

2009 Travels in China

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June 16

My eleven hour, red eye Air China trip to Beijing turned out not so bad. I made the acquaintance of two kids. One was a Chinese guy, going to school in Sydney, flying back to see his girl friend in Xi'an. It was nice to see such a happy young guy. Phillip is planning a career creating computer games and he is already thinking of his first Maserati (he doesn't like Ferraris). He was quite knowledgeable about many of my favorite computer games. He is a very outgoing and friendly guy. I liked him and I think he may even succeed in his dreams. The other college kid was a guy who grew up in a small place in Queensland and was doing his undergraduate work at Harvard. Talking to this nineteen year kid, one gets the impression that Harvard chose right. A nice guy too. We talked a little about economics and the dangers of sharing the Aussie continent with the ten most poisonous species of snakes in the world.



The new terminal building in Beijing is quite impressive – I am sure it is the most impressive terminal building anywhere. I remember reading about it before the Beijing Olympics in the New York Times. Parts of it resemble dragon scales. It is impressive because of its absolutely massive size (twice the size of the Pentagon), but most of all for its beauty. It has delicate features.

Later, I met up with my friends, Wayne and Wenjing, at the exit of a Beijing subway station somewhere in the “suburbs”. With all my luggage, it was long journey from the airport, with several subway transfers. The subway system is quite modern and all that is really needed is a subway map and one can not get lost. I wasn't that worried about getting on the wrong train, accidentally crossing the Yalu River and ending up the longterm guest of the dear leader, Kim Jong Il. Just the same, it was good to find Wayne and Wenjing waiting for me outside the station.

18 June

Wayne, Wenjing and I had a planned a trip to the South, to Yuan and to the land of Shangri-la. It turned out not to be since Wenjing and her sister, Jiamo, could not find a good tour there. Wenjing and Jiamo booked us on another tour instead. I was told where the tour went to – I just didn't recognize the names of any of the places we were to see. Out of a sense of adventure, I took bliss in my ignorance. I only picked up that we should dress for cool weather.



After flying out of Beijing, we landed near Chengdu, the capital of Szechwan province. We were met at the airport by a tour guide and driven past a main square, with an large statue of Mao, to our hotel in the downtown. Chengdu is a large city about 75 kilometers from the epicenter of the deadly May 12, 2008 earthquake that was a 8.0 on the Richter scale. Fortunately, Chengdu, itself, did not suffer much damage. That evening we wandered around the city, visiting Manjushri Monastery (Buddhist) and observing the street life. We had an excellent meal and later we all went for a foot massage. My feet were aching, so this was a real treat.

19 June

The next morning, after a not so good (my opinion) hotel breakfast, we returned to the airport. The plane took off from Chengdu and forty minutes later we landed on the top of a sawed off mountain at 3,500 meters (about 11,600 feet). I had no idea where we were. The airport was just three years old. It used to take eight hours by bus on curvy, landslide prone roads to get here from Chengdu. The airport can only accommodate an occasional Airbus A319 (much smaller than a Boeing 737) due to its short runway and frequent bad weather. Our A319 turned its rear thrusters on high just as it touched down and roared to a stop a little bit before the runway gave way to precipice leading it to the valley below. There were no taxiways, just a strip of concrete that served as both runway and taxiway. There was no room for more than one short runway, terminal building with a small parking lot and room for a few A319's. The terminal was quite modern, but all the bathrooms had pits in the floor for toilets.

We were picked up by Star, our tour guide, and joined by five other tourists. The tour was completely in Chinese. Wayne and I were the only westerners (we only saw about four other foreigners for the next three days). Wenjing had volunteered to interpret for us. We immediately jumped into a waiting van, took off from the airport, in the rain, for a nearby Tibetan village for lunch. It was a great lunch. The villagers were all dressed in traditional Tibetan garb. Their favorite color seems to be red, as that was the predominant color of their clothes and buildings. I did not pick up much about the Tibetans due to the fact I don't know Chinese (other being able to count to five), but Star did point out that they practice polygamy. What a great place! After some spicy Tibetan food and mucho cigarettes (by the guides, driver and others in our group), we were back on the road.

Through more rain we rocketed past Tibetan houses and farms, passed buses and trucks around blind curves, honking, braking and accelerating all the time. In the morning we were just 500 meters above sea level, but we were now shooting to over 4,000 meters – over twice the height of Tahoe. Over twice the height of where I had last had altitude sickness years ago. Higher than I had ever been (except on a plane). Despite our altitude, there were spruce trees and lush meadows. Far above was the tree line and gigantic granite peaks covered with ice. The sure scale of scenery was amazing. A large number of work crews were scattered along the way, blocking parts of the road as they built large concrete retaining walls, protecting our route from landslides. These construction workers ate off food trucks and slept alongside the road in tents. Out of the windows we spotted special yak-cattle that can only survive above 2,000 meters. They were shorter and much hairier than normal cattle.

We arrived at a place called Huanglong, departed the van with our umbrellas extended and took a cable car up the side of a mountain. At the top the rain started to ease up; the beginning of a wondrous afternoon. The clouds (many below us) started to clear, revealing valleys below and new peaks thousands of meters above. Despite our altitude we were still

in a spruce forest, with the tree line many meters above. The Chinese have constructed fairly wide wooden paths to direct us on our way, which was a good thing since there were a tremendous number of Chinese tourists. Every so often there were small huts supplying large cans of pressurized oxygen. We were now on our own, told to meet up with the van later after a six or seven kilometer trek back down the mountain.



After a while, the trail joined a somewhat large stream and followed the stream down the mountain, back to the road. This stream was no ordinary stream. Leached into its waters was a great deal of travertine. At times, when the stream relaxed, in relatively level areas, on its march down the mountain, the travertine would leach out of the water forming surreal clear pools with brilliant turquoise blue bottoms. The pools had delicate retaining walls, each feeding into other pools below. I had seen this pattern twice before. The first time at Pamukkale in Turkey and the second at Monmouth Hot Springs in Yellowstone. It is a combination of large amounts of time and an integrate chemistry that allows such formations. Along the way were occasional Buddhist temples, some maintained, some not. The temples seemed as indigenous to the area as the stream. All was surreal and supremely beautiful. Green shrubs and trees grew along the stream and in small islands in the pools, complementing the turquoise blue of the pools. When the mountain forced the stream to make a more rapid descent, the turquoise blue disappeared and a brown mineral bottom was revealed. A succession of waterfalls, each unique and breathtaking would appear when the trail descended quickly. The thin air was as one might expect at 4,000 meters – wonderful. It was a marvelous day.

The wooden trail was very well maintained. Despite the large number of Chinese tourists,

there was virtually no trash and everyone was careful to stay on the wooden planks so as not to damage the fragile formations. The Chinese are chronic smokers yet most refrained during the hike, though there were a few puffing away between sucks on oxygen canisters. Wayne and I were the only non-Chinese on the trail and occasionally we would attract attention. Several Chinese asked if they could have their picture taken with me. Sometimes they were very cute young Chinese women. For the sake of binational relations, I obliged. The boardwalk was crowded with Chinese posing in front of the formations with loved ones snapping their photos.

Coming from the lowlands, exerting oneself at such altitude has its price. Back in the parking lot, some of the tourists were busy heaving. One of the members of our van fortunately did her vomiting before we headed back. Unfortunately another did not and we discovered what the sealed canister placed in the middle of the van was for. All of us suffered altitude sickness. Wayne and Wenjing had headaches. My turn was to come the next day. My problem then was my feet – I was suffering from a fallen arch. My beat-up feet could hardly support me when I reached the bottom.

Fortunately, in terms of altitude, our hotel was thousands of meters below us. After two hours of treacherous curves, horn blowing and passing on blind curves, we arrived in another Tibetan village containing our “four star” hotel, and a 9:30PM dinner.

20 June

This day we drove a small distance to Jiuzhaigou Valley. This a huge area containing seven Tibetan villages and tremendous nature preserves. At one point in time the land was being heavily logged, but a Chinese specialist in forest management, who had traveled the world, petitioned the Chinese government to have this area set aside as an ecological reserve. The forester claimed that this area was more beautiful than other places of its type in the world. It is to the credit of Chinese government that they have taken such good care of this area since 1984. Everything is very modern and well maintained. After paying an entrance fee, free buses take you everywhere; cars are prohibited. The road splits and heads up into two valleys, ending up well over 3,000 meters high again. The terrain has almost completely recovered from logging. We took the bus that went up the “wet” valley. The road paralleled a river that flowed through many beautiful waterfalls (many high, but much more broad) and lakes. The water here also had travertine in it, so while the water was very clear, the lakes had a supernatural turquoise aura to them. Again, well-constructed wooden walkways were present through the forest.

Wayne was wondering if the Tibetans were moved here from Tibet by the Chinese government, but it turns out that they have been living here since the Song Dynasty.

Unfortunately, this was my day to be nauseous. I toughed it out in Jiuzhaigou until noon, but by then I was feeling worse so I went back to the hotel. Wayne and Wenjing continued exploring the area. What I missed, in person, I saw later when viewing the photographs Wayne took. Unbelievable beauty.

21 June

The next day consisted of three planned mandatory shopping stops and then a drop off at the airport. However, the day turned out to be anything but routine.



The first mandatory shopping stop was a Tibetan meat market with booths outside that sold trinkets. There were lots of free samples of various cooked and dried body parts of the local yak-cattle, but I was still remembering my nausea of the previous day so I abstained. What I really wanted was to take some photos of the Tibetan women outside selling trinkets. I sensed that they didn't want their pictures taken, so I abstained here too. However, Wenjing spotted a yak she could sit on and Wayne discovered the price for a photograph was only two yuan (32 cents). Soon afterwards I discovered the Tibetan women were very eager to have their photos taken for only one yuan. Unfortunately, the van was leaving and I had time for only one or two photos.

The next stop was not as interesting. It was a modern building where jewelry and Chinese medicine were sold. While serving out our shopping sentence, I suddenly realized I needed a bathroom, quickly. And our plane was going to leave in about an hour and we were not even at the airport. The bathrooms in this show house shopping detention center consisted of holes in the ground and nowhere was there any toilet paper. I was desperate, without toilet paper on me and the van was about to leave. Afterwards, I ran back to the van. Wayne noticed my shoes were untied. I told him I was in a terrible hurry since I thought the van was waiting for me. Unfortunately, Wayne is not one to let a puzzle pass him by. He asked if I had sacrificed a sock. "Worse", I muttered. He immediately figured out what had happened and told Wenjing I was not wearing underwear. So Wayne and Wenjing had a good laugh, but then Wenjing started talking Chinese to the rest of the van! Wayne explained to me that Chinese culture does not value privacy in the same way that ours does. Anyway, within minutes I was famous, not only in our van but in the van parked next to us too. Later my fame would spread to Beijing and by now probably the rest of China. The Chinese thought the story quite funny, but I can't imagine that most of them haven't found themselves in the same predicament.

As it turned out, my rush to get to the van was misguided, as the van sat for another twenty minutes while our tour-mates continued to shop. I actually had had enough time to tie

my shoes! When we finally got to the airport and made it through the lines, the people at the ticket counter refused to take our luggage and we missed our plane. It was entirely the fault of our tour guide, Star, who should have left the shopping building sooner. The next two flights were booked up and then bad weather, as it often does, closed the airport. The tour guides were arguing with the airline representatives and the police, but were making no headway. For them, this is a big thing and Star was fighting back tears. To his credit, he did not blame anyone else other than himself and did his very best to fix things. I am sure he feared losing his job, and in a region where the locals keep track of each yuan and there are not many good jobs, that is a big deal. I don't know if he paid out of his own pocket for our hotel rooms that night or for the van to take us there and back to the airport the next day. My guess is that he did, and the total was a very considerable sum to him. The folks on the van were polite, but they were angry at him. I felt sorry for him. If he keeps his job, I am sure he will never miss a plane again.



That night Wayne, Wenjing and I took a walk around the Tibetan town, before turning in early since we had to get up at five to catch our plane. It seemed like every car entering the town honked its horn to let everyone know of its arrival. Vans and buses typically honk their horns as they passed other vehicles to warn oncoming traffic. My idea of improving the local culture was to issue air horns to pedestrians so they could make their presence known too. As I was contemplating how I might pass my idea along to the locals and how they might show

their gratitude, in a bit of bad luck, someone on a third floor threw out a bucket of warm water just as I was passing under that window.

June 22

The next morning, on hearing of my unplanned shower of the previous night and remembering my bathroom adventures of the previous day, a Chinese couple on our tour insisted I write a book about my Chinese travels. They were actually a nice couple with whom we became friendly. They were traveling with their eighteen old or so son who was very well behaved, but obviously bored out his mind. They, like everyone else on the tour, did not speak any English, but Wenjing did a stellar job translating.

We arrived the airport early – Star was not going to have us miss the plane again! My ancestors floated across the Atlantic in steerage to come America and I have always flown coach, but Wayne and Wenjing are members of the Northwest Elite WorldClubs. This allows them, and a guest (me!), to relax in first class lounges at airports. I imagine this was not available to my ancestors on their sea voyage to the New World. The first class lounge was closed, but there was a handwritten note, in Chinese, directing us to the business lounge. The business lounge was so much quieter than the noisy waiting area for commoners. The couches were very comfortable and one had all the free coffee and tea one could desire. And there was free internet. My bliss was only slightly diminished when Wayne informed me that the business lounge was not up to the standards Wenjing and he had grown accustomed to. What really destroyed my bliss was when two lounge attendants unceremoniously kicked us out of the lounge claiming they did not recognize Wayne’s and Wenjing’s WorldClub card. I failed to see why I had to also leave just because Wayne and Wenjing had the wrong card. Was that my fault? I let the lounge attendants know I was not a person to be trifled with by making sure to take my paper cup of free tea with me (without asking).

Because of the missed flight the previous day, we lost the opportunity to spend another day in Chengdu, but we did manage to catch lunch with the couple and their son we met on the tour. Since we were all between flights, we ate near the Chengdu airport before flying back to Beijing. The tour company paid for the lunch and sent an agent to the airport to escort us to the restaurant and to take care of the luggage. We had a Szechwan lunch that was pretty good, but it may of been the cause of the runs that Wayne, Wenjing and I endured when we got back to Beijing.

June 24

Wayne and Wenjing went hiking in a Beijing park this morning, but my feet were not up to it, so I took the subway downtown and hunged out at a Starbucks. The coffee at Starbucks is overpriced (it costs about the same as it does in the states), but Starbucks has free wireless internet. Later, as I checked out the hundreds of emails that had accumulated over the last week, Wayne and Wenjing joined me, fresh from their hike. We were all in the mood for a foot massage, and that was our next stop. It turned out to be a good move. Massage shops are common in China, only they really are only for massage. I really liked my friendly, cheerful, young and cute masseuse.

Later Wenjing's sister, Jiamo, her husband, Jinsung and their son, picked us up and took us out to dinner. Like Wenjing, her sister, brother-in-law and nephew are very generous and good people who are fun to be with.

It was dark after we ate, and Jinsung drove us to the Olympic Park. Driving through Beijing at night one realizes what an impressive and booming city it is. We passed many huge, tall, and modern buildings. Some were corporate or regional corporate headquarters and others were residential. All of these new buildings were designed in good taste and placed with greenery and trees in keeping with good urban design. When I was in Beijing in 1999 I was impressed with how many people one would see at street level. It seemed at times that one could look down a single street and see more people walking about than there are in all of New Haven. This is not so anymore. Beijing has gone vertical. When one sees for how few yuan many Chinese are happy to work, and how many are forced to rely on their own ingenuity to support themselves, one realizes how much richer the average American is than the average Chinese (though there is a huge and growing affluent middle class now in China). However, when viewing the city that evening from Jiamo's and Jinsung's car, it was apparent that when measuring China's wealth by-the-acre instead of by-the-person, it was at First World level. This too was different from what I remember of my 1999 trip.



The Olympic Park was nothing less than spectacular. I knew what to expect from photographs and articles I had read in the New York Times, but it was even more impressive in person. The bird's nest stadium and the nearby translucent aquatic center are the stars of the park, but the Olympic village and adjoining hotels (including a thirty or forty story building built in the shape of the Olympic torch), the plazas and the landscaping are up to the same tasteful standards. It is clear that the Chinese threw a lot of money at the Olympic Park infrastructure, but they also tossed in a lot of good planning and inspired architectural genius into the mix.

June 25



Today we visited Wen-jing's brother, Wenjun, and his wife, Xiolan, at the Central Academy of Fine Arts, CAFA, where he is an administrator. The school is one of the, if not the, leading schools of art in China and we got to see a whole heap of student art. The semester had just ended and the students had taken most of their works with them, but there was still a great deal left. Wenjun took us all out for lunch. He treated us to a huge "farmer's food" lunch featuring lots of fresh vegetables and good country cooking. Like all such events, the food was great and there was more of it than we could possible eat.

After returning for lunch we visited the newly opened CAFA Art Museum. It is a very impressive and large building, designed by a famous Japanese architect. The works on display were from the students. I found myself liking a higher percentage of the art on display than in many other museums of its ilk. Many of the students were very talented. However, despite this being China, there still was "art" that made its claim to being art by being shocking and revolting. I don't even want to describe the disgusting "art", but needless to say it is competitive in its "revoltingness" with the most egregious examples of American and European "art".

CAFA was an interesting place and I found myself taking a fair number of photographs with the intention of showing them to my artist sister. Perhaps she would be interested in a residency here!

Later, returning to Wenjun's office, we found representatives of the travel agency we had

used waiting for us. They came to give us a gift and to let us know they were sorry the tour guide had not delivered us the mountaintop airport on time. Also, besides giving us such a great day, Wenjun and Xiolan had a nice gift waiting for Wenjing and Wayne.

June 26

Early in the morning Wayne and Wenjing left for the airport. They were flying into Narita airport in Japan for a somewhat lengthy layover and then back to their home in Honolulu. They are great travel companions and friends. My flight to Korea was later, in the afternoon. Jiamo and Jinsung came about forty minutes early and got me to the airport three hours before the flight – just as I wanted. They were heading off for Jinsung’s parents’ place afterwards. They are really nice people.

When I arrived in Korea I got an email from Wayne. He was in the first class lounge in Narita and he wanted me to know that it was definitely up to Wenjing’s and his standards. He mentioned free meals, showers and entertainment. He also mentioned a few things that I don’t think I trust him on, like the free services of a Swedish masseuse. On the other hand, I will not be finding out firsthand if Northwest first class lounges employ Swedish masseuses anytime soon. My own travel experience that day was special in another way.

China Eastern did not even open their check-in counter until two hours before the flight. I was second or so in line and then I learned there was a limit of 20 kilograms of check-in luggage per person (for an international flight!). There was a huge financial penalty for my extra 15 kilograms of weight. Feeling bushwhacked, I left the line and transferred my heavy books to my walk-on day pack and then threw out a large amount of stuff (including my Aussie guide book and a fleece vest). Returning to check-in line ten minutes later, the lines were huge. After getting to the front of the line I carefully, but sneakily, placed the edge of my luggage on the side of scale to keep the weight down. My luggage was now only 8 kilograms over. The ticket lady told me to go wait in another line to pay my fine. There the pay-your-fine lady insisted on my passport, but the original counter lady had it. The two ladies got into a verbal argument over possession of my passport and then settled on the compromise that I would not have to pay anything.

Later, as the wheels my China Eastern Airbus left the Beijing tarmac, I felt somewhat sad to be leaving China. Besides being a fascinating and interesting place, China is a fun place to be and it is filled with a lot of decent and good people.