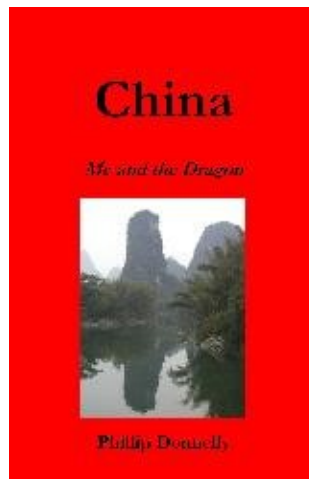


China-Me and the Dragon

By : **Phillip Donnelly**

Join the author on his month-long journey from Macao to Beijing: from the hi-tech metropolis of Hong Kong to old Lhasa, from the pollution of Chengdu to the pristine beauty of Yangshuo, from the tomb of the First Emperor to the new model city of Zhuhai. Join him on a journey through time, from China's past to its present and even its future. Join him on a journey through his own mind and its struggle to come to terms with the Land of the Dragon.



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Information on the Author

Phillip Donnelly grew up in Dublin. After completing a psychology degree, he realised that he was profoundly misanthropic, and started travelling the world looking for aliens to take him to another plan.

Unable to speak any foreign languages, he decided to teach English as a foreign language, as this was the only job that would allow him to travel widely without any marketable skills or noticeable intelligence. He has unsuccessfully searched for life from outer space in classrooms in the following countries: Spain, China, Russia, Thailand, Hong Kong, the UAE and France.

He currently lives in Paris with his patient and long-suffering wife who never gives up hope that his condition might improve.

Apart from this piece of travel writing he has also 'published' travel writings on India, a novel (Zoo) and a book of short stories (A.S.S.). He has recently ventured into the moving image, and been equally unsuccessful in that field.

More information on this strange but harmless creature can be found on his website and his YouTube channel.

www.geocities.com/ambricol/the_dark_site

www.youtube.com/phillipdonnelly

Forward

This 'book' has had three forms. Beginning life as a notebook I scribbled into on a four-week journey around China in 2005, it was later typed up and published on line, both on my own deserted web site and on various travel web sites. .

Anxious to be able to say I had 'published' four books in three months, I decided to covert the web travel writing into dead tree format, thinking it would only take a few days. However, it has taken far longer, since large parts of it had to be rewritten, being too awful for even me to put my name to. It is, of course, still badly written, but at least it's better than it was.

As with everything I write, it is more a journey through my own mind than anything else, but since that is where I live, I make no apologies for it. Moreover, thus far at least, my five loyal readers have been quite understanding.

Prelude

Warning

This preface is rambling, self-indulgent and far more concerned with the author's internal state of mind than with describing China. It is intended to prepare the reader for the rest of the book, but can be skipped by those already familiar with author's style, or those suffering from a psychiatric illness.

"This bread is as dry as a stick," Sandra complained angrily.

It's strange: the thoughts that go through your head on a holiday. While one should be inspired by the chance to experience a new culture and the sheer joy of travelling, it is the hum-drum trivialities that tend to occupy one's mind for a disconcertingly large part of the day.

The same day-to-day concerns that occupy your mind during the working week tend to rear their ugly heads when you're away as well. You cannot escape them, try as you might.

It was the same from the very beginning of the trip. Even on the flight from Bangkok to Macao, when I should have been salivating at the thought of one month exploring China, I found myself fixated on a group of noisy passengers sitting across the aisle from me.

To be honest, it would have been difficult not to notice them, as they were louder than the plane's engines.

They spent the entire flight shouting at each other, but in a friendly way. Not for the first time in my life, I

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wondered why some people shout rather than speak to people who are right beside them.

They were the kind of passengers who are incapable of sitting down. Like noisy children in a fairground, their energy bubbled over and they could not be still; even when seated they gesticulating wildly with their arms.

Jetting off into fantasy land, I wished there was a more thorough segregation of passengers at check-in. They used to separate smokers from non-smokers, so why don't they separate noisy people from quiet people?

It wouldn't be hard to do. The check-in girl would simply have to ask you, "*Would you like a noisy or a quiet seat, sir?*" and then seat you accordingly. In fact, why not does the same thing at the job centre too: "*Would you like to work in a quiet office or a noisy office?*" It could even be extended to the social sphere, with 'quiet parties' and 'noisy parties'. And what about education? Why shouldn't students have the right to demand a 'quiet teacher'? If I ruled the world, it would be a different place!

All planes, for example, should be required to have a separate section for children, of course, or perhaps they could just be put in the hold with the baggage. I don't really care where they seat children, just so long as they keep them well away from me.

By now, completely oblivious to the fact that I was on a plane journey to a land I had always dreamed of travelling in, I instead considered a new law to enact when I'm placed in charge of the planet which would require those whose voices that exceed a certain decibel level in any enclosed space to be fined, using ANDs (Automated Noise Detectors), which would be placed beside smoke alarms in all public buildings.

It is often like this with me. My travel notes are full of bizarre schemes like the one above. My mind is like a spidergram that is constantly spinning out of control; a mind that cannot stay focused around its central circle; a mind that cannot tolerate reality for more than the briefest of periods before throwing itself into fantasy.

Lost as I was in developing my ten-point plan for world dominations and the creation of a fair and just society for the subjugated introverts of this world, and deciding which Morrissey song would be the world's new anthem, I dozed off in the surprisingly comfortable airplane chair.

I woke up with a start, horrified to find myself surrounded by strangers, but after reminding myself where I was and what I was doing, I picked up my book on Chinese history and tried to read it. However, I was still in the Neolithic era, a remarkably boring period, and instead my mind returned to studying the people around me.

I wonder if people realise that when they travel on public transport, or sit in a cafe½, or do just about anything in any public place, people like me are studying and analysing them. I do it covertly, appearing to be lost in thought, often with an open but unread book in front of me.

I'm sure I'm not the only one out there who studies people. I'm sure there are many others like me; watching and analysing complete strangers for no reason whatsoever. As you read this book, perhaps you too are being watched. You may end up being a paragraph or a page in a travelogue. You might even become a character in a novel. There is no way to defend against this sort of character theft.

At this point, lest the casual reader think I am going to spend the entire book describing the imagery lives of people unfortunate enough to sit next to me, let me assure you that this prelude does not reflect the rest of the book. It is only intended to make the point that consciousness is a ferret-like creature, darting hither and thither, and difficult to control. Being on holiday and taking notes for a travel book you intend to write does not change that. You are still you: you are just in a different place; but all the petty neuroses; all the prejudices; all the experiences that have shaped you, for better or for worse, are still there too; like unwanted hitchhikers you picked up and can't get rid of.

In rewriting this travelogue for the third time, I have endeavoured to eliminate the *worst* excesses in my self-indulgent writing, but I have not expunged introspective thought and restricted myself to simply describing things. To ape an objective descriptive style would be to rob myself of the reason for writing, which is to understand myself more.

To move away from the why's and the how's of writing this book, let me briefly describe my 'credentials' for writing this book, so to speak. What do I know of China that I dare to write about her?

As a child, China seemed like the most exotic place on Earth. I think it's probably like that with all children. China fascinates western children like no other place: It is a land of dragons, of kung-fu warriors, of emperors and pandas. I never imagined I would be lucky enough to see it.

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As a teenager, I was excited by tales of Mao's Cultural Revolution, but had no understanding at that time of its true horrific nature. I think I just liked the idea of the students being able to put their teacher on trial, and I wanted to force my P.E. teacher to denounce himself and admit his crimes.

I first actually experienced China in 2002, and worked there for a year as an English teacher in a small town called Zhuhai, on the south coast of China, near Hong Kong.

While a year is obviously not enough, and I freely admit that a man could easily spend his entire life in China and still not understand the Chinese, I would like to point out that I am not *completely* ignorant of China and my opinions are not *totally* without foundation.

However, I am by no means an expert on China, in any sense of the term, so this book will instead focus on my impressions of China; on how travelling around China affected me; on me and the Dragon. While I admit to not being an expert on China, I am an expert on myself. In fact, I'm the world's greatest authority on myself, and have spent a lifetime studying the subject.

You, the reader, may ask yourself at this point, what could possibly be gained by spending your precious time reading such a book, when there are so many 'real' books on China out there. I do not have a proper answer for you. You will find some history, politics and economics in this book, and may find out some facts you don't yet know about China.

As a member of the human race and a member of the same species as the author, you may even inadvertently find out something about yourself. And that would be wonderful; highly unlikely, but wonderful.

You may even get a laugh out of reading this book, or at least a wry smile. I try very hard to be funny when I write; being so unfunny in real life. I try too hard perhaps. My favourite travel writer by far is Bill Bryson, and while I will never approach the level of that literary genius, I can at least imitate him, or perhaps only ape him. But to return to my original point, after this very long preamble, it is the hum-drum, day-to-day concerns that occupy most conscious thought on any journey; however much you'd like to believe you're on some epic adventure and completely divorced from the mundane concerns of day-to-day existence. Your mind is full of the same flotsam as always; you're just in a different place.

At least, it's always that way with me when I travel.

The only 'epic' thing about my journeys is the struggle to clear my mind of junk and focus on what I'm actually seeing.

This is the story of that struggle; this is my four-week journey through China; this is me and the Dragon.

Chapter 2: Macao

Macao

We decided to begin our journey around China in Macao; a city we already knew well. We used to live in Zhuhai, which borders Macao. However, Zhuhai is in China proper, whereas Macao is now a Special Administrative Region (SAR) of China, like Hong Kong.

Let me begin with a little history. Macao, or Ao Men in Chinese, was the world's first Asian colony, and for 400 years the Portuguese held sway, but they were always a racial minority, and in the 20th century their rule was nominal and almost ghost-like. Having said that, the old town still looks remarkably Portuguese; it's just that 98 per cent of its inhabitants are Chinese.

Macao still has its own currency, the Pataca, and-nominally at least, its own local government, but in reality, Beijing calls all the shots, as in Hong Kong.

Macao also has the highest population density of any city on earth. If all the people who live here, about half a million, tried to leave their tower blocks and stand in what little pavement its 25 square kilometres offers, they'd kill each other in the resulting squash. Thankfully, it's never occurred to the Macanese to do this.

It would be like this in most cities, I suppose. We rarely go outside nowadays. If you will permit me the first of what I'm afraid will be many digressions, consider, dear reader, how little time you've spent 'outside' in the last week. We've all got so used to living in boxes that 'outside' has become merely a medium to get from one box to another.

Indeed, it sometimes seems to me that to 'succeed' in life really just means living in a bigger box. In Paris, my wife and I have just bought an old but charming 33-square-metre box, which is quite a small box, but the box has a wonderful location. What worries me is that I rarely go outside to appreciate it. I stay in my box.

We've all forgotten that 'outside' is where we belong, and after a lifetime's education spent teaching us how to live and work in boxes, we are incapable of surviving outside one for more than a few days. I mean, how long could you survive if you suddenly found yourself transported to a wilderness, bereft of all civilisation? And yet this is the environment we have evolved for. Little or no significant evolution has occurred since that time, and we are still, at a genetic level, hunter-gatherers, but we no longer hunt or gather. We have learned to be helpless.

It is this, I suspect, that is at the root of the angst that is so much a part of post-industrial man's existence. Or perhaps I'm just spreading my own neurosis onto society at large.

In any case, the immense and innumerable tower blocks of Macao, contrasting so strongly with the ancient colonial Portuguese city centre, made me think of the boxes that have become our world and how unnatural everything has become.

But us move on from history and my Grand Theory of Boxes to Macao's current 'raison d'etre'; gambling.

Casinos are illegal in Hong Kong and China, so every weekend sees ferry loads of Hong Kongers and mainland Chinese descend on the roulette wheels and black jack tables of Macao's many casinos to place their bets and roll the dice.

I went to one of the casinos once, the Lisboa, one of Macao's largest; replete with garish lighting and well-worn, but once plush, carpets. What I remember most was the air of desperation in the place. It was almost palpable. There is something very unpleasant about casinos, and I can't understand why people go there. The gamblers, to me at least, looked like drug addicts desperately craving their next fix. I've never seen a crack den, of course, but I imagine they have the same rank atmosphere.

Of course, there aren't any flashing lights, expensive suits or cocktail waitresses to distract you in a crack den, but the psychological cues and triggers are fundamentally the same.

I didn't do any gambling in the Lisboa. In fact, I have never gambled. I could never see the point of it, as the 'house' always wins. The gambler is doomed to failure. The facts are irrefutable, so why anyone gambles, and why the Chinese in particular-surely the world's most logical and calculating race-are so addicted to gambling is a mystery to me.

Psychologists, or rather behavioural psychologists, argue that gambling is addictive because of the power of what are called 'variable return reinforcement schedules'. To oversimplify, the possibility of short-term

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reinforcement (winning one game of cards) outweighs the long-term punishments (eventually losing your money, your possessions and possibly even your friends and family).

Other mammals, from rats to republicans, are governed by the same laws of reinforcement, and exhibit the same preference for short-term reinforcement. We are hard wired to think short-term, it would appear. From an evolutionary perspective, this makes sense. Life in the wild is brutish, ugly and short; and you need to live one day at a time, so there is little incentive for long-term planning.

This 'inconvenient truth' might also explain the psychology of why we are making our planet uninhabitably polluted in the long term, so we can drive large pieces of metal from one box to another in the short term. It's a depressing thought really, but doesn't it upset you too? I mean that something as 'dull' as our genetic predisposition to short term rewards over long term punishments may condemn our species, and perhaps even the planet itself, to extinction. You cannot grab peoples' attention with a piece of information like that, regardless of its fundamental importance. It's so terribly dry that I came very very close to deleting the last two pages. Who can make 'variable return reinforcement schedules' sound interesting? I mean, can you imagine a news headline stating: *Short-Term Reinforcement Shocker!*

But again, I digress. Let's turn to geography. The S.A.R. of Macao is divided into three areas: Macao proper; that is, old Macao; Taipa, the middle island which is mainly residential; and Coloane, the last and smallest island, which has been left largely undeveloped, and is a beautiful park area. Actually, recent extensive land reclamation makes the word 'islands' somewhat misleading for Macao and Taipa, but Coloane is still a bona fide island, but connected by an enormous bridge to the other islands of Macao.

Macao proper contains the old town and the historic heart of the city, the Placa del Largo do Senado. The plaza is laid out in a truly beautiful traditional Portuguese pavement style, a *calcada*, with black and white mosaics of waves and ships and so forth, all intricately inlaid into the pavement. I mean the pavement itself is a work of art, even without the carefully preserved 18th and 19th century Latin European buildings. How many places in the world can claim that their pavements are a work of art?

At one end of the square, an old church, St. Dominic's, constructed in 1587, remains open for business, but most of the business these days is not the devout, but the mildly curious. The hapless tourists outnumber the churchgoers ten to one.

We sat in a pew and admired the church. Now and then, however, an aging Portuguese resident ambled in, knelt and prayed in a pew, temporarily oblivious to the end of the world she had known. There was something oddly moving in this, but I couldn't put my finger on what exactly. I still can't.

The old town only extends for a few blocks and is rapidly swallowed up by massive, and massively ugly, tower blocks. During the Chinese civil war and World War 2, refugees swelled the city's previously tiny population, and the government could either let them die on the street or build high rise monstrosities to house them all. And with so little land available, the towers had to be crammed very tightly together.

Financial constraints and the need for speed meant that architecturally speaking, the towers of Macao are truly hideous.

However, taste is a luxury the teeming and starving masses cannot afford. I guess if you're dying on the street, a high rise monstrosity looks pretty good. The need for shelter, the most basic of human needs, along with hunger and thirst, must be satisfied before abstracts like beauty can be considered. Macao needed to build high and build fast, and to its credit, it did so.

Indeed, Macao was a bastion of peace and tranquillity in the twentieth century, while China proper was torn apart in wars, civil wars and the insanity of Chairman Mao's Cultural Revolution and Great Leap Forward. It still attracts mainland Chinese immigrants now, and nearly half its current population are Mainlanders. It is a very pleasant place to live, which could account for it having the longest life-expectancy rate in the world: the average Macao resident lives 84.3 years.

The shortage of space and the demand for land in Macao meant the streets were built narrow, but since they are not clogged with traffic, they seem more 'cosy' than oppressive. In fact, Macao has one of the world's lowest rates of car ownership, and people do not see having a car to be a necessary status symbol, as they now seem to feel in most of China.

Indeed, Macao is small enough to make a car completely unnecessary. Cars are also heavily taxed to discourage car ownership. Mainland China's environment, and the environment of the entire world for that

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matter, would benefit greatly from the rest of the country adopting the same policy and placing financial penalties on car owners. I mean, if smokers must now pay punitive health taxes on cigarettes, then why shouldn't car owners also pay high environmental taxes? Instead the Chinese government actively encourages car ownership and car production. It is keen to promote all industry, regardless of its environmental impact. Built long before the arrival of those moving cigarettes we call motor cars, near the end of Macao's old town, an old fort, Monte Fort, still stands on top of a hill and its cannons and watchtowers still appear to guard the city.

Beside the fort, the front of St Paul's Cathedral, Macao's emblem, somehow remains standing, but the rest of the cathedral was destroyed by fire during a typhoon.

This is taken by some as miraculous, but I fail to see how 90 per cent of a church burning to the ground, killing those inside, and a piece of it not falling down, can be seen as evidence of divine intervention. I mean, what kind of God are we talking about here? A God who kills, maims and demolishes buildings, drowns entire cities in typhoons, burns down his own church, but then holds back and decides to save the façade of one church. What would be the purpose of such an action? Why would an all-powerful God do something like that?

I put this question to one side when my long-suffering wife reminded me that I always made exactly the same point every time we visited the church, and that I had promised not to vent my vitriolic atheism when we were actually on church property.

Instead we looked down on the city from the fort's walls. The old town, and its colonial pink building, lay around us. In the distance, an old disused lighthouse stood on a hill on the other side of the city, a beacon to ancient mariners, since Macao's original wealth was built on exploiting the spice trade, and not exploiting gamblers.

In the other direction, across a small bay, mainland China was busy building itself up from farmland to city; skipping the intermediary stages of village and town entirely. Cranes were everywhere, skyscrapers shot up from nothing, industrial complexes mushroomed in the misty damp air, and everywhere there was energy, vitality and sheer determination to succeed.

Part of me was excited by the dizzying speed of progress in China, but part of me was appalled by the ugliness of it all; sorrowful like the polluted muddy brown waters of the Pear River, flowing into and discolouring the sea beneath me.

Behind me was the beauty and charm of old Macao; in front of me the power and industry of new China; the waking dragon. *"We're heading into the belly of the Dragon,"* I said to Sandra, with a cigarette dangling precariously from my lip, hoping I sounded cool rather than crass.

In the afternoon, we went down to Coloane, Macao's wooded island park, for a small hike. Well, 'hike' is probably an exaggeration. A 'stroll in the woods' is probably a better description. The minibus from central Macao only costs 5 Patacas (50 cent) and if you're quick, and a little bit childish, you can sit at the front of the bus, next to the driver, in what must be the only bus ride in the world that feels like being in a grand prix. The engine roars, and the minibus swerves to and fro through the narrow streets. It's wonderful!

The strange thing is that this park cum island is almost always empty. Only about 2,000 people live there, and since new construction is prohibited, the rest remains unspoilt. Moreover, on our stroll, we only came across a couple of other people there. We finished our walk at Hac Sa beach, but even its black volcanic sand and swimmable beaches didn't seem to attract many people.

As we prepared to leave Macao, the same thoughts occurred as when we arrived: thoughts of boxes, cages and a dysfunctional society. It seemed odd to me that in the city with the highest population density on earth, the large wooded park remains empty and is left to the birds. People just don't want to leave their boxes, it would appear.

When psychiatric patients spend too long in a hospital environment, they become 'institutionalised' and cannot function outside this environment. The human race, I sometimes fear, is suffering the same fate, but on a far larger scale.

Are we all now 'institutionalised' to living in boxes, staring vacantly at TV boxes and screens, moving from box to box, blissfully unaware of the rabbit hutches we have confined ourselves to?

Have we become a race of agoraphobic

Chapter 3: Hong Kong

Hong Kong

You join me on a ferry from Macao to Hong Kong. It's super fast. I think it's called a catamaran, or something, but whatever it's called, it's certainly fast; so fast, in fact, they make you wear a seat belt, but that might just be for show. Perhaps they feel they can charge you more if they make you feel like you're on an airplane.

Out of the window, tiny islets glide by and we zoom past countless small fishing boats in the interminable mist. Southern China spends about nine months a year shrouded in cloud and mist, and I'm beginning to remember how dispiriting it is. When I lived in China, I remember the sky becoming overcast and misty in about November and I didn't see the sun again until June. Perhaps my memory is just playing tricks on me. Surely there must have been some sunshine between November and June, but I don't remember any.

As we near Hong Kong, the sea changes from dirty brown to pale blue. This means we have escaped the clutches of the Pearl River Delta, one of China's most massive rivers; pouring mud, silt and a million containments into the South China Sea. . Hong Kong is far enough away from the mainland to be free of its effects, so the sea is blue and not brown, but Macao and Zhuhais' waters (the city where I used to live) are permanently muddied by it.

The sea is very choppy today, I note in my diary, and we're experiencing what a pilot might call 'major turbulence'. As I write, the captain announces that *"the boat is pitching heavily, and we're experiencing a heavy swell and you should please return to your seats and fasten your seat belts."* I wonder absent-mindedly what exactly a 'swell' is, and then I wonder when people stopped using the word 'swell' as an adjective to mean great, and I ponder if a connection ever existed between the two uses of the word 'swell'.

I am also suddenly interested in unhygienic nature of seat covers, and wonder if headrests carry germs. My mind often fixates on irrelevant details like this, even in moments of 'crisis'. If, one dark night, the nuclear missiles do fly, and we hear the air raid sirens wail out the final three-minute warning, I'll probably start thinking about a song from the eighties called 'Two Tribes' that began with a siren alert, and then start wondering what ever happened to Frankie Goes To Hollywood.

My mental perambulations are brought to a halt by the disquieting sound of people vomiting into paper bags. It makes me question the wisdom of that last glass of wine last night, or even the bottle of wine that preceded it.

I wasn't really worried though. Actually, I've never been sea sick, unless you count the sense of nausea brought on by watching Leonardo di Capio's romantic histrionics in 'Titanic'. Nevertheless, the sound of quadraphonic vomiting is rather unpleasant.

Vomiting, I suddenly recall from an unfortunate incident in my university days, can easily become projectile vomiting. I wonder if my fellow passengers can be trusted to fire into their vomit bags with 100% accuracy. An irrational fear of being hit in the face by projectile vomit grips me for a while, but then I realise it is an irrational fear and it passes.

Eventually the swell passes as well. I pick up my pen again as we head into Hong Kong. Small fishing boats are replaced by enormous tankers. Hong Kong has the busiest port in the world, but will soon be replaced by Shanghai.

Through the mist, I can now make out the magnificent Victoria harbour, whose skyline must be unmatched, and the catamaran has slowed to impulse power as we dock at Central, Asia's answer to Manhattan.

Arriving in Hong Kong always gives me an odd sense of ...well... 'arrival'; that I am entering somewhere important and therefore must myself be important.

We've all seen Hong Kong as the backdrop to some movie or other. It's one of those places everyone can identify whether you've been there or not, like Paris or New York. James Bond seems inordinately fond of the place, but his Hong Kong is very different to mine. In Bond's Hong Kong, it's always swelteringly hot, beads of perspiration glisten on wispy young girls in Suzi Wong dresses, rickshaw drivers hustle busily, triad gangs wage war on each other using ancient marshal arts, and so on and so on.

The reality, of course, is far more mundane. When we docked, everything was enveloped in that omnipresent Chinese mist; hiding the glass and chrome of the skyscrapers. The temperature was a damp and chilly 15

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degrees; a cold that quickly enters your bones. The Cantonese busily and joylessly went about their daily lives in drab clothes, occupied as we all are in making a living, wrapped up in the blanket of petty distractions and irrelevancies that is modern life.

In a sudden moment of bleakness, an emotion that seems to follow me wherever I go, uninvited and unwanted, the place looked about as exotic as Birmingham in the Winter.

I had never noticed it before, but Hong Kongers don't look happy: busy and purposeful, certainly, but not really happy. It shocked me for some reason: the sight of so many unhappy people.

Perhaps it was because I had spent the previous nine months in Thailand, *'the land of smiles'*, and Thais look so happy they'd make Santa's Elves seem like a miserable bunch of workaholic dullards.

In Thailand, as a teacher, I lived in fear of being found 'too serious' by my students, and tried to only show them *'Phillip Light'* in class: the fun-loving, game-playing, all-singing, all-dancing side of my personality; and kept the more serious, some might say dour, side of my personality hidden. In China, in contrast, I could keep my students spellbound with earnest discussions on my philosophy of teaching.

The point I'm trying to make is that while the word 'serious' only has negative connotations in Thailand, the country I was living in at the time, seriousness was definitely something positive in China. So, for the first time I understood why my Thai students who visited China were rarely impressed by the place, or more exactly, by the people, who they found too 'serious' and rather unfriendly.

While Hong Kongers don't have the steely-eyed grimness of Muscovites, who have an idiom that claims that *'only an idiot smiles all the time'*, Hong Kongers do not go through their day with a smile on their face, a song on their lips, and a magical glint in their eye.

On the other hand, neither do I, and if I ever start doing so, I've instructed my wife to shoot the alien body snatcher who has taken over my corpse, or at least poke me in the eye with a chopstick, which she has agreed to do-all too readily, come to think of it.

But let's return to our trip. We went through the tedious formalities of customs, and I went through my habitual moan about my passport being filled with stamps for travelling from one part of China to another. Sandra had heard this particular rant many times before, and just nodded resignedly, no doubt going to that 'happy place' in her mind that she goes to get away from me. I often wish I had a 'happy place' in my mind I could visit to get away from me too.

The problem, you see, is that when travelling between Hong Kong/Macao and China proper, you are required to go through an awful lot of form-filling and passport-stamping, all watched over by stern border guards; the boys in black and blue, men trained for years in how to go through their entire working day without ever showing the slightest flicker of human emotion.

I passed my time in the queue wondering how they did it. I imagined them sitting through old episodes of Star Trek and studying Science Officer Spock, the emotionless Vulcan.

Anyway, after the border formalities, we brought our slightly queasy stomachs onto dry land, and set about looking for a toilet.

This is not as straightforward as you might think, as Asian shopping centre architects set out to hide them in the unlikeliest of places, believing that if they make you walk around the mall long enough, you'll make an impulse purchase. Personally, I've never enjoyed shopping, and I'm even less likely than normal to pop into Benetton to buy a fluffy jumper when what I really want to do is empty my bladder.

But after ten minutes that seemed much longer, and another ten minutes looking for the mall's exit (those wily architects also hide those, the fiends), we found ourselves in the centre of Hong Kong, ants among the skyscrapers.

For the record, I should point out that I have the world's worst sense of direction, and my inability to find my way out of shopping centres is legendary.

We came out of the mall on an elevated walkway. The centre of Hong Kong is full of them, and to be honest, I think they're amazing. I kind of feel like I'm walking on air, removed from the traffic fumes and the eternally red pedestrian traffic lights.

It feels a bit like being an extra from a Star Trek episode, a contented automaton in a futuristic metropolis.

However, if you're not careful about where you're walking, you can easily end up in another Mall, and if you wander too far inside the mall, you may never find your way out of it again. However, we kept our bearings,

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and soon descended into the middle of Hong Kong's financial district, where all the best skyscrapers are to be found.

Hong Kong has more skyscrapers than any other city on Earth. I don't just mean per capita of population or anything; I'm talking absolute numbers here. It has a whopping 7,417 of them; 2,000 more than its nearest rival, New York.

Moreover, their setting, with Victoria Harbour on one side and a mountain on the other, only adds to their appeal. Admittedly, only a small percentage of the 7,417 skyscrapers in Hong Kong are works of art, but those that are enthrall me.

A skyscraper, you might object, is inherently ugly, but I don't agree. In Central Hong Kong, they are works of art; monuments to progress and the unlimited potential of man. They have style and panache. The architects actually seemed to be trying for once (perhaps growing tired of hiding toilets in shopping malls).

The centre of Hong Kong is what all future cities should look like, and we should live and work in these gleaming utopias, challenging the sky and aiming upwards, upwards, ever upwards.

Cities like London could be squashed into a fraction of their present size if we tore up the suburbs and let people live in skyscrapers; buildings they could be proud of, buildings that make a statement. Not rabbit hutches, not council-built lego sets, but real buildings.

The retreat of the countryside could be halted and the suburbs tuned to parks and farmland. All would be perfect, evermore!

Or perhaps it's a terrible idea, but Hong Kong's skyscrapers can turn a boy's head.

In the centre of Central, we took a lunch break. We went to some yuppie health-food place and had a smoothie, or to give it its proper name, a 'Power Booster', and ate a 'Tofu Full-On Energiser'. Everything on the menu sounded very tiring, but it tasted nice nonetheless.

It was an American chain, and the staff had been well trained in offering American service: shop assistants enthusiastically wished me a good day, and seemed inordinately keen on me enjoying my meal. I didn't know why they were so taken with me, but it felt very gratifying to be so wanted.

The other clientele were very smartly dressed, and spoke with that quasi-American accent so common among the children of the ruling elite in Asia.

In the group of four teenagers next to me, for example, there were four different races; all speaking with the same accent, all dressed the same way and all using the same body language. I wondered if this was the 'new global society' I kept hearing about, and if so, why did it make me feel slightly uneasy?

Perhaps because it's not quite the egalitarian meritocracy it first appears to be. The teenagers might look good in a 'United Colours of Benetton' commercial, but these future captains of industry are simply the offspring of the present captains of industry; preened in exclusive private schools, and set to inherit the Earth.

The positions of power and prestige are not won by hard work and aptitude on a level playing field. They never were. They are passed on from generation to generation. The poor, for the most part, are excluded through lack of opportunity.

I wondered if this was the same in mainland China. When the Soviet Union collapsed, the 'Communist aristocracy' moved quickly to grab the wealth and preserve their place at the head of the trough. I wondered if the Party cadres in China were doing the same thing.

My analysis came to an abrupt end when I noticed the group I was studying had realised I was staring at them and taking notes. This always upsets people, as a matter of fact, and I usually just take notes in my head, which is much safer.

Suddenly the tables were turned, and they studied me. Even though I am white, which is always a status symbol in Asia, they recognized by my relatively shabby appearance and lack of brand names that I did not belong in their class. They knew I wasn't 'white trash' but they also knew that I wasn't an 'alpha male'. Our caste signs are easily read.

I stopped writing before they called the police and had me thrown to the dogs, or thrown to the chickens, or whatever animal they throw you to in this part of the world. I didn't want to end up as part of a 'Full-On Energiser' on tomorrow's menu.

In the afternoon, we took a funicular up the side of the mountain, and took in the view from 'The Peak', Hong Kong's park/shopping centre at the summit of one of its mountains.

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From The Peak, you get some idea of the majesty of Hong Kong: the skyscrapers, business and residential; the harbour, its blue waters and jetties; Kowloon stretching into Shenzhen and the mainland. Millions of people; all of them busy.

When faced with all this beauty, this New Eden, this Brave New World, I found myself, much against my will, focusing instead on ear-wiggling a telephone conversation between an obese English woman and her family back in Blighty. She spoke of nothing else but what she had bought and how little she had paid for it. I earwigged and earwigged, convinced that she would have to change the conversational topic sooner or later, but she didn't. Eventually, she hung up, and I was forced to seek other entertainment.

I looked at the mist for a while, and felt a little glum, wondering if beauty actually existed if you didn't see it, and wondering if there was a pill you could take to prevent distraction from beauty.

In the evening, back in the heart of Hong Kong, we had a fantastically expensive but rather mediocre Indian meal in one of Hong Kong's so-called 'budget' restaurants. After 9 months in Thailand, Hong Kong seemed horribly expensive.

Trying to recover from the shock of the bill, we went to a bar but were even more shocked to pay eight dollars for a beer in one of Hong Kong's backpacker bars. It was Happy Hour in the backpacker bar, but I wasn't happy.

This particular backpacker was haemorrhaging cash, and decided to head for China proper, where a beer costs a dollar, as God intended.

Chapter 4: Zhuhai

Zhuhai

Zhuhai is not famous. Marco Polo didn't bother to visit it, for example, perhaps because it didn't exist at the time, and it's quite difficult to visit places and see things that don't exist. It's not impossible, of course. I mean, the American army 'visited' Iraq looking for WMD's that didn't actually exist, but let's not get distracted by politics.

Indeed, if I had gone to Zhuhai myself as a teenager, in the grim eighties, I would have found nothing more than a sleepy fishing village surrounded by paddy fields. In twenty years it had changed beyond recognition, like so much of China.

When I first saw it, three years ago, it was my first time in China. In fact, it was my first time out of the comfortable paddock of the European Union, and I was pleasantly surprised by what I found.

As the ferry approached mainland China, I wondered what had made me leave Europe in the first place, but I couldn't really find an answer. Perhaps I was just propelled there by the mysterious forces that drives humans, and English language teachers in particular, to keep moving; always searching for El Dorado, always drawn to the greener grass on the other side of the fence.

I stayed in Zhuhai for a year, but it felt longer. I don't mean that in a negative way. I just mean that because it was all so new and different that time 'expanded'. The more new things we do, the more memories we build up; and the more memories we have, the longer something seems in our memories. Time only seems to speed up when you get older because you do fewer and fewer new things, so there are less and less memories and time seems shorter. Well, that's my theory anyway.

The school I worked in treated me extremely well. In fact, I have never been treated so well anywhere in my life, before or since. I felt like a VIP, like I actually mattered.

It was all quite shocking coming from Spain, where schools have a hundred other teachers who will replace you at a moment's notice, and you are of no consequence whatsoever. I do not intend any disrespect to the school I worked for in Spain, which always treated me fairly, and did their best to make me feel wanted and valued, but at the end of the day, you knew deep down that you were nothing special; just one more teacher chasing hours and trying to get next month's rent together.

The economics of teaching in Western Europe, and Spain in particular, mean that the supply of English teachers is always greater than the demand for them, and this inevitably drives wages and job security downwards.

I was fortunate in that my school was one of the better ones, so I was not exploited, and indeed I wouldn't have stayed there for five years if I was being exploited, regardless of the inimitable charms of Barcelona. But Spain was becoming very routine, and I did need a change.

And China was certainly a change. In Spain, from the moment you arrive, you are very much on your own and it's a case of sink or swim and do it fast. Your employer will offer you no support in finding accommodation, health care, or dealing with the labyrinthine complexities of Spanish bureaucracy.

In China, in contrast, we were met on arrival, immediately brought to our luxurious free 100-metre apartment with a view of the South China Sea, and seemed to have the school admin staff at our constant beck and call.

Our opinions were sought and listened to. People seemed genuinely keen to help us. We were, as the cliché goes, treated like royalty.

It was all quite intoxicating after Europe. In Europe, where the roots of democracy and egalitarianism grow deeper than we realise, we are all equal, and we are all nothing. We are all just trees in a forest of 350 million other trees. Finding myself back in Europe now, in 2008, it feels like a rather dark and claustrophobic forest. Uprooted and washed up on the Chinese coast, as I was in 2002, I was suddenly something special. I was not a face in the crowd-I stood out from the crowd. Forgive me, dear reader, for labouring this point, but it is hard to convey the strange mix of joy and paranoia that comes from suddenly being noticed after a lifetime of being ignored.

Firstly I was a white foreigner, which always confers status in Asia, and secondly I was a teacher, and teachers in China are still very respected.

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In Europe and America, teachers have largely lost the status they once enjoyed in society at large, and even within the classrooms, they are not the authority figures they once were. New 'student-centred' philosophies of teaching mean that there is no such thing as a bad student anymore; there is now 'an under-performing teacher' who is 'failing to maximise student potential.'

Teachers in Europe and America have even become scapegoats for many of the ills of society at large, from falling literacy standards to juvenile crime. I once heard them blamed for the 'decline in the moral fabric of our society', whatever that means.

However, in China, teachers are still respected; perhaps more so than they ever were in the West.

Sometimes this respect could actually get in the way. For example, in the classroom, Chinese students expect the teacher, the expert, to talk, and the students, the receptacles of knowledge, should listen to the teacher, the fountain of knowledge and wisdom. However, in order to actually learn a language, students need to speak, and since there is only one teacher and twenty students, they need to talk to each other and not just to the teacher. It was very difficult to get this message across, but once you did, students looked on you as a sage and a philosopher.

Now, in 2008, as I find myself once more facing recalcitrant and uncooperative European teenagers, living in fear of student complaints and wondering if I can make next month's mortgage payment, I do really miss my school in China. I didn't realise how much I missed it until I wrote this.

However, in spite of the charms of the place, I found my feet started itching to leave after about nine months. I don't really know why. These itchy feet have never really left me, and follow me wherever I go.

Let's move away from me and take a closer look at Zhuhai; one of China's new model towns. Zhuhai is a *Special Economic Zone* (SEZ), not to be confused with a *Special Administrative Region* (SAR), like Hong Kong and Macao.

The SEZ's were set up by Chairman Deng Zhou Ping in his last days to transform the moribund Chinese economy, truly wrecked after decades of Mao's madness, and turn it into something more prosperous and vibrant.

"To get rich," Deng proclaimed, *"is glorious,"* and the SEZ's are where Chinese people come to get rich. Here, free of Central Planning and the stranglehold of bureaucratic interference, the capitalist economic model of free competition thrives and free markets reign. As a result, Zhuhai went from being a forgotten fishing village in the eighties to a rapidly expanding city of about 1.5 million today. This is still small by Chinese standards, but it's growing daily.

Those Chinese fortunate to live in this new capitalist utopia must obtain permission to work here. In a way difficult to comprehend to Westerners, the Chinese are not free to move from one part of China to another in search of a better job.

The Party is keen to create an orderly urbanization in China, and fears the chaos that might ensue if China's rural poor, who still make up 60 per cent of the population and often live on less than a dollar a day, were to suddenly up sticks and arrive en masse in the cities and the SEZ's.

While one can bemoan the lack of personal freedom, it should be noted that Chinese cities do not suffer from the slums and shanty towns of other third world nations.

So, the people in Zhuhai are the lucky ones, and they have arrived at the land of opportunity, where fortunes are there for the taking and the streets are paved with free market gold, and everything has a price.

This is even more evident in nearby Shenzhen, China's number one SEZ boomtown. Shenzhen was also a fishing village in the eighties but now has over twelve million people and is one of the world's fastest growing cities. It borders Hong Kong, and you can almost smell the frenetic energy there; you can practically feel the craving for wealth and power; you can sense the greed and avarice. While Shenzhen has been far more successful than Zhuhai, in terms of GDP and growth rates, it is all about money there, whereas in Zhuhai there was also a desire to create something beautiful, as well as something prosperous.

If you are fortunate enough to be allowed to live in one of the SEZs, you have opportunities and can afford a lifestyle the average Chinese peasant could only dream of. Nevertheless, by Western standards, even the SEZ inhabitants still lead a tough life, for the most part.

For every wealthy factory owner in a large chauffeur-driven black car with smoked windows, there must be a thousand factory workers, sleeping 10 to a dorm, and getting one day off a week. Their real working day is

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often 12 hours long, and their average salary would not tempt a work shy European dole bird out of bed. If they do not meet their targets, they will be dismissed.

The SEZs are an example of old-fashioned capitalism: brutal, ugly and ruthlessly efficient. I'm sure if the Neo-Cons and Thatcherites had their way, it is this type of capitalism that would return to Europe to help us 'maintain our efficiency in a global market'. But I for one could not survive for long in this kind of environment.

I remember one day at work a couple of other English teachers and myself were being shown round a large industrial plant we were about to start teaching English in. What struck me most was that during their breaks the office workers took naps at their desks. I mean, they were so tired that during breaks they simply slept at their desk. If I was that tired, I'd stay in bed.

I wondered why workers would voluntarily subject themselves to this kind of toil. When the factories send their recruitment officers into the Chinese hinterland at job fairs, the jobs on offer are always massively oversubscribed. As I mentioned before, the problem with the SEZs is keeping workers out of them, not attracting people into them.

I suppose that in order to understand why anyone does anything apparently unpleasant, you should always consider the alternatives they have, and you should always remember that the alternatives they have are not the same as the alternatives you have.

A life of toil and drudgery on the factory floor is considerably better than a life of toil and drudgery in the paddy fields, both in terms of quality of life and financial gain.

It is even better, in many ways, than a dead-end job in one of the government-run factories, especially in the dying rust-belt cities of northern China. While these government factory jobs offer better job security, in the short term, there is always the possibility that the government will grow tired of subsidising an unprofitable company and close it down. They also pay quite badly, and are run by communist officials who are far more interested in rewarding political orthodoxy than efficiency.

The biggest attraction of all to the SEZs, I believe, is hope. A government-run company offers job security but little opportunity. The SEZs offer opportunity but little security. The SEZs will continue to thrive because humans are drawn to opportunity. It is an irresistible force for us, a throwback to our hunter-gatherer past. As a species, we are the ultimate opportunists.

Zhuhai is, as I have already said, a land of opportunity for the Chinese. Every lowly factory worker believes that with hard work, diligence and a little luck, they could become tomorrow's factory owner. And even if they don't, perhaps their children will.

In post-industrial societies, where growth rates tend to hover around 1-3%, and society is therefore relatively stable, it is difficult for us to imagine the instability, and the consequent opportunity, that exists in a country with growth rates near 10 per cent. Citizens of Zhuhai and the other SEZs are at the vanguard of that growth, and they know, or at least believe, things can only get better.

Zhuhai is known in China as 'Zhuhai Piaoliang' or 'Beautiful Zhuhai'. It's located on the coast of the South China Sea, and is famous for its immaculately manicured parks. In fact, it's one of the greenest cities in China, and people often go there for their honeymoon, or holiday there, if they can afford it.

Having said that, the holiday brochures and the internet sites promoting 'beautiful Zhuhai' can be rather 'creative' sometimes. Digital photography makes 'touching up' photographs child's play, and the Zhuhai tourist authorities do certainly play with some of the images of the city they dissemble.

For example, when they depict the crystal blue waters of the South China Sea, and the immaculate beaches, bathed in golden sunshine, they could be accused of being rather economical with the truth. The seawater is, in fact, almost invariably a muddy brown; contaminated by the silt and pollution of the mighty Pearl River and its enormous delta.

Even if you ignore the colour, the coast is home to an enormous amount of flotsam and detris from upstream, but this never appears on the publicity shots. I once saw a dead dog, for example, his bloated body bobbing among some plastic debris, but I admit this was exceptional, and most waste is usually non-organic.

However, you would most definitely not swim in the sea here. Indeed, it looks more like something a mutant sea monster might crawl out of. This doesn't seem to worry the Chinese too much, who practically never swim in the sea, or even sunbathe on the beach, obsessed as they are with the whiteness of their skin.

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There is a much darker side to Zhuhai, I believe, and I have heard it said that Hong Kong and Japanese tourists and businessmen are often drawn here by its relatively cheap and apparently abundant prostitutes. However, all of this completely passed me by when I was there. A lot of things simply pass me by, lost as I usually am in my own thoughts and petty neurosis; not traits that one normally looks for in a travel writer. Turning towards the future, how might Zhuhai fare in the 21st century? The Communist Party has big plans for Zhuhai and Shenzhen, and the Communist Party has become quite good at turning grand plans into reality. Unfortunately, it has also shown itself to be quite good at bringing China to its knees, but that can perhaps be blamed more on the insanity of one man, Chairman Mao, than on the Communist Party itself. However, having said that, communism does create an environment in which homicidal megalomaniacs can easily come to power: Mao in China; Stalin in Russia, Pol Pot in Cambodia, Ceausescu in Romania, and so on. Without the checks and balances on power one finds in a democratic system, one man can easily create a culture of fear and hatred, a vortex of paranoia that can lead to the deaths of tens of millions.

But let's assume that China is not brought down the road to self-destruction again-what is Zhuhai's future? Might I return here in 20 years time to find myself in the biggest city on Earth; a metropolis almost too large to imagine? I have heard it said that there is a long-term plan is to link Guangzhou with Hong Kong, through a dramatically expanded Zhuhai and Shenzhen.

This would create a massive conurbation on a scale the world has never seen before: an area the size of France with a 100-million strong population; a megacity like no other.

It sounds impossible, but so did a fishing village like Shenzhen turning into a city of ten million in less than thirty years. I think it could happen.

The Chinese, in my opinion, still see nature as something to be controlled and conquered; something to be subjugated to their 'will', and not something to live in harmony with. Witness for example, the Three Gorges Dam, which placed so much land under water that 1,240,000 people had to be relocated. Placing vast areas of farmland under concrete in order to create the world's biggest megacity wouldn't arouse the same feelings of dread and horror in China that it would inspire in the west. Even the idea of a city needing a 'green belt' around it was an idea my students didn't really seem to understand, much less agree with.

The Han see it as their right to rule, and if becoming the world's number one economy requires mega cities of 100 million, then so be it. Westerners may bemoan the environmental destruction and inhumanity of such colossal cities, but how many of us would volunteer to return to a life of toil in the fields, or wish such a life on our descendants, to protect something as ephemeral as the environment? It is far easier to be green in a post-industrial society than in a pre-industrial one.

The Party sees its main role as freeing people, not from dictatorship, but from poverty and want. Indeed, the Party has already freed more people from poverty in the last 20 years than all the NGO's put together. If poverty is to be eliminated then it will not be through charity, but through commerce.

My only concern is that an increasingly fragile Planet Earth will find itself incapable of supporting a wealthy China and the inevitable pollution that will come with it; massive on a scale as yet unknown.

Our future, and perhaps even whether we have one at all, may be decided in China's Special Economic Zones; the SEZ's hold the key.

To move from the world at large to my own little part of it, on our last day in Zhuhai, we paid a visit to the school we used to work in.

Some of the Chinese staff from the school still worked there, and they seemed genuinely glad to see me again: much more than I had expected. Most people regard my reappearance in their lives in the same way that they react to the reappearance of cold sores, with weary resignation, but the school staff actually looked happy to see me.

Flattering my ego, they also said that many of my ex-students still asked after me, and that I had left a deep impression in the heads of many of our students, which sounds a bit like I had thumped them in the skull with a hammer, but I'm sure they meant something nicer. I was genuinely sad to say goodbye again, and it takes a lot to make a cynical misanthrope like me feel like that.

The non-Chinese teachers we had worked with had long since flown the coop, as teachers of English as a foreign language are a migratory species, and need to keep moving. Occasionally, they take a fancy to one place, or find a partner there, decide to build a nest and drop an egg or two, or they grow old and return home

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to die, but in general, they can't resist the call of the wind, and keep moving.

The whole city of Zhuhai had been built on this deep-rooted need to move on; to look for something better; to find an El Dorado. If we could we would even travel to other planets in search of it.

My thoughts turned to more mundane matters when we tried to get out of Zhuhai. Travelling in China is rarely easy. It was undoubtedly more difficult for our hunter-gatherer ancestors in the past, since cavemen could not avail of the services of travel agents and budget airlines, but travelling is nonetheless still a difficult business in modern China.

Matters are not helped by travel agency's annoying tendency to hire people with little or no English, or any other foreign language, and a complete inability to understand foreigners when they try to speak Chinese. One or the other I could tolerate, but both together are insufferable.

Things are made worse by their 'flexible truth system', in which the truth becomes whatever is most profitable for the travel agent. No two travel agents in China ever told me the same thing.

I will stop myself mid-rant to point out that my wife, who I admit *generally* has a closer grasp on reality than I do, felt that the root of the 'travel agent problem' was my inability to communicate with others and my insufferable lack of patience.

But to return to my rant, I still maintain that you simply cannot trust a travel agent in China, and must remind yourself that their objective is not really to sell you what you want to buy, but to extract as much cash from you as possible. If this means being a little economical with the truth, then so be it.

In order to maximise profits, travel agents in China are also wont to try to change your holiday plans, and often keen to send you to an alternative destination to the one you had intended to go to; which coincidentally, they happen to have a tour of, and as luck would have it, the travel agency can offer you a special discounted price.

The trick to actually going where you want to go in China, and not ending up where the Travel Agents want you to go, is to pigheadedly go from travel agency to travel agency until you get a ticket for the destination you want.

You must then buy the ticket *immediately*, before the travel agent changes their mind. On no account should you believe a travel agent who tells you to come back tomorrow to pick up or pay for a ticket because this ticket will have become mysteriously unavailable.

Eventually, we managed to buy a ticket out of Zhuhai, but it also involved an unwanted three-hour bus ride to Guangzhou airport.

In the airport, a thunderstorm came out of nowhere, just to remind us we were still in the tropics, and the rain fell so heavily that you couldn't see out of the airport window, which looked like a car window does in a car wash; except without the suds, of course. If you peered closely enough though, you could just about see that planes were still taking off and landing, apparently oblivious to the lightning forks in the night sky.

Guangzhou airport is incredibly modern, so modern it looks like it belongs in the future, rather than the present. It's science-fiction modern: all gleaming glass, impossible high ceilings, and so much empty space that you feel like an ant in a football stadium.

It makes Heathrow look like a museum piece, but so much of modern China makes the west, and Europe in particular, look so hopelessly old-fashioned and out-dated; quaint and anachronistic, but ultimately irrelevant to the modern world.

Pacing around the cavernous halls of the Guangzhou's Space-Gordon airport, I asked myself what was happening to the West.

Throughout the twentieth century China was eons behind the west, and then in the blink of an eye, it suddenly seemed to be leap-frogging us and become more modern. If this was a 21st century 'hare and tortoise' fable, we would be the hare, watching helplessly as the six-million dollar tortoise sprinted towards the finish line, wondering where it had all gone wrong; unable to understand how we had been so far ahead but had lost the race.

There is still an enormous amount of poverty and backwardness in China, of course, and development has been unequal. Even on the bus from Zhuhai SEZ to the metropolis of Guangzhou, the eight-lane motorways passed peasant farmers in straw hats, tilling the land by hand, with the occasional reluctant help of a water buffalo, much as they have done for centuries.

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In today's China, contrast is everywhere: Between the belching factories and the dehumanizing tower blocks, greyer than an Irish winter sky, giant oxen plough the lush green fields; banana plantation trees sway nonchalantly; bridges so long you can't see the end of them until you are half way across span the endless Pearl River delta with ease, as tiny wooden fishing boats try to eek a living by finding what few fish can survive its muddied polluted waters.

These contrasts will be swept away as China modernises. Economic progress, the great leveller, will leave this place as it has left the West: standardised, homogenised, and equal. In a strange way, I felt privileged to see it before this happened, before everything becomes one.

As always, everything was covered in mist, but the nearer you got to Guangzhou, the more acrid and polluted the air became. It looked like the smog was yellowing the mist. I could almost feel it clogging my lungs, or at least, fighting with the cigarette tar for prime real estate.

Images of the soon-to-disappear paddy fields among the motorways flashed in and out of my mind, and mingled with the glass, steel and chrome of the airport.

The plane, to my surprise, ignored the raging storm, and took off on time into the worst turbulence I've ever encountered. The air hostess said something in appalling English, which I couldn't really make out, but it sounded like, *"We will be holding a Chinese funeral service shortly,"* but I'm sure she actually said something else. They left the lights out for the entire flight, not just landing and take off, presumably following Nirvana's sage advice in 'Smells Like teen Spirit':

"With the lights out

It's less dangerous"

None of this seemed to remotely perturb the Chinese on the flight (everyone except Sandra and I) and they all slept like babies.

Although I had lived in China for a year before this trip, I had not travelled in it, at least not beyond the province of Guangdong. . Instead I had spent my holidays in Thailand. Now that I was living in Thailand, I was spending my holidays in China. It all made sense at the time.

In any case, I was about to go into uncharted waters. I was about to parts of China I had never seen before. I was heading away from the coast and into the hinterland, into the 'real' China. This, the shaking of the place in the storm, the flight attendant's repeated references to Chinese funerals, left me feeling very excited. I had the sense of elation mixed with trepidation that one gets before one does something completely new.

China was mine. The Dragon had invited me into its lair and was showing me around.

Chapter 5: Yangshuo Guilin

Guilin/Yangshuo

The only thing worse than *not* getting what you want, Oscar Wilde, once noted, is getting what you want. I saw the truth of this when I went from the gleaming *new* China airport to the wretched *old* China bus station in Guilin. This was the 'real' China I thought I had wanted to see. As soon as I saw it, I wanted to leave it. Let me paint you a picture. Each of my five senses is assaulted in a different way. It's the sound of Chinese bus stations that really gets to me: The roar of men hawking phlegm from all sides; that 30-second guttural throat cleaning; that demonic sound; that sound no human should be physically capable of creating. If there is a Hell, I will be sure to find Beelzebub himself waiting for me there and beckoning me closer, hawking phlegm.

And then there is the cacophony of noise produced by the hoards of other travellers; chaotically milling to and fro, as if war had just been declared and there was 10 minutes to flee for their lives before the enemy arrived. Sometimes one sound becomes so loud it temporarily deafens the others: the barking tour guides; the extended families of a million; the honking bus drivers trying to clear a path through the melee.

The most unpleasant sound of all is my own pigeon Chinese ("*qing-mai piao-na li*" / *please-buy-ticket-where*"); which usually gets a raucous laugh from the unhelpful staff, who can't or won't understand me.

Visually it all feels very oppressive as well. Men, unlike women, try to make sense of the world they find themselves in by focusing on one thing and then another, but we find it difficult to take in everything at once. In sight, as in so much else, man is sequential and cannot multi-task the way a woman can. If you don't believe me, faithful reader, notice how differently a man and a woman's eye movements are when they enter a room, or even when they sit in a group: men stare at one thing at a time, and women take short glances at everything.

Encumbered with a man's vision, I'm not having any luck finding the ticket booth. My eyes stare at signs, from one indecipherable Chinese character to another; peering at them, apparently oblivious to the fact that I cannot read a single Chinese character.

My eyes are also kept busy in staring contests with other men; another maladaptive male trait that leaves the male of the species so blind and helpless in situations like these. We do it instinctively, staring out other men, like dogs growling at each other.

Sandra had also warned me to 'keep an eye on the bags' in the bus station, further complicating matters, and adding more tasks to my already overworked eyeballs.

Protecting our luggage brought out the warrior in me; determined to defend my homestead against all aggressors; temporarily unaware that I could no more fight than I could ski.

The sense that was most active, I know realise, was not hearing or sight, or any of the five senses. It was the sense of fear that was awakened. I was a stranger in a strange land, and the only white face for miles. I stood out from the crowd and was a centre of attention. While I sometimes find this intoxicating, I sometimes find it terrifying.

I felt like I was being watched by some very disreputable characters; gangs from some kind of Dickensian fable, all singing the Chinese version of Fagan's '*You've got to pick a pocket or two, gov.*'. I felt people eyeing up my bags, wondering what Western delights lay inside; waiting on me to let my guard down for a moment; like vultures waiting for a moment of weakness before swooping down to carry off a young calf. I should stress the word '*felt*' here. I didn't see it: I felt it. Or more probably, I simply imagined it.

With one eye in a staring contest with a particularly suspicious looking type, one eye guarding our bags, one ear focused on some hawking and the other listening to an old woman breaking the sound barrier, I was quite shocked to suddenly find the filthiest of begging bowls stuffed under my nose. I wondered where it had come from. A wily, crippled octogenarian had apparently sneaked up on me and appeared from nowhere.

He wanted money, but when I said no, he agreed to be bargained down to three cigarettes, but this act of carcinogenic generosity attracted beggars from all sides; all wanting to sample my foreign cigarettes, and each one filthier than the last.

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I was reverting to growling and snarling, a primitive state I enter in times of acute stress, both real and imagined, probably caused by spending too much time in the company of canines as a child. Fortunately, Sandra recognised that I was about to go into *Rantis Extremis* and made the executive decision to get a taxi. Like so many taxi drivers in China, he dreamt of being able to take the rest of the week off by charging an ignorant foreigner like me the most outrageous of fares, but we bargained him down to only triple the appropriate fare, skilled bargainers that we are.

This rather long introduction to Yangshuo is simply to point out that there are many negative aspects to travelling. Some claim the best part of any trip is the journey, but if bus stations were the best part of any trip, I'd never leave home!

The 30 minutes we spent in the bus station also seem to occupy a disturbingly large part of my notes for the day, so it must have seemed important to me at the time. However, rewriting this travel diary years after the event, I can't help wondering what on Earth I had got so worked up about. Perhaps I'm more used to travelling in the developing world now, and can't see why a grotty bus station left me so shaken. Or perhaps I'm simply growing up.

Anyway, we eventually found ourselves in Yangshuo, which my guide book described as 'legendary'. The reason for its mythic status is its 'karst rock formations', a great deal more beautiful than they sound. Yangshuo contains countless odd undulating mountains; the kind of scenery one always associates with China, but rarely actually finds there. To me, the mountains and hills of Yangshuo looked like a thousand Bell curves, worn away and left slightly jagged by rain and wind. The entire region was once underwater, and the landscape does look strangely subterranean, or even moon-like; or rather what the oceans or the moon would look like if they were covered in a thin layer of green vegetation.

We were lucky that the mist and cloud cleared for once and we could see the hills in all their undulating glory. We took a short river trip down the River Li on a tiny boat and tried to take it all in.

CCTV9, the government run English language TV station in China, which I found myself watching a lot through lack of any alternative, waxes very lyrical about this place, and often shows pretty young westerners being hypnotised by its scenic spiritual beauty, and then deciding to spend the rest of their lives here.

Personally, I found three days to be enough. Geological features, I've always found, lose their appeal quite quickly. In a way, everything loses its appeal, or should I say its novelty value, quite quickly. We get used to things and stop noticing them. We are designed that way. Otherwise we'd never progress.

Nevertheless, the mountains are certainly beautiful, especially if you get to see them on foot or on a bike.

However, my troublesome left foot, Sandra's stomach pains, and the ever-present threat of rain, meant that serious hiking was out of the question. We did just about manage to haul our creaking frames onto a pair of mountain bikes for a few hours.

In order to avoid the hassle of having to read a map, something I've never really been able to do properly, we took a local guide with us. It was only 5 dollars for a half day, but I'm sure I could have bargained him down to a third that figure, if only I didn't hate bargaining so much. I've always disliked guides too, I must admit, but it was too 'fang bien' (convenient) to resist.

I have two problems with guides: one, they cannot be silent; and two, they want to milk you for every Yuan you've got. So, despite my grumpy lack of interest, there was a lot of the usual guide stuff, like trying to pressure me into buying unwanted tours and providing me with redundant information, such as:

"This-rice field"

"This-buffalo"

"This-farmer"

"This-new department store-I have friend there-you want good Chinese silk?-I get you cheap price-big discount-you want?"

Nevertheless, every so often my steely contemptuous looks would make him shut up long enough to take in some of the scenery, which was, as they say, breathtaking. There are about 20,000 of these karst hill things, and they can leave you dizzy, or perhaps that was the lack of oxygen going to my brain, since it had been about five years since I was last on a bike.

You had to keep your eyes on the dirt road too, or you could find yourself sliding into a muddy ditch, or crashing into a rock and going head-over-heels off your bike and inadvertently head butting a mournful water

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buffalo.

The town of Yangshuo is, in itself, an anomaly. I'm writing this in a café in the town's centre, on Xie Jie, West Street. It's a pedestrian zone lined by many cafes, with names like, 'Minnie Mao', 'Drifters', 'Wild West', and my personal favourite, 'Co-Co', which used to be called Coca Cola, until the long arm of the omnipotent Coca Cola corporation threatened them with a libel suit.

All of these cafes offer not only English menus, but also reasonably authentic Western food, a welcome rest bite from authentic Chinese food, which is all beginning to seem like fried vegetables covered in white slime. Even a Chinese curry here actually tastes like the Chinese curry I used to have in Ireland, and not like a Chinese one! And yes, I am aware that one really shouldn't go to China to experience authentic Western food, or inauthentic Chinese food, and even suggesting such a thing is a crass example of Western Imperialism, and who am I to criticise Chinese cuisine etc etc.

Yes, I know all of this, but I just don't like Chinese food enough to want it seven days a week. I'm sorry-I just don't like it that much!

The street also feeds a repetitive array of souvenir stalls. I've always been curious as to why stalls, especially souvenir stalls, always seem to be selling the same thing. Couldn't they each specialise in something different? Imagine if supermarkets had aisles all selling the same thing.

I decided not to raise this issue with the stall holder and instead I bought a copy of Chairman Mao's 'Little Red Book.' An amazing six billion copies of the Little Red Book were published in Mao's lifetime, making it perhaps the most published book of all time.

However, a cynic might note that failing to have a copy of the book on you at all times during the latter half of the Cultural Revolution could result in arrest or worse. Work Units throughout the country even used to have group study meetings of *Mao Zedong Thought*, in the belief that after being enlightened by the words of Mao, the workers' efficient and output would inevitably increase. Rarely has a book held such power.

It is not, as one might imagine, the stunning work of literature its sales figures might suggest. It is not on a par with Marx's 'Communist Manifesto'. In fact, it is not even a real book. It is just a series of quotations Mao and his cronies could use to justify oppressing whatever person or group they suspected of disloyalty.

In some of his quotations, he warns about the dangers of altering, even slightly, the centrally planned economy, arguing that even a tiny loosening of the communist controlled system would snowball out of control, and allow the 'capitalist roaders' and 'rightists' to create an economic system based on greed, and this would destroy the socialist nature of the state within twenty years. I wondered what he'd make of today's China, as near as damn it to naked capitalism, red in tooth and claw.

Yangshuo has more than its fair share of touts, and none of them are touting communism, let me assure you. Readers of my travel writings in India (all five of you!) will already know of the bitter war I am forced to wage against touts, enemies of the people, and the undisguised contempt I hold them in. Indeed, some of you may sigh in the knowledge that I am about to start ranting again about the exploiters of the proletarian tourist by the yolk of the tout oppressors.

But I will try to maintain a sense of dignified objectivity in my analysis of the problem. Firstly, let us look at the causes of touts in this region. As these karst rock formations are unfarmable, the land here being quite poor, there's nothing much for the locals to live off except tourists, and because I was there in low season, there were quite a lot of locals trying to feed off a very limited number of tourists.

Bloated 'Foreign Devils' are especially appealing to the Vampire Touts of Yangshuo, and no crucifix will protect you from them. I toyed with the idea of using Mao's Little Red Book instead, and denouncing them as 'Rightists', but thankfully sanity prevailed.

The never ending requests to clean my trainers began to fray my admittedly limited temper quite quickly, and the postcard touts, who seem to be genetically incapable of understanding the word "NO!!!" almost sent me into a homicidal rage on many occasions.

Luckily, Sandra had the foresight to warn me that repeatedly trying to sell someone a postcard he didn't want was not justifiable cause for homicide in China.

The hotel touts were the worst. They are tenacious little devils, and they follow the weary and bewildered travellers from the bus station, and drag them to their hotels and guesthouses, wearing their resistance down, like dripping water will wear down a rock, given enough time.

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I shouldn't complain too much because for only 6 dollars a night we got a really nice room. In France, if I ever had the money to travel, which I don't, I would need 60 Euro for a mediocre room, so I really shouldn't complain.

I'll try to resist the temptation to whine about the fact that you couldn't 'make a deposit' in the bathroom without blocking the toilet. Instead, I will like to take you on a brief detour to the fascinating world of Chinese toilets. I'm sure you've been very anxious to know where I stand on this issue.

Chinese toilets are best described as 'functional', in that they just about perform all the functions they were designed for. However, Chinese efficiency has led to the elimination of certain unnecessary western features. Why bother with a toilet seat, for example, when you can just squat over a hole in the floor and drop your stool like a bombardier, and enjoy the innocent fun of listening to it come to a squelchy stop from a height? I am reliably informed that since women lack a certain piece of anatomy considered standard in males, a certain, shall we say, 'directable hose', that even urination must be conducted in this same awkward squatting position in Chinese toilets. I shudder to think how difficult this must be and thank God for my directable hose. And to take things one step further and to maximise the minimalism of a Chinese bathroom, why bother separating the toilet from the shower when you can combine the two by simply placing a drain in the floor? In fact, if you really wanted to save time in a Chinese bathroom, you could conceivably defecate, shave, brush your teeth, and shower all at the same time! Think of all the time you've wasted in my life by not performing these morning ablutions simultaneously.

Anxious to move away from the bathroom, which was blocked again, we went to see what the sign outside described as "*Guilin's Magical Caves-a Natural Wonderland and Heavenly Sight Transposed on Earth.*" People come from all over China to see them, and as I hadn't been in a cave since I was knee high to a stalagmite, I was looking forward to it.

They were impressive, I admit, but hardly my idea of Heaven. Indeed, if Heaven is a stygian cave, then what must Hell be like? The caves had been lit up in a kaleidoscopic array of colours to make them look more spooky and surreal, but it also had the effect of making them look like something out of Disneyland.

As so often with Chinese tourist attractions, they had attempted to improve on nature, but in doing so, they had ruined it. However, I seemed to be alone in this opinion, as I am alone in so many of my opinions, and the Chinese tourists in the flock of sheep we were being shepherded in 'oohed' and 'ahed' right on cue.

There were an awful lot of named rocks, like the '*1000 Buddha's Rock,*' the '*Chicken Rock,*' or the '*Golden Key Rock.*' In the world of '*Rocks that Look Like Something Else,*' there was some prize specimens here.

It was just after the '*Golden Key Rock,*' that Sandra started rummaging in my shoulder bag, gasping for some reason, and mumbling something about a plastic bag, which she seemed to be very keen on obtaining immediately. As my shoulder bag was on my back at the time, Sandra was mumbling these plastic bag incantations to my back and pawing her way through the bag in the near total darkness. I felt confused.

Even though we were at the back of the flock, I didn't think it would be a good idea to try to steal the '*Golden Key Rock.*' For one thing, it was technically theft, and for another, the rock was about a metre long, and it wouldn't fit in a plastic bag. It would also bring us way over our weight allowance on the flight home.

However, she wanted the bag for an entirely different purpose. Just after getting the plastic bag out of my backpack, she projected some multicoloured vomit straight into it. If there hadn't been a bag, she would have had to add some more colours of her own on a nearby green stalactite.

It might have become a tourist attraction in its own right to future flocks of tour groups-'*The Lumpy Psychedelic Stalactite of 2005,*' perhaps. We hung back from the rest of our group for the remainder of the tour, and thankfully the tour guide's megaphone dampened the occasional retching noises from Sandra as her plastic bag filled with last night's 'fried vegetable delights'.

Fortunately, Sandra made a full recovery, and that very night we went to see another attraction so beloved of Chinese tour groups in Guilin, the '*Light Show.*' It has a cast of hundreds and takes place on a man-made lake. The actors use pontoons to move around the lake, but it looks like they're floating on water. It's like an opera on water with a light show thrown in.

The choreography, lighting and timing were truly amazing, and I made a mental note not to miss the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympics in 2008. When it comes to choreographed spectacles, the Chinese are unbeatable.

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Our time in Yangshuo and Guilin had come to an end. The next day we would be heading deeper into the Chinese interior, further into the great unknown, deeper into the Dragon's cave. We sat in a bar on Yangshuo's 'West Street', and thought about what we had learned. American TV has taught me that you should always think about what you have learned at the end of an episode.

I had learned some Mao quotations, become an expert on karst rock formations, and developed a revolutionary time-saving way to exploit Chinese toilets. Sandra had learned how useless I was in a bus station, and the importance of bringing plastic bags to all future outings.

China held no fear for us. Let the Dragon do what she may; we were ready for her.

Chapter 6: A Bus Ride in Haedes

A Bus Ride in Hades

Long bus journeys are always unpleasant. Twenty-seven-hour bus rides are worse than unpleasant! They leave you wishing you'd never left, promising never to leave anywhere ever again: Just so long as you can leave the bus right now.

You join me in hour 22. My backside feels like concrete, and I wouldn't be surprised if gangrene has set in. It's both painful and numb at the same time. My bottom has never experienced this level of pain before and is probably contemplating a divorce from the rest of my body, which is clearly mistreating it. I'd talk to it to try and explain things but men talking to their bottoms can raise eyebrows. Having said that, a man talking through their arse is perfectly normal, but let's forget about that and move on to a different part of my anatomy.

Saying that my neck is 'stiff' doesn't quite capture the level of discomfort it is experiencing. It probably comes from trying to fall asleep in a series of uncomfortable positions, each one more uncomfortable than the last. The age of the bus and the appalling roads aren't helping matters. It makes me feel as if the bus is using my head in the same way a pinball machine uses the speedball.

In short, I'm tired, I'm hungry and I want nothing more than to be off this infernal bus. I'd give my right arm to be off it-I may have already permanently lost the use of my bottom and the ability to move my neck.

Let me describe the bus to you, in case you're ever fooled by a Chinese travel agent into believing that a 'Super VIP Bus' is something that might pass its MOT without substantial bribery. Firstly, the bus is very old. In human years, it must be about 15-20 years old, but as with dogs, each bus year is the equivalent of seven human years, so the bus is really well over 100 years old. And would you ride a 100-year-old man for 27 hours?!

Many of the windows are cracked and held together with copious amounts of sticky tape. The seats were probably never comfortable, and age has not been kind to them. Everything on the bus is grotty and dirty. It's the kind of place where you don't want to touch anything because you'd have to wash your hands afterwards. I should have taken one look at the bus and never got on to it. As we went to take our seats, we saw a small orange cockroach was on the headrest waiting to welcome us to his ancestral home. Sandra deftly crushed him and buried him in a plastic bag, which we kept beside us as a warning to his family and friends. Unperturbed, a few hours later, a roach colleague turned out to bid us welcome, and he was quickly dispatched and buried with his friend. I spent a large part of the night wondering how many were crawling over us in the darkness. My mind always tends to run away with itself at night, and even under normal conditions, I cannot sleep in a room where I even suspect an insect might be lurking.

Since I couldn't see anything, and Sandra refused to stay awake all night to protect me from the insect menace, I had to rely on my sense of touch, which is very susceptible to my paranoid imagination, and often imagines things in the dark that aren't there. So, as the bus spluttered and shook its way through the Sichuan night, I spent my time flicking imaginary insects out of my hair and scratching myself, like some junkie going through cold turkey.

I was never so glad to see the dawn.

Even the darkness, however, could not hide the odour from the passenger behind me, who had feet only a dog could love. And even then, the dog would have to have a very pleasant disposition and be very forgiving. Usually one becomes accustomed to bad smells very quickly and stops noticing them, but this man had feet that just kept on giving. The smell never went away. I comforted myself with the thought that the cockroaches would surely be drawn to that rotting smell rather than me.

At the front of the bus there was a small portable TV which I tried to distract myself with. It wasn't easy: the screen was tiny, the image flickered and there was no sound.

The DVD, or rather the VCD's, were 24 one-hour episodes of a Chinese period piece; some kind of costume drama thing. Chinese TV is full of them. I've no idea what this particular one was called; probably something like *'Kung-Fu Monks and the Magic Mirror,'* judging by the plot. Every one of the twenty-four episodes was the same: poorly choreographed kung-fu fights, cheap costumes and three sets, which all looked like they had

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been knocked up in a hurry using only egg cartons by a bunch of Blue Peter aficionados.

I was occasionally distracted from this televisual feast by sound of a passenger hawking phlegm at a decibel level loud enough to provoke landslides, and then spitting a disappointingly small amount of phlegm into a bag, or onto the floor if the driver wasn't looking.

With all the noise produced by the hawking, and with night falling ominously around me, I imagined some kind of mutant alien creature was going to emerge from the gaping mouth of the hawking passenger and devour everyone on the bus. I thought of the headlines: 'Mutant Mucus Massacre', or 'White Foreigners Eaten Alive on Chinese Bus'.

By hour 10 of the journey, I would have volunteered to be gobbled up alive. Even being eaten by an alien, I thought, had to be better than this bus journey. At least it would be a quick death.

I changed my mind about that when, in Hour 11, we stopped at a 'roadside caf  ', for want of a better term, for a dining experience I'll never forget. The caf  -cum-shack looked more like a floodlit garage than anything else, and it had a post-Armageddon Mad Max kind of bareness to it. It was as if civilisation had collapsed and this was all that was left; or like the front line in World War 1 was 300 metres in front of us, and this was all that could be done under war-time conditions.

There was one wok, a gas cylinder beneath it, and a large bamboo drum of pre-cooked rice. The Chinese, of course, saw nothing strange in the place, and happily munched away; stopping only occasionally to spit out bones they'd sucked dry; a Chinese custom that never fails to turn the delicate stomach of a vegetarian like myself. The men also engaged in copious amounts of hawking phlegm, which they could now spit on the concrete floor of the restaurant, unperturbed by our kill-joy driver.

If I had been starving and on the very cusp of death, I might have been persuaded to nibble some of the rice, but I figured there was more than enough body fat on me to see me through the trip. Have you ever noticed that you never get food poisoning from eating your own body fat? Perhaps that's why it evolved-to protect you on long Chinese bus journeys.

It was the middle of the night, and my lack of sleep, my hunger, and my war with the imaginary insect hordes on the bus were beginning to play tricks on my mind.

I started to imagine a gory horror movie in which a roadside caf   in the remote Chinese countryside cut down on costs by murdering foreign tourists, butchered them and then used them as chicken-substitute. I looked at the 'chicken' bones on the concrete floor around me and wondered how I could be sure they weren't human bones. I also noticed the chef was looking at me suspiciously, which I had previously imagined was because I had refused to eat anything, but I now realised could be something more sinister.

I decided to keep my eyes open and my wits about me when I went to the toilet. It is always best to keep one's wits about one in male toilets, of course, because you never know when you might bump into George Michael. One should also keep one's eyes open by default, but actual eye-contact is to be avoided at all times; again for fear of bumping into George Michael. Admittedly, one is unlikely to find George Michael in a shack in the middle of Sichuan countryside at 2am.

The toilet, or 'facilities' as the Americans put it, was nothing more than a nearby shed with four cubicles separated by walls of concrete bricks. The wall, however, was only a couple of bricks high, and there were no doors of any kind, so when I entered I was met by the grimacing supine figures of other passengers, crouching to make deposits and 'straining at stools'.

I suddenly wished I was back on the bus, and I would have run out of this place screaming, but I really did have to pee. There were no two ways about it; I needed to pee, and there was no way on Earth I could hold it in for another 12 hours. It just couldn't be done.

I have, you see, an aversion to public toilets, and avoid them whenever possible. Being blest with the bowels and bladder of an elephant, and the stubbornness of an ass, I can usually manage it, but not this time.

I also, I must admit, have an abhorrent fear of making eye-contact in a public toilet.

It's irrational, I know, like all of my hang-ups, and all of your hang-ups too, dear reader, but it's there nonetheless. However, there I was, the centre of attention in a male toilet; a white face, entertainment for the bored passengers, and remember that staring at someone is not considered impolite in China.

I looked at them; three crouching tigers, all smoking cheap cigarettes to speed up the defecation process, adding to an already overpowering smell of urine and faces. But, as I've said, dear reader, I *really* had to go.

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I approached the centre-right cubicle, and the heads of the Chinese men turned toward me. I was standing up and they were squatting, so there were no two ways about it. If I went for a pee, they were going to start staring at a part of my anatomy no other man had ever seen before. I did my best to use both my hands to cover the offending article, but it wasn't easy because I'd never used two hands to pee before.

I stood there for what seemed like an eternity waiting to start peeing. Fear, of course, makes urination difficult, and I had to imagine Niagara Falls to get the waterworks moving. I constricted my bladder to make everything move as fast as possible, and suddenly a torrent of urine gushed forth.

I noticed that there weren't any holes to swallow my pee, just a drain, so my yellow tidal wave of urine must have washed away all the turds of my neighbours.

This wasn't the meeting of cultures I had hoped from this holiday.

Back on the bus, shaking with post-pee traumatic stress disorder, and flicking imaginary insects off my body, I waited for the dawn.

When it came, I tried to rise above the discomfort and concentrate instead on the Sichwan countryside.

Western Sichwan is one of the most fertile areas of China; most of the land in the country being barren and suitable only for light grazing, at best.

To be more precise, the soil in Sichwan is fertile, but farming here is technically very difficult. The hilly landscape makes mechanical farming impossible, and in a European context, the land would probably be left to hardy sheep and goats. The Chinese, however, see semi-mountainous terrain merely as an obstacle to overcome, and have farmed it regardless. They have altered the landscape to maximise production and to better suit their needs. The hills have been 'terraced' to allow rice production, using only mud, sweat and an occasional buffalo.

I've haven't seen a single tractor yet, and I think they would probably topple over in this hilly terrain, so farming here is a very labour intensive business. In Europe and even more in America, the countryside has been effectively depopulated, and is now the preserve of agricultural machinery and the monocrops they engender. In China, however, and in Sichuan in particular, the peasants still toil the land, and they toil it with their hands.

There are also innumerable small green rivers and streams, and on the higher hills, where even the Chinese can't farm, trees cling on perilously, wondering what has happened to what was once their sole domain. All of Sichuan was once bamboo forest and the preserve of pandas and other wildlife, forced to retreat further and further into shrinking pockets of wilderness, banished by the inexorable advance of man.

Every now and then, we pass market gardens, which produce much of China's fruit. Even here in the agricultural heartland, however, there are signs of China's industrialisation. Dangerously overloaded enormous coal trucks clog up the roads, and convoys of other vehicles impatiently follow them, snaking their way through the narrow curving roads.

. We pass through village after village, whose shops look more like garages and always seem to full of old men whose main business seems to be sitting around.

In spite of the scenery, I must say that the trip was the most wretched and uncomfortable of my life, but I suppose I'm still glad I did it. Not in a masochistic way, but because it showed me how most people actually travel in China. The mobile phone wielding businessmen one finds in the new gleaming airports on the coast are a tiny minority. Most people in China still travel by bus and train.

And, of course, there are many people who never travel at all. Even the other passengers on the 'VIP Luxury Haedes Express' are not really poor. The average Chinese peasant, on a dollar a day, could only dream of holidaying in a different province, or holidaying at all, for that matter. They might regard the bus journey I've spent so much time vilifying as an interesting experience.

Sandra and I, however, did not regard the journey that way, and we spent a large part of the trip in an acrimonious exchange concerning whose fault it was that we were on a 27-hour bus journey, rather than a 1-hour flight.

I remembered the decision to use the bus as being a mutual decision, brought about by our desire to see the countryside, a gross misunderstanding of the term 'Super VIP bus', and an attempt to stop us haemorrhaging cash. Sandra, however, had a very different memory of events, and claimed she had wanted to take the plane and I had insisted, Scrooge-like, on the bus. The truth of the matter will never be known. Reality is subjective.

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If my loyal readers will allow me yet another aside, I am beginning to think that when apportioning blame, the golden rule with humans is that *everything* is someone else's fault. And even when one must actually admit that one is in the wrong, when one must hold up one's hands and cry 'culpa mia', there are always extenuating circumstances to mitigate culpability. We are all heroes in our own unconscious minds, all supermen and superwomen, and therefore largely incapable of doing wrong.

In order to maintain this fiction, we are equipped with memories that are 'flexible' and susceptible to interference from our unconscious minds, allowing us to recreate events in the way we would have liked them to have happened, rather than the way they actually did happen.

The icing on the cake is that we are not even aware this is happening, that our own personal histories are being constantly rewritten, and that the culprit is none other than ourselves, or rather the unconscious part of ourselves, which makes up 90% or what we actually are.

It only becomes obvious with mental illness. In depression, for example, the sufferer distorts events to make himself the villain; the doer of all wrongs; the eternally culpable. In megalomania, the positive rewrite of oneself and the negative rewrite of others become so absurd that even others notice how little grasp on reality the megalomaniac has. However, we all distort reality to a greater or lesser extent. We are six billion reality destroyers.

These thoughts occur to me now, for no apparent reason, in my own rewrite of the China trip; four years after the events described took place. As to what actually happened, who knows? Not me.

At the time, I remember, or I think I remember, being quite excited to be arriving in Chengdu, and very relieved to be off the bus, the Hades Express.

The Dragon had teeth, and she had nearly bitten my bottom off. I would have to learn to be more careful.

Chapter 7: Chengdu

Chengdu

The first thing you notice on arriving in Chengdu is a sudden deterioration in air quality, and let's face it, the air quality on the bus was far from pristine. It's like you've suddenly gone back in time and found yourself in a Dickensian industrial city: an evil grey on all sides; an environment that is somehow hostile permeates through you; sticking to your skin and clinging to your lungs.

China boasts some 16 of the world's 20 most polluted cities. Chengdu is not the most polluted city in China, but it is still the 16th most polluted city on Earth, and it was by far the most polluted place I had ever visited.

The air pollution is so great that there is a permanent haze hanging over the city, a kind of cold smog.

In case you're wondering, the most polluted cities on Earth, in terms of air pollution, are Cairo, Delhi and Calcutta. I have now been to two out of three of these cities, and although they are certainly polluted, I remember the shock of pollution being greatest in Chengdu, probably because it was the first time I had experienced it, and also because I was coming from picturesque and pristine Yangshuo.

Chengdu's air is bad enough, but if you take a broader measure of pollution, and define it in terms of its likelihood to damage your health, then China takes first place, with its three-million strong city of Linfen, deep in the heart of the coalmining province of Shanxi, in the centre of the country. China takes not only gold but also silver in the League Table of Toxic Cities: Tianying, in the north eastern rust belt, produces half of China's lead, and this and other toxic metals enter the water and food supplies.

Why do people choose to live in an environment they know to be poisonous?

The disturbing truth is that after only a few hours in Chengdu, I had stopped noticing that the air I was breathing was part coal. We can get used to anything, and if we couldn't then cities, both clean and polluted, could not exist. Cities, as I have mentioned before, are not an environment we were designed for. They are an environment we have created and learned to live in. Humans can learn to do anything.

It is this adaptability, however, that may prove our undoing. We can put up with almost any level of pollution, and psychologically at least, stop noticing it very quickly. And if you stop noticing a problem, then in many ways it ceases to exist. Like the proverbial ostrich which was once thought to bury its head in the sand to avoid having to deal with a problem, city dwellers, even in the filthiest of cities, are almost blind to the problem, and find it easier to learn to live with it than to do anything about it. Like the cigarette smoker who quits *after* he's been diagnosed with cancer, we often do things too late.

To put it another way, we have difficulties changing current behaviour patterns in response to long-term consequences of behaviours, regardless of the severity of the consequences. To be blunt, my fear is that we won't start to really do something about pollution until we're a few hours from choking to death on it, and by then it will be too late.

With this happy thought in my head, I left the bags in my musty hotel room, guarded by old world charm, 1950's furniture, and peeling wallpaper, and set off to explore Chengdu.

Firstly, let me tell you a little bit about the city. Chengdu, in central China, has a population of about nearly eleven million and a history that spans over a thousand years. Indeed, its very name translates as 'become capital', and it was the capital city during a large part of the early imperial period.

However, as with most Chinese cities, its history has been destroyed by war, progress and indifference, and little or nothing of its past survives.

Chinese cities have more than the occasional make-overs; they have plastic surgery, and it's difficult to tell what they looked like before.

Today's Chengdu contains many wide boulevards, some faceless communist architecture even Stalin would have had second thoughts about, and an enormous number of bicycles, which by some perpetual miracle, manage not to collide into one another. It also contains many bars and teahouses, more than either Beijing or Shanghai, in spite of their higher populations, and people here have a reputation for being a 'party city'.

We went to the People's Park, which was full of pensioners doting over chubby grandchildren. We sat in a teahouse, fought off some touts, desperate as always to clean my boots and loath to take 'no' for an answer.

One innovative tout wanted to clean out my ear wax with an odd wire and cotton wool contraption that looked

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like something one might click a blocked drain with, but I declined, in spite of my curiosity. Instead, we sat and watched grandparents play with the children. Sociologists tell us that the extended family has been replaced by the nuclear family, but no-one told China, and people here continue to live three generations to a flat in relative harmony. Both parents usually work, and upon retirement, the grandparents settle down to a life of bringing up infants. As they themselves probably had full-time jobs when their own children were growing up, it is often their first experience of full-time parenting.

Judging by the happy scenes in the park, they seem to enjoy it. I imagine the one-child policy makes things easier for them too, by reducing the number of children they have to look after. Indeed, it struck me that Chinese pensioners seem to be a great deal happier than their western counterparts, who are often left to rot away in old-folks home or die in freezing flats; unwanted, frightened and considered a burden by a society that has moved on.

Western society has no place for the old: "*That is no country for old men,*" if I may be pompous enough to (mis)quote Yates. Their Chinese counterparts, on the other hand, are respected and seen to play a vital role. In the park, it was mainly grandmothers who watched over the toddling 'little emperors' while the old men gathered in groups and played cards, mahjong or held impromptu discussions. Some of them still wore blue Mao suits and eyed me suspiciously, wondering what this 'foreign devil' was doing in their midst. I wondered if things got nasty whether I could outrun them or not. They had the numbers, a better knowledge of the city, and were more used to the pollution, but I still had my own teeth.

What they were discussing, I have no idea, but it all seemed so much better than a semi-circle of pensioners in an old-folks home in England, rotting zombie-like around the inane nothingness that is day-time TV.

After the park, we visited an ancient temple, luckily not central enough to have suffered the same fate as an even older temple, whose name I've forgotten, which was demolished to make room for an enormous Mao statue during the Cultural Revolution.

Mao and his Red Guards were quite keen to destroy anything that smacked of being one of the 'Four Olds': Old Customs, Old Habits, Old Culture, Old Ideas. Anything that existed before 1949 could be considered old, so temples suffered most of all. Indeed, the Red Guards probably did more damage to China's historical monuments than the fourteen-year war with the Japanese or the civil war that followed it. Not surprisingly, however, the Communist party has never published a list of exactly what damage was done.

The temple we visited was very popular with actual believers, rather than simple tourists, and Taoist devotees dutifully left incense sticks at various Buddha shrines, dotted around the complex. They bowed and mumbled incantations as they went, and red robed monks went among them.

It surprised me at the time to see so many active Buddhists in one place because the Chinese I had previously met always seemed completely uninterested in religion, and I had come to the conclusion that the Communist Party had thoroughly purged what Mao called 'the poison of religion' from China.

However, my knowledge of what Chinese people think or don't think was largely limited to classroom discussions, but since the PSB (the Chinese police) often operate incognito, and keep a very close eye on all interactions with foreigners, students were always careful about what they said or didn't say in class. The PSB are especially sensitive to any references to religion and determined to prevent any and all proselytising. Two other slogans in the Cultural Revolution were '*Beating down foreign religion*' and '*Beating down Jesus following.*' so it is understandable that my students never brought up the subject of religion.

Expressing a strong religious affiliation still makes your loyalty to the Party questionable in China, in spite of the supposed religious freedom the Party propaganda machine likes to claim is normal in today's China, and if you have strong religious convictions, you tend to keep them to yourself.

The temple's monks were a lot less colourful than their saffron-robed Thai counterparts, and held in far less esteem, needless to say. However, the horrors of the Cultural Revolution are long since passed, and monks are no longer forced to attend re-education sessions, or to take their monasteries apart brick by brick and rebuild them as barracks, factories or even pig sties.

Buddhism, even under the ever watchful eyes of the Party, does appear to be making a slow comeback in China, but it's hard to imagine it ever occupying a central role in peoples' lives again. Even in Hong Kong and Macao, where Buddhism it seemed somehow ephemeral and almost irrelevant to people's daily concerns.

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At least, it seemed that way to be, but a voice in the back of my head tells me I am missing something crucial here, and I must admit I often miss what is not blindingly obvious.

One should always beware of 'false prophets' like myself and their sweeping generalisations, and I am probably mistaken in believing that because the Chinese don't talk about religion much, it is not important to them.

Witness the Falun Gong movement, for example, which has grown since its inception in 1992 to become a 'movement' with 70 million practitioners today, in spite of a severe government crackdown. It even somehow managed to amass 10,000 silent protestors outside the headquarters of the Communist Party in 1999, taking the Party by surprise. Since then, the Party has become even more determined to deal with the movement, and it has been claimed that two thirds of all government torture victims and half of China's labour camp population are Falun Gong supporters.

I never met a Falun Gong believer, but since they are hardly likely to advertise their membership of the movement, I wouldn't know if I had. Like so many things in China, it is hidden.

We ate at a vegetarian restaurant in the temple complex. The tofu meat imitations were some of the most impressive I've ever had. In fact, it looked and tasted so much like real meat that Sandra couldn't eat it, convinced that for reasons unknown, there had to be real meat in it. I had no such qualms, and trusted the monks not to slip me a piece of pork on the sly.

I must have eaten nearly a whole chicken's worth of spicy tofu, and paid for it later that night with some terrible stomach pains. Sichuan's food is very hot and spicy, and it is by far my favourite type of Chinese food. By the way, there are four main types of Chinese food, the 'Four Great Traditions': Sichuan (spicy); Canton (oily); Shanghai (sweet) and Huaiyang (?). This is, of course, a gross oversimplification.

To distract me from my red hot intestines, we spent the evening at an 'authentic' Sichuan opera, which also offered a puppet show and a shadow dancing 'extravaganza.' A purist might object that it was all rather touristic, but 90 percent of the audience was Chinese, so I didn't mind so much. I figured that if it was good enough for Chinese tourists, it was good enough for me.

The costumes were psychedelic and almost other-worldly. The characters in Chinese opera usually represent Gods; such as the 'Money God', the 'Pride God', the 'God of Compassion' etc. This explains the bizarre make up, the inhuman grimaces, and the screeching voices. As an ignorant westerner, I was completely lost and hadn't the foggiest idea what was going on, but I must admit I've always kind of liked that feeling of being immersed in something completely new, of being lost. Perhaps this is the universe toddlers and young children experience; piecing reality together bit by bit, surrounded by a shiny beautiful world they do not understand.

It felt as though I had been transported to a different planet, where strange bipedal life forms occupied time and space in much the same way as I did, and appeared to be using sound as a means of communication, but what were saying or doing was unknown and unknowable. If astronauts are ever sent as emissaries to study new life forms, they should first be sent to see a Chinese opera to let them know in advance how little they can expect to understand.

Captain Kirk had an easy time because just about everyone spoke English, and all the species operated according to easily understood codes of behaviour. The Vulcans, Klingons and Romulan societies may have been different to Captain Kirk's, but they were easy to understand. He never came across anything as bizarre as the characters in a Sichuan opera. I wondered what Bones, Star Trek's doctor, would have made of the opera characters, and imagined him reporting to Captain Kirk that: *"It's life, Jim, but not as we know it."* Yes, indeed.

We went home immediately afterwards, and tried not to communicate with the fungus in our hotel room; another strange life form I had no desire to make first contact with. We had to get up early the following day to see one of the cutest life forms this planet has to offer: the Giant Panda.

We dragged ourselves out of bed at the ridiculously early time of 6.30, but you have to get to the Panda Centre early in the morning, which is when the pandas like to eat and play. Otherwise, you just get to see them engage in their other favourite pastime, sleeping.

As we arrived at Chengdu's world renowned 'Panda Breeding and Research Centre,' I wondered why the world had not set up a 'Phillip Breeding and Research Centre', but I let that thought go, realising that world

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wasn't that interested in the propagation of the Phillip species, and I had already spent most of my life researching myself anyway, and had nothing to show for it. Moreover, pandas are a great deal cuter than Phillips.

There's no getting away from the fact that pandas are cute. I read somewhere that we find them so irresistible because the black markings around their eyes exaggerate their eyes' size. Oversized eyes remind us of babies, which we are hard wired to find adorable. Pandas are also fluffy, another admirable characteristic in animals, although less so in babies.

The Panda's cuteness, however, has not stopped them being brought to the edge of extinction. There are only about 1,500 left in the wild, and 250 more in captivity. Moreover, with the few remaining bamboo forest being eaten up by human expansion, their future survival or lack of it may be determined by the success or failure of breeding centres like this one, and according to the breeding statistics proudly displayed on the wall of the museum, the Chengdu Centre has by far the most successful of the breeding programs. It's the Sex capital of the world, as far as pandas are concerned. There's probably a Hugh Hefner panda somewhere in the complex, publishing PlayPanda.

Pandas are, it must be noted, partly to blame for their own fate. They are incredibly fussy animals; the prima donnas of the endangered species. They will only eat bamboo, for example, and only certain types of bamboo, in spite of having the digestive tract of a carnivore which is entirely unsuited to digesting it. Indeed, they often die from digestive problems.

They're also very fussy about when they'll mate and who they'll mate with, and so artificial insemination is often used to get around this problem.

You can't help wondering though what goes through the mind of a panda when she realizes she's pregnant but hasn't had sex. Does she suspect the miraculous intervention of the Holy Panda Spirit? Does she therefore expect to give birth to a Messiah, a second coming, a King of the Panda People?

But you can't feel angry with a panda when you come face to face with one.

We happily watched them stuff their face on prime bamboo, and felt star struck when one of them occasionally looked up and gave us a glance. Moving on to the 'baby panda' enclave, we 'oohed' and 'aahed' while we watched panda cubs frolic about with each other and with their handlers, all dressed in scrubs and wearing face masks, lest the precious cubs caught a cold. In between bursts of play, the spoiled cubs were fed with baby bottles.

Pandas are so high profile, and the government so keen not to be seen to let their extinction happen, that they'll probably survive. The fate of other less lovable animals is much more grim, both in China and in the world at large. The Giant Phillipus Moanicus, for example, is almost certainly going to become extinct. The culprit, of course, is us: you, the reader, me, the writer, and the other six billion humans who have not read this book, and are completely unaware of our existence. We're all to blame, to a greater or lesser extent. What the world needs most is fewer humans.

The Chinese government is unique in the world for having the determination, power and foresight to face the population problem head on. By limiting the number of children to one per family, China has saved its population from eternal penury, from the famine of overpopulation; and in theory at least, it should have saved its environment too; but in reality, its environment is in freefall; the most toxic on the planet, and getting worse all the time.

The economic miracle means that Chinese pollution levels are still increasing dramatically, thereby further weakening an already fragile ecosystem. Yet again, I wondered if China, and the world at large, could survive an affluent China, and the effluent it will produce. I wondered if the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) would find, in twenty year's time, that it has saved its emblem, the panda, from extinction, but few other species remained. We cannot, both morally and ecologically, only save the cute species from extinction. We must save them all; the cute and the hideous.

These grim thoughts were matched by the eternally grey sky. Chengdu has even less sunshine than London, and to distract myself from the guilt of being a member of a species that has brought untold numbers of other species to extinction, and will bring countless more to the same fate, unless they are somehow 'cute', I spent the long mini-bus journey back into Chengdu city lost in fantasy.

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Religion is not the only opium of the masses, we also have our imaginations. What follows are my notes at the time for might have been the world's worst ever B-Movie. If only Ed Wood was still around to make it, it might even have surpassed his 'Plan 9 from Outer Space'.

Chapter 8: Mutant Panda Killers

Mutant Panda Killers

Hum.. I'm thinking now of a possible science-fiction movie in which a great breakthrough is made in panda breeding by splicing the rat genes for reproduction with normal panda genes. Everything goes swimmingly, at first. Panda numbers rocket, and pretty soon, there are enough of them for people to keep them as pets, and the scientist who invented the process (played by Julia Roberts, I think) is universally acclaimed.

However, things take a dramatic turn for the worse when the panda genes mutate in unforeseen ways, and the pandas change from docile vegetarians into aggressive super intelligent carnivores, with a special affinity for human flesh, especially young virgin female flesh. They break out of their breeding centres and spread through the remaining forests of central Asia, increasing their numbers exponentially while preparing for a great assault on Chengdu.

In one scene, General Wee Pee, the panda leader, talks strategy with other panda generals, while Julia Roberts looks on helplessly, held hostage in a small cage and taunted by thuggish panda guards, who call her 'big mouth, baldy monkey face'.

The Chengdu offensive takes the city in two days, and panic spreads through the world at large, as satellite TV images show humans being torn to shreds by bloodthirsty panda killers, their black and white fur splattered in red blood stains.

At an emergency meeting of the UN Security Council, the American President (played by somebody black or female, or preferably both) convinces everybody that the only way to retaliate is through a limited nuclear strike on the Sichuan area. The Chinese leader (played by Jackie Chan) at first proposes a kung-fu solution, but admits there isn't time to train the populace and reluctantly agrees to the American plan, and the USAF drop the big one.

However, catastrophe strikes again when the radioactivity only makes the pandas stronger. New Super Mutant Pandas emerge from the ashes of Chengdu; 50 metres tall, with claws the size of cars, and laser eyes. The pandas look set to take over the world. Chairman Jackie Chan manages to take out a few with some deft martial arts moves outside the UN building, but he's overpowered and all looks lost.

After a vicious genocidal war, human numbers are reduced to 1,000, and the pandas set up a Human Breeding Centre in London Zoo. The humans are pampered and given everything they could need for a happy life; mobile phones, big cages, home entertainment systems and a McDonalds. Most of the humans settle in happily enough to their new lives of ease, and learn to ignore the panda cubs laughing at them and pointing at their antics, and President Bush finds he enjoys all the attention, and performs special tricks to make the cubs throw monkey nuts.

Julia Roberts, however, refuses to accept her prison sentence, and joins a crack band of resistance fighters in a daring bid to escape from London Zoo. Then she breaks into a laboratory, plays around with some test tubes for a few minutes and finds the solution that somehow eluded all the best scientific minds during the Panda War.

She places a slow-acting but lethal anti-panda virus into the water supply that kills all pandas and leaves mankind back in control of the planet, and the pandas are brought to extinction

The film could be called "Mutant Panda Killers," and the advertising slogan might be, "*Cute is a four letter word*", or "*Teddy Terror*." All I need now is a love interest. Perhaps Julia Roberts could hook up with one of the resistance fighters-some kind of tough marine type. You know, the guy-who-breaks-the-rules-but-always-gets-his-man action hero used in all Hollywood films these days. Bruce Willis might be good for the role. Heaven knows, he's never played any other role.

Yes, I think this will be next year's summer blockbuster...But there has to be a twist in the tail. Of course!

Julia Roberts turns out to have been artificially inseminated with panda general Wee Pee's baby-and then there can be a Mutant Panda Killers 2.

Hurrah! I'm gonna be rich!!

Back in Chengdu city, and surrounded by 11 million humans, I began to have second thought about the movie. Firstly, no-one would ever watch something so crass, and secondly the only real danger to the planet,

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the science-fact monster rather than the science-fiction one, is a hairless simian biped, called man. I put these thoughts aside and prepared to fly to the roof of the Dragon's cave, the roof of the world, in fact, Tibet.

Chapter 9: Lhasa

Lhasa

You join me on a plane from Chengdu to Lhasa. Almost all the passengers are Han Chinese, demonstrating who wears the trousers in modern Tibet. The first group of ethnic Tibetans I saw were unloading the luggage from the plane.

The 'roof of the world' is only an hour away. From the plane window, the scenery looks 'moon-like'. I know this adjective is often overused, but in Tibet's case, the description is valid. The mountain tops are occasionally snow-covered, but mainly brown and barren.

I had expected mountains like the Alps, with craggy snow-covered peaks separated by fertile green valleys and lakes, but I couldn't see anything green from the plane; just an endless series of brown lumps. This must be what all of the earth looked like before life evolved.

As the plane descended into Gongkar airport, I noticed that several of the valleys did manage to support some kind of meagre agricultural production, but even these crops looked brown and almost petrified.

We drove into Lhasa, but as the bus headed into the city from the airport, we very quickly began to feel dizzy and giddy. Altitude sickness was kicking in. The feeling you get from the lack of oxygen going to your brain when you suddenly ascend to 4,000 metres with no time to acclimatise is a little like being drunk: you laugh for no reason and your co-ordination is shot. It also becomes difficult to think logically or coherently.

Sandra quickly went into a 'hangover stage' and became nauseous, as well as dazed and confused. When we finally got to our hotel room, she lay on the bed, pulled the covers over herself and didn't get out of bed for the next two days. I was still rather giddy, but too disorientated to effectively deal with the most basic of questions, like the hotel receptionist request for my passport.

The symptoms of altitude sickness grew more severe as the day went on: a screaming headache, fever, disorientation, nausea, and in Sandra's case, vomiting and diarrhoea too.

The strangest effect though is the permanent shortage of breath. The slightest exertion, like getting out of bed to take a pee, leaves you wheezing and your heart pumping. Your instinct is take long deep breaths, but this only makes things worse. What you need to do is take lots of short, shallow breaths, like a panting dog.

Even sleeping becomes a skill you have to relearn. When we sleep, our breathing automatically slows and becomes deeper. This is not a problem at normal altitudes, but at 4,000 metres, there isn't enough oxygen getting from your lungs into your brain, and your heart beats faster and faster to try and make up the deficit. Soon, you wake up with a start to find your heart is racing, and you've got to breathe like you never breathed before.

This happened to me last night every twenty to thirty minutes, so my sleeping was fitful at best. At about 2.30, I woke up for the last time, and spent the rest of the night staring at the ceiling and listening to my heart pound. It wasn't very interesting-pretty repetitive actually.

Even when lying in bed, my heartbeat was over a hundred beats per minute, and taking the slowest of walks, with frequent stops to drink water, as the dry mountain air robs your body of moisture, brought it to well over 120.

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Our room was laid out in a traditional Tibetan style, and quite beautiful to look at, but it was freezing. Well, not really freezing, to be honest. I suppose it was about 15 degrees during the day and 10 degrees at night, but after Bangkok's 30 degrees at night, it felt freezing. I can put up with the cold for short periods of time, and even enjoy extremely snowy cold winters in a way, but I cannot bear to be cold *inside*. It can be 30 degrees below outside, and I won't complain, but anything less than 20 inside and I become a Super Grouch.

There was no heater in the room of any description, and the hotel staff said they didn't have one to give me. I didn't really believe that there wasn't a heater in the hotel somewhere, so I tried pleading with them, cajoling them with tales of my wife's imminent demise. I even descended to borderline begging and then attempted bribery, but I eventually realised they were telling the truth. There were no heaters in the hotel. Moreover, none of the other backpackers I met had heaters in their hotels or guesthouses either.

Finding myself, perhaps for the first time in my life, forced to experience cold on a long-term basis, cold as an all-day event, I quickly realised how inherently unpleasant it actually is.

The lack of heating appliances is very odd, when you think about it. Even then, in April, the temperature can fall to zero at night, and in the depths of winter, it can plummet to minus 20. How can these people survive, I asked myself, without heating? How many layers of clothes can you wear? How tough could they be?

I felt sure there had to be heaters somewhere in the city, so tiring of lying under my four blankets and wondering if my toes were in danger of gangrene, I decided I would need to purchase a small heater for myself here in Lhasa. I had most certainly not come to Lhasa with the intention of buying a heater, but it became my first mission and my number one objective.

I realise this sounds absurd, and perhaps this obsession with heating appliances was part of the altitude sickness, or simply another sign that I really do need professional psychiatric help, but all I could think about was the cold and how much I wanted to escape it. In Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, the need for warmth comes near the top, and Tibetan culture would just have to wait until I had satisfied my most basic needs.

I set off into the heart of old Lhasa to find a heater. With the naivety that comes from growing up in the shopper's paradise of Western Europe, I thought it would only take five minutes, but hour after hour went by without success.

Night was beginning to fall, and I knew our room was only going to get colder and colder. The cloudless sky looked very unforgiving, and the mountains surrounding the city took on a bleak air, as the shadows of the setting sun shrouded them in darkness.

I also knew from previous experience in China that restaurants and bars rarely have any form of heating either, and when you go out to eat in China, you do so with your coat on. So I trundled on and on, determined not to spend the evening in my coat in a freezing restaurant, trying to eat my dinner through chattering teeth, with nothing to look forward to but returning to an even colder room.

I was also aware that my sickly wife had grown oddly silent before I left, and as I got completely lost in the old-town, I thought of her lying in bed: fully clothed, wrapped in blankets, and staring at the ceiling, like a frozen mummy. This brought out the hunter in me, and I was determined to trap a heater and bring it home.

It took on the feeling of a holy quest: the Search for the Holy Heater. It would have been easier to find the Holy Grail in a meeting of the Central Committee of the Communist Party. I searched all over the beautiful old town of Tibet, and then I ventured into the ugly Chinese new town, but heaters were not to be found. I looked in more shops in four hours than I had looked in during my whole life beforehand, but without success. There are no heaters in Tibet!

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This may not count as spiritual enlightenment, but it sure shocked the Hell out of me. Tibetans have no heaters! They cannot be bought for love, nor money, nor yak's milk.

Slowly I find myself seduced by the 'heaterless' environment I found myself in. There are places in this world that are so beautiful, and so different, that even a mind as warped as mine cannot help but appreciate them. Old Lhasa is one of those places, and I slowly became aware of it. It crept into my consciousness that I was somewhere truly special, somewhere magnificent.

Old Lhasa is like something out of a medieval museum. Not just the buildings, but the people. There are plenty of European cities that boast an old town, or rather the façade of an old town, but there is something almost Disney-like about them in comparison to Lhasa. Europe may have old towns, but its people are 21st century people: uniformed, insipid and mass produced; crafted by the mass media they think they control; automaton and cogs in the invisible machine that is modern society. Tibetans are not yet part of the machine; they have not yet been assimilated.

Occasional, for the briefest of moments, my mind shook itself free of the machine and I actually saw them. More than 99% of the time I am blind: I do not see, I think, or rather I think I see, but all I receive are images fed to me by the machine that has crafted and controls me. That afternoon, I saw for real: flashes of the most vibrant traditional costumes, layer upon layer, 'real' in a sense beyond comprehension, then or now.

I saw spinning prayer wheels; always moving clockwise, always held in upturned wrists; I saw the colourful clothes and the ceremonial daggers of the young men from outside Lhasa; and above the clothes, the Tibetan faces; tanned, lined and both tough and soft, both wise and ignorant at the same time, chanting melodically.

I saw, or rather felt, many things that afternoon, in a way I have not seen or felt anything since, and perhaps may never see or feel again. My rational mind tells me that these 'sights', and I will not use the word 'visions', were simply the result of altitude sickness, but I would like to believe they were something more. I do not mean something spiritual, for I have no time for spiritualism, but I would like to believe I experienced, even if only for the briefest of instants, another world; a world so entirely different from my own that I cannot understand it, and if I cannot understand it, I cannot really describe it.

But to return, rather sadly I must admit, to the world I do inhabit, let me describe Lhasa as best I can, as best as I remember it, being who I am, a 38-year old 'civilised' man, sitting in a flat in Paris, on a cold November Sunday afternoon, wishing I was somewhere else, wishing I was something else.

I think 'tough' is the best word to describe Tibetans. I could barely survive there in a comfortable hotel with all the creature comforts money could buy; except a heater, of course. The Tibetans from outside Lhasa eek a living from the most barren and inhospitable land I have ever seen.

Before Buddhism gained a hold here, the Tibetans were regarded by their neighbours much as the Huns were regarded by Europeans: fierce savage warrior creatures; intent on pillage, rape and general destruction. And, to be brutally honest, I was still rather apprehensive of them. They looked wild and savage, much as the indigenous population of the Americas must have looked to the first 'settlers'.

If I had been some kind of Hemmingway figure, I would have struck up a conversation with one of them, hastily built a friendship with some of them over hot Yak milk and whiskey, and headed back into the mountains with them to see how real men live, and experience life at its toughest. Of course, I probably would have died in a week or less. I'm a city kid, and cannot survive outside it. The environment has imprisoned me. Even the Han Chinese, a pretty sturdy bunch, tend to stay within the towns, and leave the herding in the

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Wastelands to the Tibetans.

Even the monks, who I had expected to display a glowing serenity, were a little on the scary side. One of them approached me once, smiled with a touch of menace, and then showed me a tattered piece of paper requesting money to rebuild some monastery or other. I took some crumbled notes out of my pocket and went to give him a five yuan one. He grabbed the other notes out of my paw too, and took off smiling, spinning his prayer wheel as he went.

"What a naughty monk," I thought to myself.

This happened several times in Lhasa on my first day, so that pretty quickly, I learned not to make eye-contact with any red-robed fellow, and to ignore their many 'hellos' and commands to parley. They seemed insatiably greedy, and displayed an avarice even the Catholic Church would balk at. Apologies to the Dali Lama and to the entire Tibetan Spiritual Movement, but I do not appreciate being targeted in this way. I am nobody's cash-cow. I am an atheist and do not want to give my money to exploiters of the proletariat, and peddlers of the opium of religion.

Ignoring monks wasn't always enough though. A few days later, after staggering down from the Potala Palace, and falling into the nearest restaurant, hopelessly out of breath and desperately in need of something cold, liquid and sweet, I looked on aghast as my just-opened can of coke was swiped from my table by a middle-aged monk.

The owner of the restaurant (a Han Chinese) shrugged his shoulders sympathetically, and I was left to wonder how the monk helping himself to my can of coke was going to bring either of us one step closer to enlightenment.

In the dizzy and disorientated state of my first day, as I walked around the Barkhor temple, Lhasa's holiest shrine, incongruously asking all and sundry for a heater, not knowing the word in Tibetan or Chinese, I was accosted by uncountable numbers of beggars and enthusiastic stall owners who enjoined me to purchase large quantities of prayer wheels, yak's butter, prayer mats, prayer flags and hand-woven carpets.

Everything proffered was accompanied by the mantra "luck-ee luck-ee" and "cheap-ee cheap-ee." Nobody offered to sell me what my heart desired—a heater. The sounds and smells of the crowded market street were overpowering. As I crawled along, zombie-like in short shuffle steps, I was struck by how alien the place was compared to everything I had seen in my life before.

I was also struck by how close to fainting I was, and more than a little worried by my inability to remember how to get back to my hotel. Thankfully Lhasa is quite a small town, so I stumbled across my hotel again eventually. The room was freezing, I was exhausted, and after checking that Sandra had not frozen to death in my absence, I began the roller coaster ride of sleep and heart palpitations.

Slowly the worst effects of altitude sickness subsided, but the racing heart beat and the shortness of breath continued. I also managed to pick up a cold and a nasty cough, which I suspected could be tuberculosis, being of an optimistic disposition. I almost thought about giving up smoking, but sanity prevailed.

Instead, I decided to visit a nearby health clinic. Sandra had also told me that we should buy some altitude sickness medicines, which with a complete lack of foresight and planning, we had neglected to buy before the trip.

In the clinic, the doctor took my heartbeat, but I must admit I was worried by the amount of time it took her to find my pulse, and even more worried by the state of her faded and discoloured stethoscope. I had watched

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enough medical hospital dramas to know that stethoscopes are meant to be shiny and silver, but nothing in the clinic was shiny or silver, least of all the doctor.

She was a woman of indeterminate age, but certainly over a hundred, and she had breathing problems as bad as my own, or worse. She had about 50 faintly recognisable words of English, and an unwillingness to speak Mandarin with foreigners, a trait common to every Tibetan I tried to speak to. To make up for these linguistic deficiencies, she affixed 'ee' and 'upa' to the end of Tibetan words, hoping this would make things clearer, but it didn't.

Her medical apron had once been white, but was now rather off-white. In fact, everything in the clinic looked slightly off-white to me, and it didn't reek of bleach, which alarmed me.

The doctor placed a thermometer under my armpit, and was then called away by another client at the counter. I think she forgot about us, as I'm sure a thermometer doesn't normally require 20 minutes to get a reading.

In her absence, we chatted to a young woman from Chengdu in the bed beside where we were sitting. She lay fully clothed, even to the extent of having her chunky coat done up to the top button. She also had some dark brown blankets pulled over her since the clinic, like everywhere else, had no heating.

She said she was suffering from a cold and had come in to have a drip put in her arm. The Chinese often go to a hospital to get a drip when they have nothing more than a cold to worry about. In view of the highly questionably hygiene standards of the establishment, I refused the doctor's later offer of a drip for me. Indeed, as long as I could maintain consciousness, I was determined not to let the wheezing doctor insert a needle into any part of my anatomy.

By the time she returned, the thermometer had fallen from my armpit and was resting on my hip, but she said it didn't matter. She diagnosed a cold, and gave me the same prescription as everyone else; dispirin and altitude sickness potions.

I got the impression she sold these to everyone who visited her clinic, regardless of their complaint. You could walk in with your arm in shreds, hanging off at the shoulder, following a savage attack from a flock of rabid vultures, and you'd probably leave with nothing more than a few dispirin and some altitude sickness potions.

She also advised me not to climb any tall mountains in the next day or two. Ha! I had problems enough climbing the single flight of stairs to my hotel room. Everest was definitely not on my agenda.

Determined not to develop pneumonia, I made some frantic phone calls from deep under the covers in my hotel room, and managed to find a hotel that promised to provide me with a heater.

It cost triple what I was paying for the other hotel, but it was still only 35 Euro a night. This is a fortune in Lhasa, and I'm sure I would have been expelled from the Backpacker Association of Scrimping for paying it, but I couldn't face the thought of another day shivering under three blankets, a t-shirt, a fleece and a winter coat.

Moreover, the new hotel's location was nothing short of spectacular. It was right opposite the Jokhang, Tibet's holiest shrine, and right in the middle of the old town, the Barkhor. The temple building cannot compete with the Potala Palace but the atmosphere of the Jokhang is incredible.

Crouched over my beloved electric heater, trying not to burn my fingers by hugging it too closely, I looked through the window as the pilgrims walked around the temple, over and over again, always in a clockwise direction. This is called 'doing koras,' and it apparently earns you some kind of spiritual merit, a Buddhist

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version of 'Hail Mary's', I suppose.

Rather than counting rosary beads, the Tibetan pilgrims walked, chanted and kept spinning ornate prayer wheels in their hands, all dressed in the elaborate regional costumes that I mentioned earlier.

The PSB and the army kept a very close eye on everything, but the Pilgrims didn't seem to even see them, or if they did, they paid them no heed. Even 50 years of Han domination, or what the Dali Lama once labelled 'cultural genocide' does not seem to have destroyed Tibetan's culture, or even dampened their spirit. In spite of the oppression and hardships, they laugh and smile a lot more than the Han, or westerners, for that matter.

I'd like to think this will continue forever, but Beijing is thinking long term, and it is not prepared to give this 'province' back to what it considers a bunch of savage primitives, too backward to even appreciate their 'liberation from feudal servitude', not to mention the roads and airports the Chinese have built, the schools they've set up, and the jobs they've provided.

Greater Tibet (Tibet itself, Qinghai, and parts of Sichuan and Yunnan) is an enormous area, far bigger than the size of the Tibet province one finds on maps. Greater Tibet, defined in terms of areas with a majority of ethnic Tibetans, is the size of Western Europe. Moreover, it's grossly underpopulated, especially in comparison to overpopulated Chinese lands to the east, and it is ripe for Han expansion. There are also significant untapped mineral resources here that the Chinese are keen to explore.

Beijing offers great financial incentives for Han Chinese to resettle here, and as there are only about 5 million Tibetans in Greater Tibet, and there are 1,207 million Han, crowded into Eastern China's lowlands and costal areas, the Tibetans will soon find themselves a minority in their own 'autonomous region'. The same is true for other ethnic minorities in China, who make up only 7 per cent of the population, but occupy nearly 40 per cent of the land.

Apart from repopulation, the Han fights the Tibetan campaign on a second front, a cultural front. The pilgrims I mention come from remote mountainous regions. In the urban centres, the young Tibetans seem a great deal less devout. They listen to hip-hop, wear western clothes and watch VCD's. Western culture, insidious and all-conquering, may achieve what communist propaganda has failed to achieve in 50 years-it may make the Tibetans forget who they are.

Being brought up in a secular Europe, where even the Catholic church is on the wane, I was completely unprepared for what awaited me inside the Jokhang temple. Even in St. Peter's Cathedral in Rome, the epicentre of the Catholic world, camera-toting tourists outnumber the faithful three to one. Every Christian church I've ever visited feels like a museum; of historical and architectural interest only. In Macao, I remember a pair of young Chinese girls smiling for photos under the more picturesque station of the cross, searching in vain, I presumed, for a smiling Christ.

The Jokhang Temple, on the other hand, is most definitely a place of pilgrimage and worship. At the entrance, in the large open square in front of the temple, pilgrims perform a long ritual before entering.

First, they kneel and then hold their hands in front of their chest, almost as if they were praying in a Christian way. They then place their hands on the ground and use them to support their body weight as they gently allow their body to touch the ground, finally touching the sacred ground with their forehead as an act of worship and atonement. They then slide their hands (covered in some kind of mat) forward in front of their head so that it's pointing at the temple. They chant something special for each part of the procedure, and repeat it over and over again.

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It looked very strenuous, like doing a push up, but the tough Tibetans continued on and on, oblivious to all discomfort, as always. If Tibetans can experience pain, I never saw them show it.

All religions, it seems to me, contain some element of self-humiliation. In Christianity, the act of humbling oneself before a deity has been reduced to symbolic genuflection, and the days of self-flagellation are thankfully a thing of the past. In Islam, one is still required to lie on the ground, prostrate and powerless before an all-powerful Deity. The Tibetans Buddhists also placed themselves on the ground, in complete humility. Armed with the arrogance of a western rationalist, I simply could never do this.

As you enter the temple itself, everything suddenly becomes very dark. Electric light is not permitted, and this in itself is a shock to the system. At least, it was a shock to my system, as I get nervous without the electric hum that has been a part of my life since birth, and even beforehand.

We slowly tried to navigate the dark labyrinthine corridors, the smell of incense and yak butter candles mixing with the smell of the unwashed pilgrims and their dirty clothes.

The chanting devotees moved hurriedly and purposefully past the fading paintings of the Brahayama (one of Buddhism's most sacred books), spinning enormous silver drum-like prayer wheels as they went, making brief stops at tiny alcoves, each containing a different Buddha statue.

I didn't see any other foreigners in there, but nobody stared at us, as they were all far too busy seeking salvation to bother with a pair of wheezing 'big noses'.

Red-Robed monks were everywhere, and in the central room, a gigantic gold Buddha smiles down, secure in the knowledge that life and existence are nothing but illusions. He is also probably relieved that the Red Guards of the Cultural Revolution have left, as they destroyed about 40 per cent of the temple the last time they paid a visit.

On the roof of the temple, the Potala Palace, two kilometres away, appeared even more wondrous and stately.

Even Lhasa itself, surrounded on all sides by freshly snow-covered mountains, seemed truly locked away from the world at large, and above Earthly concerns.

We had deliberately left the Potala Palace until our last day in Lhasa, daunted by its many steep steps. Finally, armed with a large breakfast, and an increasingly powerful set of lungs, a set of lungs a 60-year old would be proud of, we felt ready for the climb upto the Potala.

We still took it slowly, stopping frequently to take in the views of Lhasa. However, they were a little disappointing. It's only from the height of the Potala that you realize how greatly 50 years of Beijing rule have changed the face of the city. While the Jokhang and what remains of the old town are still very much Tibetan, the rest of the city is completely new. Of whatever there was before, nothing remains. It's all been rebuilt in accordance with modern urban planning; all straight lines, wide roads and uniformity.

At least they have kept it low rise, and the Potala does not have to compete for skyline with some shimmering steel and glass Bank of China monstrosity, but new Lhasa is about as interesting as a small mid-west American town. It's only the backdrop of snowy mountains that remind you that you're not just in the middle of Normalville, Idaho.

When we had climbed about one third of the way up to the entrance, we were aghast to find somebody shouting at us and telling us to hurry up because the Potala would be closing soon. I looked at the remaining steps to the entrance, hundreds of them, and the few steps we had so far climbed, and shrieked, or would have

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done, if I'd had the breath.

Not for the first time, I cursed my guidebook for trying so hard to be witty and not paying enough attention to essential details, like opening and closing hours. If I want to read something witty, I pick up a Bill Bryson book, and if I want to know what time the Potala Palace closes, I expect my guide book to know about it.

As to the name of my illustrious guide book, let's just say it has 'Planet' in the title, and I wouldn't shed a tear if the authors were exiled to a different one, preferably a cold one where possession of a heater carries the death penalty!

Determined not to enter the Guinness Book of Records as the only sad fools who had managed to come to Lhasa and not managed to see the Potala Palace, we sped up. After climbing 20 steps, my heartbeat reached 140; after another 10 steps, everything was zipping in and out of focus in an alarming fashion; after another 10, there was an odd buzzing sound in my ears, like helicopter blades from a Vietnam War movie.

We simply had to stop again and catch our breath-perhaps hyperventilate is a more accurate description. Once the worst of the dizziness and nausea subsided, we clambered up more steps and through a feat of super-human exertion I never thought myself capable of, we made it to the ticket office.

I tried to explain our late arrival, but couldn't stop gasping long enough to badmouth the guidebook. In fact, I couldn't emit any comprehensible sounds at all. The assistant did not summon the nearest doctor or monk to administer whatever the Buddhist equivalent of 'last rights' is, as I would have done in her place when confronted by two swaying wrecks who looked as if they were about to 'shuffle off this mortal coil,' but just punched 100 Yuan into a talking calculator and said, "*you must hurry!*" I tried to think of a witty retort, but at this stage of oxygen deprivation words were not even forming in my brain, let alone coming out of mouth.

We fell into the Potala only to be confronted by more steps. There are thirteen floors in the place. Thirteen! While geriatric monks seemed to have no problems whatsoever bounding up the tree-like steps, we certainly did, but there was always a monk or caretaker nearby to helpfully tell us to hurry up.

One should look on the bright side... I don't know why, but people always tell me this. However, it is true that the lack of oxygen in my dying brain and the mild visual and auditory hallucinations it caused did make the experience more mystical. Also, we had the place to ourselves, and didn't have to suffer a single tour group or guide, praise be to Buddha.

The Potala has 1,300 rooms, but of course, only a few of these are on view. A lot of them seem to be under urgent repair. The Potala was built and is still supported using wooden beams, and they are far from eternal. The endless rooms contain Buddha upon Buddha, thousands and thousands of them; some big, some small; some silver, some gold; some with him sitting, some with him lying down. Each one is probably a collector's piece and I'm sure many are priceless.

We are lucky they are still here. The Red Guards of the Cultural Revolution were all set to come in to destroy the 'Four Olds' and Potala could have easily been raised to the ground.

Thankfully Deng Zhou Ping, at no small risk to himself, as he was already being accused of being a rightist and a reactionary, sent a contingent of loyal Red Army troops to protect the Potala and it emerged from the Cultural Revolution unscathed.

The walls and roof of each room are painted to depict scenes from the Brahayama, with its freaky assortment of goblins and monsters. Centuries of yak oil candles have darkened and blackened everything, and there is very little natural light in most of the rooms, but this only heightens the feeling of peace and isolation. Other

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rooms contain holy scrolls, browned by age and musty beyond belief. Some of them, I was told, had been brought from India by Tributaka himself.

We also passed through tall cavernous rooms, containing hefty golden, jewel-encrusted tombs of the previous Dali Lamas. Near the top of the Palace, we were briefly allowed to see the Dali Lama's living quarters; where he ate, slept, and looked out on a world that was about to disappear.

Standing in the throne room, I thought how strange a world it must have been to grow up and live in; believing yourself to be the reincarnation of previous Dali Lamas, universally credited with possessing divine qualities and born with a right to rule. In this fairyland world, it's hardly surprising he didn't see the Chinese Dragon at the door. But it is the Dragon's house now, and I for one cannot see her giving it back.

Although we would have liked to have spent a great deal more time in the Potala, as it probably is the kind of place that one should not see with a heart rate nearing 140 beats a minute, we did at least get to see it, and we comforted ourselves with this knowledge on the many steps back down from the Potala.

This was to be our last day in Lhasa, which seemed a great pity, since we were only now beginning to acclimatise. I wanted to spend a lot longer there, and I wanted to explore the rest of Tibet. Part of me even wanted to become a yak herder, but I knew my time was up.

Lhasa airport is situated hours away from Lhasa city right beside a military barracks, presumably in case of a revolt. The last thing Beijing wants is a group of revolutionary Tibetans seizing control of an airport.

On the plus side, the very early morning taxi ride gave us a chance to see dawn rise over the Tibetan mountains, as we sped through empty roads, hugging the hillside as it followed the slow, green-blue and meandering Lhasa River along its lonely path. Thick fog banks flowed over the mountain peaks and slid down the valleys. An occasional serene yak munched away on clumps of yellow semi-frozen grass, and for a while, Tibet seemed like a magical place.

That feeling immediately vanished when we left the warm taxi and entered the brand spanking new, and completely unheated, airport building. At the check-in counter, we found that our flight had been cancelled, for reasons unknown, and how dare we have the audacity to demand to know why.

We were waved away to the other side of the hall. There, a woman with an enormous amount of attitude said she was the Bank of China, and waved us back to where we had just come from. This happened over and over again, as we pinballed our way from one counter to the next.

These coming and going was made all the more difficult by the abject inability of Chinese people to form a queue. Yes, I know I have no right to ask other cultures to abide by the strict queue following norms of the society I was brought up in, but queues are just such a good idea, and when I rule the world, I'm going to make queue forming obligatory worldwide. It will be part of my manifesto, along with self-determination for Tibet, the abolition of cars, and a Phillipus Moanicus Breeding and Research Centre.

Instead of the orderly line of people you find in a queue, in China you must enter a kind of scrum, or rather a tightly packed semi-circle of barking fiends.

All of them are simultaneously shouting at anyone behind or near the counter, stuffing documents under their noses, and nudging each other to and fro, jockeying for position like their life depended on it. In this kind of situation, the meek may very well inherit the earth, but they've absolutely no chance of getting a plane ticket.

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Different cultures, sociologists tell us, have different acceptable levels of personal space, into which strangers must never tread. The Anglo Saxons, they say, have one of the greatest distances; they require more personal space than other cultures.

The Chinese, it seems to me, in situations like this, operate with a personal space threshold of zero. I should be able to accept this as a cultural difference and not expect other cultures to play by my rules, since I am not as yet in charge of the world, but I simply cannot bear people in my personal space. It just seems so insufferably rude, so terribly presumptuous.

I don't know what disturbs me most: the feeling of a stranger's breath on my neck; his crotch in my backside; his falling asleep in a crowded bus with his head on my shoulder. These things never fail to aggravate me.

However, I have just to grin and bear it, or rather, grind my teeth, mutter abusive remarks in Spanish, and bear it. When I rule the world, it will be a very different place, and everyone will have personal space detectors that emit a siren alarm whenever someone gets too close. Ah, when will this Utopia come about?

After a few more yo-yo perambulations of the airport, just to make sure we left Lhasa feeling as dizzy as when we arrived, they informed us that the next flight to Xian was in two day's time, and we should sort out the details with a travel agent back in Lhasa.

Standing firm, well swaying firm actually, we insisted on flying the same day and demanded an indirect route, if no direct one was available.

They reluctantly offered to exchange the Lhasa-Xian flight for a Lhasa-Chengdu flight leaving in a couple of hours. We pointed out that this was only half way there, and wondered if we were expected to walk the rest of the way, or perhaps grab onto a passing swan.

The girl behind the counter was getting angry now, and shooed us away like you would a malevolent ghost or a smelly skunk, and told us to buy another ticket in Chengdu. Sandra was getting pretty angry too, and was beginning to take on the air of a tigress, with her flight to Xian representing the cubs she was going to protect with her life.

After a lot of snarling and bearing of teeth, they gave us the connecting flight, but made us pay a 50 dollar surcharge. Somebody in the scrum realized what had happened, and before long everyone was demanding the same thing, much to the attendant's displeasure. It was not 'convenient' for her, as she now had to fill in two pieces of paper for every customer instead of just one.

I had similar experiences in Russia when dealing with officials. I think it's something to do with communism. The 'service mentality' of Western cultures is turned on its head, and officials of every rank believe that they are doing you a favour by serving you. The customer is not always right, as in the west. On the contrary, the customer is nothing more than a petty inconvenience and should be ignored whenever possible, or if they must be dealt with, they should be treated with undisguised contempt.

Eventually, the plane took off and Lhasa and Tibet disappeared from view. Forever.

It's customary to say that you will return one day, but I know I'll never go back to Lhasa. I'm simply too weak to survive there, but I've nothing but admiration for those who can.

I do earnestly hope the Tibetans and their culture manage to survive up there on 'the roof of the world.' There is something unique about them, and the world will be a poorer place for their passing.

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However, I can't help but feel pessimistic about their prospects. History is full of peoples and cultures that have been laid waste by 'The Mighty Han.' Even those who appear to have defeated and conquered them, like the Manchus or the Qing, are later assimilated and become indistinguishable from the Han, in language and culture.

Originally, the Han were merely one people among many in central China, but they grew and grew, and reached a 'critical mass.' Like the Borg from Star Trek, they conquer, assimilate and grow, growing stronger and stronger with each fresh conquest. However, no Captain Piquard is going to beam down from the Enterprise with an away team to protect the outnumbered and outgunned Tibetans. They must fight alone, and fight passively, without even the threat of violence, in a manner even more subtle than Gandhi's passive resistance movement in India.

Can they succeed? I don't think so, but I hope so.

Looking at a group of army cadres on the plane, I softly hummed the tune of an old Morrissey song that had come into my head out of nowhere:

"Shelve you western plans

And understand

That life is hard enough

When you belong here"

As acts of defiance go, it was pretty pathetic, and it didn't appear to have any effect on the course of Sino-Tibetan relations. But what could I do, and what can you do? We are all mere ants in the face of something as large as the Han's swallowing of the Tibetan people and culture.

As the plane landed in Chengdu, a group of Tibetans in the central rows of the plane ignored the 'Fasten your Seat Belt' sign, and stood up to get a better view out the plane windows. They looked in awe and wonder at the flat, green and lush farmland below them.

Perhaps it was the first time they had seen such a landscape. How strange it must have appeared to them.

They wanted to visit the Dragon's home, perhaps wondering if the Dragon would ever leave their home.

Chapter 10: Xian

Xian

There's something about the name of the city 'Xian' that sounds wonderfully exotic to me. Perhaps it's because it begins with a capital 'X', or maybe it's because it sounds rather like a tribe of North American Indians.

However, my enthusiasm for the city had been dampened by my students long before I actually set foot in it. They had warned me that it was so polluted that when it rained, the contaminants in the air were absorbed by the falling raindrops, leaving them black by the time they hit the ground. One of my students described it as 'The City of Black Rain,' which would, I think, make a wonderful title for a novel. Another student had joked that I could return my greying hair to its original colour by merely spending a weekend there. And two years later, I found myself in Xian: the City of Black Rain.

I expected a black, decaying industrial behemoth, like Manchester in the eighties. In reality, I'm glad to say, Xian is a much more pleasant metropolis of approximately eight million people.

From its central square, the Drum and Bell Tower Square, the city's four main arteries (East, West, North and South Street), spread out into infinity, dividing the city in a logical and coherent way. The square itself, which our hotel looked out on, is a nice enough grassy place, where kite flying aficionados ride the wind, or rather their kites 'ride the wind.' They themselves stay on the ground and try to sell you kites.

The square contains two typical Ming Dynasty towers; one containing a museum of bells, and another a museum of drums. We went to one of them, but I can't remember which one, which shows what a great impression it left on me. It's not that there was anything wrong with the museums; it's just that I can't muster up any interest in drums or bells.

The rest of the city centre is all new. This is surprising when you consider that Xian was China's capital for far longer than any other city, and much longer than the current capital, Beijing. In fact it was a capital during five dynasties: the Zhou, Qin, Han, Sui and Tang emperors all called Xian home.

Most of the dynasties rose and fell here in Xian, over its three thousand plus years of history, but judging by the downtown area, they left no trace. Once again, war, progress, indifference and a tendency to build with wood rather than stone, have destroyed visible reminders of Chinese history. The centre of modern Xian could be any American city: malls, banks, McDonalds and traffic jams.

Xian's citizens looked prosperous and purposeful. This was a world of business, of mobile phones and factories, and the rough and ready Tibetans of yesterday were worlds away, much to the delight of both parties, I suspect.

Even the weather surprised me. I had expected more of the damp, drizzle and grey mist so characteristic of Southern China, but Xian was dry and dusty. In fact, it was dangerously dry. Posters everywhere encouraged people to conserve water: 'each drop means life', the posters warned ominously. Xian is surrounded by rivers, but they are slowly drying up, and most of them are too polluted to deliver water suitable for human consumption.

Instead of mist, one finds a slight haze in Xian. The sky here is cloudless, but not really blue. It's a kind of yellow/blue I had never seen before. That's partly due to pollution, no doubt, but mainly due to the dusty yellow loess soil from North West China being blown east by the howling winds of Mongolia. The soil up there is yellow and like powder, and winter winds lift it from the ground and carry it all the way to Xian and Beijing. There's nothing new in this, but the scale and intensity of soil erosion has increased massively in this century.

Recent rapid economic progress is bringing things to a crisis point. Drought, over-farming and deforestation, combined with ever increasing demands for water from industry and the cities, are pushing north East China toward the abyss, and some speculate that the whole region, from Xian to Beijing, may soon become a desert. The Party, not one to let even Mother Nature stand in its way, has a plan. It has begun a massive canal building project to transfer water from the wet south of China (which receives 80-90 per cent of China's rainfall) to the dry north.

Once again, I was impressed by the power of the Party and the Chinese in general to control nature; to organize and to build. When it comes to enormous public works projects, can anyone compete with the

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Chinese, a nation that built a wall the length of a continent? This contrasts sharply with, for example, Spain, where the Sahara desert is already moving into the parched Andalusian south, spreading the arid death that is a desert landscape into Europe.

Does Spain, occupying an area smaller than a Chinese province, and in per capita terms far richer and more economically developed than China, build its own canals from its wet north to irrigate its parched south? No, it does nothing. It merely talks about the possibility of doing something at some indeterminate time in the future. The same is true for Europe as a whole; the north has more water than it knows what to do with, and the south doesn't have enough, but there is not enough political will to build pipelines.

However, we had not come to Xian to see the yellowed sky, to ponder the growth of the Gobi Desert, or to congratulate the Party on its Public Works' projects. We had come, like everyone else, I suppose, to see those Terra Cotta warrior statues.

I'm sure you know the statues I mean: those life-size replicas built by Emperor Qin to protect him in the afterlife, used in place of burying real soldiers alive, which was standard practice at the time. Who knows what kin fog afterlife these emperors expected? A violent one, apparently.

Burying soldiers alive with you when you die must have made military recruitment rather difficult. You can just imagine the slogans on the posters: '*Join the army-Get Buried Alive!*', or '*Don't Die For the Emperor-Die With the Emperor!*'.

The soldiers with the terracotta stand-ins were the lucky ones-Emperor Qin's many wives, concubines, servants and all but one of his 22 children did receive the honour of being buried alive with him, whether they wanted to or not.

I feel most sorry for the workmen involved in building the most sensitive part of the complex, the emperor's tomb, who were buried alive in it immediately after it was completed to prevent them revealing the secrets of its construction.

Talk about a bum rap! You spend 25 years, your whole life, slaving away underground, suffering terrible terms and conditions, and all to complete the tomb of some paranoid megalomaniac you've never even met, and then as soon as you finish, they bury you alive in it. I guess these guys had pretty weak unions.

Emperor Qin was the first emperor to rule a united China, but also a bit of a paranoid megalomaniac, apparently. It seems to me that paranoid megalomaniacs often do well, historically speaking. Even the 'enlightened' 20th century provides many examples of the advantages of megalomania and paranoia to a leader. For example, Hitler, Stalin and Mao are the three 'greatest' dictators of the 20th century, and all of them were paranoid megalomaniacs; each one using these personality traits to rise to absolute power, and then hold on to it.

But to return to Emperor Qin, after uniting China, he set about making sure the whole continent of a country was kept busy glorifying his magnificence, and he devoted an enormous percentage of GDP to building physical manifestations of his power and wealth.

For example, he built the greatest mausoleum the world has ever seen; a mausoleum so large that had it survived, it would have made even the pyramids look puny in comparison.

The terra-cotta warriors were only one small part of the 25 km complex that was to ensure his greatness was never forgotten.

The irony is that only a year after his death peasant uprisings destroyed the emperor's vast monument to himself, looting what they could, demolishing what they couldn't and burning the rest.

Even the Terra Cotta warriors had their metal weapons stolen and were smashed to pieces. The warriors you see today have been painstakingly put back together again by teams of dedicated archaeologist, who are so patient and skilled, they could probably reconstruct Humpty Dumpty.

The Chinese can be a very destructive lot when they set their mind to it. They can build on a massive scale, unthinkable by other cultures, but they can also tear it all down again at frightening speed. I know this is a crass generalization, and not my first, but so little of China's long history is still standing I can't help but make the assertion.

Often when it is still standing, you find it's just a replica of something that was destroyed earlier, often several times, and always for no apparent reason. The Cultural Revolution and the vandalism of the Red Guards is just a recent, and comparatively mild, example of the China's periodic lapses into self-destructive insanity.

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But enough of my armchair theorising: Let's get back to the Great Qin.

The First Emperor, who reigned for twenty-six years from 247-221 BCE, brought to an end what was known as 'The Warring States' period in Chinese history, when petty feudal states were locked into permanent and rather pointless wars and mini-wars, in an endlessly shifting system of alliances.

He also abolished feudalism, which is remarkable when you consider that this did not happen in Europe until the Renaissance, some 1800 years later. He built roads, canals and above all brought conformity to China, even unifying the Chinese script and the currency for the first time.

He had a particular dislike for Confucianism, believing it to be divisive and inefficient, and he buried unrepentant Confucian scholars alive wherever he found them. He replaced Confucianism with what became known as 'Legalism', the idea of government through law, applicable to all and divorced from morality and religion. A legalistic state governs through coercive law rather than moral virtue.

Confucianism was to return after his death, and the Confucian historians were perhaps understandable quite negative in their reviews of The First Emperor, so it is difficult to know how much of The Emperor's supposed tyranny and madness was real, and how much of it the invention of disgruntled Confucian scholars. History, of course, is written by the victors.

However, if even a part of what is said about him is true, he was a brutal tyrant. Indeed, many historians claim that Legalism was the first form of Totalitarianism, emphasising as it did strict and unquestioning obedience to arbitrary laws.

Further echoes of the totalitarianism that was to find its apotheosis in the 20th century under Mao, Hitler and Stalin was his determination to burn all books that had been written before his reign, or that he didn't officially sanction. Emperor Qin was a man who had to control everything; even peoples' thoughts: a classic megalomaniac.

Fortunately, for the First Emperor, the peasants who ravaged his mausoleum complex following his death, couldn't find the entrance shaft to his tomb, hidden as it was in the middle of a mountain, so they never desecrated the inner sanctum, the tomb itself.

We visited a replica of the tomb, which modern archaeologists have explored through x-rays and other non-invasive techniques, but have yet to actually enter.

The replica makes Lenin's Mausoleum in Red Square look like a pauper's grave. There are jewels and gold everywhere, and no expense was spared in fitting out what must be one of the world's most luxurious tombs. His coffin lies in the centre of the enormous circular vault-like tomb, and the coffins of his favourite concubines are buried into walls around him. These lucky beauties were allowed to swallow poison rather than being buried alive. Naked favouritism, eh?

There are also rivers of toxic lead and mercury, which is one of the reasons archaeologists are so careful about exploring it, and one of the reasons tour groups aren't allowed inside it. However, I would have quite liked to dip my own tour guide's head in a river of mercury at this stage, if only to silence her electronic megaphone, which to me seemed completely unnecessary in a group of seven people.

Ironically, The First Emperor accidentally killed himself with mercury. He had grown obsessed with immortality, and his doctors were prescribing mercury pills for him, which was believed to absorb poisons from the body. Instead it absorbed life from the Emperor.

As impressed as I was by the cavernous Tomb replica, I couldn't help feeling slightly cheated as well. I wanted to see the *real* Emperor's Tomb. I wanted to stare at the actual bones of the world's first totalitarian despot. I've always felt cheated by replicas, but the Chinese in the tour group didn't seem to mind at all. I've noticed this before about the Chinese: they seem to see no significant difference between a replica and the real thing. China is littered by parks where you can see replicas of everything. Near where I used to live in Zhuhai, there is a park with replicas of all the important and famous structures in China (i.e. the Great Wall, the Summer Palace etc.), and nearby there is another park with replicas of famous foreign buildings (i.e. the Louvre, Buckingham Palace etc).

My students told me once, without a trace of irony or sarcasm, that it's more convenient this way, as you can see all the places at once without having to travel around a lot, and you only have to pay one entrance fee.

As if to prove their point, near the tomb of Emperor Qin, there is even a replica of a pyramid and a sphinx, so you don't have to bother actually going to Egypt!

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The nearest you can get to the real tomb of The First Emperor is to stand on the hill which it was dug into. The hill itself used to be twice its current height, but has been shortened by erosion.

From the top of the hill, when the mausoleum complex was completed, you could once see all 25km of the great emperor's magnificent mausoleum; an eternal necropolis; walled in, guarded by turrets, and a 'permanent' reminder of his greatness.

Today, you can see absolutely nothing, because nothing survived. There is not a trace of the necropolis that once spanned 25 kilometres. All I could see around me was farmland, some humble peasant dwellings, and a small dirty factory in the distance. The whole complex was only discovered quite recently and accidentally by a pig farmer.

It reminded me of a poem by Shelley, *Ozymandias*; one of the few poems I've ever really liked. As my English teacher told the story, but this is not confirmed by Wikipedia, Shelley was travelling around Libya, and he came across the stump of a once-enormous statue, but only two legs remained, and part of the head lay incongruously beside the legs.

Inscribed on the statue, Shelley read the following:

I am Ozymandias, King of Kings

Look on my Works, Ye Mighty

And Despair'

However, none of the Pharaoh Ramesses' (i.e. *Ozymandias*) projects could be seen. What remained of his own statue was surrounded by an empty barren desert, thereby demonstrating the fickle nature of power and the futility of vanity. Nothing remains of either the Pharaoh Ramesses or The First Emperors' monuments to themselves.

Time renders all our projects obsolete. Be they great or small, they are of no real consequence. Whether you build an empire on the blood and bones of your subjects or whether you write a travel guide only five people will read, it is of no importance to the sands of time.

The First Emperor Qin had not even left a broken statue in the desert, as far as I could tell. There was nothing in his memory as far as the eye could see.

So, in memory of the Great Qin, I will quote Shelley's poem in full:

OZYMANDIAS

I met a traveller from an antique land
Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. Near them on the sand,
Half sunk, a shatter'd visage lies, whose frown
And wrinkled lip and sneer of cold command
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamp'd on these lifeless things,
The hand that mock'd them and the heart that fed.

And on the pedestal these words appear:

"My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:

Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!"

Nothing beside remains: round the decay

Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare,

The lone and level sands stretch far away

I suppose I could have spent more time in Xian. There were tombs aplenty left to visit, and temples galore, or perhaps they were just replicas, but I was anxious to get to Beijing. We visited other places in Xian, but as I write this, two weeks later, back home in Bangkok, I can't even remember what they were.

And four years later, rewriting this in Paris, I have absolutely no idea what they were. Memories, like the great works of *Ozymandias*, get lost in the sand. It occurs to me to ask once more: If you don't remember something happening, did it actually happen? The question isn't as silly as it first appears. I mean, of course it happened, in the sense that an event took place, but if you do not remember it and it left no traceable

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impression on you, then what was the point of it? We remember so little of our lives, less than 10% I would say, and I can't help but question what was the point of going through the other 90%? What has it achieved? I do remember that my cold was getting worse, and rivers of phlegm were turning my sinuses into volcanoes. The dry and dusty airs, and some truly awful fake cigarettes, were making me cough like a moose. Sometimes they were comically bad copies. For example, one Marlboro packet's health warning read *'Smiking dimages your hill'*. And the 'hill' of my nose felt truly damaged.

I wanted to move on, believing for no sane reason, that I'd feel better in Beijing. I felt like a fish, which like all gilled creatures, must keep moving to breath.

"If you don't keep moving, you die," I said to Sandra, completely out of the blue, on the way to the train station, trying to sound enigmatic.

"Don't forget your bag again," Sandra replied.

With my bag in one hand, I silently pondered the subtle psychological differences that being a gill-based life form must engender: the constant need for movement; the lack of a home, the weightlessness of water; and so on.

And with these thoughts in my head, I saw absolutely nothing and remembered absolutely nothing of the journey to the station, or the station itself. Once again, the psychic babble that are my thoughts had hidden the outside world, which is rather a pity, as the outside world is precisely what travel writers are supposed to be looking at.

The Dragon was passing me by.

Chapter 11: Beijing

Beijing

Beijing, meaning 'nothern capital', is a big place. In the greater municipality of Beijing, there are some seventeen million people. And even with those seventeen million people, it is still only the second largest city in China; Shanghai being slightly bigger. However, Shanghai's recent rise to prominence is based on commerce, and Beijing has been far larger and most of its far longer history. In fact, Beijing is thought to have been the world's largest city from 1425 to 1650 and from 1710 to 1825.

The municipality of Beijing today covers an area the size of Belgium. I know Belgium's quite a small country, but there is still something quite frightening about a city that's the same size as a country.

Capital cities are normally where I prefer to be, as they usually contain both the best and the worst that any country has to offer. However, I must admit, Beijing failed to impress me.

If I had to choose one word to describe the place, it would be 'grey.' From the weather, to the buildings and even the 'sights' themselves, it all seemed mournfully grey. Perhaps that was just the mood I was in at the time: some people go through life with rose-tinted glasses, but I have grey-tinted glasses, and often drag myself through a two-dimensional black and white world while others frolic in 3D Technicolor. However, it would be dishonest of me to 'wax lyrical' about a place that that did not live up to my expectations.

The train from Xian took a long time to get from the suburbs to the centre, as one might expect from a city that has just completed its sixth ring road, and we passed row after row of tower blocks, each one as faceless as the last. It felt like the railway carriage window was a film projection on a loop, with the same shot over and over again.

I have read the Beijing used to be even grimmer, but the city government has spent years sprucing it up in preparation for the 2008 Olympics. Heaven only knows what is used to look like.

Even Tiananmen Square was a disappointment, but almost certainly because I had expected so much of it. I had expected something equivalent to Red Square in Moscow, where a sense of history seems to seep from every cobblestone, but Tiananmen Square just seemed to be a vast slab of concrete. It may be the world's largest open air apace in any city, covering some 100 hectares, but it felt rather like an enormous empty car park, like a football pitch without grass, like a desert of concrete.

Today's Tiananmen Square is a monument to Mao; four times larger than the original square, dating from 1651, and covered in grey concrete in 1958, it stands as a testament to communism's love of size over beauty. It was from Tiananmen Square that Mao proclaimed the establishment of the People's Republic in 1948, and for Mao's funeral, a million people crammed themselves into the square. A million people; I cannot imagine so many people in one place at one time, let alone in one square, gigantic as it is. Many mourners were crushed to death in the streets around it, trying to enter or leave. Even in death, Mao brought death.

Tiananmen normally enters the western mind as the place where the democracy protesters were brought to heel in 1989, and learned how fragile a thing the seeds of democracy can be. The image of the protester standing in front of the tank on Tiananmen Square is one of those images that once you've seen, you never forget.

It is symbolic, I feel, of the struggle of the individual against the state, of the one against the many, and perhaps even of man against machine. It is also a rather depressing reminder of how hopeless that struggle is, and how the state subjugates and might prevails.

"Power," Mao famously proclaimed, *"grows out of the barrel of a gun,"* and it was the barrel gun of a tank that wielded power that day in 1989, and that holds it still.

There were no tanks on the day I visited Tiananmen. However, there were troops of Chinese tour groups waddling all over it; each group wearing a different colour baseball cap, and led by tour guide leaders waving small rectangular flags.

They were all armed with tiny quacking electronic megaphones, leading their pack around the square, like a mother duck leads its chicks, in a V-formation. Near the centre of the square, things got too crowded for a classic V-formation, and the tour groups took on the air of penguins; huddled into each other for protection against the cold wind, all looking in this Antarctica of Tiananmen for somewhere to lay their eggs before

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Winter set in and the snow started to fall.

The overcast sky was the same colour as the paving slabs, and everything looked *so* grey.

Even the enormous Great Hall of the People, home to the rubber-stamp parliament, a classic communist architectural structure, demonstrating size over substance, failed to arouse my interest.

I had a morbid desire to see Mao's embalmed corpse in his Mausoleum, partly to check he was actually dead, and partly to add to the list of embalmed communist leaders I've filed by. However, the queues were enormous; both the queue to see him and the queue to check your rucksack before you saw him, so I didn't bother.

The contrast between the massive lines of devotees for Mao and the couple of hundred tourists and aging die-hard communists who had gone to see Lenin when I 'visited' him was striking. Indeed, I have heard that Lenin may even be removed from Red Square and sent to somewhere anonymous in his native Petersburg. First he lost the name 'Leningrad' to its founder, Peter the Great, and now he might even lose his mausoleum. In the league of communist dictators, Mao is still streets ahead. Unlike Lenin, Stalin and the other once great communist leaders in Russia, Mao has never been officially discredited and is still a hero of the Party and the people in China. His portrait still hangs over the Gate of Heavenly Peace in Tiananmen Square, and he is still an object of veneration to many. His star is fading, of course, especially in the Special Economic Zones and the megacities, but he has not been officially disgraced.

This is, in my opinion, a great injustice, as Mao killed more than the 20th century's other two great dictators, Hitler and Stalin, combined. For example, his 'Great Leap Forward', which was supposed to transform China into a first world economy almost overnight, only succeeded in causing a famine that may have killed a hundred million people. It also destroyed industry, and was more of a great leap into the abyss than anything else.

But Mao is not held to account for these crimes against humanity; at least, not in China.

The official party line is the 70 per cent of what Mao did was good, and 30 per cent was bad. The 30 per cent that was bad is never really clarified.

His catastrophic mistakes, let alone his megalomania and paranoia, are rarely mentioned by the communist controlled media, and Mao's remains an official hero. Perhaps the Party feels that his image and their own are so irrevocably linked that to tarnish one would be to tarnish the other as well. The Party needs to give the people a hero, and Mao is allowed to continue to occupy that role posthumously. Dead, at least, there is a limit to how much harm the middle class son of a money-lending kulak can do.

The official history of China during the Mao years blames natural calamities for the 'serious food shortages' (i.e. famine), and obscure references are made to excesses of revolutionary zeal to explain the horrors of the Cultural Revolution, which are usually blamed on Mao's wife and the other Gang of Four.

Although Mao's embalmed corpse was not going to be on our agenda, we had no problems entering the Forbidden City, pleasure dome of the Ming and Qing dynasties. The price was 10 dollars, but a century ago, the price would have been decapitation, or the loss of my testicles, since only eunuchs, concubines and the Emperor were allowed.

The 'Son of Heaven' no longer exists, so I was safe from the chopping block, but I did fear for my life at times, swept away as I sometimes was by warring tour groups; colliding, decoupling and apparently indifferent to the collateral damage inflicted on one lone 'big nose', finding himself in the wrong place at the wrong time.

The Forbidden City is apparently the largest surviving palace complex in the world and boasts nearly a thousand buildings, but practically none of them can actually be entered, but you can peer into many of their dark interiors from a railing at the front entrance, and I think I made out a throne or two.

To win even this meagre prize, however, you really do have to fight like a warrior. Around each front door, a surging mass of Chinese tourists push, elbow and snarl at each other for prime position. They fight first to get to the door, and then they fight to stay there. A weak, weasel-bodied westerner like me has little hope, especially since crowds bring out the rabbit in me. A crowd, I have always felt, is just a mob waiting to happen.

However, I was carried on the wave of a tour group or two past some of the doors. I held my camera above the throng, pointed inside the building and took some of the worst photographs of my life. I was more

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preoccupied in wondering if my health insurance policy covered being trod underfoot.

The Forbidden City was home to twenty-four Emperors, including the Last Emperor, Puyi. He became Emperor at two, and was brought to the Forbidden City, where an army of eunuchs treated him like a God when he was growing up, which is not the healthiest way to bring up a child.

Deposed at the age of six, briefly reinstated, deposed again, and later used as a puppet emperor by the Japanese, his life truly was tumultuous. Perhaps saddest of all was the ending, when the one-time Son of Heaven spent his last days suffering minor persecutions from the Red Guards one more victim of Mao's Cultural Revolution.

The Forbidden City, like so much else in China, is so well-known that we all carry a mental image of it in our heads. It is a complex of temples, squares, courtyards, and gates; all guarded by prides of stone lions, but by this stage, I must admit, 'temple fatigue' was beginning to set in, and I didn't appreciate them as much as I should have.

I was saddened to discover that the Forbidden City that stands today isn't that old; most of it being only about 150 years old. The various palaces were repeatedly damaged and rebuild, or simply raised to the ground by an emperor so he could build something else in its place.

Often buildings were burnt to the ground by powerful court eunuchs, eager to get rich on kickbacks they would receive in awarding the reconstruction contracts. All power breeds corruption.

In hindsight, I wish I had spent a great deal more time in the Forbidden City because we only saw a small part of it, and most of that was seen over the heads of gagging tour groups.

I wish we had gone there very early in the morning and got a real sense of the beauty of the place, and the power that emanated from here for hundreds of years, from 1420 until poor Puyi was finally evicted at the end of World War 2, even though power had effectively switched to 'foreign devils' from 1860, and the Second Opium War, when Anglo-French forces occupied the Forbidden City to protect the rights of international traders to turn the Chinese into impoverished drug addicts.

For most of its history, however, the Forbidden City was the centre of the world's most powerful nation, and I wished I'd seen more of it.

The following day, we paid a visit to the Great Wall. We were determined to do this alone and to avoid doing it as part of a tour group. I've always disliked tour groups, as all of my loyal five readers will already know, and I have a particular dislike for Chinese tour groups: partly because I don't like being told where to go, what to do and how long to spend doing to; partly because I can't bear the battery-powered mini-megaphones the tour guides here use, whether they need to or not; and partly because I simply don't like groups. I know it is a shocking thing to say, but I just do not like being in a large group of people: Parties, football matches; open-air concerts; I don't like any of them. I never have, and I probably never will. As to why, I really don't know. Perhaps it's all part of the misanthropy that is me.

But to return to the event at hand, not going as a tour group proved to be impossible. The drivers of bus number 937 simply would not let us get on, and the more we tried, the more vigorously they waved us away to a nearby bus station.

Once there, we were quickly ushered into a nearby coach. I still thought it might simply be a public bus service, since all the other passengers were Chinese, but my hopes were dashed when the bus pulled away and a yellow electronic megaphone came out of the tour guide's bag. The bus was already on a motorway by now, so there really was no escape.

The over-excited and all too enthusiastic guide began blabbering into his megaphone, and he kept it up all day, careful not to let a moment's silence allow any form of conscious thought. My only consolation was that this running commentary was only in Chinese, which somehow make it more bearable, and when the batteries wore down on her megaphone later on, almost ignorable.

The tour went on all day, from 10am to 7pm, but only about two hours were spend at what we had actually gone to see, The Great Wall. The rest of the trip was wasted on shopping breaks, restaurant breaks, toilet breaks, and some more shopping breaks.

Many compulsory shopping trips were cleverly disguised as something else, such as the 'educational' visit to the 'Alternative Chinese Medicine Institute for Well-Being and Inner Harmony,' which was supposedly an introduction and explanation of Traditional Chinese Herbal Medicine, but at the time my notes reveal that I

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considered it to be just *"an excuse to flog over-priced roots to the witless"*.

We managed to escape the lecture/sales pitch on the grounds that we wouldn't have understood a word of it, and were allowed to leave the group and play in the courtyard instead. On the way there, we passed a cigarette stand, which made me chuckle; a cigarette shop in a health food store.

While the lecture went on, Sandra was treated to my own lecture in the courtyard on the superiority of Western to Chinese medicine. She listened patiently, staring into the distance and humming to herself, while I smoked a couple of cancer sticks under the non-smoking sign in the courtyard.

No-smoking signs are where many Chinese men choose to smoke, indicating a healthy disrespect for authority.

And, of course, there were other 'attractions' to be enjoyed. One I actually did enjoy, much to my own surprise, was a wax museum depicting important 'historical' scenes from the Ming dynasties. There was a rather salacious and even blood-thirsty aspect to many of the exhibits. If you had asked a thirteen-year old boy what they would like to see in a wax museum, this is exactly what they would ask for. I didn't take any notes, but I remember the scenes: Emperor Ming the Merciless interrogating and personally beating General Treacherous; Emperor Sex Maniac consorting with common prostitutes; savage barbarians slaughter Emperor Hapless.

On the down side, we were just one tour group in an army of tour groups; all being shepherded hither and thither, and each tour guide repeatedly raising the volume on his megaphone to be heard above the general din.

Eventually we reached the Great Wall. Well, sort of. I hate to be the one to break this to you, dear reader, but the Great Wall does not exist. It simply isn't there anymore. Time, that great Destroyer of Worlds and Walls, has reduced it to rubble. Not only is it a myth that it can be seen from space, it can't even be seen from the land.

"But how can this be?" I hear you cry, *"I've seen it on TV"*. What we see on TV, I'm afraid, is a replica of what was once the Great Wall. Parts of the Wall have been rebuilt to resemble the wall that once was, but it is a recreation, a copy. Any beyond the tourist-friendly recreation, the rest of the Wall has fallen into ruins.

In fact, even the name 'The Great Wall' is something of a misnomer, indicating through the use of the definite article 'The' that there was only ever one wall. In reality, there have been many walls, built and rebuilt from the 6th century BCE to the 16th; the first of them built by the very First Emperor, Qin, but little remains of any of them.

More than the wall itself, it was the bleak and mountainous scenery around the wall that grabbed my attention. The Wall, of course, was built to keep the Mongols and the other nomadic tribes out of China. So, it was constructed at the mountains that separate the fertile farmland of China from the Steppe, where farming is impossible. In other words, it was built where agriculture ceases and nomadism begins; a barrier between mankind's hunter-gatherer past and his farming present; worlds which like matter and anti-matter, needed to be kept apart.

I tried to imagine the barbarian hordes sweeping over the hills on horseback and attacking the wall with their swords outstretched, with loyal imperial troops doggedly defending each inch of it tooth and nail, protecting the motherland with their lives. At its peak, the Wall is said to have had almost a million men defending it, and is thought to have cost two to three million lives to construct over the centuries.

In reality, however, it rarely happened like that. Any wall is only as good as the men defending it, and a weak man can always be found. For example, the Ming Dynasty came to an end when the wily Manchus simply send emissaries to different parts of the wall until he found a corrupt official they could bribe, a certain General Wu. Once past the wall, they stormed Beijing and the Ming were replaced by the Qing. The Qing, the last of the Dynasties went beyond the wall, subjugated Mongolia, and the wall, lacking a military purpose, fell into decline and decay.

Walls, it seems to me, and I know you are keen to know my opinion of walls, are never a good idea: From the Great Wall to the Maginot Line; from the walls that separate Israelis and Palestinians to the walls the American middle class have taken to building around their suburban castles, their 'gated communities'. None of them offer an effective defence. The effort required to build, maintain and defend them greatly exceeds the force required to overcome them.

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More worryingly, those who live behind the wall become complacent and inward looking. China itself was to become inward looking, and as the Qing royal court amused itself behind the walls of the Forbidden City, believing it had frozen time, the West progressed and moved through enlightenment and then an industrial revolution. Centuries of self-enforced isolation had left China unprepared for Western and Japanese aggression, and it has only just regained its territorial integrity with the removal of the last imperialists from Hong Kong and Macao.

If China had not retreated behind walls, if it had looked outward rather than inward and favoured change over stability, it would have found the Americas ripe for colonisation, and a divided India there for the taking. If China had industrialised first, and it was well ahead of Europe technologically speaking until the 18th century, then the world we live in today would be a very different one. Instead China hid behind 'great' walls.

To return to our trip, it had come to an end. We had intended to finish in Shanghai, but we just couldn't face it. That decision has haunted us ever since, and every time we see Shanghai on the TV, we remember that we had enough time and money to go there, but didn't.

The fact of the matter is that we had already been travelling for about four weeks, and we were tired, plain and simple. Dog tired. We longed to return home to Thailand, and to be free of hotels, tour guides and 'sights'.

If I were to choose three words that characterize Chinese culture, they would be diligence, family and conformity. The three words which are said to most characterize Thai society, on the other hand, are 'sanuk' (fun) 'sabai' (comfortable) and 'saduak' (convenient). I wanted to return to that Thai world. Now back in Europe, I would settle for either world, since the three words that best describe my life here in Paris are 'work', 'bills' and 'taxes'.

But to return to China one more time, even if only in prose, my last memory is sitting in Beijing's new shiny airport, and wondering what the 21st century had in store for China; wondering if it would be China's century. I concluded that it would be, and announced this to Sandra, who listened patiently, as always, as I rambled on, teasing my theories out.

It is tempting to believe that Western military, economic and cultural dominance in the world is permanent; that history is an evolutionary process and that the western concepts of free markets, liberalism and individuality have defeated all other ideas and all other societies; that these ideas and systems are now set in stone; immutable and victorious.

This is simply not the case. In historical terms, the 200 years of Western dominance are probably just a historical blip; the 'fortunate' result of industrialising and colonising first, while China slept.

For most of the history of civilization, however, it has been China which led the way: The centralized state, gunpowder and printing, among many others, are all Chinese inventions.

I had seen such drive, such energy and such determination in China over the four-week holiday, as well as during the year that I lived there, that it seemed to me unthinkable that an aging, disjointed and dysfunctional Western World could possibly compete with China in the future.

And if that doesn't convince you, just look at the numbers. There are 1.3 billion Chinese, far more people than in America and Europe combined; their economy grows at 10% a year, three to four times the growth rate of western economies; the workshop of the world is now China, while we in the West have forgotten how to make anything.

I could go on with page after page of facts and figures, but the truth is so obvious there does not seem much point in denying it. The West is doomed.

We are the last, dear reader; the last generation of Westerners to rule the world, and our days are numbered. In the politically correct world we live in, it is not acceptable to claim that one culture is superior to another, and I do not claim that Western culture is superior to Chinese culture, but it does make me sad to think that Western culture, my culture, is on the wane, and that its glory days are behind it.

The return of China to global dominance is just a matter of time. As to what kind of China it will be, I do not know. I doubt it will be democratic, I fear it will be nationalistic, and I know it will be powerful.

The Dragon is awake and she's coming out of its lair.

All Hail the Mighty Han.

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