

“Fragments of China: Concrete, Flashbulbs and Formaldehyde.”

Urumqi, August 2014 to July 2015

Dear Lychee,

Once again, I am back at Urumqi Vocational University (“Zhi Da”). The old proverb goes: “As the dog returns to its vomit, and the pig the mud it was wallowing in, so too the fool returns to his folly”. However, I do not consider my choice to be folly; on the contrary, I consider it to be a strategically correct choice. (More on this, later.)

I enjoyed the past year, with all its travel and “eye-candy”. Sometimes, I wonder if I should have carried on traveling for a second year...but, no. It was better to come back here. For quite some time, I wondered if the “troubles” in XJ would make it hard for me to get a work-visa. Sometimes I didn’t care if I came back or not, but deep inside, I knew that I wanted to return. On a certain day, I was standing on the famous concrete jetty on Corregidor Island where Mac Arthur said, “I shall return!”, and I prayed that I might return to XJ. The work-visa was later on processed in 1- ½ days, so I believe I was heard. For this I am thankful.

It has been three years since I was last working in Urumqi. On the mere surface, much looks the same (save for the yellow-and-black concrete barricades at every institutional entrance). The roads are still blocked by heavy traffic, and the oppressiveness of the rush-hour congestion. “The city, choked in its own traffic” remains the defining motif of Urumqi. In fact, this situation has gotten worse. However, there were some paradoxical changes: the city seemed “greener” than before. More trees, shrubs and flowers had been planted, especially along the roads, and the “cloverleaf” intersections. (I wondered, “Where is the irrigation water for all this coming from?”) The people seemed to be moving around at a faster pace than before. It is more and more difficult to wander about the streets of Urumqi at a nonchalant and sleepy pace, for the flow of the people has been ignited – but by what? Perhaps I am just becoming old, and cannot think “on my feet” quickly; I am happier to sit alone and still in the semi-dark silence of my room, away from everything. There have been a number of events in my short time here when I felt the need to step aside from the flow of pedestrians, get up against a wall or behind a lamp-post, and just stand there alone, in utter confusion. So, perhaps it is not just Urumqi that is changing, but me.

Here is another observation: living here is much more expensive. Money just evaporates faster than ever! I must buy certain things for my personal infrastructure, and they are expensive. Also, the dollar – yuan exchange rate is 1:6 (in the past it was 1: 8.27 – a good rate!)

Zhi Da has a new campus on the western edge of the city. It takes the university’s shuttle bus about 1-1/4 hours to travel from the old campus (which is on the south-east edge of the city). I must live in the old campus, but teach my classes at the new campus. Needless to say, I sleep on the commute, both ways. The new campus is big, and has huge classroom buildings, with long corridors that elephants could get lost in. The construction work is still not finished (the result of not enough money?), and the place has a raw and dusty feel to it. Around the new campus lies an urban-sprawl wasteland of light – and heavy – industry plants, new housing developments, semi-desert, new travel arteries, chimneys and high-rise buildings in the distance, and the abiding emptiness of the former desert, now violated by the new wave of “development”.

The students detest the new campus, for they are effectively exiled from the urban pleasures of shopping and socializing. However, I like the new campus, for I want to be sent away from the existential turmoil of the city, its noise, its pressure.

The university gave me a “Foreign Teacher’s Office”, and I like it, for I have somewhere to camp out on one or two nights each week. This office is quite big, and has a high ceiling. The windows are huge: the 27 window – panes make me think I am in the “chin” observation section of an Ilyushin – 76 cargo airplane, gazing out at the vast universe of clouds. Although in reality it looks onto a faceless wall, at night I can imagine myself flying through any sky, or anywhere in a far galaxy.

The first two months were very uncertain and stagnant. My one-year work permit finally came in in mid-October, just after the 12-day “National Day mini-break” came to an end, thus destroying any chance of traveling. When I arrived at the school in late- August, my assigned apartment was not ready for me. I was eventually assigned to a temporary apartment for some weeks; this place was very big, with many things peeling off, broken, run-down, and with a shower- water heater that refused to work. Since many of my students were off campus doing their “social-work practicum”, I used a lot of my time to make my own Russian and Kazakh – language study materials. When my real, assigned apartment was released to me, it stank of dangerous industrial glues and solvents (from the recent re-modeling and decoration). The air made me feel sick and dizzy. However, my former neighbor let me rent his own apartment (since he was living in a new place). Finally, I had a place I could really sleep in! I re-claimed my heavy baggage from the three friends who had kept it for me over the past “year away”. When possible, I opened the windows of the “smelly” apartment to blow out the chemical fumes. I shopped for household supplies, and patrolled the major markets of Urumqi, snapping up goods. (How nice it is to be single, since I am thus accountable to no one!) This year, the Foreign Affairs Office of Zhi Da was negligent, to a level I have not experienced before, or heard of from expat “urban legends” for a long time. For me, the underlying, unspoken reason is plain: the “honeymoon period” of the 1990’s, when English teachers were sought after and coddled with all kinds of perks, is over. While picking up my one-year work permit at the main city police station (a big place), I saw the bureaucratic channels choked by large numbers of visa applicants. Just as Urumqi will be choked into paralysis, confusion and extinction by its traffic, so too the job-landscape of Urumqi will be choked by the excessive numbers of foreign workers here, coming for “a piece of the action”. There will be a correction, a freeze-out, an extinction of expat jobs here in Urumqi. This is why I am here in Urumqi, for the fourth time: I want to enjoy the last of “Indian summer”, before the winter comes, and Xin Jiang resembles Soviet Central-Asia in the 1930’s. I do not regret or apologize for my pessimistic and cynical assessment. Therefore, when seen in this context, the nonchalant attitude of the Zhi Da Foreign Affairs Office makes perfect sense.

Meanwhile, in the new campus, my life is organized by the English Department (of the Foreign Language Department of the Foreign Language College, of Zhi Da). Here, everything works fine, and all is in order. The leaders there care for me, and try to make my life better. Since the big foreign teacher’s office is not well-heated, and since I was “camped out” there on an army folding bed, the department leaders got me a room in the “duty-teacher’s hostel”, which

is just like a corridor of hotel rooms (from a respectable 2-star hotel). The room has heat, and a toilet.

Please remember, Lychee, I wanted to “camp out” at the new campus for two big reasons. One: I wanted to have evening “free-talks” with my students. Two: the combined weekly time spent on bus commutes was ten to twelve hours, and I wanted to use my time better. While at the new campus I could have classes, have the evening “free-talks”, study language or make language materials, or just sit alone in my office (the imaginary observation cabin of the Ilyushin-76). One can experience hard-core deep-existential isolation in that building, especially after all the students have gone back to their dormitories, and I wander the vast labyrinth of corridors alone. I like that place very much. Thus, I am four days at the new campus, and three days at the old campus. This allows me to have two very different lives.

Since the new campus is in a part of Urumqi I never knew before, I like to use the Wednesday afternoons to explore the area by city bus. Some of the buses are rather slow and “clunky” and this gives my wanderings a certain charm. There is nothing innately beautiful about this part of Urumqi – it is semi-desert wasteland turned into urban and industrial wasteland, and a wasteland of city planning and real-estate property development. This is the area that will become a nucleus of infrastructure and administration, when the “troubles” force the city to “red-line” itself. Here, future housing estates rise out of the semi-desert like distant escarpments or island towers of cream-colored coral. Here, the #72 bus wanders through a huge grid of well-apportioned streets and city blocks (without the city), past light-industry complexes, through formerly deserted “mini-valleys, between the foothills”, where buildings are slowly appearing, like Jason’s dragon-teeth, slowly sprouting from the ground. It is much too big for me to walk through, (and in any case, I shouldn’t), but fine to gaze at from inside the #72 bus. Other bus-routes tell a similar story. I ask myself, where is the water going to come from to supply these new and widespread cities? For now, I am just happy to watch the world pass by.

So, Lychee, that is the running commentary for the first two months. It is now mid-February, and I am camped out at my usual winter holiday watering hole. The fan is now blowing on me, but I still sweat profusely – and I am in my underwear. Still, Bangkok in the winter is far better than Urumqi in the winter.

I think back on the first term of this year, and all I can say is that Urumqi is dying by inches, pickled like an aborted fetus in a glass vat of formaldehyde. I have had “talks” with people from “nei-di” (ie, inner China), and they believe that “dangerous problems require strong medicine” – that is, the threat of separatism must be countered by stifling social control policies. In this opinion, I feel they are right. However, watching it happen on the ground is a very different experience. It is like watching someone nearby undergoing chemo-therapy, or some treatment for syphilis – the old fashioned way with mercury or arsenic, and not the modern medicines. The utter tragedy of such treatments lies in suffering alone, yet being able to see many other people walking about and living their daily life, at liberty to do as they want. Urumqi, and the whole province, has been put into a cancer-ward: what is outside cannot come in, but everyone knows what they are missing in life; one senses oneself under observation (not by the police, who are always there) but by the curiously indifferent. When the pain becomes too great, and the “patient” tries to lash out, the “treatment” will be ratcheted up another notch, as needed. It is a surprise to me why more people do not commit suicide.

Even my abnormally isolated life is affected by the taint of formaldehyde. (I am nobody special: just another global misfit.) As you know, Lychee, I like to have “free talks” in the evenings with my students, to improve their conversational English. These days, the trickle of enthusiastic students is under pressure, as even visits to my office must be registered and monitored. The same hallways, which by late night or early morning I walk alone, are staffed every fifty feet by a bored member of the Zhi Da student union, whose job it is to monitor or choke off all movement on the corridors. The results are obvious: many students who want to come for “free-talk” are blocked and obstructed. In their evening homework classrooms (shall I say, their “strategic hamlets”?), very little actual homework is done. Instead, most students chat with each other, or play music on their cell-phone, or sleep. Most of what passes for “homework” is copied from someone, half an hour before the actual class. Lychee, I fear an ongoing “creeping battle” with the Zhi Da student union, and their all-too-conveniently untraceable masters.

Another phenomenon I have observed is the unwillingness of many students to study. As one student infamously quipped to me, “Teacher! We don’t want to learn – we want to play!” Maybe I am hopelessly outdated, and have no place in the 21st century, but for me, education was never meant to be a form of entertainment; it is to be likened to stone-breaking, with a definite end-product in mind. The act of stone-breaking does not have to be an act of punishment (there are mechanical stone-breakers, to be sure), but it is stone-breaking. A few students are willing to work, but the envy-based, social/peer-control mechanisms are very strong among “twenty-something/late-teen” Chinese girls. Thus, much personal initiative is snuffed out. Since the new campus is physically set out like a “gulag”, apart from the city and apart from meaningful social interaction, taking any enthusiastic students apart for special tutoring is very hard, and perhaps impossible. It is this one dynamic that will ultimately force me to abandon this career. For me, it is not the “naughty Uighurs”, or the conflict of separatism, or the like that will drive me out; rather, it is another “cultural and social revolution”, designed to re-engineer Chinese society from the inside out, and purge it of any Western cultural influence, that will turn me (and many other EFL teachers here) into a latter-day dodo, and drive me into extinction. However, Lychee, I have seen this coming for many years, so I expect it.

Chinese college students, like young people all over the world, are addicted to their “smart phones”. It seems that almost everything they do is done through the smart phone. I will not go into details, save to say that I think such constant use of the smart phone degrades one’s native intelligence, as well as one’s “study skills”. It also turns entire populations of “users-of-technology” into “techno-sheep”, that are easily monitored and directed, and fed on the same diet of “info-pabulum” by whatever “little green men” control the information networks. Here is a revealing anecdote: it serves to say something of the mindset of the typical “silicon serf”. (Make no mistake! The smart phone revolution has nothing to do with empowerment; rather it is a return to feudalism, and other, former systems.) I noticed that all smart phones have cameras, and that the pictures they take can be transmitted. So, I said to one class, “Write a short message in English, on a small slip of paper, photograph it, and send the picture to your friend. In this way, you can practice your English writing. Write by hand; do not use the texting function.” There were some students in that class who were visibly offended at this idea. (One of them was a known “aparatchik” a creature of the system, and a student union Monitor.) I think they were

offended because I was asking them to use their smart phones, for a purpose not actually intended by the “little green men”. This little incident was very revealing to me, and cast many other things in a new light. So, one morning, I wrote an article, called “four ideas for the Wei-Chat generation”. Now, all I need is a door in the cyber-equivalent of the door where Luther nailed up his 95 Theses, and watch.

There are other reasons as to why I plan to resign my post in July, 2015, but for me, having a suitable intellectual climate is very important. Note: this has little to do with “political restrictions”, to which I have adapted quite well over the years. No, this is about the loss of habitat, the complete defoliation of an eco-system, and the resulting destruction of a species – me. This process is intentional, it will not be reversed or moderated, and it will drive several current social entities into total extinction. It is time for me to clear out.

However, Lychee, I am still glad that I came back for this one year in Zhi Da. I wanted to say good-bye to some of my friends, to shut things down, on my terms.

I should also note here that there are other reasons for my leaving China. My health has been “not good” for some years now, and I think it is high time for me to work on my “bucket list”, and complete some of the things I have long wanted to do, but did not do. (It was my mother who once mentioned to me something about the “sins of omission”. I should take note.) I also realize that China has outlived its usefulness to me. Today, there are other places that can better give me the “life under the cork tree, among the flowers”, which is all I ever really wanted from life. So, maybe I will go to Burma, or Indonesia, or Kyrgyzstan, or Portugal, or other such places, and there do the things I have long wanted to do. Nonetheless, I do not regret these fifteen years in China. We used each other well.

So, Lychee, in this next section, I will jump from recollection to recollection, as they come to me. (The unity of the mosaic comes from the fragments of China.) I like it that way.

The city of Urumqi is changing, as always. Internal migration (from places like Sichuan or Henan provinces) has swelled the population. Buildings – countless “fairy-rings” of them – continue to rise in all corners of the city. (Yet once again, I ask “Where is all the water going to come from?”) The cultural “centres of gravity” are shifting to new places in the city. This is due, in part, to some committee’s firm decision to re-organize the city’s makeup into better managed (ie, defended) districts. Thus, the “Nan Men” district, which has always been my cultural “center of gravity”, and my favorite watering-hole, has been “left behind”, rather like an ox-bow lake. What caused this “not yet, but inevitable” slow extinction? The reason is simple: Nan Men lies next to the “Casbah” area. Come Tet, and it will warm up very quickly. However, for now, it is a business centre, and one of my many Asian watering holes. Sometimes, I hop on the #17 bus, and go down to Nan Men, on the flimsiest of pretexts, so as to be there, and enjoy the moment, and some tea.

There is nothing especially glamorous about Nan Men. It is a square, about 100 m. x 100m. In the middle is an underground market, where many of my students (from the old days) would go shopping; it is a bargain-hunter’s hunting ground, even today. Topside, there is an ornamental blue-glass pyramid, and the traffic island. Around the square is the big branch of the Bank of China, the Xin Hua bookstore, the Ai Li bread and cake shop, the city cinema, a DVD shop, and a Kazakh tea-house and restaurant. Nearby are a Hui “wonton” restaurant, and a Han

soy-milk and set-meal restaurant. These places keep me fed and happy all the year. I shall miss these places in the years to come.

I feel a need to describe these places, to leave a record. Of course Lychee, you have often been there, and they are firm in your mind's eye, but for me, the memory sleeps and must be carefully awakened. In time, even Nan Men will be forgotten to me.

The Kazakh tea-house/restaurant is my favorite place in Nan Men. If I come before or after the lunch rush-hour, it is fairly quiet. It is one large room, with about twenty tables. All the usual Chinese-Kazakh dishes are there – horse meat or lamb noodles, oily bread, milk tea, lamb-bone soup – but they have been slightly modified to suit Han-Chinese tastes. This is a good practice, as it opens Kazakh cuisine to the mainstream, and assures a clean room. (Some Uighur and Kazakh restaurants are real “greasy spoons”, with over powering volumes of ethnicity.) If I come during the rush hour, it is too boisterous. In the quiet hours, I can read my book, and let time pass by. Service can be slow, but Kazakh cuisine was never intended to be rushed. Besides, it is a given for me, the outsider, to be the second or third person served, even if others come into the restaurant after me. That is why I bring a book – the “pulpier”, the better. Every time, I must remind the waitress to add no salt to my milk tea, and serve it to me in this way. Then, when no one is looking, I put in my powdered ginger mix from Bangkok, or some other powder. Of course, they all know... In time the “na-ren” noodles come. It is a bowl of wide and thick noodles, cubes of horse meat, onions, carrots, and broth. One must eat this dish carefully, or else the noodle-ends will whip around, and scatter grease-drops all over one's shirt. To solve this problem, I lean far over, putting my lips almost into the bowl, as if I were an asthma patient inhaling an herbal steam remedy, and I eat slowly and carefully. Since I know that I look strange and revolting to the other diners, I sit in the corner, out of the way. No people, no problem... It is hard for me, an outsider, to come close to the Kazakh people but I do enjoy eating their “na-ren” noodles, and drinking subverted milk tea. For a while, life, students, and the busyness of Nan Men is forgotten.

Nearby is the Xin Hua bookstore. In the past, I would go there to buy books for my students, but now many students do not care as much. Instead, I go down into the basement, and buy stationary. The A4-size plastic folders, long paper notepads (5” x 9”) and plastic envelopes are all sent home by sea-parcel; over time, I have sent quite a lot back home. I will use these materials for language curriculum. I know intuitively what I want to buy when I patrol the shelves of stationary, and I know how apparently pointless purchases will come together at the other end. It all makes good sense to me, even though I cannot clearly articulate it to a skeptical observer. The sales ladies must wonder why I am buying so much stationary, but they keep their thoughts to themselves. It is better that way.

In between the Kazakh teahouse is a soup-wonton restaurant run by the Hui ethnic group. I also go here for “soul food”. This small restaurant is very famous in Urumqi, and always busy. The menu is very fixed, and the staff accept no deviation from the established protocols. During off-peak hours, it is a refuge for the body, and a place to relax the mind.

There is no German-standard brown bread in Urumqi, but the Ai-Li cake shop has a passable attempt. I eat broken bread/banana/ milk “mush” for breakfast, or else eat bread with my canteen lunch food at the new campus. The serving staff at the canteen are always surprised that I say “no rice” when dishing up. For them, rice is very important. What will I eat with my

“three vegetables”, if not rice? I go to the farthest corners of the student cafeteria, away from all of the students, and there eat Ai-Li brown bread with the “three vegetables”.

There are many supermarkets all over Urumqi, but I have always liked the large basement supermarket at Tian Bai (also near to Nan Men). Some supermarkets are “shopping, with Chinese characteristics” venues, and others follow a European look. I like Tian Bai, because it caters to the elite, and those with a lot of money to drop, for a very small cart of goodies. This means it is well organized, with much cleaner surroundings, and good-looking food. As the saying goes: “My tastes are simple. I like the best!” Wandering up and down the air-conditioned aisles of large supermarkets is one of the few things in life that consistently make me happy, so I sometimes go to Tian Bai just to walk up and down the air-conditioned aisles. It is here that my diminishing buying – power becomes very apparent: I long to buy many things (my vice-tastes are for all sorts of cookies, and smoked meats or preserved eggs), but the money is short. In fact, during March/April/May of 2015, I found myself close to broke one week before pay day! This was a real shock to me. (More on this later.) Meanwhile, the new elite would fill up their carts, and drop \$120 or more at the check-out counter. Where do they get such money?

I also went to Tian Bai (and many other food places), as part of a wide-ranging nutrition study that I was doing for myself. Over the 15 years I have been in China, I have tasted many different kinds of food – both in the restaurants and in terms of packaged food. Now, with my departure coming up, I wanted to know what it was that I had eaten. Therefore, I “revisited” virtually all of the store-bought, packaged foods that I knew I had eaten over the years – as well as some new ones that caught my eye. Each food wrapper I carefully kept, washed, cut out the nutrition information (in Chinese), had it scanned and “blown up” to A4 size, printed, sorted into food categories, and then stored for future analysis. Thus, for almost one year, I shopped and ate with this survey in mind. As with my stationary purchases, I knew where I was going, but I could not articulate what I was doing to a skeptical audience. I just did it.

I still have not analyzed the raw data; I still do not know if my final sea-parcels made it home. Hopefully – all in good time. However, I do know this. The packaged food that people are eating in China today is really, really bad and unhealthy. In addition to “the usual suspects: of fat, salt, sugar, trans oils, flavorings and preservatives, I saw another category. I call it “dead, mummified food”, which has been on the shelf for such a long time. Like candy, it is sealed in “tear-open” plastic bags, and covers many categories of food. I had my “epiphany” moment one day, when I saw that so many products were packaged in this way. This is very dangerous!

Now, back to the money problems of recent years... In 1995, when I worked in Tianjin, my monthly salary was 1,200 yuan (1=8.27). Now, 2015, it is 4,000 yuan (1=6.1). Back in 1995, I felt like there was enough money to spend each month. Granted, my “projects/travel” budget was very small in those days. Now, in 2015, I ran out of spending money ten days or more before pay-day. Earlier in the year, I solved this problem by changing a \$100 bill from my travel fund (ie, money from home). After the winter holiday, that money was almost finished. For the first time, I found myself wondering how to make ends meet. Some of the expats suggested I tutor some rich kid in English; although the schools did not like the foreign teachers to do any outside teaching, many people did it. However, I did not want to solve the problem in this way. Rather, I wanted to shrink my life, watch my spending very carefully, and somehow

muddle my way to pay-day. I did tutor a local student for free, and her mother was the boss of a small noodle restaurant. I tutored her because she was clever and willing to develop her English – not for money. Usually, I would visit the mother’s restaurant, to get a free meal (about \$2). However, when I was close to pay day, I would visit twice a week.... Teaching English in China has never been about making lots of money – it has always been about enjoying the life there, being with the students, and travelling during the holidays. This is worth far more than money. Now, however, I am running at an obvious loss each year. Still, I am not ready to quit: I like it here too much. When I do pull out, it will be time to retire – so why worry about it?

Everywhere I go, especially in the wealthier countries (China, Thailand, or Singapore), I get less and less from my money. That is why I like to travel in other countries (Indonesia, Vietnam, or Burma), where the dollar is still strong. However, even in these countries, prices are going up. How long can I last?

Lychee, you will remember in the letter from Altai I wrote about making many language study flashcards from cardboard/heavy card cigarette cartons. In those two years, I visited certain family shops in Altai city, scrounged their empty cigarette carton-boxes (the ones that hold 20 packs of cigarettes), took them to my teacher’s office at the Lin Da school, cut out the two long parts of each carton, and converted them into 4-line, language analysis flashcards. This consumed a lot of time, but since that job at Lin Da was a type of “semi house arrest”, I am glad I used my indoor hours in this way. Those cards are now in my “global crash pad” home in Maine state, waiting for use...sometime, somewhere. Later, in 2014-2015, I saw some long notepaper in the Xin Hua bookstore in Nan Men. It was about 9” long by 5” high, in blocks of about 45 sheets. So, since I had lots of “dead time” at the new Zhi Da campus, I bought hundreds of notepads, and converted each and every sheet to flashcard format. (As you know, in life, and especially in China, there is a lot of “dead time”.) I bought classical music CD’s back home, brought them with me to Zhi Da, and listened to music as I ruled out each flashcard. The time passed quickly, and I produced many flash cards; I also listened to much classical, Kazakh, Indonesian and other music. Once, or even twice a week, I prowled the shelves of the stationary stores. I suspect the sales ladies wondered at me. I bought hundreds of A4-size, plastic zip folders, in many colors (for each language I want to study), as well as clear plastic A4-size envelopes. When my living room floor became far too cluttered, I bagged everything, hauled it down to the street, found a taxi, went to the main post office (where the postal clerks are friendly), and sent home a heavy sea-parcel. It was, all told, a labor of love – but also of habit, addiction, denial, frustration, evasion, wishful thinking, and much more. However, I made a first rate infrastructure for my planned language study curriculum. Nothing else mattered!

Lychee, if you are wondering at all this please remember that I viewed Urumqi as a dissolving utopia, having no use or future. I wanted to suck out every drop of marrow, to eat then and there, or else send home in sea-parcels. I no longer believe in the future, but wanted to pillage the present. Let the city freeze for a thousand years, in the name of “state security”! As for me, I will take my life somewhere else. This attitude in my heart dictated everything I did – the language materials; “salting away” many friendships for a distant, rainy day; tasting all sorts of delicious Xin Jiang food, as if for the last time; the wholesale dumping of contacts that I deemed unable to survive the coming freeze-out; walking certain neighborhoods in a sort of daze, but ruthlessly and intentionally photographing everything in my mind (with my eyes);

spending time with the few people I really cared about, and preparing the relationship for burial. Yes, Lychee, I did all this, and more. As for you, I will never forget you; indeed, the whole world will know about you a long time!

In October of 2014, something important happened. A block of free time suddenly appeared, so I cajoled the school's Foreign Affairs Officer (ie, comrade Pa), and got permission to visit Almaty, in east Kazakhstan. The Kazakhs had a 15-day, walk-in visa protocol newly in place, so I went. This simple "get-away" holiday influenced the entire year, in many ways.

Both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have that delightful, run-down Soviet aura of "civilization – and – scruffiness" about them. For me, it is completely addictive. I think the Russians understand Central Asia and its people far better than the Chinese. I like the parks, Russian food, the ability to speak Russian to many people (at a simple level), the distant civilization of European Russia mixed with the lingering Soviet idealism and the iron persuasion of Kamaz trucks and heavy bulldozers. The Russian side of Kazakhstan gives me a cultural "starting point", from which to look at and explore the Kazakh aspects.

A friend got me a room in a hotel directly over the bus station. The plane from Urumqi arrived late, and the taxi carried me over a darkened, unfamiliar landscape. What sort of place was this hotel? However, it was well-managed in what I imagined to be the Soviet style. The "auntie" at the front desk was kind, and put up with my basic Russian. In this hotel, the furnishings were simple, and well looked after. The central heating worked. One level down, in front of the bus station, there were some very basic snack shops selling the usual Soviet Central Asian, bus station food – and it was so good, I came back to the same snack shop, to work my way through their short menu. Of all the many cuisines I have tried in the world, I feel happiest when surrounded by Soviet culinary things. I can be a new person!

The next morning I went into town. The bus station was some ways from the business centre, so I used the taxi, until I knew how to use the bus. Many people must live "close to the edge" in Almaty. I could see it in their eyes, their clothes, how some readily engaged me in conversation. The Russians used to run this place, but many of the older generation – not that far from me – existed close to the margins, in very rundown wooden neighborhoods. I remember one man from that first day. He very kindly told me how to go downtown, and pointed out the "unofficial" taxi to me.

The reason for being in Almaty was to buy books, specifically children's books for language study. Therefore, the centre of operations was the "Meloman" bookstore. It was also easy to find a taxi to go there, as everyone knew it. The "Meloman" book store has business ties with Germany, and as a result, it is the best bookstore that I have yet seen in Central Asia. I picked up the usual western children's books, but written in Cyrillic-script Kazakh. Later on, I would like to study them. A new language is much easier to break into, if the stories come from one's own culture. Thus, "Little Red Riding Hood", "The Book of Ruth", and a few others have become my personal code-books, my "Rosetta texts". I bought others. There were also many Russian DVD's downstairs; however, there were very few Kazakh language DVD's. The staff at "Meloman" were very helpful, and spoke very good English. The new generation of Kazakhs are getting ready to "go global"; this should not be too surprising, given that many countries want to invest in Kazakhstan's minerals.

Although there were many good books in “Meloman”, there were even better books on the streets. On many street corners, there are kiosks, mostly dating from the Soviet period. They sell candy, newspapers, pulp-magazines, cigarettes, very basic snack food, and “penny-books”. This is clearly the place where working class parents get a 4” x 5” pamphlet-book for their child for a few pennies. They are the usual Russian and western fairy tales, and the quality is very good. The Soviets took education and literacy very seriously, and their “children’s books” are several grade levels higher than same-age material being served up to western kids. These books were suitable for my language-study purposes, so I went to a few kiosks, and bought up the whole set – for pennies. Sometimes, “the best” comes by surprise.

Almaty’s building infrastructure is Soviet, with some late Imperial buildings, but what goes on inside them is more and more influenced by Europe, and global changes. There are grand, if aging, buildings. The many statues convey the grace of dancers, the soaring ambitions of the old order, the determined resistance of Panfilov and his band of heroes. Inside the big supermarkets, one is in new Europe – in all aspects. Those words in the song, “The words of the prophets are written on the subway walls” are very true, when one travels on the Almaty metro and examines the stations, and some of the posters.

I did not talk to many people, save when transacting business, using simple Russian. However, I observed everything carefully, in all aspects: the almost silence in the old wooden Orthodox cathedral; the artwork for sale in the “walking street”; the hearty food at a certain “stalovaya” (canteen); the far-away mountains; the opera house; the faint images of the outside world, cold in the early morning, seen through the lace curtains of my hotel room; the “auntie” managing the hotel, who, like some Anglo-Indians in Calcutta, went through the twilight of her era and her life with grace perfect and indescribable. I sat, almost alone in the bus station snack-café, devouring every detail in the room, while eating a dozen dumplings floating in hot, clear broth.

Lychee, if I were young and free of constraint, I would immigrate to Kazakhstan!

I returned to Urumqi, my suitcase bulging with books. Over the next several months, I scanned the best, blew up the text to letters 3 cm. high, and pasted those enlarged line-of-text onto the 5” x 9” flash cards I had been making. I ended up with a study tool of unrivaled power, which I will use later. Many people would think me crazy, so I told no one. I easily spent a few hundred hours on this work. On many occasions there would be a hundred pieces of 5” x 9” note-paper lying on the living room carpet, to dry. I re-formatted almost 30 fairy tales into the 4-line, language-analysis format, in Kazakh, and Russian, to use for study later on.

Classes continued: I gave “free talks”. Ironically, it was the most difficult class that gave me one of my most consistent “free talk” groups. They came to the teacher’s office during the evening study-hall period, somehow getting past the obstacles put up by the student union volunteers, very unsure of what they wanted to talk about, but willing to be there. Once free of the stinging gaze of peer-envy, they became more talkative. (Only by subverting culture, can one get good linguistic results.) I had “free talk” rule, which was, “You should bring your own conversation topics.” This was very hard for most students, since all aspects of their culture opposed any form of independent action. Still, we made the most of our temporary refuge. Somewhere deep in the desert would have been better, but even there, they would have looked around at each other and wondered, “Is she the one who will betray me?” so, within very

prescribed and somewhat stilted limits, we had our “free talk, for late-teen adolescents”, over many evenings.

The straight-jacketed existence of the Zhi Da students in their new campus has disillusioned many. There are at least three checkpoints that any student must pass through – out of the classroom, out of the departmental building, out of the school’s main gate – before reaching the artery road leading to downtown Urumqi. The buses that stop are full of people, so one must stand. It is one hour to upper Urumqi, and then another 40 minutes to the shopping grounds. As time has passed, new services have sprung up to take students downtown; at the school gates, there are several private mini-vans. Only when each seat is full does a mini-van leave. Most students travel in groups of three or four.

There are cameras everywhere. I wonder if there is anywhere in Urumqi that is not under observation. On the road, there are flashbulbs that go off every time a vehicle passes by. This happens not only at night (to photograph the license-plate), but also in the day. In front of the majority of “work-unit” entrances, there are concrete barriers, with some laid out like slaloms. One can estimate what is inside by how fancy the barriers are outside. It doesn’t bother me much, as I habitually look down at the ground when I walk about. Thus, Urumqi turns from wind, to poplar “fluff”, to cold set aspic, to concrete, to stone fossils. Everything is planned, to the last detail.

During this year in Urumqi, I did not visit many people. I kept to myself, made my language-study materials, and went out on procurement sorties (to get more supplies, or to scout the various shopping centres). I rarely visited the other expats; I did not come to China to see variations of home. There were a few that I would drop in on, to share news, and let them know I was still out there. I wanted to live in a world that was largely stripped of social accountability. The people who I visited and who I wish to remember were local people, who I saw in daily life, week after week. It was through them I had my necessary diet of social life.

The most important was the scanner. She took my food-labels, my Kazakh fairy-tales, and blew them up to A4-size so I could use them. She must have done over 1,000 scans for me. Her shop was really a “hole-in-the wall” sort of place, very small, always crowded, and on the verge of meltdown (however, she managed the social stress very well). In the back were two mini-rooms, for other printers, a hot-plate for warming up lunch, and some stools. One or two runt-cats chased torn paper or ink-ribbons in the corner. They died when they drank acetone, thinking it was their water. Even in the midst of this pre-apocalyptic warren that is Urumqi, their entire universe the floor of a photocopy shop, with stomping feet above and around them, not a green plant in sight, fluorescent light for sunlight, with bodies scrawny even by cat-standards, these cats pounced on each other and savaged balls of paper as cats do everywhere in the world. Why is it that nature remains true to itself, while the people are diluted more and more?

The scanner was really, really clever. Even though she worked in a chaotic shop, with rush-orders bombarding her all the time, she walked through the universe on her terms, like a queen in her deer-park. How she did it I do not know, as some of the customers were very rude. Her shop was known by word of mouth throughout the district. I am glad someone told me about her, for there was no other copy-shop in Asia that came close in terms of service. She understood and synthesized everything I wanted scanned.

Near to the old campus of Zhi Da, where I lived, there was another copy-shop, run by a couple. Here, I did my simple copying, and read the news on-line. Both the husband and the wife helped me with my silly computer problems – but it is these same small things that make or break a project. Here, I wrote my articles, managed my paperwork, and prepared my final exams.

I still went to the “Shen Hua” restaurant for occasional meals. It is still my favorite restaurant, along with two others in Bangkok. The boss’ son is now in college: the fifteen years since I first met them have flown by.

I resumed tutoring an old student. She was now a middle-school student, and was glad to resume tutorials. This was the one of whom I wrote, “...her eyes surveyed the barren landscape of the childhood assigned to her”. Fortunately, I was wrong. She had all the attributes of a normal middle school kid, complete with a Hello Kitty cell phone. Her English was actually quite good; she had been working on it over the last few years. She was the ideal student during class – all work, and no playing. (I wish all of my Zhi Da students were like that!) When we had free-ranging conversations, she was able to follow and share her views. Her mother and father still managed a Hui “ban-mian” noodle restaurant, but in a new location, still on Xing Fu Road, but closer to the main gate of Zhi Da. It was a much more pleasant and healthy place. In winter, I liked to sit by the coal-burning stove and keep warm; in summer, I also liked to sit by the now cold and empty stove, and think of winter. Lychee, this girl is the last of my Xing Fu Road “outside” students: all the others have left. I am glad I spent some time with these “min-gong” children. Their parents were “internal migrant” workers, who struggled to bring up their families. They let me into their shops, and over time, I observed a little of their daily life. Most of these kids wanted to play, but they also put in the effort when we were at the table with the textbooks. I hope to teach the last student one more time, if I am able to return to Urumqi in 2017. Then, she will be a final year student in high school!

I also tutored two children over the telephone. Their mother was one of the local English teachers in the foreign language department of Zhi Da. Her English was very good, and she had often helped me with my curriculum projects. One day I said to her, “I have spoken English with you for 16 years. Can I tutor your children?” (She had twins – a girl and a boy.) Of course, she said yes, and I began tutoring. However, this time the method was different, for I taught them over the telephone. Since the traffic in Urumqi is so bad, and a given case-load of tutorial students live in the far apart areas of the city, a lot of time is wasted on travel between jobs. Many of my students lose most of an afternoon, just to travel to one student’s home! So, I was resolved to neuter this problem. Since willing foreigners are so rare in any given city in China, I could set my terms – teaching over the telephone is considered unusual. However, Lychee, I want results, not decorum! I started with the girl, and after a few weeks, the boy asked his mother if he could have telephone tutorials as well. The Chinese have used “face” and “decorum” as fearsome weapons, but these elemental forces can also be used by the outsiders, to good effect. We did not follow any textbooks, but had “free-talk”. I told them to generate the topics.

Towards the end of this project, the mother asked me to join them for lunch in the “soy-milk restaurant”, near Nan Men. I arrived late (my fault), and she was offended and stony, even after I said sorry. From this, I learned two things: (a) there is no recovery from error, when one has upset one of these people, and (b) all that has gone before – even 16 years – counts for

nothing. So, I was right, to invest my career time in travel, obscure curriculum projects, reading, and an elitist approach to “grooming” a few promising students who wanted to learn. Thus, I can carry profit out of this formaldehyde-pickled city.

At some point, cell-phone technology will develop to such a level, that any one of my college students can dial up one of their primary or middle-school students, and give them a language tutorial (with full audio and video support), from the comfort of their dormitory. Thus, the army of college students can reach out to the far-flung army of migrant worker’s children. With the burden of bus travel removed, productivity will rise, with many good results.

Lychee, I will change direction, and go back to an earlier topic. On Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday nights, I chose to “camp out” at the teacher’s on-duty hotel. This place was on the ground floor of one of the dormitory buildings for men. It had a wide central corridor, with about ten rooms for two (with bathroom, TV, and easy chairs) on each side – thus, accommodation for 40 people. (As with all the buildings in the Zhi Da new campus, everything was very large: why build small, when the land is big, “imperial ego” is running strong, and everyone else is expressing their ambition in concrete, steel, and polished stone façade?) I liked this temporary home. After dismissing my “free-talk” students, so they could return to their own classroom, I would sit alone for a moment.

Outside it was dark if winter, or still light if summer. The windows of my Ilyushin-76 always opened out onto unseen dreams. I would imagine anything outside, or else look at the emptiness inside. There were not even crumbs on the floor, only a brief and confused memory – had people been here for an hour? For a brief time, we had tried to express life, in the midst of formaldehyde – usually failing, but sometimes striking a few sparks. It is so hard to draw out and meet the true soul of others in this place, to open the tomb windows so the breeze might come in. So, I sat on a chair, and looked at the sofas, the dusty unswept corners, or the high ceiling above me. Then I picked up my pre-assembled “night bag”, turned out the lights, locked the door, and walked down the corridor.

I had to time my exit well. The last few minutes before dismissal were full of a strong anticipation. The student union monitors still kept the students in their classrooms, but their power was rapidly slipping away. All the students knew this: there was a rising sense of energy, waiting to be released. In the corridor, barricade tables were moved to one side, and the doors leading to the stairwells unblocked and opened. In the last few minutes before the nightly revolution, I left the building and went to the hotel. I never stood by to watch two thousand pent up souls leaving through two small doors.

The whole campus was full of energy and life, as groups of students spread out to every corner. They might not be allowed into downtown Urumqi, but the campus was theirs. However, through their cell-phones, and motorcycle delivery services, they were able to bring in many things from outside. Apart from a few bold couples smooching in the usual places (ie, right in the open, but covered by darkness), I never really knew what my students did after classes. Before, they had everything Urumqi could offer (if they had enough pocket money, and a more relaxed parental overview); now, they were confined to a large but sterile campus, far from the city centre, with only two choices – their cell phone, and their dormitory room. It was a real prison!

For free-thinking college students (ie, people who want to encounter the universe on their terms, unfettered by “trolls, groupies, apparat-chiks, losers and co-dependents”), life in Zhi Da after classes is grim. One is forced into either the classroom, or else the dormitory. The students are marshaled here and there, or else locked in (and I really do mean “locked in”), all in the name of security. It is just another part of the “concrete, flash-bulbs and formaldehyde apparat”, which is the way things are in XJ these days. To a degree, this doesn’t bother me, because I have the unspeakable treasure of being single; I can go back to my room (at the new campus, or at the Xing Fu Road campus), and be quite alone. On some nights, the mere idea of “having to go home, to someone” quite revolts me! Yet this is not my problem. I can read, watch a DVD, write, make my endless language – leaning flashcards, or something else. For my students, this is not so. If I were one of them, living in those gulag dormitories, I would go crazy. There is no privacy. Everything in one’s life is subjected to the force of peer-pressure. The rooms are noisy – quarrels, conversations, “streamed” internet films on a cell-phone or laptop, and long phone monologs. There are some girls who chat with their boyfriend (or vice-versa) late into the night, preventing others from sleeping. Often, these people do not care about their room-mates one little bit. “Face-saving” cultures invariably favor the aggressor over the one inconvenienced. Thus, any student who wants to study or sleep has no chance. This school, and many others, is just a warehouse. As for the other choice (the world of one’s cell phone), that is even worse: it is an alternative universe that is no better than an opium den.

Lychee – you know me all too well! For me, university should be a place where one’s mind is cultivated. Instead, here, it is warehoused. I was able to find a few students who came to “free-talk”, or who helped me do some good shopping – but these moments were all too few. So, what will drive away the last of those idealistic foreign English teachers? It will be: the death of education; the “anomie” of the students; the apparat-chiks, who would pickle the whole province in formaldehyde; certain troublesome foreigners, whose actions provoke the authorities; the spirit of the digital age, which is evil and elitist, and drives the individual into a honeycomb cell; the complete exhaustion of the glorious vision that started back in the early years of the 1980’s. Maybe it is time for me to leave for a while, and actualize other parts of my life.

As for the students, what of them? Those with “connections” (ie, their daddy) can go into a slot which is arranged for them. Sometimes it is a fairly good place; usually, it is much less than bearable, but with no other choices. The majority of Zhi Da graduates take what they can get: English teaching jobs (or even unrelated subject areas) in those parts of XJ that few people want to go to. For most of the students, who are girls, this is dire. They go back to their home towns, and are led down the marriage path by their parents. If they go to a far-away teaching post, they suffer a severe drop in cultural and material living standards. The men who come courting (or should I say “acquiring”) are local rednecks, or petty apparat-chiks, who favor teachers or nurses, because they compliment raw power – the way cold cucumbers and raw spring onions compliment vodka shots. For most of my students – even the playful ones who say, “We don’t want to work; we want to play!” – graduation is a social death sentence. Out of the warehouse, they become fertilizer, for the raising of the next generation. A few students become the “fu-er-dai”, the “rich-second-generation”: they inherit money (sometimes), but more importantly, social and power connections. After all, who needs private money, when the whole

social collective is at one's disposal via "friends"? Thus, the flower of each generation is trampled into manure for the "collective".

In January 2015 (or thereabouts), I took my winter holiday, and went to Bangkok, as usual. From there, I branched out on two side-trips – to Burma, and to Cambodia.

The trip to Burma was my fifth. By this time I had already visited many of the mainstream tourist sites; now, it was time to fill in the empty places on the map – to a point. I flew up to Sittwe, on the west coast of Burma, to have a look. Since the temple complex of ancient Mraung-U is there, tourists have a reason to go to Sittwe. I think that in the not too distant future, Sittwe will become one of the 21st Century's "regional gate-way" ports – like Gwadar, Chabahar, Port Sudan, Djibouti, Luanda, Dawei, and others. So, I wanted to walk the sleepy streets of Sittwe, and see for myself.

I camped out in a shabby hotel, which catered to the tourists going upriver to Mraung-U. Upon arrival, the first thing I did was to carefully close all the windows in my room, jam plastic bags in the many cracks, draw all the curtains, close the door, light up mosquito coils, and lie down for a rest. The room was hot and stinky, but at least there were no mosquitoes. (The Burmese brand of mosquito coil is appropriately called "Godzilla"). Since downtown Sittwe is laid out in a grid pattern, I walked up and down the streets; "feeling" the place; picking up some daily snack food, a travel map, a hotel brochure for Sue (in Zhi Da), a wad of 100-kyat bills (about \$10 worth) for the rickshaws and snack-stalls; scouting out a place for dinner that night. I also walked around the harbor construction, wondering how such a place could become Burma's future western gateway port. The location was perfect, but it all seemed so sleepy, so rundown. I wandered the old market, and visited an old mansion from the colonial British period, now stuffed with various collections. As with most "old buildings" in S.E. Asia, it was the building itself that interested me, not the exhibition or collection.

The next morning I took the usual slow river boat to Mrauk-U. Since this was Rakhine State, security was higher on this boat. I found a deck-chair on the shady side, and dozed away the six hours to Mrauk-U, languidly opening my eyes to see where I was, and to note the passing hills. I was not in the mood to re-live the past adventures up the Irrawaddy River – so I slept.

Many years ago, when the Portuguese were setting up trading forts everywhere, and even before, Mraung-U was a famous city of temples. European travelers of the 16th Century mentioned this place. The great city has disappeared, but quite a few of the temples remain, in various degrees of ruin. I hired a rickshaw, and visited three or four temples. In Burma, it pays to buy many packs of refrigerated, menthol – scented, 8" x 8" face-wipes, and use them for cleaning off one's feet instead – since in S.E. Asia, one must go barefoot into a Buddhist temple. I am getting older and stiffer, so foot-care and temple-hopping is becoming more of a chore. One temple had its "inner sanctum" at the end of a long mosquito-coil tunnel. I walked very slowly, barefoot on the rough slabs, feeling like a very small insect wandering deeper and deeper into a snail's shell. Then I had to walk out by the same way, feeling weak, dizzy and footsore. If I had had shoes, a portable stool, an hour of time, and the absence of any other person, I would have had a completely different experience in that place. Nevertheless, "being denied" is in itself, an experience.

I spent the night at one of the tourist hotels in "new" Mraung-U, then returned to Sittwe by boat. The day after, I flew back to Yangon, where I stayed one week.

By this point, I was collecting Burmese language study materials, for possible future study. What I had done with the Russian and Kazakh materials, I would do also with Burmese. So, I started to collect, not at all knowing what would come of it. The dictionaries, children's stories and other books were cheap, and readily available. (In any case, no such materials can be found back home! Better to have language-study materials in my containers, than in my dusty, futile, unfulfilled dreams.) I also commissioned a Burmese translation of my book "Sentences and Paragraphs", from a local.

During this time, I wandered in parts of Yangon. The Shwe Dagon pagoda was still charming, its potential for "eye candy" and impressions undiminished. I found a hole-in-the-wall shop that sold fresh, cold soy-milk. I realized that Japanese food in one particular restaurant is much cheaper than Japanese food anywhere else – so I ate there quite a lot.

However, there were many life-paradoxes. To wit: I was interested in foreign places, but nowhere seemed suitable to live in; I liked foreign language, but there was no one who I wanted to speak with, or relate to; I was finally admitting my life-dreams, but I was getting older, and worse still, unmotivated; Asia was full to bursting with life's choices and opportunities, but I was losing my interest in life. I realized that I had cheated myself. Although I kept busy with various projects and with travel, I recognized the inner dissonance, which will never be resolved.

This was my last visit in what for me was the "former state of affairs" in Burma. Times of change will come, and if the people want this, then so be it. However, I have fond memories of my wanderings, my first impressions, the trip up the river, as a "nobody" tourist in the latter years of the old system. This, I will never forget.

I returned to Bangkok, rested for three days, and then went to Cambodia for five days.

This was my second trip to Cambodia. I went to Siem Reap (Angkor Wat), and stayed there only. Lychee, here is the reason. About ten years earlier, I took two friends to Angkor Wat. In "baby-sitting" them, I was not able to enjoy it myself. (I ask myself, how can parents, or tour-guides ever enjoy travel?) So this time, I resolved to "do" Angkor Wat alone, and completely on my terms. My long-helpful travel agent in Bangkok recommended a hotel in Siem Reap which was not far from the "tourist quarter". I very rarely stay at "boutique" hotels, as they are not my style. However, I wanted a safe and unimpeachable place to lock myself into, after a long day's wandering all over Angkor Wat. I do not go to hotels to indulge in fine food or material luxury, but to withdraw from everything and from everybody. The food was good; the pool suspect.

So, Lychee, for three days I "did" the temples of Angkor Wat, hired a motor-scooter-cum-chariot rickshaw, went up in the tethered observation balloon, found and re-visited the "Soup Dragon" restaurant, did more scanning work, drank lots of coconut-water, and remembered the past. Above all, I remembered the past, those I had travelled with before, the lost chances, and how different my life might have been. She was my best option, but I chose not to take it, and I left her, for the world of total isolation. Common sense, social opinion, and sometimes conscience say, "You should have gone with her! There was no one better." Yet, my heart says to me, "Remain in the desert. It is better there." So, I chose the desert. However, it was true that she was the best, the noblest by far of those that I had considered. So when I walk the ancient ruins of Angkor Wat, or of Ayutthaya, I think of her, and see her as clearly as if she were actually there.

The great ruins of Asia are sad and melancholy places to visit. They were built by war prisoners, convicts, slaves, victims, the oppressed, entire conquered peoples – all for the egos of cruel kings who wanted to be god, or placate god. Today, even in ruins, they still manage to bring into one place, those with everything and those with nothing. You have only to walk in any of these places to see it for yourself! I drink my cold coconut-water on a bench in the open sunlight like an impala at the water-hole, ears alert for the leopard.

Thus, at night, after a good dinner at the “Soup Dragon” (and it is good!), I would walk through the “faux-Khao San Road” area, to my hotel, lock myself in, jam plastic carrier bags in the door-cracks, light up a mosquito-coil, watch the world destroying itself on BBC news, have a shower, and go to bed. By then, all the mosquitoes were dead.

There are two forms of tourism. One involves “going into”: this means entering a new culture, exploring new things, meeting and interacting with new people – both the locals, and one’s travel partners. One comes home, a changed person. The other form is all about “getting away from”: this means leaving behind all aspects of one’s home environment, and for a short time, imagining oneself in a world where one’s home identity is quite forgotten. In this second paradigm, one does not have to rush here and there (conquer this mountain, cross that desert, interact with such-and-such a people group, rescue the current “animal célèbre”). All one needs is a quiet and safe hotel, in a small oasis of calm (it can be found!), in a horribly over populated and polluted city, with a daunting language, terrible gridlocked traffic to choke off all movement, something local that frightens away the people you are trying to leave behind. Bring books, enough money; find a favorite local café and a restaurant; try to have the hotel reception clerk answer those “local questions” that mystify you; cut off all contact with “things past”; avoid trouble. Above all, know the way to the airport, and how to leave that place in a hurry. In this world, one can go nowhere with the body (ie, visit museums or temples), or do social things (ie, meet people, “do things” with one’s friends) – but this is not the point! Instead, one is free to become oneself, in if not a “room of one’s own”, then a “hotel and very local neighborhood of one’s own”. Virginia Woolf was quite right when she said, “500 pounds, and a room of one’s own”. Therefore, I like the following places: Chiado (Lisbon); Soi Rambuttri (Bangkok); Ende and Larantuka (Flores, NTT, Indonesia); Bukittingi and Lake Maninjau (Sumatra, Indonesia); the Old Quarter of Hanoi (Vietnam); Gobelins (Paris); “Little India”, (Singapore); “Madame Cuc 127” (Saigon); Pyay (Burma); “Motherland Inn 2” (Yangon, Burma); “Nakula Familiar” (Depasar, Bali, Indonesia); “Losmen Lucy” (Yogyakarta, Java, Indonesia); El Rashidia and Chefchaouen (Morocco); Gamla Stan (Stockholm); and maybe others in the future, if I can go.

Lychee, I suspect that as the world becomes more crowded, and chokes on its own filth (for the globalization of the “western, middle-class lifestyle”, and travel are prime environmental culprits), more people will choose their holidays based on the “second paradigm”... or, they will just stay at home. What do you think?

I left Cambodia, returned to Bangkok, shopped up as usual, and returned to Urumqi.

Lychee, this narrative has not been strictly sequential, but more topical. I wrote most of it in hindsight, in the summer of 2016, in the isolation of my container home. Here it is very quiet. Few people visit me here.

The second term at Zhi Da was much the same as the first. I taught classes; in the evening I gave “free talks”; I met some expats sometimes to recharge the part of my soul that China could

not reach; I made many “4-line, language-analysis” texts, drawn from Russian and Kazakh children’s stories; I also visited some of my non-Zhi Da friends who were still living in Urumqi; I tutored the last “migrant worker” child, at her mother’s noodle restaurant. However, by now, everything was dying, like garden plants after the first hard frost of late autumn. I told the Zhi Da leaders I wanted to resign. Fortunately, I was able to give them the name of a new teacher. Now, I was in a “lame duck” mode.

People have often “used” me in life, and the people I knew in Urumqi have been no exception. Some people wanted my help in getting into some American university, but were curiously unsure about what they would study once they got there. Some of the expats who ran a café in Urumqi wanted me to work in another small tea-and-buns mini-café, selling snacks! They even had the nerve to say the visa could be arranged. Behind these words, I clearly perceived two things: (a) the cold willingness to convert a Masters degree, 15 year veteran of English teaching into no more than a “burger-flipper”, just because it suited their HR needs, and spared them the effort of finding a “suitable” person, willing to endure the lot of a Victorian circus-freak; and (b) the fear of all the expats in Urumqi, who fear the coming day of reckoning, when the Chinese government will order the purging of all the foreigners who are working in XJ. Well, let that day come! The “career-jobs ecosystem” of the foreigners in XJ needs a “correction” (just like the Shanghai stock market, for that matter). Clean out the stables!

Lychee, this list goes on.... One middle aged woman with a nine-year-old daughter wanted to marry me. Obviously, the daughter needs a provider. In China, the relationship between spouses is subordinate to the raising of the child, and also the demands of the in-laws. The spouse with the lesser family, and especially the foreign spouse, has no chance at all. Besides, I did not want this woman, at any time!

Another woman, Uighur, with an almost gypsy flair said, become a Muslim: then, anything is allowed. Many Uighurs have this attitude towards foreign men. As if I was a shank of lamb, only needing to have my carcass stamped in purple ink, “USDA-certified, Grade A, grass fed, organic lamb” – and then everything is above-board and acceptable! This is a contract not worth the ink it was written with. This has no relationship at all with authentic conversion – I am quite happy with Jesus, thank you very much! This same woman also says, take me to America; as my departure date draws near, she becomes more pushy. So, I avoid her.

I avoid many people, for a wide range of reasons – mostly because we are on totally different life trajectories, find each other’s values and expectations repulsive, and are not willing to give. The school has no real use for me, apart from my showing up for classes, so they leave me alone; that suits me just fine. Many people on my social “Rolodex”, I just leave, without any comment – it saves money, and a worthless banquet. For those who are valuable, I assure them that I will be back (so just carry on without me, until I do show up). I hope they do believe me; otherwise, it is a messy good-bye.

Then there are a few, the lucky few, that I go out of my way to visit, or to call on the telephone. I may not offer them much, but they have my sincerity. We meet in a dirt-simple restaurant (the more proletarian, the better), or go to a park bench in my favorite haunts, and we just have a pleasant talk. Or, I call them, and we chat on the phone for some time. Needless to say, these are the relationships where there were no material or emotional expectations. At the

end of the day, these are the people who made my existence in China worthwhile, and who gave me some “meaning”, and a brief shelter from “anomie”.

At times, I wondered if I had made yet another life-choice mistake, by burning my Zhi Da career beyond recovery. Should I have stayed on, for longer? Maybe. In any case, I was now “lame duck”, and Zhi Da took hold of the next teacher very quickly. I was going to leave, and that was the end of it. I looked around me, and saw nothing but concrete, flashbulbs, and formaldehyde. I saw their effects everywhere. There was nothing left for me to live for in Urumqi. So I faced the future, and turned my back on this city – “dear, dirty Urumqi”, of eight years.

On one “mini-break”, I flew down to Aksu, in the southern part of XJ, to visit a former student. Maria, now a wife, mother, and teacher, was one of my star students from the same period that I knew you, Lychee. She was the year before you. We had good talks, and good dinners. Of course, she asked me to make an appearance in her classroom (which was fine by me: Maria can do no wrong). I found it amusing that her school’s “between class music” on the P/A was “Come away to Dixieland” – not the best choice for southern XJ now! In Aksu, the “concrete, flashbulbs, and formaldehyde” effect is far, far more advanced than in Urumqi: they are locked, loaded, and ready for grizzly bear. Foreign teachers were cleared out. I doubt they will ever return. I was glad I saw Maria, and “hung out” with her and her family for two days. There was no need to “do Aksu”, for there was nothing to do. The city was gearing up for another “intefadah”, and besides, the streets were unbearably hot. It was far better to stay in Maria’s home by day, chat, chomp down on cold cucumbers, and relax. Before dark, her husband took me to a government-appointed hotel, for foreigners. I went home by train.

At some other point, I made a flying visit to Altai, to close down my life there too. It was May, so all frost had gone away. I stayed in one of the tourist hotels for two nights. During the day I wandered the streets and shops I had frequented. Some of the shopkeepers recognized me. How strange that the downtown area of Altai had occupied my attention for two years! Then I wandered along the river, and along the back streets up to the upper bus terminus. I saw those familiar sights and gazed at the distant hills, but my mind was glazed over. I took a city bus and went to the southern park, with its observation cupola, and looked over that landscape. Across the valley, even more land had been turned into high-rise housing estates. I turned my back on it, and gazed with fierce longing at the high land above me, which was still relatively untouched... for how long? Far to the south, I saw the “mini, semi-desert playground” I had wandered through, on foot or on the back of a motor-tricycle – but now, I looked at it for a few seconds, before saying goodbye and looking down at my feet. Some “do good-er” came up to the observation cupola to see what I was doing. Explaining myself to him was tiresome. For me, the spirit had already departed from Altai, the place I once knew. Oh, Altai, you have “come of age”! You are now “developed”! I went back into the city.

I climbed the stone stairway up Camel Mount (Luo Tuo Feng), to gaze out over the city, look up the northern valley, down to the south again, and behind to the high ground. I remembered the many places I had stood on, for a knowledge of this area of land depends on climbing most of the triangulation peaks and synthesizing deep in one’s heart what one has seen. It was the land, and the land only, that I shared my true self with. This was my Altai – a world of peaks, viewpoints, an abstract network of angles, reference points, distances, triangulation

points, elevations. I calculated all of it in my mind, and came to know it intuitively. Above everything presided far-off Macadamia Peak, always majestic. On that day, I was tired and broken, and could not remember the past with an active mind. I will relive the mountain walks on another day. Suffice to say, the foothill country and the semi-desert land around Altai city is world-class, day-trekking territory!

I had lunch with a friend, and her parents. I really went up to Altai to see them. We ate local food, talked, and my soul was happy. I also had a lunch with three local mothers, and their daughters. (I had taught the three girls when they were between four and six years old: one was three!) The girls, now older, played together. My “free-talk” ended up being with the mothers! We agreed to meet again, when I came to Altai.

One evening, I had dinner with two middle school English teachers. These were the ones I had “high-level, free-talks” with. With them, I could have intellectually stimulating conversation. That night, in a private dining room in some restaurant, we had a wild, rollicking conversation that knew no linguistic boundaries. I say this, Lychee, because most Chinese do not know how to “live out and synthesize” a conversation: they filter and constrain everything. Not so these two: we went everywhere in the linguistic universe! The next morning, someone said to me, “Oh you had dinner with two women in such-and-such a restaurant...yes?” Alas! Everything I do in Altai is known, all over town!

Now, Lychee, I will change direction once again. As you know, I have become very sick each winter, usually from having lung infections. The causes were: not wearing enough clothes, the bitterly cold and dry winters of XJ, and the horrific air pollution of Urumqi. Also, my inner disposition and outer lifestyle gave me a lot of stress. Therefore, I became sick. However, that was just the beginning: the drug and TCM treatment also ravaged my body. Is it any wonder my family scolded me for living in Urumqi? So, this year I decided to do things differently. I dressed in penguin-bulky clothing, covered my neck, chest and head carefully, and I stayed in my room most of the time. I went out as rarely as possible, and then only on mild days. I ate more meat, and hot soup. Since I had little social contact, I had little conflict with others. The results were good. I did not get sick as before, and during the “evil months” of March and April, I only got a cold. Again, this year (2016), I remained healthy, since I was in tropical S.E. Asia, and had little stress. So, Lychee, the obvious solution would be to give up living and working in XJ! I am not yet willing to do this, since so much of my life is wrapped up with this place. I would like to put in five more years, and then wash my hands of China.

During this time in Urumqi, I collected the nutrition information on many of the food products I was eating. Now, I have about 800 or more A4 sheets of paper, put into categories and numbered... and I do not know what I will do with all this raw data! So, it rests in my archives. However, I do know this: in its rush to become “globally middle-class”, China has created a food chain that will cause serious nutritional and health problems for its people. In addition to “the usual suspects” of fat, trans-fat, salt, sugar, preservatives, artificial flavoring, MSG, junk calories, chocolate, caffeine, and GM foods, there is the category of “dead, mummified food” (I cannot think of another name to give it). This is the food which comes in clear plastic, tear-open-and-eat wrappers, and which sits on the shelves for months and months. To me, such food is dead, and devoid of all life.

One day, Urumqi will wake up with no groundwater, no fresh food, and no healthy children. I do not want to be there on that day.

(I am also fully aware that the US, and many other countries, have serious problems in the same areas. The results will be very dire)

Lychee, I want to stop here. I have said enough. It was good to see you, dear earthly muse, before I went home. Of course, there will be more letters to you: it is a good model, and I like it. I hope to do more travelling in S.E. Asia, and live in places on my “bucket list”.

As for Urumqi, the stench of formaldehyde is everywhere. For me, it is not glorious.