 2012

I'm staring at a plate of fried locusts in a Kunming barbeque restaurant when I realize I must be drunk. I pick up one of the inch-long insects with my chopsticks and turn and twist it around, tilting my head so I can glance at every part of it. The abdomen consists of progressively shrinking rings tapering towards the back end. The thorax—the central part of the body—is covered by wings and heat-shriveled legs. The head is indistinct; mandibles and antennae broken or melted off, the eyes blank and shimmery, staring at nothing. The entire body is, as a cookbook author or food blogger might say, golden brown and delicious. Deep fried in oil of questionable origin, then pan-fried in a giant wok with soy sauce, vinegar and spicy oil; a plate of locusts sit on a food-stained plastic table in front of me.

Acting like I'm getting blood drawn is probably the best approach; don't look. Look away and you can't anticipate that sharp, piercing pain. The anticipation is always worse than the act.

The structure and size of a locust bothers me less on a serving platter than it would if I encountered one at random. Bugs scare me, though they haven't always. I don't remember when I devolved from a child who would jump into a pile of raked

leaves every fall into an adult that wakes his mother-in-law to kill a spider in the bathroom at three in the morning. The stereotype of the cringing wife standing on the table while the manly husband kills a six or eight-legged intruder is reversed in our family.

Eating insects is common throughout the world. Countries and peoples with longer histories than most Americans bother to imagine have dealt with hunger and famine, and made the choice to eat what was available. Thousands of years of cultural and culinary knowledge have built upon themselves as people learned that this is acceptable to eat, and that is not. This focus on the available is apparent in many of the world's cuisines: congealed blood, bone soup, chicken feet, pig tails, tripe, along with fermented and pickled everything are some examples of common dishes throughout the non-American world. China, especially, has discovered how to get the most out of what was, and is, available. Necessity has become tradition over the years and now I can sit down at a table on the second floor of a barbeque restaurant, in a crowded alleyway full of similar establishments, and order a plate of fried bugs.

Their thickness is consistent from the head to about midway through the abdomen, each one maybe half an inch in width. My wife, Haze, is sitting next to me, amused at the look on my face while I carefully consider our late-night snack. We're sitting on small, square wooden stools. They're only about a foot tall, so my knees are almost level with my chest. My fellow diners—one a British expat who calls himself Tudou (Chinese for Potato), the other a recent Harvard grad named Alec who's here studying Chinese—have looks of disgusted curiosity that probably mirror my own.

Tudou's boyfriend, Adam (his English name), says something to Haze in Chinese and they laugh.

Haze picks a locust off the plate and pops it in her mouth. It crunches crisply once. I raise my glass of rice liquor to my fellow adventurers and say, "Gan bei!" Bottoms up.

The term for eating bugs is Entomophagy. The term for a fear of bugs is Entomophobia. The cultural taboo towards the eating of insects is much more prevalent in western cultures, regardless of the fact that there's no way to avoid eating them. Forget the stories about swallowing a certain number of spiders in your sleep every year; there are bugs in everything you eat. Most are small and impossible to avoid, but some are not. Grain and grain-based food, such as rice, cereals, or pasta—along with pretty much any other processed foods—all have bugs in them. If you eat bread, you're eating bugs.

There are over one thousand species of insects and arachnids eaten by humans around the world. The "insect rights" movement is limited in scope and would probably be mocked mercilessly if more people knew it existed. We eat insects every day. It's unavoidable, like breathing argon gas or tripping over your kid's toys in a dark hallway. The difference between the normal western diet and the plate of bugs the five of us are staring at, in this dingy dining room, is the presentation. These locusts have not been processed and ground down. They are not hidden in what I think I am eating. They are staring at me and all around me with oil-slicked compound eyes.

Alec is downstairs ordering fried noodles. Tudou started aggressively making out with Adam at some point, and somehow they've twisted themselves so both of them can sit together on one tiny stool. I pick up a locust with my chopsticks and ask Haze how they are.

"It's like eating air," she says.

"What do they taste like?"

She thinks for a moment. "Salty. A little hot."

I nod. I can't bring myself to do it and put down my chopsticks. Alec returns and we eat fried noodles and try not to watch Tudou and Adam drunkenly chewing on each other's lips. The noodles are shit—dull wet gray with bland brown sauce, stuck together despite the excess oil collecting in the bottom of the serving dish.

Alec and I drink some more baijiu and get silly. We stumble around the otherwise empty dining room, hanging out heads out the window, and shouting at each other instead of talking. The fried locusts wait calmly on the table, their semi-translucent wings shimmering, and watch without judgment as Tudou passes out in Adam's arms and slides to the floor, where he lies unconscious, spread-eagle at our feet.

Adam is scared. Haze is concerned. Alec and I laugh.

"What should we do? Should we go to the hospital? I think he hit his head," says Adam.

"Is he breathing?" I ask, sitting back down on a stool. I avoid looking at the bugs.

Adam puts a shaky finger under Tudou's nose and nods.

"Is he bleeding?" I ask.

Adam shakes his head.

“He’s fine,” says Alec, who picks up a handful of locusts and tosses them on Tudou’s face.

We laugh and leave him to sleep.

I wonder if I should feel guilty that we are wasting these creatures’ deaths on humor as tasteless as the gelatinous noodles still sitting on the table next to the locusts. But I don’t feel bad about it, except for the guilt I feel at my lack of guilt. I don’t feel anything but satisfaction and relief when I step on a spider or swat a fly. It may be no more profound than the belief that insects and spiders aren’t as developed as I am. They don’t feel like I do.

Maybe I’m hiding behind limited scientific evidence, or simply rationalizing to make myself feel better about my murderous habits, but standing in that cement-floored room alone with my wife and friends of varying sobriety, throwing deep-fried insects on a drunk Briton, I feel only hysterical laughter and tears of joy.

After taking a picture of Tudou’s locust-covered face with Alec’s phone, we calm ourselves and sit down to face the golden locust pile, now somewhat diminished. Again, I pick one up with my chopsticks, but can’t look directly at it. Slowly, I bring it to my mouth while Alec watches me, chopsticks grasping his own locust. I take a deep breath, attempt to say something clever and pithy, and at the edge of my vision, see an unfocused image of black plastic chopsticks clutching a golden-brown locust enter my mouth.

It is like air. The texture is similar to the edible packing peanuts my 7th grade life sciences teacher let us eat. We dissected owl pellets that year. They were made up of

various organisms, but the pieces of insect exoskeletons were some of the most obvious. I'm eating bird food and I don't need teeth, just like an owl. The locust dissolves in my mouth and is salty, as my wife said, with a spicy, sour tang from the vinegar and pepper.

“They're good,” I say. I reach for another.

TWO CASTLES

When my wife, Haze, was four years old, her father was in a car accident. His friend, a fellow officer in the People's Liberation Army, was driving. There weren't many personal vehicles in China in the late eighties, so there were very few requirements for being allowed to drive, especially for army officers. Neither of them had a license.

No one knows exactly what happened. They were between Guangzhou and Kunming, the capital of Yunnan province in southern China and Haze's family's home, and somehow the car flipped. Then, as now, few people in China wore seat belts. The driver was thrown from the car and knocked unconscious. Haze's father broke his neck in two places. The farmers who found them didn't know anything about possible spinal injuries and as they pulled him to the side of the road their jostling further aggravated the damage.

At the end of August in 2003, before it was moved, the Student Union at Emerson College sat at the intersection of Beacon and Arlington Streets, just across from the northwest corner of the Boston Public Garden. I had arrived on a flight from San Antonio the night before, and that morning we were scheduled to leave for Kasteel Well, Emerson's European campus in the southern Netherlands. I stared out the third floor

window of the Union at the fog-blanketed Garden as someone called out a list of names. Cars and trucks and buses were bumper to bumper, stuck in rush hour traffic.

There were almost eighty of us and it was hard to hear our preparatory briefing over the traffic downstairs. None of us wanted to sit there in the Student Union, being told that we should be careful. That we would be on our own, wandering through various European countries for the next four months. There were Americans on the ground in Iraq; had been for several months at that point. They told us not to sew American flags on our backpacks.

Haze's mother got her a puppy when she was five, about a year after her father's accident. It was black and white and followed her everywhere.

When her parents traveled to Beijing for an experimental surgery on her father's spinal cord, Haze stayed with her aunt and uncle. Her uncle, Sun Jie Ming, born in China but ethnically Vietnamese, would carry her to school on his shoulders and the dog would follow them, then go back home with her uncle for the day.

When Haze's parents returned home, her father, in pain and infuriated by his paralysis, would scream at the dog and order it to come close enough for him to hit it with what little muscle control he had left in his arms. The dog eventually stopped following commands and Haze's father demanded that they have it killed. Her mother gave it away instead.

As the bus from Amsterdam's Schiphol Airport arrived in Well (pronounced “Vell”), it drove past one, two, three, four brothels and turned slowly onto a narrow road flanked by wide sidewalks, or “voetpads,” as I would learn to call them.

The village of Well is a small collection of simple, modern buildings, mostly built or rebuilt since the war. They thinned out a few hundred meters from the main road.

We finally caught a glimpse of the castle through some trees. The bus pulled up next to what had once been a drawbridge, but had been replaced at some point by a permanently fixed one. Some horses snorted next to us from behind a metal fence as we collected our luggage from under the bus. Across the street from the castle was a field of golden corn, almost ready for harvest. Beyond the horses were rows upon rows of purple flowers.

Around a year after the massacre in Tiananmen Square, Haze and her mother had the chance to see some of the temples and other sites of interest in Beijing. Her father had some more surgeries and several weeks of recovery scheduled, all paid for by the army, but they hadn't been sure he would survive the two-day journey from Kunming, or the surgeries, so her mother was too anxious to take Haze on the day-long trip to see the Great Wall.

Years later, on Christmas Day in 2008, Haze and I traveled to Beijing so I could raise my right hand inside the US Embassy and swear to an American Foreign Service Officer that I wasn't already married. Until we received a confirmation form from the

embassy indicating my singledom, we wouldn't be able to get a Chinese marriage certificate. It was painfully frigid that week; the cold seeped up through the metal floors of the buses and numbed our feet, and we lost feeling in our faces and hands standing in Tiananmen Square outside the Forbidden City. Hiking up and down the Great Wall was not appealing.

Kasteel Well is almost seven hundred years old and has an inner and an outer moat. It's also a rare bird sanctuary, populated by black swans, peacocks, scores of ducks, and a blue heron that sometimes stopped by. Napoleon used it briefly as a traveling headquarters, as did the Nazis, though they were there for a bit longer.

I was assigned to live in the Voorburch, or New Wing. It was built in the 18th century; a horseshoe-shaped building on the east side of the main castle where my girlfriend at the time, Allie, was assigned a room. My room, which I shared with a fellow sophomore named Ross from Wisconsin, was directly over the entrance to the courtyard. Two massive windows, taller than me, opened inward. They were very old and the small glass panes, each about a square foot, were wavy and thin. With a view of the stone courtyard, the main castle, and the inner moat, I was very aware that I was living in a no-shit-for-real medieval castle.

Allie's room was located in one of the castle's towers. Its walls were curved, as you would expect from being located in a round tower, and none of the windows faced the Voorburch.

Haze's maternal grandmother, Liu Wen Hui, was married off at the age of sixteen to an older man, an officer in the PLA and a respected member of the Party. It was a marriage of convenience and protection. Her family were capitalists and had to give up almost everything to avoid persecution as Mao tightened his grip on the country in the late forties.

After fathering three daughters, Haze's mother being the last, Haze's grandfather grew sick and died. In the midst of the Cultural Revolution, Liu Wen Hui took the few items of value from her family that she had managed to keep and, when she had a chance, snuck them out of their apartment and threw them in the river on the way to work.

A set of ivory chopsticks. Tiger bones. Two bear feet. Items of sentimental and monetary value that could easily result in arrest or worse during the late sixties in China. She had hidden her family history for years, choosing never to join the Party for fear of a background check, but with the death of her husband, his protection disappeared. She didn't want to risk leaving her three daughters alone for the sake of some kitchen utensils and ultimately useless traditional medicine.

On July 20th, 1969, human beings walked on the moon for the first time. That night, my mother, having recently graduated from George State College for Women with a degree in music, went to the movies with some younger cousins. She doesn't remember much about the night except that she was probably drunk or high and couldn't have given

less of a shit about Apollo 11.

My father watched the landing with his family on a small black and white TV in a Cleveland suburb. He was a middle school English teacher; a job my grandmother had arranged for him so as to continue his draft deferment after graduating from Kenyon College. At twenty-three, he was already almost completely bald and had a thick, brown beard. This made him look older than he was, which he claims helped keep his students, stuck in a drowning rustbelt city, attentive and well-behaved.

Had he not gotten that deferment, and had his admittedly high draft number been called, there's a chance, however small, that he would have encountered Haze's uncle's father, Sun Ying Cai, in Southeast Asia. Though Sun Ying Cai and his family, avowed communists, had moved from Vietnam to China during the 40s, he returned to Vietnam during the late 60s and early 70s. He was a fairly high ranking officer in the intelligence gathering branch of the People's Liberation Army, though he won't talk about it, at least not to me. Haze's family has never been shy about challenging his claim that he speaks no English and have implied several times that he learned it in order to interrogate American POWs during the war.

The first time I met Sun Ying Cai, during the Spring Festival holidays in 2009, we were stopped by a pair of aggressive armed guards at the entrance to his building, something I had yet to encounter in China. They recognized Haze's uncle, but they were obviously nervous about the foreigner attempting to enter what I later found out was an

apartment for retired army officers of a certain, yet unspecified, category.

That afternoon, Sun Ying Cai had me flip through a book of almost one hundred karaoke DVDs, mostly English titles, and pick a few to sing with him. A few hours later, after dinner and drinks, we performed a fairly drunken rendition of “Let It Be” together. Sun Ying Cai may have claimed that he spoke no English, but he knew The Beatles better than I did, and the whole time we were singing, his eyes seemed to say that he understood the meaning of every word.

When Haze's father was around ten, his mother left, moving out of their mountain village to a nearby town. She was tired of the beatings. Her husband, Haze's grandfather, would drink rice liquor and corner her, punching and slapping her face, her stomach, her chest, wherever he could reach. Haze's father took the brunt of the abuse after his mother left, protecting his younger brother by distracting their father.

When the abuse became too severe, Haze's father would take his brother to a nearby family friend and then walk all night to the town where his mother had moved and stay with her for a few days to recover. He had to go back, though. Every time he dreaded it and knew his father would just drink himself into a rage again and again until the next time he had to walk back down the mountain.

I loved Amsterdam from the first step off the train. The climate, the canals, the architecture, the coffee shops, the museums, the mushroom shops, the meat croquet

vending machines, even the blue and white trams barreling down the middle of pedestrian-heavy streets.

Our first night there, Allie and I were walking along a canal in the Red Light District with a few friends from the castle. One of them, Eva, had never smoked pot and didn't want to, so she ate a hash brownie instead, which caused her to hallucinate.

After dark, the Red Light District, which had been crowded with young families and older tourists during the day, got a little rowdy. The outdoor cafés were packed and pink-lighted windows separated the crowds from the prostitutes on display. It was loud, and Eva kept gripping my arm, asking, “Is it supposed to feel like this?” Allie was laughing at her and the frustrated expression on my face.

Then there was a crash and the sound of broken glass scattering on the sidewalk. Someone slammed into my back. I looked around, confused and a little angry, when Allie pointed to a man running away from us. It was difficult for me to see in the dark, but I caught a glimpse.

His arm was twisted back so that he was grasping at something on his back. Blood ran down his forearm and was soaking his shirt. A large piece of jagged glass stuck out of his shirt just below his left shoulder blade. Some people walking out of a sex toy shop pointed at him and laughed.

Haze went to one of the best middle schools in Kunming. This could have led to one of the best high schools, and then a good university, but she suffered from testing

anxiety and scored poorly on her high school entrance exam. In China, the school you attend is determined by a series of standardized entrance examinations, as well as your family's "guanxi," loosely translated as "relationships." Or as most Americans would say, "it's all about who you know." Because of her father's accident, much of his guanxi had vanished in a loss of face, an ingrained aspect of Chinese culture viewed more consciously than in the West, and a terrible thing to lose.

On the way home from school each day, Haze would stop and buy a bowl of deep fried potato wedges covered in a spicy oil and pepper sauce. She'd eat them on the way home even though she knew her mother had worked hard to prepare a specially balanced dinner tailored for her and her husband's various health issues, many due to malnutrition thanks to The Great Leap Forward, which left tens of millions of people dead from starvation in the late 1950s.

Haze's father also had, and still has, kidney problems resulting from his paralysis, but her mother managed to make dishes that were both delicious and fulfilled the strict dietary guidelines laid out by their doctors. Haze would eat this second dinner every night, on a full stomach, and gained weight. There were few overweight children in China during the 90s, so she was ostracized at school, as overweight children often are throughout the world. She was also embarrassed by her father's condition, his paralysis a loss of face among her peers, and her grades suffered. Her high school entrance exam scores were poor; her chances of acceptance to a top-tier university were ruined.

During my time teaching in China, one of the biggest challenges was getting students to understand that they didn't have to get perfect grades or score in the 99th percentile on the SAT to get admitted to an excellent American university. Attempts to inform them that there were well-respected universities beyond Harvard, Stanford, and MIT were greeted with puzzled stares. The only explanation I felt ever got through to them was when I told them that my first university was one they'd never heard of, and I'd gotten the chance to spend a semester living in a castle in Europe. The looks of disbelief on their faces helped me really understand what a different system my students were living in, and what a privileged life I'd lived growing up in America.

In mid-October, Allie and I took a train from Avignon to Figueres, where we planned to catch a bus to Cadaqués, a picturesque coastal village in Spain where Salvador Dali used to spend quite a bit of time. As we were about to cross the border, a yellow lab started running up and down the aisle. We thought it was cute, then changed our minds when it latched onto the backpack at my feet and growled. Two men in uniforms approached immediately and ordered us, in stilted English, to come with them. Even without American flags sewn onto our bags, we were obvious. I had to explain that I didn't have any marijuana, we were studying abroad in the Netherlands, and that my backpack must have smelled like it from earlier purchases that semester. It took awhile to get things straightened out, with Allie crying and terrified the whole time.

Later, on the bus from Figueres to Cadaqués, I clutched Allie's hand so tightly

from fear that we'd drive off the narrow mountain road that she hissed at me to let go. On the walk to the hotel, which had a view of the Mediterranean, Allie walked ahead of me while I lagged behind. My legs were shaky from the bus ride and I was weighed down by both of our bags. I said something rude to her about it.

We didn't speak for several hours, our anger towards each other and the aftershocks of terror blinding us to the sunset that was framed by the doorway to our balcony.

When it was time for Haze to go to college, her father told her to go to a school as far away from home as she could. He didn't want her to stay in Kunming, stuck taking care of her paralyzed father. She ended up studying English Education in Wuhan, a twenty-six hour train ride away, at a second-rate university. It was an opportunity made possible due only to her father's limited *guanxi*. In China, higher education is not just about doing well on tests, but who you know. It's an interesting, and possibly disastrously flawed system for a country trying to drag a billion people out of the village-life mindset.

Her dorm room had enough space to hold four sets of bunk-beds and nothing else. There were no desks and only one small window. Wuhan is known as one of the three ovens of China, and the province of which it's the capital, Hubei, is China's Minnesota, famous for its many lakes. The combination of heat and available breeding grounds lead to an annual explosion of the mosquito population, and since the only way to get any fresh air in their dorm room was to leave the window open, Haze and her roommates

were constantly dealing with bites all over their exposed skin.

When the itching became too much, they would boil water with an electric kettle and pour it on their legs for relief.

In early November of 2003, during my semester at Kasteel Well, I came down with some kind of viral infection in my throat. I was feverish and couldn't swallow anything without terrible pain. The one doctor in Well prescribed anti-viral medication and some pain relief spray for my throat. Allie stayed with me instead of traveling that weekend, sleeping wrapped around my body in the empty Voorburcht to help control my shivering.

After I spent two days in bed, eating only what Allie managed to bring me from the cafeteria in the main castle's basement, Allie made a comment I can't remember now. Maybe she was wondering what her friends were doing, or something equally innocuous, but it infuriated me. I sneered at her and angrily shuffled from my room. Everyone else was off traveling, and walking through the castle's empty courtyard was eerie and unnerving. It was silent and overcast and when I finally reached the empty cafeteria I drank some tea and ate a little yogurt before my stomach, shrunken by anger and several days of involuntary fasting, told me I was done.

Still angry, and weak, I stumbled while walking up the stairs to the courtyard. When I raised my hands to catch my fall, my left hand broke through one of the wavy windowpanes in the door. The sound of glass shattering startled the resting birds floating

in the inner moat. Quacking and honking mixed with the rustle of wings and splashing of birds taking flight from the water. Underneath the explosion of noise, I heard the tinkling of glass on the stone floor of the courtyard, and then Allie's scream at the sight of blood dripping down my arm.

After graduating with a degree in English Education, Haze got her first job teaching Business English at the Chinese equivalent of a junior college. There she met her first foreign friends: an Australian named Ben and a Filipino woman named Babylyn. A few weeks later, one of her roommates started dating Victor, a former US naval officer from Boston. He was the first black man either of them had ever met. The expat community in Wuhan was small, and eventually Haze had met a good percentage of the foreigners working in the city, including a British ESL teacher named Simon.

She worked there for just under two years and went out dancing at least three times a week with her co-workers, both foreign and Chinese. One of her best friends, a Chinese girl whose English name was Flora, got engaged to, and then broke up with, Ben. Victor, the ex-naval officer, had gatherings at his apartment where they would watch science fiction movies and television shows on \$1 bootleg DVDs.

Every few months Haze would take the train back to Kunming. Her mother had hired a retired man in his late-fifties from a village in the countryside to help take care of Haze's father. They called him "Uncle," and paid him around two hundred US dollars a month, quite a bit of money at the time, most of which he sent to his wife, who had

stayed in their village. He supplemented this income by collecting cans, glass and plastic bottles, as well as cardboard in his spare time and selling them to a local recycling plant.

The only way to enter any of the apartments in their building was from one of the two staircases. These could only be reached from the interior concrete courtyard, which was accessed through a single entrance with a wrought iron gate that was locked at midnight. The building was U-shaped, with an eight-foot high concrete wall topped by barbed wire blocking the gap. Only truly dedicated intruders would be able to get in without being noticed. It was like Kasteel Well in a way, though more traditionally communist than medieval in its architecture, and lacking a moat. But its impenetrably high walls and single entrance were spiritual cousins to Kasteel Well's.

To accommodate the needs of Haze's father, he was moved into a small two-room space underneath one of the apartment building's staircases, which he and Uncle shared. With mostly retired soldiers and their families as tenants, the apartment had been designed with security guards in mind. Uncle and Haze's father took over this duty, keeping track of visitors and greeting residents in the courtyard, which is where I, when visiting in September 2008, met my soon-to-be father-in-law for the first time. When he needed to lay down, which was every few hours due to blood pressure issues from his paralysis, Uncle would lift him from an almost twenty-year-old Japanese wheel chair and place him on his bed in his small room under the stairs.

When our semester abroad ended, Allie and I returned to Boston. Our friend Steve met us at the airport. The three of us had met during orientation week the year before and were inseparable as freshmen. Our second semester at Emerson, Steve and I had been roommates and he had briefly dated Allie's roommate, Sarah, a redhead from Houston. The four of us would sometimes all sleep in our room, five floors above a Dunkin Donuts at the corner of Tremont and Boylston Streets, though Steve would occasionally stay with Sarah on the other side of Boston Common in the girls' dorm on Beacon Street. He couldn't afford to join us at the castle.

The day after we returned, I took a Greyhound to Concord, New Hampshire to work as an intern for Howard Dean's presidential campaign. I took the semester off to work for a man I truly, though naively, believed would help end the war in Iraq that had been dragging on for almost a year. A few days after I arrived in Concord, Saddam Hussein was captured, hiding in a hole. When asked about it, Howard Dean stated that the capture of Saddam did not make America safer. I was proud of his honesty and didn't know that it was the beginning of the end for his campaign. People want to feel safe, even at the expense of their own safety.

When I got back to Boston a few months later, Allie and I fought constantly for a few weeks before she broke up with me. I was devastated and depressed, stuck subletting a room in an apartment I'd found on Craigslist with three people who'd known each other since middle school. The bedroom I'd rented belonged to a friend of theirs who was studying abroad for the semester. Steve and I made plans to find an apartment together and resume our roommate relationship when my sublease was over.

We finally found the perfect place in Somerville, near Davis Square. The night before we were going to sign the lease, Steve came over to the apartment I was subletting and sat on my bed while I straddled my desk chair. He told me that while I had been working on the campaign, he and Allie were “together.” I was too surprised to be angry and he left, still apologizing. We didn't move in together, and only spoke a few times afterwards during tense, chance meetings near campus.

While Haze loved teaching English, the pay was low and she decided to become a tour guide. In China, being a licensed tour guide is a well paid and highly respected career, and becoming one is quite a process. To be licensed, candidates must pass four extremely rigorous exams, establishing expertise in English, Chinese History, knowledge of foreign customs, and a final exam on the specifics of a wide range of popular tourist destinations. She left Wuhan and moved back to Kunming in August of 2007 to study for the exams, which are only offered once a year, less than a month before I arrived.

In the summer of 2004, I was living in another Craigslist-sourced sublet on Mission Hill, Kerry won the Democratic nomination, and I lost my terrible job at a mall kiosk where I sold cell phone cases and had to fight for bathroom breaks. I only had enough money following that to afford two out of three things: food, marijuana, or cigarettes. Food drew the short straw and I lost forty pounds in three months.

The end of my relationships with Allie and Steve, the end of the Dean campaign, Bush's reelection; all of it made me, looking back on it now, go a little crazy. I missed Kasteel Well, and my depression and laziness—along with a newly developed habit of heavy drinking once I turned twenty-one—led to a long list of incompletes on my transcript from Emerson.

A year later, just before Christmas in 2005, I dropped out of Emerson and moved to Florida to live with my father. My first job there was at a neighborhood Italian restaurant owned by a Dutch man named Tony whose family, coincidentally, owned a home in Cadaqués, the Spanish town where Allie and I had visited and fought. I started out as a dishwasher, and on my second night, I slipped on the way back to the dish pit. The smoking oil in the pan I was carrying sloshed out and onto my hand. I watched as my skin melted, peeling back to expose the muscles and membranes underneath.

I lasted two months, then switched to working full-time at Radioshack, selling cell phones to people who barely understood how to turn them on. I was good at it, and the chances of serious injury were far lower. A year later I got the chance to transfer home to San Antonio to work as a Radioshack assistant manager. I made the move in January of 2007 and was placed in management training almost immediately. By the end of the summer I was told I would soon be managing my own store.

I was happy to be able to spend a good portion of my week not dealing with customers, and was thrilled that my new schedule meant I could avoid the strangest co-worker I'd ever had: Michael. None of us understood exactly why Michael chose to eat his lunch sitting on the toilet in the employee bathroom. It was the same thing every day:

tuna salad on white in a sandwich-shaped tupperware container with a bottle of coke and a ziplock of baby carrots. He would take his half-hour lunch break exactly three hours and forty-five minutes into his eight-hour shift, walk into the bathroom with his mini-cooler, lock the door, and chew so loudly we could hear him through the door over the sounds of the vent fan.

One morning in early August 2007, I woke up and got high, as I had done almost every morning for the last five years, and got dressed in my Radioshack uniform—name tag affixed to my blue button-down shirt, tucked into khaki pants. I imagined waking up twenty years later, doing the same thing. Selling things to people that they didn't need. Six weeks later, after three weekends in a Teaching English as a Second Language class and selling my truck for cash, I arrived in Wuhan.

I decided to move to China because nothing else seemed tolerable, but half a year later, not much had changed. I was still miserable, but miserable in another country. As Hemingway wrote in *The Sun Also Rises*, “You can't get away from yourself by moving from one place to another. There's nothing to that.”

Haze, even with her testing anxiety, passed her first three tour guide exams, but failed the fourth. Since the exams are only offered once a year, she decided to move back to Wuhan to once again work as an English teacher. Simon was in the shower when I heard someone knock. I left my room and opened the front door. Haze was standing in the hallway, fashionable and beautiful in a form fitting dress with a stylish haircut. She

smiled at me and it made my heart ache with loneliness.

She introduced herself and asked if Simon was home. Wrongly assuming she had more-than-friendly feelings for him, I told her Simon was in the shower and that she was welcome to wait for him on the couch. Then I walked back into my room and closed the door, unable to even be in the same room as her.

THE MARKET

January, 2012

It's Spring Festival, Chinese New Year, the last day of the year of the Rabbit. Most of China is shut down as half a billion people journey home to see their families. In the morning, Mama and I walk to a vegetable market next to what used to be an apartment building.

Dirty pink and white bricks are scattered among stones and gravel, forming post-apocalyptic piles of debris three stories high. A few walls that escaped the destruction still stand. There are empty holes where windows used to be and the rubble rises higher the closer it is to the shells of what were once homes. There are hundreds of people, maybe over a thousand, in this market tucked amongst the ruins, all here to buy ingredients for the largest feast of the year.

I have a folded up canvas bag in my pocket and follow Mama along the narrow makeshift path into the market. This requires some effort. People walk against each other, some trying to get to the market, some trying to get back out to the street. Others stop to haggle with peasants from the countryside, who have illegally set up cloth or plastic sheets along the path on relatively flat sections of rocks and shattered cement, selling vegetables and homemade noodles from their farms.

Finally, we arrive in the market proper and the first thing I see is a pile of cabbage

leaves being ground into the dirty cement floor. Customers pay by weight, and no one wants the outer leaves, so they're ripped off and tossed to the ground to ensure the lowest possible price. Everyone who comes afterwards steps on the leaves, mixing in dirt and powdered brick, grime from the street and sidewalks, and whatever else they've stepped on so far that morning. It creates a muddy green, white, and black pile of fragrant rotting cabbage. I wander off on my own so Mama doesn't get charged the always higher foreigner price and slip a little as I step on some cabbage; the pile is too wide to step over and there are too many people on either side to walk around it.

Where the concrete floor isn't covered in decaying vegetable matter, it's a gray wet khaki, stained with splotches of grime. A thousand people yelling, arguing, cajoling—an almost physical presence of sound. Cigarettes hang from the mouths of men counting out change for customers. There's a corrugated metal roof overhead, held up by rusting steel I-beams. It's like a wall-less airport hanger. I am constantly bumped and pushed by fellow customers. People stare at me and some shout, "Hello!" in English with big grins, pointing to their goods. There are tables of tables; long rectangles, maybe twenty meters long and four meters wide. Inside these tables of tables stand the sellers, their produce sitting in front of them, the good stuff hidden in boxes and crates at their feet. Cabbage; mushrooms of all sizes and colors—brown, white, yellow, long and thin, short and fat, with stems and without; green tubers; two-meter long sugar canes; leafy greens, giant carrots, eggplants, several varieties of potatoes, boxes of tomatoes; piles of ginger and garlic; bitter melon, watermelon; dried and fresh peppers; mountains of eggs—chicken, duck, and quail; apples; sacks and sacks of different types of rice and beans; trays of

congealed cubes of pigs' blood; pickled pig ears; pork sausages, thin, red, and long-sweet and spicy; a tall pile of severed pig legs, pink skin still on, black hair still attached. A man with a hand-held blow torch burns the hair off to order and a woman, presumably his wife, wraps and stuffs one into a giant sack for a customer. A head lies on the table behind them, its eyes empty sockets. Tables and tables of tofu in plastic tubs...

THE SUN AND THE MOON

July 22nd, 2009

Haze and I stepped off the elevator on the thirty-second floor of our apartment building and headed up the stairs. The roof was crowded and hot. Wuhan—one of the Three Ovens of China—spread out below us in every direction, baking under the July sun. Almost everyone held a pair of identical black sunglasses in anticipation of the eclipse. Haze pulled a second pair from her purse and smiled at me.

“You forgot,” she told me. “I knew you'd forget, sha gua. Here.”

She handed me the sunglasses. They were made of cheap plastic and a little tight along the sides of my head. I looked around; except for the small amount of light coming in from the gap between my face and the glasses, it was like wearing a welder's mask. There was a dismayed muttering as a cloud floated in front of the sun with only a few moments to go before the moon would appear.

But a solar eclipse doesn't start or end in an instant, and as the cloud moved to slowly reveal the sun, people exclaimed, pointing out that the moon was visible. It started as a small sliver of black on the edge of the sun, creeping onward until it could be recognized as part of a circle.

Even with the glasses, staring at the sun for too long was uncomfortable and left white spots in my vision. I took them off and glanced around to see everyone looking in

the same direction, their heads angled upwards as one. It was quieter than normal for the middle of the afternoon, as if all of Wuhan had paused at that moment to peer into the sky. The moon continued to crawl across the sun's face. It was noticeably cooler and the wind began to pick up.

Haze patted my shoulder with the back of her hand to get my attention, and I looked up with her. The clouds had miraculously cleared and the smog wasn't too thick that day. The shadowed moon inched across the sky until it was almost fully visible; the sun's corona was a nearly unbroken circle around it. Then everything turned much darker, the horizon glowing like those last few minutes of deep blue sky after the sun sets, during the transition from dusk to night. Thousands of cars started to honk and flash their headlights, and we could hear screams and cheers from the streets below, but it sounded hollow and tinny from so high up on the roof. Gusts of wind whipped Haze's summer dress around her legs and a few people wrapped their arms around themselves or hugged each other. LED lights on the sides of the surrounding skyscrapers lit up as if it were night. In the mid-day darkness, people stood in clumps on roofs, on balconies, and on the ground below, all of them staring up at the sun and the moon.

SNAPSHOTS

Archie, a talented photographer, refused to go to the doctor, even when his left testicle grew to the size of an orange. He was convinced he would be deported, and China refused to publicly acknowledge the rising rates of STDs.

Wuhan was choked with filth. It was like living at the bottom of a giant trashcan. Going two or three weeks at a time without seeing the sky was not unusual. Mountains of plastic and metal refuse were loudly processed in the recycling plant next to our apartment building.

Archie once developed a severe rash on his feet; they turned bright red, then blistered and peeled continuously for months. He never went to the doctor. He wore sandals in a city where people shit and pissed on the street. Garbage juice accumulated in potholes and cracks in the sidewalk, making the bottom of our shoes slick.

In winter we played ping-pong with our hands, sliding around on the linoleum floor of Chris and Nikki's apartment in our socks. We'd open the windows and turn on the heater when the cigarette smoke got too thick.

Carlos found a kitten in a pile of garbage outside our apartment, Archie helped nurse it back to health. He suggested the name "Chairman Meow," but Carlos decided on Quimby.

We spent many nights sitting on rickety metal stools at wobbly tables, drinking cheap Chinese beer outside a chao mian shop. The owner, whom Nikki called sweetie, and his wife would count the beer bottles on our table at the end of the night as young professionals walked by and stared in awe as every inch was taken up with green glass.

When Archie told me the flesh at the end of his dick was flaking off from overuse, I tipped one of those green bottles back and said nothing.

Instead of using the public toilets, we would stand and stumble to an unlit alley ten or fifteen meters away. The smell of ammonia slapped me sober each time. Careless missteps resulted in urine on my shoes. If I glanced up, I could see right into living rooms, bedrooms, and kitchens. Sometimes the occupants stared back, and I would get bladder shy or feel ashamed that I was using the side of their home as my toilet and go somewhere else.

Archie didn't have that problem. Shame was never an issue with him.

If it was late, or he was drunk enough, he would walk over and piss on the emergency exit of the internet café next door. They eventually put up a metal gate to discourage him, but he just pissed on that too.

Teaching children wasn't a job any of us were particularly fit for. Smells unique to central China saturated the stale classroom air. Dried fish, spiced fruit paste, five-year-old "little emperors" too pampered to wipe their own asses. I occasionally threatened to throw my

students out the window, but the temperature outside was usually too hot or too cold to open it.

One night, Archie complained that he had to put a quarter of his salary over the next few months towards an abortion for one of his lady friends. That's too bad, I said. Yeah, he agreed, she was a cool girl.

During my first week in Wuhan, Archie and Chris got me drunk and guided me through an unlit maze of alleyways to a massage parlor with a pink light in the window.

I sat on a bed, hidden behind a tattered curtain, while a prostitute tried to put a condom on me. The language barrier made it difficult to explain to her that putting a condom on a frightened penis was impossible, and I left.

Archie's prostitute was so impressed that she went to his apartment and fucked him for free later that week. Did you use condoms? I asked. What's the point? he responded.

New Year's morning he knocked on the door to my apartment. I opened it to the sight of him with bloodshot eyes, wearing nothing more than a pair of filthy boxers and a shell-shocked expression.

One of his ex-girlfriends came to school wearing a pink Hello Kitty windbreaker and threw a large styrofoam cup of coffee at him. Archie instinctively held up his laptop to shield his face and had to spend over a thousand RMB to have it repaired. Many of his photographs were lost forever.

Archie was almost the best man at my wedding. He lost the game of Rock, Paper, Scissors to Carlos that decided it and ended up standing with me and Haze, holding a silver tray of cigarettes for the guests as they arrived.

The two of us sat at a sidewalk café drinking overpriced rum and cokes, preparing to go our different ways. Archie was moving to Qingdao, where they sell beer on the street in two-liter bags. I was heading home to America with Haze, wishing I could stay. You'll be back, he told me.

ANTICIPATORY NOSTALGIA

August, 2009

The night before I left Wuhan, Carlos and I went to dinner, and he bought a small bag of hash from the waiter who sold it for the owner of the restaurant. We never really knew who that was exactly, and since the workers were from Xinjiang in western China, they didn't speak English or Mandarin very well, so the language gap was wider than usual. But some things surpass the need for the spoken word; the desire to get high seems to be universal.

The next day, a few hours before I was to leave for the airport, Carlos and I decided to go up to the roof one final time together and smoke a big hash spliff—cheap Chinese hash and cheaper tobacco mixed together. Before heading up, the two of us walked down the block so I could, one last time, enjoy one of my favorite Wuhan street snacks. It resembled a taco, but instead of a flour or corn tortilla cooked on a griddle or in a skillet, these flatbreads were deep-fried in a giant wok resting on a metal barrel full of coals on the sidewalk. The pork was sliced, marinated, and steamed, then soaked in a brown sauce that must have been a family secret since none of the other similar vendors ever got close to matching its deliciousness.

The possible fillings were fairly limited: fried eggs, steamed pork, cilantro, scallions, pepper oil, and that secret sauce. They also had some type of sausage, but I

never heard of or saw anyone getting it. The eggs were fried in the same giant wok as the pancakes, and all of the ingredients mixed together into heavenly deep-fried treats which melted in your mouth with a salty, savory goodness. I would also guess that they were one of the most artery-clogging things I've ever eaten.

We dropped off our tasty treats in my apartment and headed up to the roof. It was magnificently deserted. Late August in Wuhan is brutally hot, but the steady wind at thirty floors up made it almost tolerable, though lighting the spliff was quite a challenge. Carlos was patient and finally got the bastard smoking. We strolled around the roof, taking in the different views and landmarks, and discussing our immediate plans for the future. I was going to Kunming for two months of wedding planning and honeymooning, then heading to America with Haze. Carlos was staying in Wuhan, though would be flying down for the wedding in October.

We could see directly down into the stadium at Jiang Shan Park. The roller coaster was running a few hundred feet away. Turning a few degrees to the right, English First, the school where we had met and where Carlos still worked, wasn't visible, but the Mingsheng Bank Tower, still the tallest building in Wuhan right next door, was impossible to miss. In the opposite direction, the Yangtze and the Wu rivers flowed together and everything was unusually peaceful and calm.

"I'm going to miss it," I said with the spliff in my hand, nodding towards the city and rivers.

"Maybe," said Carlos. "But there are some things I don't think you'll miss, right?"

"The filth," I admitted.

“The crowds,” he responded.

“There are crowds in Kunming.”

Carlos took a hit and rocked his head sideways as if unsure. “Yeah, but you're not staying there that long.”

“I'll tell you one thing I am going to miss,” I said.

“The spitting? The constant diarrhea? Ri gan mian?” Carlos asked, the last referring to the breakfast noodle dish found on every Wuhan street in the morning.

“Those things too, but I was thinking about the Wuhan bellies. I'm going to miss those fat, sweaty, bulging stomachs.”

We laughed about the Wuhanese habit of men showing off their bellies in the summer, but by mocking my idealized view of Wuhan, Carlos helped me realize how high I truly must have been to think of Wuhan, as much as I loved it, as peaceful and calm. I thought of the journey I would be taking in a few hours; a taxi to the airport through Wuhan's absurd and terrifying traffic, then navigating the airport without Haze to translate or take care of any issues. Peaceful and calm were definitely not the right words to describe any aspect of the experience. My thoughts focused on memories of Wuhan and what I really would miss, the pre-nostalgia nostalgia of preparing to leave a place which, along with the spliff, made it very difficult for me to keep the conversation going.

We left the roof after finishing and went back to my apartment, where Carlos and I said goodbye to each other with an awkward man-hug and I prepared for the trip to the airport.

EMPTY STARES

June, 2012

There's a bridge near the apartment in Kunming that goes over the canal-like Panlong River, which is so drought-stricken that the water would only come up to your knees if you wanted to risk the side-effects of submersing part of yourself in it.

At night, thin Chinese men with oddly-styled hair—it twists, twirls and spikes upwards and sideways in various shades of brown and magenta—grill fermented tofu, sliced potatoes, zucchini, and Chinese leeks. Pork skin and belly spit oil as coals flare. Under the bridge—covered in layers of soot and residue from dusty water and polluted drainage, sliding down the side of the wall—there's a fruit shop next to a dairy shop next to a DVD shop. Buy a pineapple for a dollar, have it peeled and chopped by an unwashed knife for an extra twenty cents. Buy some date-flavored yogurt or some ultra-pasteurized milk in a bag for about twenty-five cents. DVDs are a dollar fifty. Why go watch the Avengers at the theater for 80RMB when you can buy it and watch it at home for nine?

There's a short-haired woman lying on the sidewalk. I can't see her at first. I'm just trying to buy some baijiu. The sun is down—late enough to start drinking, but she started way before me. There's a crowd growing. Police officers who probably aren't even allowed to handle real weapons, barely even trained, just given poorly fitted uniforms, begin to gather.

They stand around telling people to leave but no one does and there are no consequences for disobeying.

She's on the sidewalk. There are square bricks with rounded corners under her arm, which is twisted backwards against the side of her neck and face. She's convulsing in a white t-shirt with blue trim on the end of her sleeves and around the neck. Denim capris end at her shins and there's a small scrape that's oozed blood into one of her socks. Her legs and one of her arms twitch; someone laughs uncomfortably when her head starts jerking back and forth, unintentionally grinding her cheek into the ground.

The crowd around her doesn't move. It just continues to grow. Parents and grandparents are holding children who stare in mute fascination while no one does anything to help. There is no compassion in their faces, just emptiness. There is also no courtesy; the crowd is blocking traffic on the narrow road between the sidewalk, where this girl will probably soon choke to death on her own vomit, and the riverside park where they'd usually be strolling.

I mutter darkly as I push through the crowd to get away from the scene, where there's nothing I can do.

A KUNMING COMMUTE

March, 2012

When I leave our apartment in the morning to walk to work at Yunnan University, the first thing I see is my father-in-law. He sits in his wheelchair, which is over twenty-years old, in the cement courtyard of our building. The seat cushion has been replaced by a ten-inch thick block of light yellow foam. There's a small, two-room area underneath the apartment building's stairs, which is both the security guard office and his bedroom.

A man from the countryside whom we call “Uncle” is his caregiver; he cooks and cleans, bathes him, feeds him, wipes his ass for him. Uncle adjusts my father-in-law's catheter and follows every instruction given regarding food preparation. The salary is low, around two-hundred dollars a month, plus room and board. It's an income he supplements by collecting plastic and glass bottles, and discarded cardboard boxes, for recycling.

My father-in-law waves at me, his arm full of energy but his muscles are not organized enough to hold his hand still and it flops a bit like someone who took too many muscle relaxants. His sincere smile makes me grin back, but on the inside I'm wincing at the state of his teeth. There's one missing in front, which leaves a gaping hole. The rest of his teeth look like they might fall out any time and I sometimes cringe when I think about what it would be like to try bite down into a sandwich with a mouth like that. It reminds

me of having baby teeth, when I would be eating lunch and feel that wobble in my mouth or bite down on something hard and unexpected, knowing it was going to lead to a visit from the tooth fairy. It always took me a moment to realize I was chewing my own tooth and then the coppery metal taste of blood would ooze onto my tongue.

I wish my father-in-law good morning and, in my awful Chinese, tell him I'm going to work. I wish we had more to talk about, but my Chinese is shit and his English is even worse, though we're in China and not America so there is no excuse for my laziness. I spend most of my time reading English books, writing English stories and teaching English to rich Chinese students and working adults who are not nearly as lazy as I am. Learning English is a necessity for a better life in China. They want to get a promotion at work, or immigrate to Canada or the US. A foreigner doesn't need to speak even one word of Chinese to get a job in China. I couldn't even say "Ni hao" when I arrived. There's a certain proficiency you need to get around if you venture beyond the expat enclaves, but once you've reached that level, learning Chinese becomes something a certain type of foreigner does, and I'm not that type.

I walk out the apartment's courtyard. It's not an image the word "courtyard" normally brings to mind. The ground is cracked cement with a broken wall to the south which separates it from the hotel and restaurant next door. The other three walls are made up of the apartment building, set in a U shape.

Within the courtyard are a few groupings of potted plants. They're kept watered in this arid climate by dirty dishwater after every meal we have downstairs with my father-in-law. Jade, various cacti, and other slightly-exotic-but-I-don't-know-enough-about-

plants-to-say-for-sure plants are clustered together in pots even more varied than the plants themselves.

When I step past the iron gate, there is a swelling of noise and activity. Kunming is constructing a subway line and station right outside our apartment. Haze's parents will probably be forcibly moved at some point in the next few years. There's money to be made by building a high-rise apartment, or office building here. The location is prime. The government might offer a new apartment on the outskirts of the city, or maybe cash as compensation. We're hoping for cash since the housing market in China is not looking too good, but we're not economists; we're teachers and parents and former hotel workers and army officers. We don't pretend to understand how the Chinese government operates or what type of twisted logic they use. And unlike everyone else, we don't try to.

There's a twisting blue passage of corrugated metal blocking my view of the construction, and it funnels the electric scooters and bicycles that are so ubiquitous in most Chinese cities. Unfortunately, they are funneled onto the sidewalk in this situation, which leads to much honking and cursing in Chinese (and English, depending on my mood) as the scooters and bicycles are forced to crawl along at the same pace as pedestrians. As the small side-street for two-wheeled and two-legged transportation narrows, a second blue wall appears on the other side. We all travel together down a narrow hallway of doom with six-foot high blue walls on either side of us. There's a sharp turn to the left about halfway through where the wall on the outside of the curve is dented and scratched from so many scooters and bicycles skidding into it. The smooth, dusty cement ground gets slick in wet weather.

I stopped paying attention to the horns and shouts months ago and do my best to knock off a mirror or two each time I pass through when the scooters get too close. There is no “right of way” in China. It's an every-man-for-himself situation and I'm physically bigger than most people here, so my way is often the right one, at least in these kinds of situations.

As I exit the blue passage of ineptitude, it's time to decide if I want to walk along the river or take the bus. This is a choice influenced by several factors, as most choices are. Time is not a major factor, as the bus can sometimes take longer to come than it takes to get from the bus stop to my destination by foot. The temperature is usually my main consideration. While it's generally cool and dry in Kunming, thanks to the high elevation, the city is so far south (about the same latitude as Key West) that sun can be brutal and roast me from overhead until I'm sweating through my undershirt and into my outerwear.

Today, I choose the walk. It just over twenty minutes, but I know I'll feel better for my first couple of classes if I walk. I turn right and briefly walk along the side of a major road before veering into a gas station's entrance while the road rises up into a relatively large suspension bridge which crosses the tiny, canal-like Panlong River. I walk between the gas station on my right and the steadily rising concrete wall of the bridge to my left. Just past the gas station is an internet café, full of Chinese men playing World of Warcraft and smoking cigarettes. Green tea is included for free, once an hour.

Past the internet café is a walled off building that transitions from a community center, to a Tai Chi platform, to a professional croquet practice field, depending on the time of day. I only know they play croquet because you can see down into it from the

bridge. The ground behind those walls is red clay, like a tennis court or infield of a baseball diamond.

A narrow passageway exists between the walls of the bridge and croquet field. Once again, pedestrians share this walkway with scooters and bicycles. There is much honking and the sound of cement crashing into cement as giant loose rectangles shift around when scooters roll over them.

Once I've passed through, some of the oldest buildings in Kunming stand to my right. They're made of red, uneven bricks with rusted metal roofs. Some are two stories, but none of them stand straight; the walls are crooked and tilted and from above, from the bridge above, it looks like a shanty town. From ground level, it's a collection of shops and restaurants and homes. The ground is an uneven collection of paved gravel and more of the removable cement blocks.

Underneath the bridge's overhang there are a group of regulars who spend most of their days here. One man is the owner of a clothing shop at the corner where you can turn right and pass through what foreigners call the "black market" street, or pass left and go under the bridge and enter Tau Yuan Square and walk along the river. He has longish hair, especially for a Chinese man. It's not styled, but is naturally wavy and almost touches his shoulders at the side. He's a large man, though not fat. He's close to six-feet tall, with a heavily lined face. He's here every morning, no matter what time I leave for work, and is usually cooking dinner on a portable electric stove when I come home at night. His clothes are rumpled and quite plain, usually dark colors without patterns or brand names. A small black dog with firm triangular ears wears a harness and is tied to a

scooter than must be the man's, though I've never seen him ride it.

The shop he owns is full of supposedly stolen goods. Ferragamo shoes and Gucci handbags and Prada purses and other name-brand goods lie in piles in the shop and on the filthy cement steps that lead up to it. The owner rarely watches what's going on in his shop, and there's usually someone with him. They smoke cigarettes with water pipes that look like giant bamboo bongos, or cook vegetables and meat in their old iron wok, or play cards. The dog barks at people when they walk by. The women who work in the store collect money and make sure that no one walks off with anything. I've seen the owner peering at the store a few times. His eyes narrow a bit and he never looks exactly pleased, but usually he seems satisfied. I thought he was homeless for several months until I saw that look and asked Haze about it, and she informed me he was the owner. He appears shrewd, and observes his business with an attention to detail I can never seem to match in my own work.

Then it's time to turn left and walk under the bridge. It's a four lane suspension bridge with cables that light up at night. There used to be shops and restaurants underneath, but the city government decided that there was too high a chance that the bridge would collapse, so instead of fixing the bridge or reinforcing it to prevent a disaster and potentially hundreds of deaths, they emptied the underside of the bridge of anything other than a fairly ugly ankle high, broad-leafed plant that doesn't require much sunlight. They've also strung barbed wire along parts of the meter-high cement wall so that no one can walk on those plants or sleep under the bridge unless they put in a small amount of effort. The barbs on the barbed wire only point in one direction and are half a

meter apart.

After climbing a spiral cement staircase, I'm atop the bridge and heading towards Yunnan University on Yuantong Road. There is mist, actual mist, this morning and it makes Yuantong Road quiet and mysterious. It's early enough that the traffic here hasn't gotten bad enough for much beyond generic honking. Across the street on my left is a Traditional Chinese Medicine hospital, designed to imitate the Yuantong Buddhist Temple, which I approach with trepidation. Shop after shop is selling incense as I get closer.

As usual, the beggars are already out. There's always an injured monk or two, along with a few people offering to tell your fortune. This is one of the few places in Kunming where I keep my hand on my wallet; pickpockets aren't as common here as they are in some of the bigger cities in the east, but this is one of the bigger tourist attractions in Kunming, and the high number of beggars and thieves are here for a reason.

But today there is someone new; a boy, maybe 10 years old, on a makeshift wheeled dolly. He has a wonderful smile that lights up when he sees me. Whether that's because he rarely sees foreigners or because he is certain I have cash, I don't know. He has no legs, pushing himself around on the dolly with his hands and lurching up like a seal when he speaks.

"Laowai! Hello!" he shouts at me, though with a friendly tone.

Some of the other beggars, as well as the people waiting in line to enter the temple, watch the scene unfold. I break the routine of completely ignoring all beggars and give him a brief smile.

“Ni hao,” I say, which makes him smile even wider.

He holds out a dull green plastic bowl and shakes it, making a few coins rattle and clink. I shake my head and he says something in Chinese that I can't catch, though he's still smiling as I walk away. He probably was just happy to meet a foreigner, but I can't give him money. I don't want to reward whoever took his legs.

RETURN TO WUHAN

April, 2012

Farms shine green through the gray smog as my flight approaches Wuhan. It's like looking at a raincloud from above, but it won't rain for another three days. The storm will streak the sides of buildings with captured particulate matter, a fancy name for the smog that is ever present in most Chinese cities. People say you should avoid getting caught in the rain, or take a shower if you do, or else your scalp will itch and flake for days afterwards. This is, so I'm told, the Chinese Century.

On the ground, the air is thick and cloying. It's opaque and hard to see much in the distance. It's been three years since I've been here and nothing about the air has changed. The cars have, though. Volkswagen taxis have replaced the Renaults and Citroens. The same dull, semi-metallic blue paint job covers them all. The airport is new, too. It's a huge glass and white metal structure, similar to a football stadium in America. Far different from the squat, flat-roofed building with smoke stained ceilings where I was greeted by Tarubva and Grace five years before.

It's almost May and as one of the three ovens of China, Wuhan is living up to its title. I can't stop sweating.

I sit alone in the passenger seat during the ride from the airport into downtown.

There's an entirely new suburb that wasn't there before. Rows of twelve-story apartment buildings with convenience stores and Ri Gan Mian shops on the first floors are lined up like dominoes.

In Hankou, the taxi driver gets lost and I happily give him directions to my old apartment building in broken Chinese. The New World department store goes by on the right and memories of discovering Parmesan cheese and Tabasco sauce float away as the Mingsheng Bank Tower comes into view. The six-story building where English First was located is still standing, but it's gutted. The school has moved into a new business park a few blocks away.

The tower was completed in 2010, a year after I left. A huge gym was supposed to open on the second and third floors, and thousands of memberships were sold at over \$1000US a person. Construction on that has yet to begin. Much of the tower still stands empty, and the top floors are obscured by smog.

The old neighborhood that surrounded my apartment building is gone. It hasn't changed, or been altered and reformed. New shops and businesses didn't move into places where old ones once belonged. It has been gutted and flattened. Piles of rubble and debris peek above a whitewashed brick wall, but the apartment, set apart, remains.

The old buildings, one and two-story hovels, were torn down. The alleys have simply vanished, or now dead end into new seven-story apartment buildings that look like they've been there for decades. That's what acid rain and acid air does to cheap cement. The street and the sidewalks are slick with dust and soot that have settled upon each other over and over in layers of filth. The rain doesn't wash them away, only compounds them

into some kind of sickly mud of pollutants.

I can't stop sweating. I need water and I can't find my way to any of the shops I expected to know. The old shortcuts are missing. A fruit shop where we'd buy a pineapple and pay an extra RMB to have them peel it for us is gone. An apartment building stands in its place, its footprint also covering a playground and a noodle shop where Haze and I took a couch-surfing British couple that stayed with us for a few days. They were on their way home from Japan and wanted to see inland China before it became too modernized. They just made it in time.

I head for RT Mart, the supermarket where we used to buy western liquor and goldfish crackers. There's a Starbucks at the entrance now and I stare through the window in surprise as I walk towards the inclined moving sidewalk. I buy a bottle of Jim Beam for the weekend to share with Archie and Carlos and go downstairs to have an iced coffee, a first for me in Wuhan, while I wait for Carlos to get off work. There are Subways here now, too. KFC, McDonald's and Pizza Hut are old news, but they still have lines out the door at night. There isn't enough ice in the iced coffee but the air conditioning feels nice and I pick a seat under the vent so the cool air goes down the back of my neck and makes my sweat-soaked shirt cold against my skin.

I drink my coffee as memories and habits come back in flashes and brief surges, like a glacier calving. Cracks and pops of the past impact upon my present and I see ghostly images of people and places where they used to be. There's a cart that sold noodles in front of a DVD shop that's no longer there. I walk back towards the apartment on Jiangnan Beilu, remembering the sound of the recycling center that's no longer there.

Carlos texts me to meet him at the new English First, so I walk a couple of kilometers to its new location, passing the Minsheng Bank Tower again. There's another Starbucks and the old McDonald's where we used to eat breakfast before teaching on Saturday mornings is visibly packed on the second floor of The New World tower.

Carlos and I greet each other. He's now the DOS for all three English Firsts in Wuhan, and shows me the new school. All the teachers are wearing the same shirt, a light blue polo with the official English First logo on the breast. The classrooms are all smart rooms, with digital projectors and built in computers. It is surreal. Unconsciously, I try to superimpose my memories of the slightly dilapidated school I worked in five years before on this 21st century language school. Carlos seems amused at my confusion and we discuss some of the changes. One thing that's the same is his apartment. We walk back, yet again, to the old neighborhood. He's still in Chris and Nikki's old place on the 7th (6th) floor, across the hall from the apartment I shared with Simon, who's now living in Shanghai. So is Melissa. Tarubva is in Wuxi, about an hour west of them.

Archie, though, calls from his taxi on the way into Hankou from the airport. He's just flown in from Qingdao and is ready to party. He tells us to meet him at his hotel, where he's reserved a suite. Carlos agrees and grabs his hash, handmade bong, and rolling papers. It's been three years since I've seen both of them at my wedding, but that weekend I discover that not much has changed, except that when we're stoned and drunk, wandering the streets of Wuhan a few hours later, we're on the way to get sandwiches—something unthinkable during my two years living in Wuhan. I had once excitedly eaten Subway in Beijing after not having such exotic food for more than a year. Now Wuhan is

a luxurious culinary destination for western fast food that I could have only dreamed of before. It is a distressing realization, so I vow to eat only Wuhanese food for the rest of the weekend. Thanks to Archie and Carlos and Jim Beam, I can't say if I was successful. The neighborhoods may be different. The western food options are slightly more varied, but this strange, twisted expatriate bond between the three of us has endured; multiple intercontinental moves, a marriage, and a child for me; a move and a new career for Archie; and an all-but-married integration for Carlos into his Filipino girlfriend's family, which includes eleven older brothers.

It is an interesting reunion.

THE WEDDING

October, 2009

As is somewhat common in China, ten months after we were legally married in January of 2009, Haze and I finally had our wedding that October in the hotel ballroom where her older cousin, Sun Jie Ming's daughter and the granddaughter of possibly-a-spy Sun Ying Cai, was a manager. Chinese weddings are different than American weddings, mostly in that they skip the ceremony and get right to the reception. The bride's guests filled twenty-three tables of ten; the groom's side filled one. My friends from Wuhan had a longer distance to travel, and I didn't expect anyone but my parents to fly to China from America, so I wasn't disappointed by the turnout.

After the MC was done shouting at the guests, and the dancing girls in traditional dress finished their performance, Haze and I circulated around the room, taking shots of water masquerading as rice liquor at each table since twenty-four shots of the real stuff would have caused alcohol poisoning.

Two tables, populated by Haze's former classmates in middle and high school, put together a disgusting concoction that mixed a little of everything at the table with some rice liquor, then dared me to drink it. I accepted their challenges and managed not to throw up, which impressed them greatly.

We returned to the ballroom stage and cut the wedding cake, which signaled to

everyone that they were allowed to leave or could begin circulating. Sun Ying Cai joined us as we chatted with my parents. Zhao Yaxin accompanied him. Chain-smoking throughout the wedding and after, the octogenarian continued to smile all night despite having lived through the Japanese occupation, the Chinese civil war, the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution, and Deng Xiao Ping's economic reforms. He was a likely former spy who had possibly been an English-speaking member of the Viet Cong.

With Haze translating, they introduced themselves to my parents and explained how pleased they were by our marriage and that it represented their hope for a long and peaceful friendship between China and America.

It was a wonderful moment to witness; two people who had lived through some of the most tumultuous events in recent times telling two people born into one of the most privileged and wealthiest generations in all of human history their hopes for peace and friendship. Haze was stunning in her hand-made phoenix and dragon wedding dress, and I wore my fifty-dollar tuxedo relatively well as we all hugged, shook hands, and smiled while posing for photographs.

As everyone prepared for a celebratory night of post-wedding karaoke, my parents returned to their luxury hotel; the same hotel that the Communist Party Chairman stays in when he visits Kunming. Sun Ying Cai and Zhao Yaxin waved off their concerned younger family members and joined us. They left karaoke early, but sang a few songs. Sun Ying Cai did some shots of liquor with me and the other foreigners, refusing to admit he could speak English with a grin and crinkled eyes. Zhao Yaxin lit wedding cigarettes one after another and sat with Haze's mother, clapping along with the

singers.

Around four in the morning, those of us staying in Haze's apartment stumbled up to the wrought iron gate and Uncle unlocked it for us. He smiled tiredly at us and offered to help us up the stairs. Once inside, everyone passed out on a pre-arranged couch or spot on the floor and Haze and I fell into bed in our cement castle.

BIOGRAPHY

Benjamin Liff grew up in San Antonio, Texas, and graduated from high school in 2002. He finally received his Bachelor of Arts in History from the University of North Florida in 2011 after a few false starts and making the decision that living anywhere but where he was in 2007 sounded like a good plan. He is married to a wonderful woman who goes by Haze, from a country with serious, but unrelated, smog issues. They have a four year old son named Jacob who is far too sarcastic for his age.