"Fragments of China":

The Ghost of Xin Jiang – Urumqi, 1999 to 2002.

(2005).

THE GHOST OF XIN JIANG.

The Setting. Before discussing the setting of Urumqi Vocational University, I need to explain why, after so much time of silence, I am writing about this period of time: January 1999 to August 2002. Many things happened during this time, but I didn't want to discuss them, or write; sometimes, I did not want to remember. In a sense, one of the watershed experiences of my life took place at this time--it has gone unnoticed by many, who will grow old with me, and not know that the person they associate with is the same inside. I am now in Beijing, at another school, another setting, living a different chapter of my existence in China. Now that some time has gone by, some golden opportunities gained, or lost, I feel I can write about these three years at Zhi Da with less pain, or the urge to persist in denial.

First, Urumqi: it is the capital of Xin Jiang Uighur Autononous Region. The population is about three million. Every day, many "internal immigrants" come here from "nei di" (that is, inner China) and add to the rapidly swelling Han (Chinese) population of the region. In many respects, Urumqi is like any other Chinese provincial capital--large, busy, congested, full of construction in various stages of progress, people seeking a living however it can be made. In Urumqi, most of the people are Han--at least, among the well-employed. In the north of Xin Jiang, there are more ethnic Kazakh and Mongolian people, and in the south there are many more Uighurs. Like Gaul therefore, Xin Jiang is divided into three parts.

In summary, Xin Jiang is a wonderful place to live, travel, work in. It is certainly my favorite part of China (with Qinghai coming second, the "yellow-earth" plateau third, and Guizhou fourth). I loved, and still love, Xin Jiang because it is the end of the world. It has huge deserts, long and challenging mountain ranges, and all the mystery, charm, harsh beauty and emotive power one would expect from the end of the world. There are many tourist sites in Xin Jiang, but because of the vast distances involved (it is three times the size of France), it is hard to see them all or travel everywhere you want. Over the four years I spent in Xin Jiang, I did go to most places, covering 90% of the major roads--and it has been a source of great satisfaction. I hope you can, too. However, it is not the tourist sites which make the place; it is the land--the land going on and on for mile after mile--which furnishes Xin Jiang with its charm and intriguing character.

Remember, Xin Jiang is in western China--the edge, so to speak--but it is also very much a part of Central Asia. This allows it the stability of being a part of China (not some unstable Central Asian republic), and the charm of isolation, semi-oblivion, and hyper-exoticness also enjoyed by places like Marrakkesh, Timbuktu, Lhasa--without being yet another raisin in the Chinese pudding. So far, only Kashmir and Kyrgyzstan are more impressive.

The foreigners who go there come from everywhere, drawn by a wide range of factors. Business, travel, escape, pioneering are some. Although it is thousands of miles from the sea, Urumqi is nonetheless a port, with goods coming in and going out constantly. Inner China and the many countries bordering Xin Jiang do large amounts of business, and much of it passes through Urumqi. Here, you will find Han, Hui, Uighur, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Mongolian, Russian, Pakistani, a few Afghan, Japanese, Europeans, North Americans--and more. Everyone has an agenda. The "Great Game" is still active here in all its forms.

Urumqi is located in a break in the Tian Shan range; it is a natural place for people to pass through on their way west to Kazakhstan, or east to Beijing, or south to Turpan, Kashgar, or points further on. It is a very "north-south" city: the east-west dimension on the map does not look too big (although in reality it is growing at a great rate in all directions year by year). My school, Urumqi Vocational University (or, Zhi Da), is located on the eastern side of town, at the end of Xing Fu Road. It is not a famous school; however, it has developed a bad reputation of being the ash-heap of Urumqi's colleges and universities. Many employers have turned their noses up at Zhi Da's graduates, name and status. In part, perhaps this is deserved--almost every student I spoke with on this matter felt that the school administration was shortchanging them. Located at the end of a bus route, with not much of note around it, Zhi Da was ignored by society, but not forgotten.

However, this is just the kind of place I wanted to live in, to be a part of. I long ago realized my place was the ash-heap, the edge of the desert, an enclosed place at the end of a muddy, pot-holed road, an island of seclusion in a large and busy city--so Zhi Da, when it came, was recognized as home. This point was emphasized by the discovery that my apartment building, on the back edge of campus, overlooked the coal bunkers--truck parking lot by summer, and ocean of sort coal by winter. The fine black coal powder strove to enter the building by any means--up each step of the stair-well, through the warped steel frames of the windows, in your dreams. My first, most enduring impression of living in Zhi Da came a moment later, when I gazed up, beyond the coal bunker and over the wall, at a low-grade prison. Since it was built in the ubiquitous tired-red / dull-orange bricks, it didn't really look like a prison, as I might have expected. Rather, it made me think of one of the workhouses that Dickens wrote about. Many of the "dormitory" windows in it were broken--and remained unrepaired, even in winter--and there were pigeons on the roof. In time I started to question my perspective: was I looking (out of my balcony window) at them in captivity from my freedom, or was I the one looking out at the pigeons wheeling and flying over the rooftops, through the bars of my imprisonment? The pigeons soared above everything on most days, as their keepers chased them aloft by waving red flags tied to long sticks; however, from day one, I set my radio antenna, taped the windows shut, and drew the curtains. Henceforth, only the sounds of the campus and radio signals came in to me. Or, I looked out at a world through furtively-parted curtains. The only windoews which had no curtains were in the kitchen--the ones overlooking the coal bunker and the prison.

I taught English at Zhi Da for three years--Oral English, Intensive REading, Writing, and Survey of British Culture. During this time, I traveled a great deal, logging some of my best miles. I spent a lot of time with my students, both in class and in "free talks" or on activities. I observed life. I lost girlfriends. I came to the edge and jumped off, as it were. I changed. This text is an account of those times.

Xing Fu Road. Our campus, Urumqi Vocational University, lies at the end of Xing Fu Road, a lonely outpost of education surrounded by a gauntlet of small shops, restaurants, and whatnot. Xing Fu means "happy", but I often called this road "Xin Ku" (suffering, hardship); indeed, you would suffer when taking the bus into town. The road was undulating and had potholes; the bus chassis (and hence the rear

seats) would typically extend quite a long way back from the rear axle of the bus. The result was that, upon going over Xing Fu Road, you would be tossed up out of your seat and into the air; sometimes, you would hit your head on the roof.

The 907 bus route terminated right outside Zhi Da, and the 17 bus route ended one stop up the line. Both lines essentially followed the same route across town and ended at or near the same place. Who knows why.... Since I am by nature somewhat lazy, I did most of my shopping or social activities at places along this route; I could get on the bus and collapse body into seat and mind into body, then watch Urumqi pass by. There was always something to see.

There was a stretch of "Mom and Pop" stores along the street across from the university, and they were all interesting. One had three rooms. In front, people sold basic household and kitchen goods. Behind to the right was a barber / hairdresser where you could get your hair washed for five yuan (about 60 cents). Behind to the left was a sub-sub-post office. Naturally, in a place like this you could make several acquaintances. What I did was to buy certain goods from different people--each face therefore became closely associated with a certain place or particular product. Down the road were several one-room shops--still family-owned, but not quite a shanty. They dealt in the dozens of vital, "must-have" non-essentials that students love--soft drinks, gum, candy, snacks, pens, hairpins,, and notebooks. They were always thronged by students. Again, I bought certain things in certain stores. One shop sold a type of candy called "Sah-shee-ma", which is made of tubes of puffed wheat (feels like Rice Krispies), sweetened, and compressed into airy 1"x1"x2" cubes. I ate them after many meals to wash away the "after-taste" of the stir-fried dishes I had been eating. (I like Chinese food, but not the after-taste.) There were also some very small restaurants that specialized in wonton soup, steamed buns, or "liang pizi". This last dish is best described thus: cold bean-flour or rice-flour noodles, with vinegar, soy sauce, herbs, and enough red pepper to burn down a city. The students loved them; they were China's answer to pizza, which so many American students choose as their staple food while at college.

My favorite restaurant, the Sheng Hua, came next (more on that later), then more restaurants, then two more barber / hair washing shops. I tried to visit two or more of the hair washing shops and not just one, because I was afraid at what people would say if I kept returning to the same shop. (Men do not typically go there to wash their hair, and some of the women have "other jobs" there, in the back rooms. Generally, the "barber"-type shops were safer than the "hairdresser"-type shops.) The army camp entrance, the copy shop (more on that later), another hair washing place, and the turnoff to another part of Urumqi. Going on down Xing Fu Road, a VCD rental shop with all the usual trash films that skew foreigner's views of America, and a few good (i.e., "action") films. Thus the road continued--shops, schools, and so on, to the other end of the road... at least a mile. The only thing of note were the "fish-stew" restaurants. In China, many businesses often flock together in a given quarter of town, and these restaurants were no exception. However, there was one noteworthy thing about them--they were the watering troughs of the rich and powerful "fat cats" in the city. On any given evening the neon light were lit up and the sidewalk jammed with 4WD vehicles or luxury cars--many bore militia plates or were company cars. Since China is a "relationship"-oriented society, it

follows that a good way to embezzle company or public money is to go to these "house of gluttony" with your friends. The amounts of food and drink which are consumed each evening at these places would shock Belshazzar.

This is only one side of the road. There were plenty of businesses on the other side, too. Xing Fu Road seemed purposely neglected by the city government. Why?

The Sheng Hua Restaurant. This was my favorite restaurant in Urumqi. On many occasions I would brag to others that it was the best eating house in all of Xin Jiang! However, before describing this restaurant, I want to sketch the most notable restaurants I patronized in China.

That first summer of 1994 in Bengbu City, Anhui Province, there was no place of note. The only food I remember was the "cold dog" ice creams that summer, when the temperature often rose over 40 degrees C., and we lay collapsed on our beds at noon.

In Tianjin, there was a "jiao zi" (dumpling) restaurant I called "The Blue Door", on account of its blue-painted door, jamb, and window-frames. It was not really a restaurant, or even a canteen--it was a miniscule room with two or three tables or no significance and a micro-kitchen behind a partition. Perhaps in its earlier phase the kitchen had been an outhouse or a store-room. Anyways, this restaurant turned out wonderful, memory-soothing dumplings... until the shanty was demolished when the road had to be widened. I never found out where the owner moved to, but "The Blue Door" most certainly passed into legend.

In Taiyuan, in Shanxi Province, there were three restaurants, all near each other and just outside one of the school gates. One I went to for breakfast, as it served millet gruel, with green lentils hiding on the bottom, and small chunks of pumpkin in the middle levels. (The millet reminded me of Africa.) Another served noodles (dao shao mian) made of red sorghum / wheat flour, and tomatoes. The red sorghum sounded exotic. The last restaurant I went to served up "julienned" potatoes (tu dou si).

In Karamay, in Xin Jiang, it was "The Flying Dragon" restaurant, and it was here that the cult of following one restaurant really came into being. The boss was kind, and she made the dish I really liked; one led to the other. The dish was called "Mu Da Yang Bie": MU Er (the black fungus); DA Cong (Chinese onions--like a leek); YANG Cong (a round onion); BIE De Shu Cai (whatever other vegetable was seasonably available. I ate this dish again and again. Life was predictable, the boss was kind, and I was left alone.

Now to the present. In Urumqi, in Xin Jiang, it was the "Sheng Hua". It was a "Sichuan-flavor" restaurant, which means spicy food! However, the boss, after some trial and error, learned to cut out the red peppers, the MSG, the salt, and most of the oil. However, this was not the main reason why I went here--and very frequently. I felt safe in the Sheng Hua--when it was not crowded--because people would not look at me, discuss me, or mock me, as they were wont to do in other places. In short, I was left alone and in peace. Remember, Xing Fu Road is a muddy armpit of a grimy, gritty city called Urumqi in a faraway, forgotten province--Xin Jiang, the "New Frontier" of China. Therefore, I could come in, draped in my baggy gray coat, looking like a tramp, and nobody cared--or at least didn't say so. This was and is part of the glory of Xin Jiang. (Take it away, and Xin Jiang dies an inch more.) In addition, the boss was kind to me.

Perhaps it was this kindness, this mother-kindness which made me return to the Sheng Hua over and over again. It was my brother Nicholas who got it. When he came to Xin Jiang to visit me I took him there; afterwards, he said that the boss was just like Susan (our childhood babysitter and second mother). Now I think of it, so she was.

However, I never knew her name for a long time; I once asked, but soon forgot. I was afraid her husband might become jealous. She was always "laoban" (boss). Mother--oh, 34 or 35, with a seven year old son. Roundish face, hair dropping a little below the shoulders, well, but simply dressed, outflowing with kindness but pinched in by life's hardships, always an apron, ankle-height socks made of "nylon tights" material (good for straining curds from whey), the voice of a Sichuan "Eliza Doolittle" but a platinum character. The hallmark of her character was kindness, and her ability to turn her restaurant into a refuge for me when I ate. It was largely on account of her that I praised the Sheng Hua restaurant to many people in different social situations--even the school leaders at formal banquets when they asked me how my life was in Urumqi. It was never embarrassing for me.

My students sometimes told me the Sheng Hua was a little dirty. Well, maybe it was, but it never really struck me so. There were five small tables (four people per table) and a single ten-person round table. On one wall (as in many Chinese restaurants) there was a poster showing some rich person's place setting--silver cutlery, two or three wine glasses, XO brandy, exotic fruit, salad, a lobster, and all the imagined trappings of the western world. I often sat looking at this poster, choosing what I would eat and what I would toss to the dogs; invariably, the quiche and the fruit won, and the lobster and brandy lost.

At the back of the room was a short flight of concrete steps up into the kitchen. A flimsy screening curtain came down from the top of the doorway, down to waist height. The steps, the kitchen grotto behind, the cooking surfaces, the walls, the floor, the ceiling--all these were black, aged and slippery from years of cooking smoke and grease. I think that walking down those steps with a tureen of hot, hot soup, or a sizzling and spitting casserole was taking risk to a lethal level... but she did it many times each day. They worked hard--she cutting up the food with a butcher's cleaver (not with a knife!), taking it down to the customers as food and the later carnage back up as dirty dishes and slops; he vulcanizing ingredients into everyday, common, magnificent Sichuan dishes and very rarely coming out except on off-hours. She scraped the slops off the plates into slop-buckets, and put the dishes into a different bucket, to be washed later under less frenetic conditions, in less hectic hours. When I came back for a later meal, there were the dishes, reposing in their sterilizer, awaiting their next use.

Their son was hyperactive. When he was at school, the place was quiet, to a point, by Chinese standards. The Sheng Hua lived on this "baseline" until he came home--upstairs was a loft which I can only imagine as a place which would make the Parisian garrets of Balzac and Victor Hugo gracious by way of comparison--and then it was loud. He was not bad, malicious or selfish--just an ordinary boy. He would come in, flop his book bag on one of the tables, stand on one of the chairs, and then on the big "double-tap" tea urn which was on the chair, reach up, and turn on the T.V. to his favorite channel (i.e., the cartoons). The volume went up. His mother would sometimes shout down from the food-forge, but he didn't always listen. He wasn't

selfish,--just carefree and a bit naughty. He would often run in and out of the restaurant,with or without the children of the other restaurant owners (for there were four or five other establishments). Sometimes he would do his homework, then dash out. For a long time we would not talk to each other; this went on for many, many months. Finally, he came closer to me. I was studying some common phrases in Russian (as I wanted to travel and know how to survive), and he was very curious. Without any inhibition he would sit across from me or look over my shoulder at my book. In time we talked, but the conversations were never very long. Sometimes I would teach him an English phrase.

The boy--his attitude, character and behavior--was very different from the daughter of another restaurant owner who lived and worked five shops up the road. Upon returning home from school each day she would place her bag on the same table in the corner of her parent's restaurant, take out her homework and begin working. Her mother, openly curt with me to my face and mocking when in the kitchen, often criticized her. In the restaurant, I never saw that girl smile. However, one day much later when I was visiting a local school (where one of my former students was working as a teacher), I saw that girl. She was open, kind, and smiling....

As in an earlier restaurant, I had a "favorite dish" at the Sheng Hua. It was stir-fried leeks and tomatoes; as with "Mu Da Yang Bie", it was created by me and was not on any Chinese menu. My students consistently rejected it, and I consistently ordered it (with some, but not much variation)--month after month. I liked, and still like, that dish. However for me, the real pleasure of the Sheng Hua was the peace and the security the room and its owners gave me.

The School Gate Of Zhi Da. I forget what the front gate of Zhi Da looked like, save that it had bars, and it opened like a set of double doors. Like friends, I took them for granted until they were taken away.

I don't even know what month or year it was, but the social disease of "gate-vanity" struck Urumqi. One college in town tore down its front gate and replaced it with something new, modern, showy, ostentatious, "face"-giving, and above all, trend-setting. Soon, everyone else in town wanted in on the act, and the construction workers and gate manufacturers were kept very busy. In our school they came one day, screened off the front gate area with the blue, red and white striped tarpaulin material (which is one of the icons of the construction boom in China), and began work.

For two or three weeks we could not go out or in as usual, so we used the secondary gate. When it was all done (for it had been "said" in committee long before), we had a look.

Gates and wrought-iron fences are important barometers, or gauges, of how a country and its economy are doing. They proclaim the face and minds of the leaders of the "work-unit" they enclose, as well as business confidence and local / national optimism and aspirations. In recent years, I have seen significant "runs" of wrought-iron fences going up in the cities of China--this is a sign of a greater reality....

As for our reality, it was obvious that our school was "keeping up with the Jones'". It was part gate, and part modern art statement--although technically it was not a piece of modern art, just an "artistically adventurous" gate. The double door gate was gone, and its expanding, stainless steel replacement resembled the progeny

of a huge "Slinky" and a polka-punching accordion. All over China, these gleaming, expanding and contracting, latticed gates were the vanguard of a revolution in corporate / campus image. The old gates were forgotten.

I however do not wish to forget them. One night--under the old regime--during the evening homework period, the gates were locked. Several thin girls stepped between the bars sideways, and slipped through easily. Not to be outdone, I tried it; after some squeezing and forcing, I did too. The guards were angry, but I was happy, and felt vindicated.

On Daisy. An acquaintance introduced me to Daisy (not her real, Chinese name) in May, 1999. I did not know the acquaintance well, but I felt she would have some useful, inside knowledge on how to find me a wife. In fact, we met for a preliminary talk--to tell me what to expect, as well as the challenges I would face--then a second talk. It all came about rather quickly: she knew someone, cleared the matte with her, told me, and a meeting was arranged.

In a hurry, I got into the bus and set out across town. I wandered through park-like residential neighborhoods and found the place. The husband was out, the "matchmaker" met me at the door, and took me in. How strange! I have but little recollection of Daisy on that first meeting, but I clearly remember her face, her demeanor, her short skirt and high cream-colored stockings when we met with the matchmaker again in October. In May, the windows were open to let in the innocence of spring, the curtains undulated slowly in the breeze, and the hospitality tea on the low table appeared somewhat redundant as it let its steam into the not-cold, but not-hot air. Daisy and I were both shy and nervous; the matchmaker introduced us to each other and tried to stimulate the flow of conversation, then she went into the next room as she wanted us to develop on our own.

We sat there for a while, and the ice of trepidation slowly began to recede. We talked about ourselves and our hopes in life. It must be said at this point that we were entering this relationship, from the start, with a view to marriage. No playing, no dating like college students--evaluate, and sign! This way is an option in traditional Asia, and I feel it has its merits. She was 31 or 32, and I was 37. So, after some talking, we set our first date.

Daisy was about 5' 4"; not small and delicate, but strong, very determined in resolve and character, and able to endure hardship and life's bitterness. She had delicious eyes, especially when she smiled and they narrowed. She could have become delicate in demeanor and body, but her life had not allowed her that luxury. Her hands were worn and toughened from sweeping and mopping, but she had a younger face, and hair which would be the envy of any young woman. I dwell more upon her inner character--her courage, resolve, convictions, and her willingness to step out into life--rather than her outer features--hair, nose, eyes, face--because who she was as a person was first and foremost an internal affair. External things--the opinions of others, life's dangers, physical attractiveness--were not of first significance. Only her hands were an exception, because of their weathered skin. They were the bridge between passing, external perceptions and the person inside.

She was the fourth of five children, came from a very traditional family, and was close to everyone in her home. I think she had been to a two-year or three-year college, and had the ability to go higher. For various reasons, she was denied any promotions, and was

forced to be a sort of quasi-janitor, quasi-office building security person. I never saw the place where she worked, but I can imagine her running her mop over the spit-stained floors at six in the morning before the others arrived, or sitting at some desk near the front door--as visitors came and went with the hours, pages turned became books read, fair skin became a little more weathered, and dreams and personality developed as does a beautiful solitary poplar tree growing in the desert, because its roots have found a permanent source of underground water. This then was the woman I now knew. Were I to find someone of similar stature, I would have to retrace my steps, rewind my spool, all the way back thirteen or even fifteen years before, to a classmate I once knew--who knew many languages and who would achieve much. In time, I came to know that daisy was more than "exceptional".

We met in the usual places--coffee-houses, tea-rooms, fast-food restaurants, and parks--but it was in two parks that we spent most of our time, and spoke many of our words together. After all, it was spring, and we didn't want people from our respective neighborhoods to see us and expose her to gossip and shame. This was after all Urumqi in Xin Jiang, which is certainly not like Beijing or Shanghai, where foreign boys and Chinese girls are a fairly common sight.

Hong Shan (Red Mountain) Park is the landmark park of Urumqi, on account of a certain high cliff with a tower built not far from the top of the cliff. Everyone knows the place. There are many pleasant pathways, long staircases, and beautiful pavilions in Hong Shan Park, making it the ideal dating ground. The entrance fee is very expensive at ten yuan (the usual park fee in China is two yuan); this means that most high-school or college students will not come here often. At the top of Hong Shan is a statue commemorating Lin Ze Xu, the brave "anti-drug czar" who was sent to the south of China to stamp out the opium trade, and who was later made into the scapegoat after the Opium War, and exiled to Xin Jiang. A great man: His statue looks out over the everchanging skyline of Urumqi, where tall buildings pop up here and there faster than frenetic mushrooms. The front of the park near the entrance gate has the usual, tacky array of "kiddie amusements" and a false but melodious waterfall, the front side of the mountain can be crowded on weekends or patrolled by postcard sellers, but the back side is very often quiet and neglected--remember, in China, the "flocking instinct" is very strong. It was here, on the back side of Hong Shan Park that we met.

It took about fifteen minutes from the entrance gate to walk among the peaceful, leafy paths and discuss our future life. To be honest, I do not well remember what she said, but that she often agreed; it was not her nature to be assertive in many areas of life (but there were certainly exceptions). I do remember wanting to "claim" as much ground as I could (before she did?); that is, what I wanted and didn't want out of life. No car; no "rich life" way of life; no "middle-class dream" in some developed country. A simple way of life; the ability to work in some poor undeveloped foreign country--or even in Xin Jiang; a quiet, backwater and low-budget way of life. I remember her face, I remember her words, I remember us sitting on some retaining wall feeling the beautiful presence of nature around us, and then laughing when the hidden automatic watering system came on and showered the other couples who had ventured farther up the hillside to picnic on the grass. I remember nothing else.

The other park wasn't really a park at all--just some land behind a coffee-house for "Lonely Planet"-type foreigners (who rarely came),

next to a busy roundabout and bridge, and overlooking a major city expressway. However, this "enclave of green" was a park in that it had trees, park benches and footpaths. We went there to study English: together, we got to know each other better over her textbook. Daisy's English level was very basic, and we related to each other in Chinese. Actually, this was the most enjoyable part of our relationship, because in studying her English together, we had "grist" to work with; there is only so much one can say about "us", or "our life together", or "our plans". I strongly believe that if a couple has shared projects and "things to do", and not just talk and dreams, then it is easier to fill out the days and years of life. After all, "life together" is a long period of time! We spent many hours together on a park bench studying grammar and new words, oblivious of the incessant, frenetic rivers of steel rushing around us with no pause. We thought we owned and surveyed everything from our park bench. Only later, when I passed over the bridge, Xi Da Qiao, and looked out of the 907 bus at the park bench and the overhanging bush-trees, did I realize how visible and conspicuous our "classroom" had been--as obvious as a cage of canaries in a hotel lobby!

Although she was traditional and conservative in her outlook, she still took what for her were great risks: she let herself be "seen" in public with me. One day we walked together in the Botanical Gardens, tete-a-tete as usual, then I encouraged her to try the electric "go-carts", to see how she liked driving. Everyone in the area was watching us. On the way back into town, she demonstrated her understanding of "P.D.A." (Public Display of Affection); I was unable or afraid to reciprocate.

One day we took a day-trip to Tian Chi (Heavenly Lake). It takes about two or three hours to ride a minivan full of tourists to reach the park. It is a high lake up in the Tian Shan (Heavenly Mountains) range, and left to itself it is very beautiful and peaceful. However, since it has not been left to itself it is no longer beautiful, but is crowded and agitated. Vendors hawk all kinds of "kitch" and trash souvenirs, unkempt boys follow you trying to get you to ride a very dubious horse, there is loudspeaker music playing, there are restaurants and 4WD vehicles dropping off visitors, and there is litter on the ground in places. All this on the edge of the lake! The cultural locusts from the big cities have polluted another scene of natural beauty.....However, Daisy and I went up there on another date, to be together, yet more removed from the public gaze. We walked away from our group, who were eyeing us, away from the crowds, away from the horse people (or at least most of them), and up the side of the mountain. Soon, the trash of civilization became a dream, blown away by the strong yet harmless wind singing its way through the tall pine trees. We rested on a flat patch of ground formed by a rocky outcrop on the steeply-sloped hillside and looked down at the lake, across the void of clean air to the mountain slopes beyond, and up at the enormous blue sky above. It was very calming--a very beautiful exterior. If only there were a switch with which to silence the inner agitation! Although there are many pretty views in Xin Jiang, this one is still good--as long as you hold up a piece of paper to blot out all evidence of human intrusion in the lower-left corner.

Daisy and I photographed each other, made some good shots (I had brought along the camera tripod), and talked more about life. I told her how I liked having times alone--in fact, many times alone. I explained the concept of the "desert" which I liked... not so much the real desert of rocks, sand and thorn bushes, but the figurative

desert. This is an emotional place where I am alone, under the cork tree, not bothered. I told her I wanted to go there often. "That's O.K.!", she said. "I can go there with you!" She did not understand or accept that the pace I was referring to was a place I wanted to visit and dwell in by myself; I did not accept that were I to continue on life's way with her, then the "desert" would have to go.

We came down the mountain, down the access road to the main car park, and waited for the others to come. We talked about our communication, which was causing us difficulty. On many occasions, she could not tell me what she wanted to say, because my listening comprehension in Chinese was so low. Sometimes she would say something to me three times, and I still could not understand her meaning. When I spoke to her, my "non-standard" Chinese could be understood, but it was very strange to her. She called it after me--"Stephen-dialect Chinese". There it has remained to this day.

The issue of communication was actually a lesser problem. After a while--perhaps a month or two--I had doubts, questions, fear and anxiety in my heart. I wanted to flee to the (figurative) desert: in time, the voices inside prevailed and I went to her in the coffee-house to say goodbye and run away. I said my words. She was shocked. We parted. She was very shaken. I went home. Anxiety became resolve, then action, then relief, then guilt. Within a week or so, we had a "reconciliation" talk in my apartment. Like the confirmed alcoholic who swears he will never drink again I got down on my knees to say something to her. (She was very embarrassed by that.) We were together again.

Yes, we were "together", but the relationship was doomed. One day, I met her father, mother, sister and brother-in-law. The father was getting old, very upright, honest, and kind-hearted. The mother was one of the loveliest, most kindly, and joyful people you could ever hope to see; she looked like one of those old saints, struck by heavenly lightning one day and frozen thereafter in a permanent attitude of pure, quietly ecstatic joy. She was not a fake--she had the real thing. The sister and her husband were the hard-nosed realists. The family interrogation, for such it was, was left to them; the parents looked on. They wanted to know about me, my plans, and how I would behave and what I would do. What I remember most of all was the sister emphasizing "responsibility"--again and again. Here was I thinking of the simple, respectably bohemian life with Daisy in tow, in some second-rate house, at a third-rate university (teaching English), in a fourth-rate country... and here was the sister talking on about "responsibility"! She might as well have been holding an angry puff-adder close to my face. What came of that interview I will never know--not that it matters any more.

The inner fear continued as before. There was another "collapse", when as before I wanted to flee away to the psychological desert. This time, Daisy warned me: "If you do this again, then you are OUT." I don't remember much of the period between the send and third time I ran away, or how long it lasted. I called her father directly and asked him--or rather, told him--I wanted to leave. I should not have done that: he had trusted me implicitly, and telling him this was like striking a young heifer right between its gentle brown eyes with a 14-pound sledge hammer.

In early October, the matchmaker asked me to come back to her home for a three-way meeting. I went. Daisy had already arrived. The former girl of gentleness was gone, replaced by a woman toughened by life's reality, burned from within, scalded by betrayal from

somebody she thought she could have trusted. Her main charge against me was that I had lied to her--I had promised to remain with her but had lied and had deceived her and her family, especially her father. Although she was 31 or 32, I had been her first and only boyfriend. Daisy was angry and sad. She was severe, implacable, and in a departure from her usual attire, she wore a short skirt and high, cream-colored stockings.

She said that I had treated her like a bed-quilt... put on when cold, put off when hot. This way of describing me reminded me of an earlier incident in my life, when I was at college fifteen years before.... One day in my sophomore year I made an acquaintance with a classmate and asked her if we could become boyfriend and girlfriend. She agreed, but after a week or two she complained to me that she felt that she was being treated like a pair of winter underwear... put on when you are cold, and returned to the cedar closet when winter is over. Was this true?, my old classmate asked me. I said yes, and the two-week old relationship died at once.... I told this story to Daisy, and her words, I shall never forget, no, not ever.

"What a pity you have learned nothing in these fifteen years."

The windows were shut to keep out the chill of autumn, the curtains were drawn shut against the neighbor's eyes and hung there motionless, and the tea on the table was untouched and cold. One of us had to leave first, so I did. I closed the door quietly, walked through the front yard littered with the happy detritus of childhood--bikes, plastic toys and beach balls--and the leaves tenderly hanging from the grapevines growing over the doorway, and let myself out through the yard gate. It was autumn now. No sooner had I stepped into the street than the cold and dusty winds of a Xin Jiang October, the movable boundary between hot summers of melons and cold winters scouring in from Siberia, came over the whole neighborhood. Dust and leaves were tossed about everywhere around me. The birds fled, the neighborhood dogs were silent, and like Lin Ze Xu, I took the first steps out of one world, one I had not known, for another world of exile, that I had always known.

The Various Classes I Taught At Urumqi Vocational University. While I was working at Urumqi Vovational University, I taught many different classes of students. The subjects taught were: Oral English, Intensive Reading (of a text), Writing, Survey of British History / Culture. The students were mostly English majors, but some classes came from the secretary-training classes. Many classes were soon forgotten, but a few were noteworthy, even mini-legends. I cannot write of my students one by one, with close anecdotes and unfolding character development--like the Princeton author did so well in his book "River Town"--as I am very reluctant to expose personal things, real faces and real people. However, some I will write about.

It may come as a surprise to some, but I do not know well the names of many of my students. Some very well, but many, not at all. Many years earlier, I used to keep honeybees. Most scientists consider the organism to be the hive (not the bees); each bee is analogous to a single cell from a body. Thus it was with my classes--in order to preserve my sanity and my emotional isolation, I looked at my classes as the individual, and each of the students as mere cells. Of course, I got to know many students individually, but it was "the whole" (class) that was able to survive the journey into long-term memory. At times some others, and one expat in particular, criticized

me for doing this; however, I persisted as this was the way I wished to look at and relate to my world.

Perhaps it is because I am single and have nobody to cater to after a day's work, but my students became a sort of ersatz "family". After all, even lone wolves need an emotional, giving outlet, lest they turn rogue. Students filled this void perfectly--at least in the short-term (i.e., over a one-year period)--they could be loved, coddled, given extra academic attention, and then flushed out at the end of the school year. For me, this is very attractive--parenting within bearable timeframes, "zero-coupon" children, short-term and varied social interaction, and more. I gave much to my students and they returned much--although I feel that they gave me more on account of what I "engineered" (i.e., manipulated) out of them, rather than what they gave freely. This last point is important: although I am glad I did this work, I don't really believe my students gave equal free reciprocation. In a sense, my favors were unloaded into a bottomless pool of black water. It took a full seven years before I realized (deeply realized) that I was wrong, even foolish, to have expected something back. Now that the shock and dismay of that crisis has ebbed somewhat, I realize that the way forward is to continue dumping truckloads of favors into the dark pool as before, but to expect nothing back. Nothing.

Still, it is never easy. One anecdote will haunt me forever. My brother came to Xin Jiang one summer, and we toured the inner parts of the Tian Shan range. In Urumqi there is a geology museum. I took my brother there, along with some students from my best class to translate the notices above the displays. To make a long story short, the students were not able to do their job--perhaps they did not even try hard enough--so the experience was a failure. Oh well.... I must remember to dump, dump, dump. This job is about giving, loving, being patient. Only a few students respond to the nourishments of education and, like vibrant pumpkin vines, explode across the garden of their linguistic development. Only a few.... Perhaps that is why I now screen each class for students of potential, and give them something more, hoping they will benefit from it in the long term.

Anyways, back to the classes. The best class I ever taught was the class of 9801 / 9802 (i.e., the class of 1998, group 1 and group 2). Chinese classes are defined by when they came to college as freshmen, not by year of graduation). We were together for 2-1/2 years in the classroom, mostly for oral English classes. I suspect that most of what I said has been forgotten, but not lost. They were the closest thing to "temporary children" I have ever had: naughty, endearing, worth getting up for on a cold winter morning. Some of them were really quite smart, and I believe they will be able to do some interesting things with their lives. Perhaps I took the "cult of teaching" too far with them (and others) by taking snacks into the evening "free talk" for them to eat--like I said, I needed an outlet. As with many other students, they had a bad habit of not coming up with a topic of conversation, preferring to let me come up with one. Naughty, surrogate children. They covered a wide range of society, a society in the last stages of formation: tour guides, English teachers, models, strong business leaders, wives, college instructors, the bedrock of self-improving "lao bai xin" in Xin Jiang. Many tried to spill out of the economic confines of Xin Jiang and "go east": perhaps only a few succeeded, but they all learned from their experiences. Some of them did not go into the workforce--they attended extra courses at Xin Jiang University in order to upgrade

their three-year associate's degree into a full bachelor's degree. They went, they sweated, they upgraded. This is a very popular and common trend in China--scrabble up to the next level, and higher if possible. Now, (in 2003), another trend is unfolding: one by one, they are getting married, and soon, the babies will come marching in. I don't talk with them all now, but, like an old farmer welcoming a surprise visit from a long-absent child, I am fond of them and care about them. For a few, the relationship continues, and gets better and better.

Another class that co-existed with 9801 / 9802 was the class of 9651 / 9652. I ignored them for a whole year, as another teacher was their oral English instructor; moreover, I did not want them to "know" me too well, lest the next year become routine, the teacher predictable, and the students bored. (I need to maintain a mobile lifestyle, changing classes and schools, since I have a very "slash-and-burn" attitude towards life, people, and society. Therefore, this type of work suits me well--on the move, semi-autonomous, involved yet able to pull the plug and move on.) One evening, I wandered into their classroom, passed out cookies and began the relationship. Cookies are wonderful "social grease"--they countable, can be passed around, are liked by almost every person, and are not just for use in a kindergarten. Looking back, I taught them at a college level, but related to them at a kindergarten level. They were often very naughty, but also very clever. While teaching them, I believed they were academically less-gifted than 9801 / 9802, since they were "3+2"-type students (10th, 11th, 12th grades of "high school" here, at college, then two more years for a two-year associate's degree), and not the usual, three-year associate's degree students. It was only much later that I was told they were brighter, but by then, the weight of evidence had told its story. Quite a few left Xin Jiang and went to the economically-favored areas of China, to catch and hold real jobs. Out from 9651 / 9652 will come some powerhouse people--that is, translators, educators working with foreigners, small business managers, representatives of local government, and much more. 9651 / 9652 was--and still is--a very fun-loving group. Take the evening "free-talks" for example. I often liked to bring them cookies, or even loaves of brown bread. (One of my informal objectives as a foreigner in China has been to introduce my students to whole wheat bread. More on that later.) Whereas 9801 / 9802 would say, "Yes, please!", this class was different; 9651 / 9652 would tear apart the two or three loaves I tossed among them, and devour them. We were all very childish, and for this I thank them. They gave me a refuge, an asylum, a (sometimes) friendly body of individuals, a forest of people, among which to wander. Perhaps when I am old and stricken with cancer (from too much living in environmentally-unregulated Third World countries), I will think about this class and thank them for everything they gave me. As with 9801 / 9802, there are a few people who have become friends; we relate as equals and call each other up from time to time on the telephone. The talks are real, as we discuss real life now. At that time we were merely childish--but what children! Now, they are forging their own way into society--into companies, as teachers, or whatever. They are very much a "class of destiny".

The third class of note was 9601 / 9602, the "Ben Ke" class. They were a four-year class, whereas 9801 / 9802 was a three-year class, and 9651 / 9652 a "3+2"-year class. 9601 / 9602 was really formed by another foreign teacher, and I came into their lives at the

end of their time at Zhi Da. Now, most of them are English teachers at various local middle schools. A few of them have become good friends; they would make good people to "grow up" with (even if there is a 15-year gap between us.). Now, when I visit Urumqi as a visitor and not a player, I stay at the home of two of them (they are now married), and am glad for the friendship. This is the class which is leading the way in terms of getting married and having children. A few are rising in power and knowledge, and some are moving out into the wider world, away from the familiar "teacher track". They will do well, I think.

The fourth class was 9901--another three-year class. They were much quieter in character--at least, that is how I liked to idealize them. We got on well with each other. Our time together can be encapsulated by two events. First: in oral English class one day, we were adapting grammatical patterns, and one humorous pair came up with this gem: A: "Why does Stephen like teaching 9901?" B: "It must be because he likes teaching quiet girls." A: "You're right! If he didn't like quiet girls, he wouldn't be teaching 9901!" How true. 9901 was full of such girls (young women, really); indeed, Xin Jiang and traditional regions all over China are full of restrained beauty, managed personalities, and shackled careers. Second: after their graduation, they vanished--disappeared, as it were--into the quicksands of careers, society, life. One sent a letter or two; one, I called once. The only tangible thing I have of these people is a set of bamboo clappers (think of Chinese "castanets"), with their names all written on it. With me, such artifacts of life history are hard to keep, for I am always throwing stuff out. All I have left are the intangible things. I can close my eyes and instantly visualize myself in that classroom on the fourth floor, with the red-painted concrete underfoot, and the loudness of the double-doors as they were opened by late students. It is just as well that I can visualize that and some more; upon my last visit to Zhi Da, I was refused entry at the main gate (SARS precautions, they said). Apart from those clappers, there is nothing left. The other classes of old students have gone on as living, evolving entities, yielding an income of contacts and friends; on the other hand, 9901 has vanished without trace, becoming a sort of fabled "lost city". As I look at the bamboo clapper, I feel I am holding onto some vestige of another Niya (a real, lost city in southern Xin Jiang), the words or another, more benign Ozymandias! Perhaps this is their epitaph, a microcosm of parenting, the essence of many people I knew and met in Xin Jiang, of the many small things I did in China... a few dusty peanut shells luing in the bottom of a long-forgotten steamer-trunk. This is their monument, and thus, they are remembered.

The class of 9851 / 9852 were very naughty when I taught them oral English, but them again, their attitude and my general sense of disillusionment "fed off" each other. However, there was a core group of ten or so students who were keen and more interested in their English studies, so I sometimes had "free-talks" with them, and by-passed the others. A few of them helped me with certain projects, such as "team-teaching" with me on Wednesday nights at one of the city hotels. It has been gratifying to see some of them as they develop as English speakers and as young adults, and become better and better.

Finally, there is the class of 0051 / 0052. I say "is" and not "was", because as I write this article they are still at Zhi Da, and have 1-1/2 years remaining. When I first saw them, some were just 15 or 16! I enjoyed working with them, on account of their simplicity

and character--they seem so much like middle-school students, and not college students! They could be so naughty: in this regard, we (also) "fed off" each other. I called them my "babies", and they returned the favor by saying, "Stephen is just a big boy." As with other classes, I made some special contacts or friends of a few of them. It was just as well. Some students just did not care; some were utterly hopeless in English and fell by the wayside; others transferred to another school; others still remain at Zhi Da but don't want to talk when I call. So, now I deal with six or seven "survivors", and these few relationships muddle along reasonably well. What can one do? You leave, and they are sad you left and wish you could return to their school; they say their English is "so bad", but they typically don't take the initiative and telephone you for a "free-talk"; they want ideas and help in "improving their English", but won't go to a local "English corner" or mail you extra compositions to be corrected and returned. (A few have, so you work with them, as the projects trickle in.) However, a few of the "survivors" have been faithful, consistent and pleasing to work with.

There were other classes, but I will stop here. 9801 / 9802 was the best, but each of the Zhi Da classes yielded a small group of people who were kind and helpful.

On The Underground Markets In Urumqi. The climate in Urumqi is extreme: in summer, it can get terribly hot (although it is fairly dry); in winter, it is bitterly cold; in the short "spring" and "autumn" periods, the wind scatters dust from the construction sites everywhere. Some days, you just don't want to go out and face the world. Perhaps this is why there are so many "underground markets" in Urumqi. They are very much a part of city life.

Typically, an underground market is located at a crossroads. Perhaps the ground was excavated as the crossroads were being planned and built. They also serve as a way to cross the roads, which have fearsome traffic, and even more fearsome drivers. The older underground markets are lined in hand-dressed stones, all pretty much the same size and weight; I wonder if they were fashioned by convicts in some faraway quarry (but I don't know). These stones pick up the "patina" of pollution, oily rain, and street-grime over time, giving them a distinctive look; they are lethal on wet, slippery days. This as part of what makes me call this city "dear, dirty Urumqi".

For a long time, it seems, the markets were only for cheap, commonplace items. They were packed out with students and others running on a low budget. In the vegetable stores, I remember the cabbage leaves underfoot, and barely enough room to move around. The whole atmosphere was of an overcrowded flea-market. For those who wanted to cross from one side of a big intersection to the other, it was necessary to "visualize" where the other side was, go underground, and cross to the "other side" (of the intersection above one's head) by dead-reckoning. There were some underground passages that had rather unsavory-looking people hanging around the "choke-points", and computer-game machines along the way. They were very dingy and grimy.

Now, things have changed with the increase in prosperity in Xin Jiang. Many underground markets have become very upscale, and have all manner of fashion, appliance, clothing and accessory stores in them. The floors are tiled in white or light-brown tiles, the lighting is good, there is Chinese "Muzak" being softly piped in, and the atmosphere is better by far. Things are changing in Urumqi, and this is just the beginning; more improvements will come soon.

Emma and Justine.

I wish to write about the matching of two personalities during my time at Urumqi Vocational University. Emma was one of my students, and I knew Justine from an earlier chapter in my life. I do not know what fruit came from this "social experiment", but I hope that some good will come from their time together.

Justine comes first. I first met Justine Cooper in the summer of 1989, during the massive cleanup attempt that followed the Exxon Valdez oil-spill. I was in Valdez, working as a data-entry worker for the Prince William Sound Conservation Alliance; in other words, I typed addresses into the PWSCA address book data base. I did this work for about two weeks. During this time, I met Justine, who had come up to Alaska, along with many other environmentalists, to try and help out. All sorts of things related to the oil-spill cleanup had to be done--clean the beaches, help the injured animals, public relations, and the like. Justine was one of those environmentalists of the 1960's who never gave up; her "Long March" lasted a lifetime, and she never gave up struggling for the cause of the earth. She had very few resources, and during that summer of 1989, she cleaned the tour boats that took the summer tourists into Prince William Sound to see the glaciers. That work was tedious, and took up time, but she had followed this way of life for a long time. It was Justine who showed me what it really means to be dedicated to something: in a sense, she was the St. Paul of the environmentalists--I shall always think of her as such. After the Exxon Valdez oil-spill, we spoke to each other only a few times, but she was there, somewhere in my memories of that influential summer.

Emma was one of my students from Class 9601. She was brilliant, strong, had much potential as a developing leader. The student union president, she was often involved in student affairs. At a student meeting, her P/A-amplified voice went through the entire campus and penetrated into my shut-up apartment; you could hear her very clearly. She was an idealist, with dreams in her head, but I did not know what those dreams were. It reminds me of a chick trying to stab its way out of its eggshell; you see the effort, but do not know where this little life will go. Emma was an idealist, and the thought occurred to me that her idealism could be sparked, encouraged, and led somewhere. Why not link her up with Justine?

I was in the USA at that time, driving across the country from Alaska in a moving truck with my brother, bringing our mother's furniture back east. The idea had been in my mind for a while before I broached the subject. I don't think he was too much in agreement. Anyways, I went ahead with the plan. I say this, as my brother also came to Xin Jiang for a visit at about this time (I think). So, the three of us--my brother, Justine and myself--came out to Xin Jiang together.

Justine and Emma met, and had several talks together. In time, Justine went back to the USA, having enjoyed her time in Xin Jiang. Was anything achieved? Ironically, it was Emma's friend Tracy (not her classmate) who derived the most benefit from the talks with Justine. There was no further continuous communication between Emma and Justine. Perhaps I had assumed too much in believing that Justine could teach Emma all the elements of environmental activism; Emma was not ready for this. So, perhaps this "social experiment" was a failure. I think that something "derivative" was implanted into Tracy's mindset (but who knows?). As for me, I suppose that one's dreams have to be more carefully thought out.

Tracy and Judy.

Her is another "double character sketch" from Urumqi Vocational University. Tracy and Judy were some of my best students, and they both had potential. As I write this account, about three years after I left teaching them, their life histories have proven them true; they have done very well in their life, Tracy as a university lecturer, and Judy as a business worker.

Tracy was in Class 9801, and came from Tacheng, in NW Xin Jiang, which I consider to be in the best part of Xin Jiang. I don't know her background, but very early on during the 2 1/2 years that I taught her class, I saw she was very clever and would be going somewhere. (Come to think of it, some of her classmates were also that way.) I was also taken to her in my heart, but was consistently afraid of the possibility she would turn from me, or turn on me. Sometimes, I wonder if she recognized this, but was frustrated when I did not turn perceptions into action. She would complain that I always sent her my greetings from afar, via one of her classmates, rather than dealing with her directly.

Judy came from Class 9651, which was action-packed with promising students; that class has produced many interesting characters, and several successful people. As with Tracy, from the very beginning, I knew that she was going somewhere, and would excel at whatever she set her hand to. Indeed, in the years following her graduation, she worked as a business secretary in a few international companies, and has risen from level to level. I had a deep fondness for her too.

During the third and last year of my time at Urumqi Vocational University, I was asked by the school to teach evening English classes at the Hong Fu Hotel. A minibus took me downtown to the hotel, where I taught staff members, from low-level workers to mid-level department leaders. I was not too happy about this, but I could not argue with my leaders, so I went. Then it occurred to me that I could use this activity as a way to train up, or mentor, some of my best students as teacher assistants. Tracy and Judy were instantly chosen. (Later on, I brought in other students to do this work, but the core work was done by the first two.)

I particularly enjoyed the times we went to the hotel in the minibus together. Perhaps they did not know each other well before this time, but now they had more contact. Both were full of feeling, but did not express this openly; they kept their power and their feelings behind their faces. Yes, they were friendly, but behind the help was a soul of iron. We talked about many things, shared various thoughts and experiences, but I knew that there was a world that I could not enter. Anyways, on those minibus trips into town, we would talk about the upcoming class, crack jokes (many of them well-worn), and sit huddled up on our seats as the driver found his way through the complex traffic of Urumqi. On winter nights, with temperature around minus 10 C., we were warmed in our words, if not our bodies. In terms of teaching ability, both were effective communicators of English with the students, who liked their teaching. We would divide up the class into groups, they took a part each, and we got down to work. Soon, they were teaching their groups by themselves, and I just watched them. Why did I do this? I felt the need to mentor, to train up possible future teachers, and this seemed to be a good way to do it. I also felt that, since the school had "forced" this task on me, I would skim off a little bit of advantage to myself, by allowing some of my students to get teaching experience. I often let Tracy and Judy teach, while my mind was roving far, far away, in some distant place.

We worked together for about one term. During the second term, Joy joined the group; at that time, she was very shy about teaching, but now she is a good teacher in one of the city middle schools. After that came other students, until by the middle of the second term we had almost as many student-teachers as there were English students! I wonder if the school disapproved, but the hotel staff liked it. By this time, I considered Wednesday nights as "dream time"--not good, but at that time, my mind was tired of the Hong Fu Hotel.

Tracy graduated from Urumqi Vocational University, and became a student, and then a lecturer (in English) at Xin Jiang University. Her new work unit sent her to the poor, southern part of Xin Jiang to teach in Kashgar, to do her "community service" there for two years. On occasion, I called her, but not enough, I think. The conditions there were hard for her, although she survived. She will be returning to her old position at Xin Jiang University soon, and seems to have a good future ahead of her. Sometimes, I wonder if I should have been a little more assertive with her; would she have made a good partner? Perhaps, but in the back of my mind, there was always this question of "loyalty of the heart"--whether or not she would turn on me. There was the faint suspicion of the fox in her essence... but I still think she is very cool.

As for Judy, she worked for a foreign oil company that was doing business in Xin Jiang; later, she joined another foreign company--also Dutch. She went to Holland for training, got married to her boyfriend, and is now in the south of China, in Guangdong Province, where business opportunities are very fruitful to the able. She has gone from power to power, has her apartment near Guangzhou, all renovated, and is getting ready for the next sea-voyage of life. She is very competent, after getting used to a new situation. However, all this has not come easily, and I am sure that she had many restless nights as she pondered her future during uncertain times. Fortunately, she married a good, decent man.

We do not see each other much now, as life has torn us apart in three different directions, but some of the foundation of their present life and adventures was set during the time we were together at the Hong Fu Hotel, and during countless "free-talks" in my apartment, or in their respective classrooms. I wish them all the best in their careers and life.

On English by Telephone.

I spent much time with my students in "free-talks" and in class, but with some students (especially ex-students) I passed many an hour on the phone. Just think of it! One fifth of the world's population can be reached through one nation's telephone system. The phone charges are not too expensive, and the "linguistic treatment" can be focused and effective. Certain students got a lot of time. Yang Shang Ying and Vicky got three or four hundred hours between them, and others got large slugs of time. It is an effective way of improving someone's English, as the conversations are about real things, and there are no other students vying for attention. Besides, speaking on the phone (and not by writing on the Internet) can allow one the use of one's voice, with its intonation and way of expressing one's feelings. In the past, I visited students, but that was a waste of time, energy, money, and purpose: with the telephone, I could talk about something in a focused way, hang up, and move on. How American I am in this respect. In summary, some of my best, and most meaningful times in China have been on the phone with old students.

The Trip Through Pakistani Kashmir and Kashgar.

Ten days before the 9/11 incident, I was in Pakistani Kashmir. For a number of years, I had wanted to visit Pakistan and return to China via the Karakorum Highway, and in time, the opportunity came. As I was passing through Beijing on my way to Xin Jiang, I stopped off at the Pakistani embassy and got a visa. There was some time, and I flew down to Islamabad. What was most impressive about that flight were the Kun Lun mountains: they had very sharp, knife-edged, steep-sloped peaks, which formed a formidable barrier to anyone trying to pass through. Now the motivations of Chinese "border-setting" make much more sense when the physical relief of the mountains ringing in this country are taken into consideration.

After I cleared customs and had taken a taxi into the long-distance bus station, I waited some hours for the bus. The buses in Pakistan are covered with every conceivable decoration and embellishment, and they almost seem to speak to you, like camel-bells or the ornaments draped around an eastern bride. As has been the case so often with me, I waited a long time, and looked around. There were many, many refugees from Afghanistan in the bus station, and overflowing all over the city. They reminded me of earlier refugees spread out on the plains of Goshen. At that time, the whole problem of what was going on in Afghanistan seemed somewhat remote: not any more. The bus ultimately set out, the ornaments swaying, and the cabin filled with raucous Indian music. It is the music--savored, not understood, borrowed, not owned that makes foreign travel so very interesting. This music continued all night, as the bus wound its way up and down mountains, to finally arrive in Gilgit the next morning.

This is the land that Alexander must have passed through. The Indus was gray with glacier-meltwater, and flowed in a sharply-etched mini-gorge, in valleys which were almost totally desolate. So, this is the famous Indus, I thought. However, I was going north, not south. I found a jeep for hire, and we went on. The road I traveled on, from Kashgar in Xin Jiang, China to Islamabad, Pakistan was built as a "friendship road" between China and Pakistan in the 1970's (I think). It has some of the most beautiful road scenery in the region--and also some of the most dangerous. Sometimes, the road passed under an overhang of tons of rock; the driver just sped up, trusting to something to reduce the chances of a rock fall. The land was barren, save where irrigation channels had been dug and the water from the mountains brought in. We arrived in Karimabad.

There is nothing much in Karimabad, but Baltit castle, and the valley (of one of the branches that make up the Indus?). However, these make up everything. Baltit castle was the seat of the Hunza princes, and as a building, as a castle, it is modest enough. It was the location, the setting that will make Baltit castle famous in my mind forever. The castle itself rests on a small mountain. To one side stretches the open valley; you can see a few miles over the valley and to the far mountains. Behind the castle, the mountain drops down a few thousand feet to a distant river below, then straight up again... all the way to about 22,000 feet. The dimensions, the feeling of size, and beauty, and majesty are, I think, unrivaled. There were a few foreign tourists who haggled over the five dollar entrance fee, and who decided to not visit the castle--what a big mistake! It was worth ten dollars, just to be there, and enjoy the views. I will probably never return to that place, but the strong memories will, I hope, stay with me a long time. I hope that you will go to Baltit castle, if that region ever calms down.

Civilization in that valley had been painstakingly assembled, one rock at a time. The buildings, the walls, and especially the irrigation channels had been assembled over a long period of time; one earthquake would have set everything back for years. Irrigation was key, and from a distance, one could see horizontal lines of greenery on the slopes, where the vegetation followed the irrigation channels. Were these channels made or masonry, or were they PVC pipes? I wasn't sure. As in Xin Jiang, poplar trees grew along the pathways. The village seemed quiet.

Near the castle were a few restaurants, where one could eat some Hunza dishes, while hearing the distant sigh of the river far below the castle, and looking up at the range above. I should have stayed longer, but didn't. Next day, I rented another jeep, and went to a town where the trickle of foreigners who passed through Pakistani Kashmir gathered for the last journey, by bus, to the Pakistan-China frontier. I will not bore you with the details: we passed through more rugged land, saw some ibex on a distant peak, and entered China. Earlier, I mentioned China as being a great mansion worthy of much exploration--which it is. It was also a satisfaction to enter by many of the mansion's "doors", and especially the lesser-used ones. The most striking memory of entering the Tashkorgan Tadjik county area was that of the marmots. These rodents look like huge woodchucks; they really are big. On a late-August day, when the air was a bit chill, they sat on the ground next to their holes, sunning themselves, always keeping an eye out for danger from eagles. The scenery on the Chinese side was definitely less majestic than the Pakistani side, although it was rugged. My one regret came on the highway: the bus drove by a few Tadjiks sitting by the side of the road; they were selling carpets. These were the real thing, not the poor imitations found in the bazaar in Urumqi. I should have stopped the bus, rushed out, cash in hand, and cleaned out the whole inventory (three or four pieces by the side of the road) without a moment's hesitation--but I was afraid to try. Well, that fear lost me some real, authentic carpets. As the bus continued on the road to Tashkorgan, I looked out over the mountains at the place where the "finger" of Afghanistan met China. I saw the Tadjik people at work in the fields, scything hay and turning it. The land, as in most of Xin Jiang, is so vast: a person placed in the middle of a hay field, on a tract of land under the aura of the distant mountains, becomes so small, so insignificant. There were many families cutting the hay that late summer day. Tashkorgan was rough but not threatening; the "Stone City" there was not too impressive, as the walls had fallen down into piles of rubble, rubble without mortar. The road on to Kashgar stretched on for a long way, and the climate became warmer, as we gradually came off the high country, followed arrow-straight roads through the semi-desert, and entered a landscape that was definitely "Uighur" in character. What does that mean? The largest of the minority ethnic groups that live in Xin Jiang live in a type of landscape that reflects their culture and their way of life. The Tadjiks lived in a high plateau-like landscape--high and remote. The Uighurs lived in the desert or near it, especially where there was water to irrigate their crops (cotton, melons, and other fruit). The Kazakhs and Mongolians lived in high and mountainous places where they ran their livestock--high pastures in the summer, and sheltered valleys in the winter. The Han and Hui liked the cities. Obviously, this is a generalization, but it paints a broad picture. There is enough landscape and terrain in Xin Jiang to occupy the lifestyles of several ethnic groups.

In Kashgar, I didn't look around or hang out in some "watering hole"--I just wanted to move on, to cover more ground. I had been to Kashgar before, but was not motivated to stay longer... except to buy some of the fresh figs, wrapped in their own leaves, which are very good to eat. I went out of the city by bus to Markit. That night, I had nowhere to stay--or rather, I was not willing to stay in the main hotel of the town. Somehow, I went into some hostel (zhao dai suo) on some dusty street and asked for a room. The boss, a woman, let me in and showed me a small room with no window, no clean air, no toilet, no light, and a rough bed. She gave me a candle. To this day, I wonder if this was a "naughty place", but the boss and her friend were kind to me and said little. The next morning, at a dim hour, I left them--scruffy, unshaved, a little dazed, and dirty--and went on to the bus station. In time, I made my way back up north to Urumqi. When the land is accompanied by mountains or desert features, the size is given a face, a character; when there are no such references, but only a landscape of ancient willows blasted by drought, wind-blown rushes, or just flat expanses of corrugated sand, then the vastness of Xin Jiang conspires against you to dive you crazy.

I said at the beginning of this article that I went through Pakistani Kashmir about ten days before the 9/11 incident. I wonder if I shall ever see that place again, for it was immeasurably lovely to be in, to look at, but above all to think about later. The lands "across the mountains" from Xin Jiang--be they places like Kashmir, or Kyrgyzstan--are like distant cousins, in that they bear a family resemblance, but have their own special flavor. Pakistani Kashmir is probably one of the best places I have ever seen. Perhaps the Pamirs in Tadjikistan will come next, one day?

Old Students.

I need to fill in this half-page, and here is a topic. Although I like my work in China, teaching ESL to college students, and even though I love to travel all over, I must admit that having contact with the old students--at least, some of them--makes life here not a job, not an adventure, but life itself. Over these years I have had more heart-contact with the old students than with any other group. The current students are fun to be with, as new things are met and explored. The local people, especially the "fu wu yuan" form the bread-and butter of my life outside the school I work at, and make me feel part of the scene--even though I know there is often a large wall between us. However, it is the old students who make life worth living. It is really necessary to have someone to talk to, someone who knows you, has a track-record of shared experiences with you, who might care about you, and whose English is usually good enough to carry on a conversation. On those cold and windy nights of the soul, when I am lonely or depressed, I will call an old student. Sometimes they call. One student, Lucy, liked to call me at midnight, ask some arcane grammar question, and then sign off! I remember her fondly for that, as it was a unique way for us to "bond". Sometimes, I wanted to push some development forward, so I would call someone and encourage them in their venture. Sometimes, I just cared about them, or was trying to develop the relationship to a deeper level. A few became, and remained friends: these are the one who I feel have become something more than "yet another student". They keep me alive, in a sense. The wider the cross-section of old students, the better and more varied my social commerce. Current students are so hard to have real, "meaningful" conversations with!

The Copy Shop. There was a copy shop not far from Zhi Da. Being a teacher, I went there frequently. I had absolutely no patience with the official, established system of getting papers copied: that is, you give it to the department secretary one or two days before, and she does it. I wanted full control, so I spent my own money. This attitude surprised the people around me, but as usual, I wanted "results over relationships" (how western of me). I went to the copy shop. In time, a few copies ballooned into hundreds of copies, and the boss asked me whose money it was that was being spent. (Also, I did not want any receipts.) In a short time, we had our own budding friendship, which got better and better.

For a long time, I did not know Ms. Dong's name: she was just "Lao Ban" (Boss). She had a husband who worked with her in the shop, and her father-in-law also helped out. She had graduated from Karamay T.V. University (where I was before), but I forget her major. She was very friendly, and over the three years I was at Zhi Da, we talked about many things. As the copy shop boss, she saw everybody who mattered, as everyone in the academic world needs copying services. I am sure she had a network of contacts within the students, the teachers, and others that would fill a blank poster easily. In terms of her character, she was very direct to me, and gave me her opinions, but she was also discreet. She had to be, as the copy shop was right next to an army base. To be honest, I am honored that I was even allowed to go into that place, have papers copied, and even type out my mid-term and final exam papers. They trusted me, and I honored the favor.

Her store, like so many "mom-and-pop" shops in China, was very small--about 15 feet by 20 feet. In this space were two photo-copier machines, two computers, a laminating machine, and a special printer for printing out large graphics. The scruffy linoleum floor was riddled with the marks of ground-out cigarette butts, the walls were a medium-light green, and had few pictures on them. Through the window, one could see into the army base. I was always afraid of looking that way, but childish "dares" would sometimes get the better of me. The "vestibule" (of a kind) held a phone and some paper-cutting machine. Into and out of this small room passed all the commerce of the neighborhood, its people, its ideas, intrigues, love affairs, all documents and graphics, and whatever people needed to be written up in a hurry. It was more vital than a vital organ; indeed, it was one.

Ms. Dong and her husband worked very hard--in fact, they were some of the hardest-working people I have seen in China (apart from the laborers). They would be typing documents, especially restaurant menus (which the restaurant bosses treated like state secrets), papers for the students, all kinds of reports, and much more. Of course, they also copied every imaginable document. Some people came in and asked for a Herculean feat of typing... all by that afternoon. Some of the customers were really rude, but what could Ms. Dong do? When riled up, however, she could be feisty. One thing that always surprised me was why there was not another, competing, copy shop in the area; after all, this was outside a university. People would come in from Zhi Da, and from other parts. In the "exam season", or at the time the graduating students were doing their graduation papers, the place was unbelievably busy. Yet, they kept at it. Although she had a limiting job, Ms. Dong's intellect was not at all limited, for it ranged everywhere; she was very clever, and could hold a conversation in any domain. She typed like a banshee. She also had good editorial instinct; when my students translated one of my manuscripts into

Chinese, and the time came for her to type it out, she changed the text as she saw fit. No problem. Ms. Dong wasn't "beautiful", but she wasn't "plain"; however, it was her good-natured spirit that made her beautiful inside.

Her husband, Mr. Yu, was also a hard worker. He smoked a lot, like to talk with the customers, and was a bit of a "good ol' boy". One of my enduring recollections of his was when he was using some "voice-recognition" software to type out some Chinese document. He lay on his back on the small sofa which was in their shop, and spoke into the headset microphone, holding the manuscript over his face with his arms stretched out in front of him. He spoke very deliberate, standard "Mandarin" Chinese (Putong Hua). On the computer screen next to him, beautiful Chinese writing appeared and flowed across the screen, as if by magic. Mr. Yu liked to talk, and would always be "schmoozing" with the customers--often to the irritation of Ms. Dong. He too was very friendly to me. In fact, they sometimes invited me to eat their lunch with them.

I was never sure how to deal with this. My stomach always said, "Eat! Eat! Eat!"; my superego said, "Say no!". Their lunch food was cooked in a wok in the vestibule, often by Mr. Yu's mother--stir-fried vegetables, some meat, and steamed buns from a local store. It was simple food--the best. When everything was ready, they would clear off some table and spread out an old newspaper, lay out some tin plates and wooded chopsticks, and eat. Mr. Yu could really pack away the food, yet he had a thin, lean appearance. Ms. Dong had that round face, very slightly large figure, and kind disposition that you would want in your mother... and mother she was.

Their daughter, Liang Liang, was one of the sweetest little girls you could ever hope to see. As a baby, she stayed at home with her grandmother. As toddler, she sat quietly on the bed-like platform, which had a small carpet laid on it, and looked out at the world at her doorstep. I strongly believe that children who grow up surrounded by the trappings of literacy, books, reading and writing, usually grow up to be clever with books and thought. So, I think Liang Liang will grow up to be very clever. Of course, all two-year olds look divinely sweet. She was shy for a long time, but in time, she said a few words to me. Liang Liang was dearly loved by her parents.

Naturally, I talked to Ms. Dong about many things, especially my ongoing quest for a local wife. Like most Chinese, she was willing to give advice in this area. Our conversations spanned three years; they even continued over the years I was elsewhere. Each time I came back to visit my friends in Urumqi, I would make my early social calls to her, and to the boss of the "Sheng Hua" restaurant. In fact, if one examines both women, they have a certain emotional similarity with Susan, my own baby-sitter from long ago in London; they were friendly, kind, and cared enough about me to talk about life and other matters of the passing weeks and months.

I write these things about Ms. Dong, Mr. Yu, and others, because these people represent what I think is best in humanity. When I was in school in England, I had few friends in those boarding schools (for a variety of reasons), but I did make friendships of a kind with the school's service staff. These were the people who I felt cared about me, and so I found them good and safe to be around. Their direct decendants can be found in all the "fu wu yuan", shop owners, hotel service staff, ticket conductors, and the like I made friends with in China. These are the people I like to be with, and Ms. Dong was a superb example of a kind heart--which is all that really matters.

Ms. Dong's father-in-law was the third part of the team. He didn't do any of the writing or composition, but he did almost everything else. He was very good at talking with the customers, and keeping the social harmony of the shop. He was what the Chinese call "Wo hu, cang long", or "Crouching tiger, hidden dragon"--that is, there was a depth to his life experience and abilities that were not readily apparent to the casual visitor. I found out he had served in the army in Qiemo, in southern Xin Jiang, in the 1970's. Even by today's standards, Qiemo is the end of the world and the middle of the desert, so in the 1970's, it must have been a wild and desolate place. It is a place that I would very much like to travel in, using a hired jeep. I did not hear much about Qiemo from him in the copy shop, but I would love to have heard how life was then. Again, in my dreams, or else in a miraculous visit in the future. I think he had an understanding of life that many people today do not have. Perhaps, if I get back to Xin Jiang again, I would like to talk more to him.

Each of these four people--Ms. Dong, Mr. Yu, Liang Liang, and the father-in-law--are interesting people. They form a microcosm of the common citizens and their life. They are my friends, and the next time I get to Xin Jiang, I will be looking for them. I have tried to introduce my most important students to them; this came about because Ms. Dong's Chinese is often very hard for me to understand. At times when she would try to explain important things to me, such as the impracticality of my marriage goals, I would call in a student, most often Joy, and I would get the translation. Otherwise, it went over my head. I am glad that both she and Joy saw fit to tell me these things. Finally, I hope that as time goes by, I hope that I will be able to speak with Liang Liang in English, so that she can grow up with it. However, that is a very big dream.

The Courses. In this section, I wish to talk about the courses I taught at Zhi Da. Obviously, the mainstay was Oral English. We followed various textbooks, which I mixed with my own "homegrown" ESL materials, so as to keep the students interested. The classes were fairly predictable in form: warm-up, textbook work, an oral discussion on some topic, a role play, a "process" to describe, and maybe a "free-talk". To be honest, I feel that these oral English classes were of limited value, as some students were not motivated, and besides, it is harder to teach real, functional English to large groups of people. "Free-talks" are better, but one-to-one, oral talk relationships are better still.

These "free-talks" were held in either my apartment room, or in certain cases, in the student's own classroom: this depended on the school's openness to my having talks with the students. It took many years, but the best way to get the students to talk was to have them get into groups (in my apartment), and let them talk about some topic by themselves; meanwhile, I would take students away one by one into my kitchen, close the door, and have five-minute "mini free-talks" with them. Finding out what works is a constantly evolving affair.

Intensive Reading was another major course, although this one was often also taught by the Chinese teachers. The aim here was to analyze a given text, and explain everything there was to explain about it--I mean, everything. It could be very tedious to do this, but I liked this course a lot. One could be very creative in explaining the text, especially when the Muse was speaking. Some of the assigned texts were abysmal, though; all you could do was plod on.

Then there was Survey of Britain, which included the history; I liked this course, having grown up in England. The Survey of America I was not as familiar with, so I liked it when one of the other foreign teachers taught it. British Literature and American Literature were not taught at Zhi Da (but they were in Beijing).

Listening was one of the freshman / sophomore courses. I do not know why the school asked the foreigners to teach it, but we did. The textbook was fairly good, but the students found the British English very hard to understand.

Then there was writing. Almost all of the foreign teachers hated to teach this course, as they had to correct all those student compositions; they wanted their time spent doing "something else". In contrast, I liked this course, because I liked to plod through the hills of papers, correcting them carefully. As you can see, I like writing, so it figures that I liked to teach the Writing course.

Most of the textbooks were poor in some way, but we got on all right. Some books, like the listening and the writing texts, were good. I think that the whole educational system, with it emphasis on passing exams, getting good grades, and "jumping hoops", was very detrimental to the cause of college education in China. However, the students had no choice, or any escape; the whole system was against them, forcing them to pass exams. Many students would therefore not really learn their major (English), but just pass the exams. Many did all right, but I know that the attrition rate was horrible... that is, after graduation, the English proficiency of many just wilted away. How sad that is....

As a foreign teacher, I liked the ability to work hard, but without the competition. In Beijing, there was more pressure (since it was the capital), but in Zhi Da, "life in the slow lane" with the students was the norm. Sometimes, the school would "ask" me to give a lecture on some aspect of American culture, or to deliver some talk on pedagogy to the Chinese staff; they also asked me to teach evening classes to the staff at the Hong Fu Hotel downtown. For the most part, it was those "one-on-one" times with the students that counted deeply, for there, real English was being spoken, and not something from the un-real world of the textbooks.

The Kazakh Restaurant. Near South Gate (Nan Men), there was a Kazakh restaurant; now, it has moved into the square of Nam Men itself. Here, I wish to talk about this restaurant, Kazakh food, and why I went there.

One major "cuisine" in Xin Jiang is the Uighur cuisine. It is heavy on lamb dishes, noodles, and "nang bing" (like a bagel). The Uighurs are traditionally an agricultural people, Muslim, and are very social. The Kazakhs are also of Muslim background, but they are pastoral, live in the mountains, and are nomadic. Their diet, customs, and language have some similarities with the Uighur, but they are quite different in many ways. Since Xin Jiang is a landscape of deserts and mountains, these two people groups have made the best use of what Xin Jiang gave them.

In terms of diet, the most important food the Kazakhs eat is horse meat. They make "sausages" by stuffing very, very greasy and fatty chunks of horse meat into horse intestines, cooking them up, and keeping them for a long time (it seemed to me). Maybe not. One dish, "na-ryn", was chopped up pieces of horse meat with diced potatoes, hand-pulled noodles, carrots, and served as soup. That was delicious, and was a staple for me each time I came to the restaurant in Nan Men.

Like the Uighurs, they also ate "nang"--a bread that looked like a bagel, but without the hole in the middle. There were lamb kebabs, too. However, the food which I liked was camel's milk.

The Kazakhs and the Mongolians are well-known for their horse's milk, which is very sour, and a little alcoholic. In summer, when the pastures are flush with green grass, camel's milk comes into season. It is sour, but not as sour as the horse's milk is. Yes, it is a bit alcoholic, but I put aside my aversions, for the sake of doing something exotic... and the rewards are worth it! They served it up in beer tankards, a pint of slightly sour camel's milk. This is what made going to this restaurant interesting. However, most people (who were not Kazakh) did not like this food, and wanted to go somewhere else. Either it was too strange for what they considered their "normal" food, or else it was just plain "gross". As a result, I typically went there alone. If I take you out to the Kazakh restaurant in Nan Men, it means that you are extremely important to me. Only one person so far has had that privilege.

As I write this article, three years removed from the time I am describing, it is almost July. I wish I was in Urumqi now, for in one month, the camel's milk will be in season. Going to that restaurant, drinking camel's milk, and eating the pickled vegetables made there, is like returning at an appointed time to see an old friend; what is more, that friend is waiting there and ready to make you happy.

Friends, Betrayal, Attrition, Survivors. Let's talk about some bad things. I used to think that I had many friends in Urumqi (and other places I worked in), but at times I realize this isn't true. These uncomfortable times are a sort of "reality check", to keep me from getting too cocky and proud. I must remember that the students, as well as the ex-students, and certainly the colleagues I work with are not "friends"--they are something else. Yes, there were and still are friends, and they have been good to me, but on many occasions I have discovered that there are limits to what is possible. One must keep one's relationships within limits, let us say. I have had many kinds of "relationships" with different sectors of the Chinese society and these relationships have covered most of the range of human emotions. "If you are willing to dance lightly on the ice, you can go everywhere; however, do not dance to heavily, or you will fall through the ice."

Being an outsider always has its consequences. You have a huge measure of social freedom, but you are also "shut out" of the lives of others: this is a "social contract" that I am content to remain in. As a foreign ESL teacher in China, there are several barriers to deal with: age, race, nationality, sex, opinions, the current "prejuge du jour", status (teacher vs. student), behavior, perceptions, and so on. One is never sure of just how strong one's "friendships" are. At times, I have felt cared for; at others, I feel a dog. As a result, I poured my dark feelings into a manuscript that will not be published, for it is not suitable for that. It was called "The Cynic's Guide To Living In The P.R.C.". Yet again, some people have been good to me, but I always remember I am living on thin ice.

There have been betrayals, insignificant, minor, more serious, and so far, no major ones. I feel like I enjoy "dog status" in this life as an ESL teacher. Some friends are not friends; they are something else--or less. Some people are good to be with, but they will not own up to being associated with you in public; for them, to be associated with a foreigner is a thing of shame, of suspicion,

of perverted loyalties. I have a good friend who I have known for years and years; yet, she once told me she was ashamed of being seen in public with me because I was a foreigner. I can choose to be hurt and resentful, or I can accept her for what she is, and enjoy the 75% of the relationship that is unaffected by her attitudes: I chose the latter. Other cases are more vague and "blurred". I have often had students who are the usually obedient and compliant students one hopes for in a class; however, when it suits them, they do not show up for a meeting, or "blow me off" in some other way. I suspect that for them, this behavior is normal; after all, "guan xi" (relationship / social capital) with this foreign teacher is not that valuable a commodity (if it were their boss, it would be a different story). In some cultures, a person's "word" is something immutable; here, one is always evaluated for one's "social capital" worth, and if one falls below the bar, then one is not worth being known. Period. Of course, there is a lot of politeness in Asia, as well as hospitality, but under it all lie the demands of "guan xi" (relationship). What I might see as "betrayal" is for them a "market decision".

I could say that I was betrayed by foreigners, but I will leave that for another article, if I do that. However, I will say this: the foreigners, by necessity, "stand together, or hang together", but there are certainly instances of those foreigners who do not "fit in" being purged out. For the most part, I did not make my "social capital" base among the other foreigners, as I did not want to become beholden to them in any way, and because I did not want to fit in, or felt I did not fit in (a vicious circle, here). Here is an idea: if you want to protect yourself from social isolation, then have many "circles of friends", but each "circle" is relatively small, and the members of one circle do not know the members of the other circles. In other words, you must ruthlessly "hermetically compartmentalize" your social world, so as to stay afloat.

Betrayal was not really a serious problem (in a sense, I expect this behavior from the outset). The more serious problem was that of "attrition". By attrition, I mean the constant, steady erosion of one's "social sand castle" by the waves of life. You move on in life, your students get married, or are married off, they leave for a distant city. The teaching contract lasts only one year, and the "seeds of relationship" dry up and die. The students at your school (as in Beng Bu and Beijing) come from all over the country, and after graduation, they vaporize away. Some (like in Tianjin, Taiyuan, and Karamay) fade away in time; you lose interest, and so do they. (After all, you were no more than "a foreign teacher".) However, it was these students in Urumqi Vocational University that, on the whole, lasted longer than all the others. Why? First, we were together for three years. Second, almost all of them came from Xin Jiang, and not other places; they were local. Third, many of them got jobs in and around Urumqi, so they remained "stable". Fourth, I must admit that we were acquainted with each other by destiny (I mean this), we mostly enjoyed each other's company, and wanted some real relationship--not all, but enough. Attrition is a fact of life in this profession. Does one bemoan all the skin cells that slough off every day, never to be known again? No. As my mother said, if you can have three or four really good friends for life, you are lucky. I have four "sisters", quite a few good friends (all old students), and many interesting contacts from many walks of life. I should consider myself blessed.

This brings me to the issue of the "survivors". I still do not know what makes a friendship last, and last, and last, every year.

Why is Valerie my best friend, year after year after year? Will Vicky persist, given her new life? How will Fanny fare? What maintains Lily and Hobson? Why are most, if not all of the students called Joy happy to talk on the phone, after a period of silence? I do not know what to say. Perhaps I should not question this, but rather accept it as food from heaven to be enjoyed. Like many other things, one's friendships have a "life-cycle", and this should be accepted. I only hope that in years to come, there will be other new friends, and the old ones will persist and get better and better.

The "Stray Dogs". My students would be infuriated by my calling them "dogs", but that is not my intent. I am referring to those students in a class who are detached from the group, for social reasons (not fitting in), or academic reasons (need tutoring help). They are like "lost sheep". Any way, there were times when a student would come to me and ask for help, usually in their English (although sometimes, it was about social problems, such as other classmates or boyfriends). It was necessary to watch out for "love-struck" students: almost every year, there was a girl who wanted to follow me (into life together, or out of China; who knows?). Those connections could be dangerous. In this article, I will talk about Connie, Rachel, and Amy. All were "stray dogs", or "lost sheep" for a season.

Connie was pretty, but she had low confidence in her language abilities. Most students plead this malady, but hers was extreme. She was not confident in her ability to say what she wanted to say. She wanted to do something about this, so we met in some classroom after class and had one-to-one tutorials. It reminded me of the time I worked with L.D. teenagers in the USA. (In some ways, the Chinese college ESL students are very similar to the US teenage L.D. students, in terms of language acquisition and certain difficulties.) We would review the class materials, have "free-talks", and preview materials. I think she really wanted the attention of a one-on-one tutorial, which built up her confidence-level. She was very afraid of having her classmates know we were having these tutorials, as "saving face" was of utmost importance to her. We were together for a few months, I think, and then she disappeared into the forest of her classmates (which is the way it should be). I hear she got married: her husband is a lucky man. In fact, the husbands of all the girls in that class were lucky, the luckiest in Xin Jiang.

Rachel was different. She was not good in her English, it is true, but she also had trouble in terms of her social life, as well as her motivation to continue in the college program. I do not know what happened to her in the end, but her class split up a year or so after I left, and many students went to other schools, or maybe went into work. I do not know what happened to Rachel. It was hard to keep her motivated. Sometimes, we reviewed material (usually from the oral English textbook), and sometimes, we had "free-talk". (Most students like to have "free-talk"--especially instead of class work.) I am not certain what it was she wanted. Was it to improve her English? Was it to know how to handle the problems outside class she was facing? Or was it something else? I do not know.

Amy came too, but I am unsure what she wanted. We met a few times. I often encouraged her in her direction. Later on, when she had a part-time job teaching weekend English classes to little children, she invited me to come over and interact with the children. This sort of activity I always liked doing, as it showed me a different side of "English Education in China", and besides, I liked

to be with them, as they were very innocent; it was a pleasure to get away from the cheating, cynical, competitive world for a while. Also, it was a chance to see Amy (I was an admirer, and her whole class knew it). Anyway, she was a good teacher, and had that "je ne sais quois" which any effective teacher working with young children needs; she had it in good measure. She turned out all right.

I will share a story about Amy, as a footnote to this matter. A few years later, I was in Urumqi visiting my old Zhi Da students. (At that time, I was working in Beijing.) I wanted to see her, so I called. Was she available? No clear answer.... After a few minutes of this sort of dialogue, I said, "I want to see you now!". So she agreed. It was eight or nine in the evening, and dark. We met at the gate of the Botanical Gardens; I arrived by taxi, and there, in the glare of the taxi's lights, I could see her waiting for me. She was immutable beauty personified. We walked into the park to have a walk. Lest you think this very strange (it was), there were many other couples walking around the park--in the dark! We talked about various things, and then realized that we were lost. After tracing and retracing our steps to no avail, we found some park workers who told us how to get out... and we did. We split and went home. That was a crazy thing to do, and I am surprised she went along with it. Now, she is married, and I suspect she will amuse her (future) children with that story for years to come.

I am not certain why these "encounters" happened with Connie, Rachel, and Amy. They had some things in common. All did not want me to tell their classmates about it. They wanted something, but that "something" was not always apparent. They moved on; the times we spent together in the classroom having one-on-one tutorials were not discussed again. It has been a number of years since these events; I was afraid to write about them, for "disclosure" reasons, but now, in this private "writing-room" back home, I feel able to write about them, and indeed about many of the characters and personalities I met during those three years in Urumqi. Once they are "on paper", the job will have been done.

There was one more student like the three already mentioned. Mary often came to me to bemoan her "poor English", so in time, we spent some time working on it. However, in her case, we did not have the tutorials: it was more a case of support, encouragement, a form of sponsoring, of long-distance telephone calls, of wires, of more encouragement through an intermediary (Vicky), and follow-up visits or more calls. I do not know what will happen to Mary, as her English needs much improvement, but her determination to succeed is strong, and I feel she will do all right in her own way. She has spent her time "in the trenches" of life, and this will make her a better, more humane teacher as a result.

In summary, the "stray dogs" were a small but important part of my life as an ESL teacher in China. If life were all classroom teaching, it would become boring and restrictive. I admit that I often went beyond the bounds of socially safe behavior in my work (as with Amy), but I did nothing very bad. I just broke the commonly expected rules of social conduct. This is one of the reasons why I so like teaching and living in China: you have such social freedoms as could not even be imagined at home here. The "stray dogs", and many others, made my life interesting and happy, and for me, the total enjoyment of my job is a very important reason for doing anything in the work-world. Thinking back on them, I am happy in my personal recollections, and I wish them a very good future.

My Crazy Apartment. This article is about the various ideas and innovations I put into my apartment. I have always liked to "invent" different things, and having a place of my own (sort of) has been good in that I can put the ideas into practice. At the outset, I must say that all of the six universities that hired me in China gave me good apartments: for me, "good" means a lock on the door, a fully operational shower, a phone, and being left alone by the university administration. Some apartments were a bit run down, and many of them looked out over dismal sights (dismal, that is, if you do not like the soot-smudged landscapes of urban China, which I like a lot). I will talk about these things later on somewhere. For me, having a place where I could try out some "crazy ideas" (and I have many of those) was a blessing. The administration left me alone, the students thought I was a bit crazy, and the workers who furnished the raw materials... well, who knows.

At the center of these inventions was the desire to save water. In China, water saving is vital, but there are many signs of neglect. In the public toilets, water flushes every ten minutes, even if there is nothing to flush. Many water fixtures are leaky, the pipes are rusty, and the general mindset is not sufficiently concerned with saving water. This is especially true in a dry place like Xin Jiang. In the apartment, the toilet was often broken; usually, the water would leak around the "flap-valve" at the bottom of the reservoir. Drip, drip, drip... it drove me crazy, so I turned off the water supply. For months at a time, I would not pull the chain. Instead, I carefully collected up my "grey water"--from washing my hands, washing the clothes, mopping the floor, and put it into red plastic buckets. When I had to "flush", I used this water. Perhaps it smelled terribly, but since I cannot smell, it did not matter; the students never seemed to complain of the smell!

I would also collect the shower water. I would stand in a "baby-washing bath-tub", with two shower-curtains hanging around me (the shower curtains were stapled together into a "cylinder" of about two feet diameter). In this way, all the shower water was collected into the small "baby-washing bath-tub". In China, there are no "shower stalls", and the water just falls onto the tiled floor, and goes into a floor-drain. It was all very much like camping, and had that "edge-of-civilization" feel to it.

Sometimes, the water supply to the apartment would be cut off, and there would be no clean water. I needed an "emergency supply". To solve this problem, I gathered up about six more buckets, and filled them with clean, fresh water, put the lids on the buckets, and stored them in every available space in the bathroom (remember, Chinese bathrooms are very small, as space is at a premium). There they would sit for months, sometimes a year or two, developing their own unique "bouquet". Although the water supply did fail for various reasons, I usually had enough "grey water" to survive the crisis; this meant that the clean water reserve just sat, and sat, and sat.

Next came the water tower. As I lived on the third floor, the water pressure was not very good. (However, the security of being higher up more than compensated for this.) I had a local welder make up a water tower, so that a bucket could be perched in the air about five feet off the ground. Siphons were used to bring the water down, but this wasn't perfect. In the end, I bought a five-gallon tea urn (such as restaurants use for their tea), and put it on the stand. Such urns came with a small "tap" on their bottom. These urns gave me a shower, but the pressure was not so good, and the water went fast.

I actually did not use it very much, but the act, the process of making something unusual and new was exciting to me. I suspect that when I had the white-painted water tower brought down the street from the welder's and into the campus of Zhi Da, many people must have thought it strange. So what.... Managing water, or security, or some other mind-game kept life there interesting. It gave me a sense of control in life. It is this desire, the desire to manage and have control over a small corner of the world, which drove me onwards to buying and developing a small-holding / homestead in Maine a few years later. Otherwise, life became too much "under external control".

Next came the "wire". I liked to listen to VOA and BBC, but the radio's antenna was insufficient. The VOA suggests attaching a short length of wire to the antenna to improve reception; I added up to 100 feet of wire! Not able to run a wire across the compound (four storeys up), I ran the wire back and forth, back and forth between the opposite ends of the device hanging from the roof of the balcony used to dry the laundry. This "wire" made for good reception--usually. I often liked to show it to the students; however, I do not know how many of them actually went out and copied it. In most of the schools I worked in, I bought coils of thin, insulated copper wire, and cut it up into ten-foot lengths, wound them up, and gave them to many students. I can remember doing this with one of the "concierge" ladies in the Tianjin school, working and talking in basic Chinese for some time. I hope this idea caught on.

Then there was the "phone-switch". I added an electrical switch to the phone line, so that I could cut myself off from the world if I wanted. This was much better, I feel, than just taking the phone off the receiver. It probably drove my students, boss and family crazy.

The "fire-bucket" was another. I got a large instant coffee can, broke some holes into it, and had a small bucket to burn small bits of paper in. I took concepts such as "security" and "field-craft" to paranoid lengths, as I did not want the boss or anyone else to look at certain letters or papers I had. I would open the window, light a match, and burn the paper. The Chinese often write their receipts on wafer-thin slips of paper, and this is perfect for burning. If the paper was small enough, I would light it, hold it high, and let it fall slowly down to the ground; if it fell right, it was totally consumed by the time it hit the floor. When I was in Taiyuan, I would pay occasional visits to the central coal-fired heating plant, and quietly throw a bundle of my papers into the sullen, wrathful flames. Again, it was a game that I took very seriously.

On one occasion, I filled a plastic bucket with water, suspended a cloth halfway down, and dropped weighted firecrackers into the water, so as to watch them explode underwater. That was juvenile, adolescent fun. One many other occasions, I would run a long plastic tube into the air-shaft that ran up the entire building from toilet to toilet, and I listened to the many sounds of the building. That was certainly very interesting, both for the content, and for the fear, the suspense and the promise of something engaging.

There were probably other things that I developed or "half-invented", but I cannot remember them. They all served the function of keeping life interesting. "All teaching, and no play makes me a dull boy." Very few other people were interested in what I was doing, and they probably felt I was stupid, but I did not do this for them. As is the case with much of China, I enjoyed the relative freedom to be myself, try out new ideas, and to have a good time. However, when I left things in the trash bin, they were always taken away quickly.

On The Many "Fu Wu Yuan" I Knew. A "fu wu yuan", in the broad sense of the word, is a service-person. They can be in hotels, restaurants, trains, buses, telephone kiosks, and other such places. In the years I spent in China, I made many friends with "fu wu yuan" and enjoyed these contacts.

Why make friends with such people? It all began in boarding school in England, in the 1970's. I had few friends, as I was so strange to others, as well as anti-social. I found solace in the fleeting, short-term relationships I had with the service people I knew there: Millie, the domestic; Mrs. Legg, the nurse; Frank, the janitor; Mr. and Mrs. Stone, the cooks; Jeff, the carpenter; Mrs. Batchelor, the laundry-woman; and some others who I hope to see again. These people were usually not academic, they had lots of world-knowledge, and most of all, they were kind; unlike my peers or the teachers or the leaders, they would not hurt me. Therefore, I made friends with them. The "descendents", shall we say, of these people in England were the "fu wu yuan" I met in China.

I strongly suspect that many "fu wu yuan" are very clever--not just clever in the sense of "street-smarts", but intellectually clever. However, as they failed some exam in their past, they were ejected from the scholastic system and refused the way upwards. They did not make it into the next tier of education, and had to find a job. China is awash in cashiered talent. I suspect that many "fu wu yuan" are very frustrated. In my dreams, my perfect girlfriend is a super-intelligent, kind, and versatile "fu wu yuan", willing to go with me around the "Third World" and do interesting work. Of course, she is Chinese. Anyways... many "fu wu yuan" have to remain in their work for a long time, perhaps for all their life.

In terms of learning "street Chinese" the "fu wu yuan" were perfect, as most could not speak any English. The students were not good as Chinese language partners (for me, that is), as they were demanding in terms of the Chinese they wanted from me, and some of them really wanted to speak English! The "fu wu yuan" were short-term contacts, and they were tied to some desk, which meant I could see them briefly as I wanted, and they could not follow me down the street. These people often spoke heavily-accented, "local dialect" Chinese, which made communication interesting--and sometimes almost impossible. They were friendly, especially the ones I visited to shop at regular times, and made life more interesting.

The down-trodden, the humble, the people who are low in the eyes of the general society are sometimes passed over by others, but they have their own interest. Perhaps I was no more than yet another passing foreigner in their eyes, but they were kind in their own way, and some tried to help me. Who were they? The staff at the "Blue Door" dumpling restaurant, and Ms. Liu in Tianjin; Ms. Yang in Taiyuan; Ms. Li, the bosses of the "Flying Dragon" restaurant, David's mother, and perhaps a few others in Karamay; the bosses of the "Sheng Hua" restaurant, the bosses of the public toilet, and many others in Urumqi; the staff on the first floor of the "Liu Xue Sheng" building, the staff of the "Yang Yang" restaurant, the fruit lady, and many, many others in Beijing. These people are the ones who make China immortal and illustrious. When traveling, there were the telephone kiosk ladies, who were very comforting when travel became tiresome and lonely. The train conductors were always noteworthy, and often interesting: some of them were very intelligent. I had more talks of interest from those train people than I can remember: together, the many fragments of experience make up a rich, pleasant tapestry for me.

It has been a long time since I saw Ms. Liu. She was the first of the Chinese "fu wu yuan" that I made friends with. Since she was one of the ladies in charge of the foreigner's dormitory at Tianjin Normal University, she had much contact with the foreign teachers and "Liu Xue Sheng" (visiting, foreign students). She sat in the small, glassed-in space for much of the day, just like a country girl working as a concierge in a mildly seedy apartment building in Paris. Often, she knit, or else engaged passers by in conversation. If a phone message came through for the tenants in the upper floor, she would shout up the stairwell in her half-whine, half-commanding voice. If ever a voice makes me think of turpentine, it is hers. "Fourth floor, Mr. Wang, telephone!" Up above, the call would go out, and in a minute, a Mr. Wang would come to the glass-box cubicle.... Ms. Liu had a somewhat sly demeanor, but she was friendly. I suppose if she felt that communication was going to be better than "transitory", then she woke up and ran with it. As in any country, people do not treat the "fu wu yuan" with much respect. In time, she allowed me to come into the glass-box cubicle, and we talked. There was a miniscule space behind the cubicle, where she had a bed, and a space for basic cooking. We talked about many things, topics that have now passed away from recollection, like the ten-foot lengths of antenna wire that we assembled for the students (what transitory souvenirs!), leaving the essence of our time together, if not the substance. Once, she invited me to her home (or an aunt's home), and they cooked up dinner. She was kind and the relationship was uncomplicated, the way the ice on a pond is kind and uncomplicated--as long as you do not walk onto the thin parts. I do not know where she is, or what she is doing. All I can see now is her short hair, and the knitting needles, always making up something.

Ms. Li, who was one of the shop-keepers at Karamay "Dian Da" (the T.V. University), had a small shop on the campus. Like most of the others, it was stocked with the usual items for students and staff who did not want to walk into town to the department store. The building was some one-floor structure (a rail car that wanted to be a small store, or just a run-down, stretched-out shed that was painted up and stuffed with groceries), a place that quaked when the fierce winds blew. Both Ms. Li and her husband worked there, but most of the memories are of her. She appeared about 55 years old, although in Xin Jiang one could not always tell. (In Xin Jiang, the Uighur girls are divinely beautiful at 20, but by 35 and 40, many have become withered in face and plump in body due to the effects of lamb fat, being shut up, and having nowhere to go. Rare it is to find a perennially-beautiful Uighur woman.) Ms. Li was Han (whose members tend to "age" better than the Uighurs, but not as well as the Hui); however, she had seen much sorrow in her life. I do not know what it was, but the stamp of hardship was written on her face. She was not a pessimist--not at all--and she was kind to all, a sort of "aunt away from home" to the students, and a source of news to those who came into the shop (good news, not gossip). As there was a public telephone in her shop, she knew the pulse of the whole neighborhood, just by being near the phone. This then, is one of the sources of power of every "fu wu yuan". Businessmen, students, sweethearts talking to their true love in the opposite corner of the country, college administrators, and me too... she saw, heard, and felt them all. She had a huge store of empathy to all. Although she could not understand the words of what I spoke to my students, flung all over the country, she understood everything, as she knew the universal language of feelings and voice.

I do not know how to describe her appearance, in the manner of Dickens or of Balzac, so I won't; besides, it has been a long time. "The aroma has gone, but the essence remains", like Mrs. Flower's butter-cookies. I remember her, not only in terms of appearance (which is there, in my mind), but in terms of her effect, her contribution to the psychology of others, and in terms of her place in the "big order of things". This woman ran a store, one of five or six on the campus, an oubliette among an uncountable constellation of oubliettes, in a wind-pounded, dust-scourged landscape, in the northwestern corner of a huge, faraway place called China. She was beautiful in soul beyond all manner of description, because she was kind. Beauty does not have to be mere "prettiness", it seems. In time, I would talk to her about things close to my heart (usually the "flamme du jour" I was going through on the telephone), and she was kind. Yes, kind, kind, kind... this is the lasting trait that sets the "fu wu yuan" apart from so many of the others. This then, is Ms. Li's legacy: of all the people I would visit upon a return to Karamay, she would be one of the few I would seek out and greet; in my comet-like wanderings in Asia, she would be one of the few people I would be happy to see. Only two other people in Karamay--and they were also "fu wu yuan". It has been some years since I was last in Karamay. After so much high-quality "Muse inspiration" and life experience, I have stayed away from the place. However, I went once or twice, and I saw her. I hope she knows that her kindness, her very essence, of what, and where she is... these things draw me back. In true fashion, I would come into town on a grey evening, when the streets were restless with desert dust, the light fading, the poorly-silhouetted building even more poorly silhouetted, most people marking me for a stranger, holding my breath as I walked resolutely past the security checkpoint and hoping that the night-watchman would not question me, and I would walk right up to her shop and go in. What a home-coming, and to what a person.

The next group of "fu wu yuan" came from both Karamay and Urumqi, and they were both "public toilet janitors". I did not talk too much to the "fu wu yuan" in the Karamay toilet, as I was partly anti-social, partly because I felt I had to say something on each visit, but she was a fixture in my mind. She was certainly not an unfriendly person, but a familiar face. With the Urumqi pair (husband and wife, I think), the situation was different. I would often talk to them, and as their public toilet was on Xing Fu Road, and hence the start of my "trap-line", I would go there often. We exchanged news and the small things of conversation ("bavardage", might I say?), and the initial politeness in time became the wanderer's friendship. I never knew their names, or their backgrounds. In fact, it is important to say that the people I know, or remember, I know not "by face", but "by place". If I encounter someone I see often, but on the street, in another setting, I might pass them by, as they are "out of context", so to speak. All I remember of them was two people, a man and his wife, sitting behind the glass, folding up the pink sheets of coarse toilet paper (soft enough to catch water; hard enough to strip paint off the concrete); I see yet another public telephone balanced on the thin shelf, and the waiting toilets to either side. I went left, into the delightful, dank, and dripping world of the men's toilet, where a man could be left alone to escape the dust outside, and commune with himself, far away from anything noxious outside. There was a sort of unspoken pact between the users of that toilet to leave each other alone. The dripping water-drops, and the rush of the flush-water every ten minutes kept time in this refuge, and sanctuary.

Very few people washed their hands; they just came in and immersed themselves in the "quiet zone". Why is it that, of all the places to be in this land, the men's toilet is one of the last psychological refuges left to hide in? The pressure of modern life is often so unbearable, and the long arm of "society" and "community" reach out in every direction. If you, the reader, will permit me yet another side-step, here is a story. I was in Aomori, in northern Honshu, in Japan. I was with Teacher Kato at a hot springs spa. The men and the women went into their separate changing rooms. In the men's room, the atmosphere was oppressive with depression, weariness, and weighted-down souls. The men went on into the open "swimming pool", which was fed with real, hot, thermal-spring water. All the men were terribly depressed and quiet. There was a wall separating the two sexes, but it did not reach to the top; over this wall came the joyful shrieks and laughter of (it seemed) every woman in Aomori! How different are the sexes.... Anyway, back to Urumqi. When I came back to Zhi Da for a new job interview, I stopped by in the public toilet. The man and his wife were still there, and they remembered me... after three years away from the place, with only sporadic visits in between. Their recollection, and the short talks we had, all had an effect on me. If I am bale to get the next job, I will look for them, and talk about common things, for I an happy there.

Finally, I wish to discuss the train "fu wu yuan". These are the conductors, the staff who are responsible for the sleeping cars, and those who walk up and down the trains (and the platforms of the stations I pass through) pushing small hand-carts. One can judge the greatness of a country by the quality of its rail service, and those who operate it; looked at this way, the Chinese rail network is truly a great thing of power, practical beauty, and national dignity. I did not talk with every "fu wu yuan" I saw on the train, but occasionally we fell into conversation. They were hard, hard workers, even if one could see them sitting in their cubicles (such small things!) for hours on end, as they had to hustle, and hustle hard when their services were needed. They were very much emblems of the greatness of China--hard-working, very dignified, "people-oriented", servants to the core (although some of them were fire-eaters, to be sure). On the long-distance trains, and especially in the "hard-sleep" cars, one could see, feel, experience the pulse of society. The open, triple-deck bunk-house feel of the place, with the landscape rushing by at a pleasantly modest speed outside, was the ultimate "people-watching", "society-gauging" environment, a sociologist's dream on wheels. The train "fu wu yuan" made it all the more colorful. Some spoke in the official "Mandarin" Chinese; others, especially the food-trolley ladies, had heavy accents. Up and down the train they passed, half-singing, half-saying their melodic sales-pitches. "Beer, liquor, sunflower seeds, cigarettes, water, fruit! Buy beer, liquor, sunflower seeds, cigarettes, water, fruit!" The passengers obliged them, consuming goods with the intensity of combusting magnesium in a dark cave. They also read, and bought all manner of reading material, at a prodigious rate: no wonder the literacy rate is so high in China. The "fu wu yuan" on the trains were more often observed, than spoken to. Every so often, there would be a conversation, but the transient nature of our encounter, and the bounds of decorum in a room full of strangers, made real talks hard. However, we communicated by being ourselves, rather than by talking at great length to each other directly. Out of all those encounters has come a larger picture of understanding, as the fragments came together into a picture, later.

There are no more "fu wu yuan" character sketches / descriptions (at least, for now). The global impression is all that matters. The "fu wu yuan" make the country work, they keep everything in order, they are as full of the essence of China as a truffle is to Perigord, and they have captured my imagination as no other social group in the whole country. Is it the raw, natural dignity of their calling, the frequent hardship of their work, the long hours, which together turn them into rugged individual characters, and at the same time, emblems of a nation and symbols of "bedrock people", the "salt of the earth". They are also a paradox to me. Many is the time I wanted to marry one, but everyone I knew, from students, to fellow teachers, to many strangers met on those long journeys... all of them told me not to try it. Perhaps the "cultural divide" was too great. I write this article as a monument to every "fu wu yuan" in China, and to their predecessors on England, a prototype of what I have found to be beautiful in human personality. I think all this comes from a story I read about in a book of African explorers of the 19th Century: some Englishman was traveling in Ottoman Bulgaria, and he came to a slave market. There was a woman there for sale, who he paid for, and she later became his wife. Later on, they traveled in Africa. I think all that happened was honorable, and certainly very romantic. It is stories like this which lie dormant in the brain for years, awaiting the right time and the right "rainfall" to come to life as something else, something indescribably beautiful and hoped-for. Anyways, the ultimate "fu wu yuan" has not showed up, and maybe she will not, but every time I see a "fu wu yuan" doing her work, I feel happy. Kindness once shared and experienced, should never be forgotten.

On Lucy and Lily. Here is another "double character-sketch". In Zhi Da, in the class of 9601, there were two admirable women (among a class filled to capacity with admirable women). Lucy and Lily were classmates, they actually got their first job out of college in the same middle / high school, they knew many of the same people, yet their characters and aspirations were different. Both were very intelligent. I still keep in contact with them from time to time, and they are certainly in the "core-group" of Urumqi friends.

Lucy came from Shihezi, somewhere west of Urumqi and a "nowhere-ville" to me, until I associated her with it. When I think of Lucy, I think of huge intelligence, an aspiration to better herself (yet not tainted by the darkness of "social climbing"), and a ferociously latent nationalism and sometime shrewdness which would sometimes come out under certain circumstances. It is these last two points that stick most in my recollections of Lucy. Make no mistake: I often thought she was an 80% perfect woman and someone to be actively admired; yet, I hesitated in caution. What was it? Am I afraid to call her "sly"? No, I cannot (quite) use that word; still, I knew she had it in her to "pull the rug" from out under me, when it suited her. Again, the lesson from that Irish play, "Translations": the friends of the crisis-moment, the beer-drinking buddies of an evening's chance encounter, became the hardened killers at the end of the play, when the lights went out; the innate, latent character came out ("Murder will out."). Lucy was one of these people, an emblem I have seen many, many times over the years. Yet, I admire her deeply, and really do like her. This is the price I pay for the life of picking meat from the teeth of river crocodiles. It is a symbiotic relationship, which both parties benefit from, but in the interests of self-preservation, everyone likes others cautiously.

Lucy had a delightful habit: after she had graduated and was working in No. 6 Middle School, she would often call me up at a very late hour and ask me to explain some grammar question; usually, this question would have to be solved in the next day's class. (My students were often like that, dealing with issues right before they were needed.) After getting the answer from me, she would sign off, saying, "Thank you!". Then I would be left to go back to bed, by now stranded on the shore of sleep, as the dreams, like a fast-receding tide, were flowing away from me. Lucy did this quite a bit, and it became her signature behavior; for this, I remember her with much affection.

In time, Lucy moved on from the school she worked in and into graduate school, as she wanted to study Linguistics. She went to Xin Jiang Normal University. All of her classmates and department-mates were very proud of her. Now, she is just past the half-way mark. I hope she does well in school, and links up with her boyfriend in time. I write all these things, as over the years in China a number of ex-students have caught my attention and imagination; they go on to greater and higher things, and it is a pleasure to see them do well. In Lucy's case, she is aiming very high, so the stakes are high.

Her classmate was Lily. I remember her for one reason: she married her classmate, Hobson. In China, it is very, very rare for classmates to marry; it is not like the U.S., where a large percentage of couples once were classmates. Lily was shorter than Lucy, had very endearing eyes, and sometimes liked to wear conservative but modern clothing. Lily understood well the need for schoolteachers to dress professionally--that is, to project competence and power. Her "incubation" period with Hobson went on for a long time, so that when they got their marriage papers from the government, their characters were well and truly fused together. They acquired their own apartment, and it was to this place that I came when I visited Urumqi on business: this got their classmates a little bit jealous. The need to be an effective teacher made Lily's English level improve a lot; this was useful, since her school was one of Urumqi's better places to send your child.

I must admit that when I was teaching 9601 their classes, I had little to do with Lily and Hobson. The only thing I remember was a barbeque party, where the conversation was convivial (graduation was fast approaching), and the lamb kebabs were revolting to look at (hey, it was a student fling in a run-down seasonal apartment, after all). Then, somehow, one day, I made contact. I taught at No. 6 Middle School as a guest speaker one day, and from then on I saw more of Lucy, Lily, and Hobson. By the time I was staying in their apartment, the contact was firmly established. We would sometimes watch DVD's which Hobson had found; these helped their English. From time to time, we would all get together at some restaurant with a few other classmates (Sarah, Joy, Angel, Christina, and others), and hang out together. Perhaps in time, I will hear they have a child, and watch it, and them continue to change and develop over the years.

Perhaps as you read this, you think this is very mundane, the stuff of everyday existence everyone goes through. Yes, it is. Over the years, I have steadfastly avoided participating in the round of life as the majority of people live it. In Urumqi, I began to look at and enter into a sort of community (albeit, rather partially and slowly). My students, people like Lucy, Lily, Hobson, and others too, they all helped me to want to belong to a set of people, a society in miniature. Due to them, I hope to remain in Urumqi a long time.

Evaporating Xin Jiang. (A retrospective piece, written for Emma, who wanted to give it to someone else.)

When I was young I would stare at maps for hours, again and again. In an unsteady childhood when all I wanted to do was look out on life from under the shade of the cork tree--rather than participate in it--maps were at once a place of solace, a constant friend, and a springboard for dreams. Three places stood out--Chile in South America, the peninsula of Kamchatka, and Xin Jiang. What did they have in common, those blobs and streaks of color on the map? Quite simple--they were the end of the world for me. I have not been to Chile or Kamchatka yet but hope to at some future point. I have been in Xin Jiang now for three years. Fourteen years or more ago, it was an "empty spot" on the map (and it is often those"empty spots" with no place-names inked in that draw outsiders), a place of mountains surrounding enormous desert basins, where rivers rushed out onto the sands and disappeared in a diminishing flow of dotted blue lines. It was as far from global mainstream life as I could hope to get.

The dream died in 1987, when I convinced myself I shouldn't go there. Seven years later I made it to Anhui Province in eastern China, the dream took fire again, spread to two years in "Nei Di" (in Tianjin and Taiyuan), then came to Karamay, then Urumqi. I have now been here in Xin Jiang for thirty-six or so months.

Would that they were thirty-six years....

I am a ferociously addicted road traveler. During the term time, I teach English to my students, giving them language and a teacher's devotion--as would any teacher here--but during the holidays I divorce everybody and almost everything and take to the road. I have wandered over ninety percent of Xin Jiang's main roads, and indeed this land is a land where the dream IS real--big mountains, roads stretching their way through immeasurable deserts and semi-deserts, and long, broad valleys framed in steep-sloping hills clad in pine forests. How can Xin Jiang, three times the size of France, be described as anything but majestic?

Yet for all this, Xin Jiang is evaporating.

Have you seen the film, "Dances With Wolves"? Why did that man choose an outpost like the Dakotas, mid-1860's, for his place of service? What was it he came out to see, to feel, to breathe? Was it "civilized society"? No, that was in Philadelphia and Augusta. Was it the might of a nation? Those things could be found in the steel-mills of Pittsburgh and Harrisburg. Then what did he look for? What did he hope to find? I think he went there to see a place in its native beauty, before the march of time changed its face forever.

Like Yunnan Province, Xin Jiang is a regional center of potential, a springboard from which China reaches out to its neighbors, and beyond them to other trading partners. It is a major crossroads of culture, international exchange, and the formative trends of the 21st Century. This makes Xin Jiang a very interesting--indeed, intriguing--place to be. Writ large and clearly among the seemingly nondescript industrial / commercial landscape of parts of Urumqi is the story of development, and the aspirations it embodies. "Develop the northwest!" has captured the imagination of multitudes, and it appears to be an inevitable trend, the work of perhaps thirty or forty years of energetic work to go, the march of time.

All over the city of Urumqi the comedy of life is played out: hotels, billboards, Internet bars, migrant workers, roads, cement trucks, interior decorators, DVD's, vegetable vendors, along the roadway like seaweed strewn along the high-water mark, massage parlors

by the thousand, coal heat becoming gas heat but roast mutton remaining roast mutton, night markets packed out to capacity like a rock star's visit to a stadium but the stadium itself a heap of rubble and a haunt of brick or "re-bar" scavengers and awaiting its reincarnation as a high-rise complex (exactly what, I don't know), traffic filling the streets to bursting point, school kids washing the road barriers in spring, fish-kettle restaurants, seasonal laborers like seasonal starlings perched on a roadway bridge, an old woman selling tea-eggs outside a college gate, and more, more, much more....

Why did I come here? That, as my students say, is a "complex" question. Yes, I like very much to be with my students, and spend various blocks of time with them over much of the work-week. They give me immense amounts of satisfaction--I like to spend some of my evenings talking with them, but not to outsiders. The evenings are quiet as I scratch comments on their homework journals, meeting and becoming friends with people whose names and faces I can't even put together in real life. I think I like to be with them because they represent potential and a semi-innocent world, where hope and dreams rush down the mountains like rivers, before becoming dotted blue lines. As for the mountains and deserts, I want to skirt their edges in rickety old busses before the last of their majesty has evaporated forever into the sky.

On Kato. During the seven or so years I have spent in China, I have known a number of Japanese teachers. They have been very polite, scrupulously polite, cooked mouth-watering food, and were almost impossible to step inside. (I think I now realize that this is, and perhaps must, be accepted for the sake of reality, sanity, and common decency.) In Taiyuan, I mostly remember Akiko's cooking; it was not food first but art first. When she asked you to help yourself to her dish, it was like a world-famous artist inviting you to enjoy the first slash of a razor blade on his latest canvas. Oh, her food was the very definition of "exquisite"! As Maggie said of Mrs. Flowers' butter cookies, "the taste has been forgotten but the essence remains"--and so it was with Akiko's creations. Yes, Japan and the Japanese are perfect for the likes of me, who like everything to be laid out in perfect and immutable order, who crave good food, and who desire to sojourn among people whose manners are impeccable but whose hearts and families--nay, their entire culture--is like an everlasting battery of "gated communities", excluding all outsiders.

That was Taiyuan, and that was Akiko. Her husband was a perfectly kind gentleman, but of him, no fragment of memory survives. In Urumqi, there was another Japanese couple, but the relationship never took shape and did not develop.

In between was Kato. For a few years I thought that she was unique, unmatched, almost like the sole survivor of a long-vanished race of impeccable-mannered citizens. That changed, of course, when I went to Japan for the first time and saw that every middle-aged lady was like her--but by then the impressions were firmly locked in place. She was born only a few weeks after my mother in 1936, so the feelings of mother-like attraction came naturally. She was kind and generous in many areas of life, although communication in areas of life having to do with feelings or emotions was never possible. If I changed the subject of discussion from commonplace things to anything personal or emotional, it seemed the very sun was turned off, as if by a light switch. Kato was not cold, though--instead she cared, and she expressed it through acts of love and graciousness, promises kept,

consideration given. She was a legendary traveler--but I will say more about that later. It is as a cook that I will reflect on her in days to come.

If Akiko made food which was an art form, then Kato's cuisine was common, everyday and motherly. I could eat her food every day, just as if we were a family unit sitting down to eat every day. In my life, there have been only a very few cooks who were legendary: Polenli in Africa (who cooked millet porridge and sauce in open cauldrons, over three stones), some others who I have forgotten about (so do they really count?), my grandmother Grankin, and Kato. There was a Japanese restaurant in Urumqi that served what I felt was delicious food--and cheaply; for about ten dollars, you could have a feast, a real feast of all the usual Japanese dishes. The tourists from Japan would come to Xin Jiang to experience the great wide outdoors, and they came in great numbers. Since Japan is such a compact country, I can see how they would like Xin Jiang and its deserts and mountains. They also ate at this restaurant. However, I preferred Kato's food, for it had that "motherly" attachment. She would often come upstairs and knock at my door and, in a politely apologetic manner, would ask if I had eaten. Of course, I said "No", and she asked me to come down. Sometimes, there would be another foreign teacher there.

After dinner on occasion, or during those times when she had called me down to ask for help in some matter, she prepared powdered Japanese green tea, following the tea ceremony procedure. It made the nape of my neck tingle deliciously to watch her do it. The part I liked best was when she used a small bamboo whisk to beat up the tea in the cup. Then, it was passed in just such a manner, and meant to be returned to the giver in just such a manner. There was often some small sweet dessert on a tiny plate to counterbalance the bitterness of the powdered green tea.

Since I lived over her apartment, I could hear the "free talks" she held with her students. For the most part, Kato was very quiet, but when her students came over for dinner, the place became very lively indeed, as they played some communal game that required the use of spoken Japanese. I suspect the Uighurs had an easier time of learning Japanese, as their grammatical structure is very similar to that of Japanese. For the most part, she lived a quiet life, went into town to do her shopping, and visited a few people.

Do not let the above fool you! Kato was one of the ultimate travelers I met. Her travels were legendary. First, she was very lucky, in that her husband back home let her come out to China and teach English year by year. I think she had been a schoolteacher in Japan for many years; then she came to China. Some years earlier, she had joined a group of Japanese tourists and others, and ridden camels (in a caravan, like in the old "Silk Route" days), from Dunhuang in Gansu Province to somewhere in eastern Xin Jiang. That is very difficult territory. They were about 21 days in the desert, with motor backup. For that alone, she had my admiration. She had been to many places in Xin Jiang and elsewhere in western China. I think that Prezevalski (the Russian explorer in the late 19th Century) would have smiled at her.

Kato was also the consummate "arranger". Once, several of us were eating in one of the Russian restaurants in Urumqi. The food and tea were flowing, and Kato "excused herself"; we thought nothing of it. When the bill came to be paid, the waiter said it had already been paid. We didn't even see it coming.

Once, a group of six or seven chartered a 4-wheel drive vehicle to go around the eastern half of the Taklimakan Desert, and Kato came too. We had taken one person too many, and the Toyota was very overcrowded. We gave Kato the best seat in the middle; she had brought two huge cushions and she sat on them in regal splendor. Although we often complained of the "hardships", she was quiet: she was in her element, and in full control. We certainly enjoyed having her along.

In time, Kato became a kind of "gan ma ma", or honorary mother. I visited her in Aomori some years ago, where the incident of the "burned-out man and boisterous women" at the hot springs took place. There, I saw the background she came from, and the taste with which she adorned her house. I am glad that the Japanese like to have hot baths and visit hot springs--they are delightful occupations. It is often useful to see a person in their "home environment", and see if or how it is different from the one they were first experienced in. This is especially true, I think, with respect to dating someone from another background. Japan is a very well-ordered country, and the people there are polite but not inclusive; somehow, I like it that way. I also saw some Japanese castles, with their extremely beautiful stonework. However, there were two parts of that visit which were most interesting. We visited the local public bath. It was about five minutes walk from Kato's home, and I soon learned how to get there by myself. (In time, I went around parts of Aomori by myself.) After paying, I entered the men's half, showered while sitting on a plastic stool, and then went into the hot tubs. As I said before, the Japanese take their bathing very seriously. I wish such public bathing houses could be found here. The second event happened at a sushi bar. We were treated to real wasabi root for the sushi, and a small grater. I scrubbed away furiously, piling up the wasabi shavings, until the gasps of the other guests told me I had done something wrong. It seems that real wasabi root is a very expensive thing, and should be used in severe moderation. Oh well....

Kato and I communicated in Chinese (not in English or Japanese). Our linguistic repertoire was somewhat limited, but that did not stop us from having many jolly old talks about a range of subjects--but the inner affairs of the heart were not entered into. She was one of the best friends I had in Urumqi, and I am glad we were together for those few years. Sometimes, I find the other (western) expats hard to get along with, and probably they find me to be too strange for them, so it was that the "other foreigners" in the city provided me with some good friendships, and a kind attitude when I needed it. Kato was all this and more to me. We talked about the days when she would come to the U.S. to see my new land, but more importantly, I would like to go into some very remote place in a sturdy jeep, and in the middle of the back seat, enthroned on her two huge cushions, she would be watching the amazing scenery pass by, and taking it all in.

On Fanny and Joy. In 9801, the best of classes, there were two students, Fanny and Joy, the naughtiest of female friends. In most classes, they behaved like the puppets in a Punch and Judy beach-show. They were often pushing each other, or taking a paper, or telling on the other. I enjoyed these antics, and I think they obliged me. They were sweet, delightful naughtiness personified, and as they sat in the front of the class they were easy to watch. Joy came from Shihezi, and is now a teacher in a nearby middle school; she married an army man. Fanny, a Hui from Urumqi, is now a teacher in a nearby elementary school; she is my sister (di san "gan mei mei").

On Maka. By now, many of you readers have noticed that I have written a lot about various women. "Who do you think you are, a new and psychological version of Don Juan?" It is true, that I have a very bad record of running away from various women, a sort of "runaway hobo" in China. Well, here is a story in which I also got hurt in heart--and it wasn't her fault, either.

I has not been easy to think back on Maka. She is one of the very few people that I have felt sorrow at losing; for a long time after the break-up, she remained an infallible archetype, invisible yet always present. She came from Nilka, deep in the Tian Shan, a town of such poverty in Xin Jiang it reminded me at once of the part of Africa I once worked in. She was a student at Zhi Da, in another academic department--I forget which one. Her brother was in a bank, and her sister-in-law a professor in another university. They were Chinese Kazakhs--that is, their nationality was Chinese, and their ethnicity was Kazakh. That means their food was really good--lots of horse meat, lamb, milk tea, "nang" bread, and the like. Maka had already met other foreigners, and was a sort of "house-help" to one of the other foreign teachers and his wife. I was asked to tutor her in English, so we met in one of the classrooms and spent some months reviewing and practicing her oral English.

In terms of personality, Maka was very quiet and shy, but inside, she had her own character and could be very stubborn. However, she was always kind and mild-mannered with me, which makes me think that she sometimes behaved in the former way when under pressure, hardship, or coercion. She was between short and medium height, had very sightly brown hair (from her ethnicity, I think) that varied in length over the years from short to long to short again, and had a pleasant face. She had no hearing in her left ear. Like so many country girls who had come to the big city to find an education, she was simple in worldliness, not too sophisticated, kind, close to her family, and honest and upright. She also had a vision, of leaving the dead-end life that most of the rest of her family was living back in Nilke (and perhaps, also in Urumqi), and moving out into the wider world. Her frequent contact with foreigners had prepared her for this. Left to herself, she would have become yet another "fu wu yuan", or some office worker. During the time I knew her, she had helped out as a baby-sitter, house-help, Kazakh tutor, day-guide, staff worker in a coffee-house, and more. Still, she was almost painfully innocent and slow in comprehending some of the things she had to do. She was not "beautiful", to be sure, but she certainly fitted the description of "fair outside, and lovely within".

It was decided to give her a shot at some "nursing internships" in England, which were somehow being advertised. (The couple she worked for was British.) This meant improving her English level, filling out many forms, and having the admission interview at the British Embassy in Beijing. All this took time. In the early days, we just had "free talks", as well as pages from the oral English textbooks I was then using. She worked well, but often liked the "free talks" better than the bookwork. She required a great deal of patience. Naturally, in time, we came to know each other's inner personality quite well, and we slowly, but inexorably became drawn to each other. (Maybe I should read the story of Abelard and Helloise for the first time, to better understand a very constant trend.) Of course, nothing major happened, but looking back on it, I suspect that we were already communicating "latently" in the bread-and-butter events of the English tutorials, as life passed by each day and week.

In time, she went to Beijing for the "visa screening" interview. Maka had a cousin (or some other family member) living in Beijing, so she stayed with her. Later on, I met this cousin, and noticed that she was very clever and well-placed in the academic world of the capital. (This makes me realize that one way that minorities can get by, can survive in the maelstrom of society, is by being excellent in all they do; otherwise, they are deleted. On the other hand, I have found the Kazakhs to be some of the most astute people in China--or should I say "crafty"?) Anyways, Maka stayed with her, and in time went to the embassy. Things did not go well, as she did not understand so many procedures and forms. It was not easy to get foreign friends (who were living in Beijing) to help her; I have very low "social capital". She filled out one form so that it looked like a second-grade student had done it. Well, I don't consider it her fault, as she just didn't have the preparation. I think she returned to Urumqi, and regrouped.

To make a long story short, she finally did get the visa, and went to England, where she stayed with the British family, now returned to their home town. It was soon discovered that Maka did not have the aptitude for nursing, so she focused her attention on some English language-learning courses. In this time, Britain and certain western European countries have become popular places for Chinese students to study overseas; the U.S. has declined in this respect, and I think the trend will continue this way. I spoke to her on the phone some times, but lost the influence of communication I had had in Xin Jiang. Upon reflection, I have not been successful in "handling" my ex-students when they go overseas. Either they could not apply what I said, or were swamped by competing influences (Maka); they "blew me off" (Harriet, Gwen, Jenny); they were too "culture-bound", could not deal with the host culture for various reasons, and wanted to come home (Kirsten). Perhaps I should learn from this! Moreover, I think there was some kind of conflict going on between Maka and the host family, and I was too afraid to intervene (and it was not my domain, anyhow). This fear later cost me dearly.

At some point, I asked Maka if she wanted to take common cause with me (i.e., be my girlfriend). This idea had been in me, but it was her brother, who I had been visiting a few times, who put it to me. I tentatively agreed, and called Maka. She was pleased, in her quietly sincere, mildly intense way. This lasted some days, until one of the hosts (the wife) found out--I had told her. I will not go into details, save to say that both the wife and her husband strongly tried to discourage me from doing this. I think they were concerned that Maka's family wanted to use me, by linking me up with Maka. I also think that the British hosts had their own plans for Maka, and I was too much of an interference for them. I will say no more. I called up Maka again soon after. You can guess what happened. She was not at all happy about this.

She stayed in England for a few more months, then came back to Xin Jiang. By sheer fortune, I met her in the hallway at Zhi Da one day, and talked. I also saw her again, in the company of another friend. In time, she left Urumqi again, and I only saw her one more time. Each time I ask some friends if they have seen her, or if she has some news; they "don't know". I think I have been shut out of the "information loop". However, one friend told me that Maka, in recent years, has become very withdrawn, extremely withdrawn in fact. I think that the disappointment, or perhaps some other factor, has shut her down. I have no idea where she is, or how to reach her.

THE TWO TRIPS TO KYRGYZSTAN.

On the other side of the Tian Shan range, a huge natural barrier on the edge of China, lies another world. The local people there, the Kazakhs, Uzbeks, Kyrgyz, Tadjiks and others, have lived there for a long time (as have their "ethnic cousins" on the Chinese side). However, their lives have been culturally influenced by their own terrain, and the influence of things Russian--first under imperial Russia, then under the Soviet Union, and now, in the Commonwealth of Independent States (C.I.S.). It is striking what one long mountain range, with peaks ranging from 15,000 feet up to 18,000 feet or more, can do to the development and character of people. Same gold, different mint-stamp.

It was only a matter of time before I tried to travel in this area. In fact, it was Uzbekistan that first captured my attention, in 1987 while at college, looking at a wall map in my dormitory basement; at that time, a deep and persistent hunger to be there settled upon me, and this hunger has climbed and fallen over the years, like a river struggling to make its way over a hostile land, down to the sea. When I finally made it to Xin Jiang, I began trying to get into (formerly Soviet) Central Asia. Make no mistake: reader, I married this area. Of all the republics bordering Xin Jiang, Kyrgyzstan seemed to be the safest, and easiest to get into. This article is about two trips I made into Kyrgyzstan. It will focus on some observations and impressions, and hopefully not much more, as I am not a "Central Asia" expert.

The first trip was in 1997, not long after the return of Hong Kong to the People's Republic of China. At that time, I was in Lhasa, traveling with two friends. We hired 4WD vehicles to see some of the local sights (and I went back to my old haunts in those ubiquitous "Lonely Planet"-type places, where you can buy all the usual food of today's "neo-bohemians", and slurp watermelon "lassis" from the roof of a cafe, and gaze enviously into the "special room" reserved for those daring backpackers who come in from the hills, stinking to high heaven and having huge, three-month beards). In time, we hired another 4WD vehicle and headed south to the border with Nepal. The scenery was good. I was a bit surprised that one could cross the Himalayas at 15,000 feet, but we did. The descent to the border town was impressive--we went down, down, down, and down again, going from high plateau down to wet, rainy, and almost a bit "jungle-like" land. We walked over the crossing, processed a visa, found a bus, and went to Kathmandu. In time, I parted with the two others, and got another visa for India. The Indian embassy in Kathmandu was noteworthy, in that there were many "hippie-like" people waiting for their visa. In South and South-East Asia, many long-term travelers like to "flip-flop" between two countries, so as to extend their time away from home for a very long time. Six months here, and six months there, and then do it again. I got a visa, and flew to Patna, in India.

That first impression of India was ferociously concentrated, like drinking a whole glass of "orange Quosh" (from England), without the water. The experience of life in India is so concentrated, like five days elsewhere packed into one Indian day. I did not spend much time in India, as I had settled for a "transit" visa (it was quicker to get); indeed, I was only there about five days, most of it spent in New Delhi. I saw very little, but in the future I would like to go back there, probably to Jaipur or Goa, and slowly acclimatize to the business of living there simply (that is, to take up lodgings in yet another "Lonely Planet" guest house, read books, and drink "lassis").

During this time in New Delhi, I applied for a Kyrgyz visa, which came after a few days.

The flight from New Delhi to Bishkek was certainly a memorable one. The plane was an old Tupolev, and the seats could easily be folded forwards, thus turning any part of the passenger area into a cargo hold. It reminded me a bit or Indiana Jones in that Ford Tri-Motor "Tin Goose". Many of the passengers were Uzbek women, who were traveling home with huge bundles of fabrics they had bought in the Indian bazaars; they folded some seats forward, and stuffed in the bundles. We flew over the Pamir mountains, and such a majestic range of peaks I have never seen before; they were all the more majestic since I was in this suspect Tupolev, looking down. In time, we made it to Bishkek.

On the whole, the Russian influence on the landscape seemed more benign than in other places I had visited. The Russian presence was always there, but it was the essence of turpentine and varnish, not of formaldehyde (figuratively speaking). However, at that time, I was worried. I spoke almost no Russian, and the few phrases I had were not going well. The taxi driver took me to the Friendship Hotel, which was very expensive, but where else could I go? Fortunately, one of the service desk staff helped me, and she spoke English. Bella was from North Korea, the first such person I met. I am glad this happened, because it showed me that my pre-conceptions of North Koreans as being bad people were wrong: she was very kind and was certainly helpful. She told me where to buy a bus ticket, and the like. Nonetheless, it was daunting to get around, with so little Russian. I wandered around the city near the Friendship Hotel, eating "shashliks" (like kebabs), and seeing what everything looked like. At times, curiosity was suppressed by fear, disorientation, and common depression. It does help to speak the local language.... The WW2 monument was very prominent. People walked about, but I had no concept of what their life was about, what they were saying, or where they were going. It was easy to imagine oneself as being totally cut off from the life of the place.

At the bus station the next day, things got interesting. I could not express myself in Russian and buy a ticket, so I walked away from the ticket window. After a while, two men came up to me; they were Kyrgyz plain-clothes policemen. They asked me to come into a back room and they asked me many questions (I answered in basic Russian). I also had to unload and open my "money pouches". All the while, I was thinking about the stereotypical Soviet secret police, and they wondered if I was carrying drugs. Perhaps my innate ability to look like the village idiot let them leave me alone; there was not even a bribe. I got on the bus, went east along the northern shore of Issuk Kul, stayed somewhere, and then came back. In all, that trip was a very short one. I knew the following: Kyrgyzstan was a beautiful place to visit, Russian was needed, and another visit was needed. This country was beautiful because the Soviets did not industrialize it (but the other republics got badly polluted); it became a place where the leaders built their "dachas" to get away from it all. I decided to study some Russian in my spare time, which I did for a few years, off and on. I bought tapes and phrase books, listening to the tapes while eating my breakfast in my apartment, and reviewing the books when waiting for my dinner at the local restaurant. I decided to come back to Kyrgyzstan at another time, to finish the journey around Issuk Kul, the large lake in the east of the country, and to explore some other parts of this mountainous area.

The second trip to Kyrgyzstan happened a few years later--the May Day holiday of 2001 or 2002. One of the best things that the central government of China did was to institute the May Day week's holiday, and the National Day week's holiday. These ten-day breaks fall roughly into the "3/4" and the "1/4"-mark divisions of the academic year... with the Spring Festival holidays and the summer holidays being the "1/2" and the "start/end"-mark divisions, respectively. This makes the academic year very enjoyable. Hey, make no mistake; one of the "draws" of teaching in China is the lifestyle, and the ability to go out and travel in very interesting places. Anyhow... we had a week in early-May, and I knew I wanted to go to Kyrgyzstan to travel. The Kyrgyz visa I picked up on my way through Beijing, but the Kazakh visa was more problematic. There was a small Kazakh consulate in Urumqi, but it served the ethnic Kazakhs of Xin Jiang and their kin in neighboring Kazakhstan; foreigners could not go there. However, a friend very kindly gave me an introduction, and a visa was arranged; I am thankful for that.

One of my students, Donna, who spoke some Russian and who wanted to help, came with me to the special train ticket office for trains to Kazakhstan; it was located in some part of Urumqi. By nature, Donna was (and still is) extremely vivacious, loves to talk and socialize, and is reputed to be a hard-core disco dancer, going to dances and dancing all night, burning out her dance partners one by one, until there are no more. I will always remember Donna for her humorous nature, and this one act of kindness. We got the ticket, and went back to our school.

The route was important. Typically, I like to travel in large "circles', so as to make the best use of time and ground covered; to re-trace one's steps is costly. Over the years, I have approached the dissection, exploration and appreciation of China and the surrounding nations with a strategic traveler's eye. The routes may seem strange for their choices of route, but there is most certainly a "greater aim", a "bigger picture" in my mind. This time, the aim was to go from Urumqi to Alma-Ata in Kazakhstan, then to Bishkek in Kyrgyzstan, and then around various places in Kyrgyzstan--Osh, Bishkek, around the lake, Bishkek again, and back to Urumqi. In ten days, too....

The holiday began. In order to maximize the ten days, most people in China had worked straight through two weeks, sacrificing a weekend, so as to have ten clear days--ten, straight, clear, and free days. The train left Urumqi late at night: once a week, a very Soviet-looking train (on Chinese wheel dollies) left Urumqi. By early the next morning, we went through the Chinese exit formalities, and then crossed a sort of "no-man's land", complete with watch towers, a desolate and open landscape, and soldiers climbing up into freight cars to see if there were any illegal immigrants trying to make their way into Europe--a long way away, but still within reach of someone determined. Then we entered into the Kazakh control point. This is where the fun began. On came the border guards, who searched everything, and found not one bottle, but three whole cases of vodka in the possession of one of my berth-mates. (There were four of us--me, two Kazakhs from China, and a Kazakh woman from Kazakhstan.) It was this woman who had the vodka. I suspected that she would be punished for smuggling in the vodka, and the customs officer asked us all to leave the compartment. He closed the door, and was alone with her for several minutes; then he left us alone. Soon after, I learned that he had accepted (or asked for?) a bribe, and he left her alone.

At the border the wheels of the train were changed. Due to deep

mutual suspicions between the Soviet Union and China, the rail gauges are different--I forget whose is smaller, and whose is bigger. This was done to stop "invasions". Therefore, at the border, the trains must change their wheel dollies. The entire train is jacked up, with each carriage getting a pair of enormous jacks. Once in the air, a steel cable is attached to one of the dollies, and all of them are drawn away. After a while, new one are brought in, positioned, and the train carriages are lowered back. The passengers get back on board, and the train moves on. The whole process took about an hour.

We continued deeper into Kazakhstan. The land was semi-desert, with scattered bushes, and very little sign of habitation. In time, we reached the eastern side of Lake Balkash, and turned in a more southerly direction for Alma-Ata, the former capital of Kazakhstan (now it is Astana). The vendors sold snacks which were much more Russian--dried, salted, deep-fried whole fish, which could be gnawed at for a long time. I think the Russians really like their fish dishes. I really like to "eat my way across a country", experiencing a new place through the local food, and places with Russian culture are no exception. I did not talk to many people, although there was one Chinese businessman who talked for a long time, as the miles and miles of semi-desert spooled by. Night fell again.

Early the next morning, we arrived at Alma-Ata station. My first impressions of Kazakhstan are perhaps unfair, but there they were. I felt that this city was unbelievably run-down... not squalid, no, but run down and falling apart, so much so that perhaps the best thing would be to bulldoze the entire region and re-build it from scratch. I looked at the concrete frames of the buildings. In China, the "posts and beams" of a commercial or apartment building are cast in place, using moulds for whatever shape is desired. In Kazakhstan (and maybe all over the Soviet Union), the parts are made somewhere else, and assembled "dry" to make up the building. (How then are the parts securely "joined" together, I wondered.) The buildings also had large "sheets" of one- or two-inch concrete to make up the walls. All this gave the buildings an appearance of impermanence and a run-down, falling apart look. It would be very easy for the Central Asian republics to dry up, shrivel and blow away like dust, were the life-blood of a sound economy to go somewhere else.

I met one of Maka's brothers on the platform. He had been told that I was coming, and very kindly agreed to link me up with a taxi to Bishkek. We went to a place where there were long-distance taxis. Here, I made a mistake I hope I will not repeat too often. I gave him the price for the ride (about 25 dollars); he kept this U.S. money, and paid the taxi driver in the local currency. I think he "took" me. However, he did get the taxi I wanted, and I did not complain. Sometimes in these places, it is a necessary part of a traveler's existence to be cheated. The secret, I think, is not to complain and struggle for one's "rights" (which do not exist here, or most places, for foreigners), but to "manage" the extent of the cheating. In these places, a little lost money is like "social grease", in that it facilitates the business of living, and gets you around. I doubt this will ever change. Besides, he was Maka's brother, and I also did not want to get into a quarrel with the only person in the entire country who had some vague connection with me. (One must take a wider, more strategic view of these things.) Anyways, he found me the taxi, and we were off. I think that, although the driver had contracted to take me into Bishkek, other riders showed up, and an active "sub-contract scheme" began, so that the driver made even more money on this trip.

We left Alma-Ata around mid morning, and headed for Bishkek. The road was narrow, although good, and the driver went as fast as he could. Around us, the open, slightly undulating landscape receded in every direction; in the far distance could be seen some mountains. The enormous fields were red with poppies. Red, red, everywhere, mixed in with the gentle greens of the pasturelands. The sound of the wheels on the rough asphault, the warmth of the sun, the red landscape of poppies everywhere, and the feeling of being free at last from the anxieties of travel were all removed: it was one of those semi-blissful experiences where everything fell into place. The driver dropped off and picked up a few more passengers, and in time we came to the Kazakh-Kyrgyz border. We would have gone on, as there was no effort on the part of the border police to stop us, or even to pay attention to our very presence. I felt a bit strange just passing through without the usual visa examination and stamping, so I went into some office bungalow. I was just waved on. Perhaps I was a bit to "scrupulous". However, I wish for the day when there is no need for screening, and a world where everyone can just pass from one place to another, freely and unrestricted, just waving a "barcode" on one's passport at some "barcode reader", just like in the toll booths on the interstate highways, where they use the "EZ-Pass" system. Travelers without borders. That would be interesting.

I wish to say something about the "Soviet / Russian influence" in this area, especially in terms of how physical infrastructure looked. This land was only "on the other side" of China's Xin Jiang, and yet so much looked different. The "Russian touch" is hard to describe well, but after several years in China, it was immediately and pleasantly recognizable. Should I say it was the "European touch"-- in the way roads, buildings, shop fronts, doors, train stations and other constructed things were displayed? Yes, and yet, no. I think the Russians are not exactly "European"; they are something unto themselves... and yet, there was the faint aroma of something from Europe. Of course, there were the effects of the local (Kyrgyz) culture and terrain, which created a beautiful "fusion" effect. During those few days, I had a persistent feeling that the Russian "cultural overlay" on the region was much more benign than in parts east. The bear and the lambs seemed, on the surface of things, to exist together well. Naturally, what I am saying here is just a flash observation: nothing appears sweet and rosy after the early stage of cultural encounter has worn off. I liked the way the Russians had left their "cultural footprint" here, as far as basic, physical infrastructure was concerned.

We arrived in Bishkek, and I wandered around the bus station in search of another long-distance taxi. Someone led me to a place and a taxi. It was operated by two ex-Soviet soldiers. After an hour or so, we left; I don't clearly remember if there was another passenger or not. As in Xin Jiang and Kashmir, the rural landscape has millions of poplar trees planted along the roadways as windbreaks. There was no "highway" out of Bishkek, in the usual sense of the word; we just squeezed our way out through a capillary network of small roads and earth tracks, through a string of micro-neighborhoods, until we were in the real countryside. The road climbed up into the hills, and at a certain place, with a few snack vendors nearby and an open field for truckers to park, we just stopped. There was no toll booth, no customs building, no police checkpoint, but we stopped, and waited for some hours. Ask little, expect anything, bring a book: these are the rules for travel in such places. Besides, my Russian was too basic.

In time, the reason came out--we had to wait, so as to arrive at our destination (Osh, in S.W. Kyrgyzstan) at a certain time. The sun was warm, so we rested in the shade. Spring was here, the mountains were clean and unspoiled, the larks were tuned up to perfection, and all was quiet around us! Thankfully, Kyrgyzstan was not subjected to industrialization like many of the other Soviet republics, so it has this "Switzerland-in-Central-Asia" look. Tourism, and the reality of being one of the last few remaining "unspoiled areas" in the world, are what will help Kyrgyzstan (and also Tadjikistan and parts of Kashmir) in the years to come. Take note, all you regional developers and planners! Perhaps it is no surprise that Switzerland is actively involved in the economic development of Kyrgyzstan; it is a good "match" of nations, I think.

At a certain point we resumed the journey, and climbed higher and higher. When the slopes became too challenging, the road punched through the mountain, about one thousand feet from the summit. The tunnel was still under construction, water was dripping through the porous ceiling of the tunnel, and it was obvious that construction was still very much in progress. We passed through carefully, holding our breaths. Whereas on the "Bishkek side" the landscape was pastoral and gentle-feeling, on the other side, as we came out of the tunnel, the terrain was completely different. Patches of snow were here and there, and the outward adornments of rural civilization gave place to the immense and majestic landscapes for which Central Asia is famous. Perhaps the road, which wound its way across this high-altitude basin to some pass in the far distance, was the only sign of human activity; not even a few shepherds could be seen. Somewhere one hour ahead, the road branched; we continued south, but I stared hard again and again at the Chinese map I had, at the thin gray line going east, comparing it with the actual road disappearing into the vastness of land and space. I wanted to return, and see this land of nothing, of vast, vast nothing in the mountains. Of course, in the winter everything was shut down, and the few people living here in this part of the "Heavenly Mountains" return to a condition of siege. It is just them, their sheep, and the wolves.

The drivers turned on their music. It was hard, pounding Russian pop / rock, and some Kyrgyz folk tunes. Russian music is one of the most energetic types of music I have ever heard, and it is a strong stimulant. (Did Donna like Russian disco music?, I wonder.) The road was long, the grey skies darkened in time, but throughout we were kept awake and invigorated by the music. Besides, the heavy speakers were right behind my head. Perhaps one can tell if the drive is an arduous one, by the "force-level" of the music the driver uses. Springsteen on the interstate, screeching Indian music in Kashmir, and Russian disco on the road to Osh! On we went, pounded by music. This was one of the top ten road-trips. On singer crooned on about "white snow" (his lover?): "Byeliy, byeliy, snyek", over and over again.

Another digression, this time about learning Russian. For a few years now, I have wanted to learn some basic Russian--just enough for travel needs. When I was in Urumqi, I had some books and tapes, which I used during my meals. For breakfast in my apartment, I would listen to the same tapes again and again, and at the restaurant, I would read some phrase book (especially the parts about food) while waiting for my dish. Progress has been slow, but enjoyable. I prefer doing it this way, to attending some "crash course through hell" type lessons, where the pressure is hot and the bills enormous. Next time, I hope to learn even more Russian, and use it for travel.

Dinner was in a wayside Kyrgyz restaurant. The low tables were on raised platforms, which in China are called "kang". A kang is a combination woodstove, communal bed, and raised platform for eating and other social activities (especially in winter). Somewhere at one end of the platform there is a small steel door for a firebox; corn stalks, small wood, or brush are burned and the heat is retained by the masonry of the kang. The tables were covered in linoleum, tea was readily available, and we ate lamb dishes such as "shashlik" (lamb kebabs), lamb stew, or "chopped, soupy noodles with lamb". Bread was the "nang" bread found in many parts of Central Asia. The service ladies were modest and efficient, and there was some Kyrgyz music floating about from somewhere. It was a quiet and unobtrusive setting for dinner. At times, I think the Kyrgyz people look almost "Chinese" because of their eyes and dark hair (some of them), but their mannerisms and the underlying life-philosophy that drives their behaviors are different. Perhaps this was just a quiet, backwater cafe on some mountain road, or else the hour was late and the truck drivers were about the business of earning a living; however, it seemed again that the Kyrgyz people were not as boisterous and loud as their cousins (the Uigurs) across the mountains in Xin Jiang.

We continued on through the night, music still beating and jarring the brain with subliminal memories. Now that it was dark, I could sit, as often before, in the back seat of an unknown car, on faraway roads in a beautiful but remote part of the world, with two men I had never met before, unable to see the beauty (or the terror) of the road we traveled. That meant I could imagine what this country was like, and what these people were up to. They had said they were ex-Soviet soldiers... so I imagined the boot of our taxi was crammed with all manner of arms and the like, and that we were not really going directly to Osh, but to somewhere in Tadjikistan, where unknown buyers would meet us.... No, it was not that way, but the dreams were very good that night, and the occasional moonlit view of the terrain we had just crossed evoked all sorts of imaginations. Later on, I found out that the road had "nicked" the territory of Uzbekistan a few times, passing in and out on its way to Osh. No doubt the driver wanted to pass through at night, so that we would not be seen. It was not arms he was "running", it was me, a foreigner. Cash, and especially U.S. dollars, is very much needed. In the U.S., one dollar will purchase so much. In China, the rough rate of "buying power" is 1:10. In Kyrgyzstan, it is 1:100. Therefore, a dollar in Kyrgyzstan is very powerful.

In time, we arrived in Osh. This city, in the south-west part of Kyrgyzstan, was one of the major Silk Route stopping points. After leaving Kashgar in Xin Jiang, the caravans would climb over yet another range of mountains, through some high pass, stopping at various caravanserai, before coming to Osh. I think that Merv was a few stops down the line, heading west. Osh had a strong Islamic flavor to it, compared to somewhere like Bishkek, which had a more "Russian" feel to it. Tadjikistan was not for away, and the "feel" of events in Afghanistan lay lightly yet persistently in the air. There is a legend that King Solomon spent some time in Osh, and he is very much a living figure from history here. (Some people think that Jesus spent some time in the Himalayas; now, here was a story of Solomon in Osh, at some point in his life.) However, this story was very useful for the city's tourist industry, as it gave the place a certain ancient mystery. After all, if Solomon was once here, wouldn't it be worth visiting too?

As usual, I found a hotel for the night. This was my first, real, "Soviet-type hotel in the provinces" experience. (The hotel in Bishkek didn't count, as it was a part of the "global network" of major city hotels.) The key was impossible: it fit the lock, but it was extremely temperamental about yielding an entry; the result was a few minutes of frustration every time I used it. However, I liked the place: the creaking wooden floors, the sense of security from the outside world once I was inside (always important in a new and strange place), and the "floor attendant" (who sometimes gave me some tea). At this point I must say that going from new place to new place is hard on the emotions, as the evenings are the loneliest and most difficult times; however, when ranged against the unparalleled freedom one enjoys when traveling alone, the final choice is easy. Go alone.

Osh looked like a good place to teach English at some future time, so I visited a local university (I forget which one). One of the professors was pleased to talk, but he was apologetic about the monthly salary of 25 dollars. That didn't worry me, as it is the "lifestyle" and the "location" which are more important, and not the salary or the standard of living. I believe that one can have the lifestyle and the location one wants, by "short-circuiting" the usual route of earning a lot of money: go and work in some run-down, less-wealthy foreign country. It is also more fun. In the four or five years since I visited that university, I have often thought about trying to work in Osh; I hope this dream will come true. People who work overseas fall into a "spectrum of hardship": some like the really "hard-core" places like Chechnya or Afghanistan; others like the wealth and comfort of Singapore or Shanghai. I fall into some part in between: the country must be run-down (to a degree), a little poor, in beautiful (or at least majestic) countryside, have somewhat friendly (or tolerant / laissez-faire) people, have a fair to good transportation system, be largely free of "Western cultural and social influences", be a place where one can work hard but drop off every societal radar screen, and allow one to pursue one's (obscure) dreams in peace and quiet. Xin Jiang will be like this for a little longer, and I hope that Central Asia will still be there, as it is now, when life in China has become too sophisticated and "modern".

The next morning, I looked for a driver. In recent years, this plan has been helpful, as the public transportation system is not always convenient. Rule one: do this in a poor country; save the public transport rides for the long hauls or the richer countries. In (Pakistani) Kashmir and in Kyrgyzstan, hiring a driver was very useful and convenient. I went into the market, and asked for a driver who spoke English. Soon, a man was introduced to me; I think his name was Genna. (Actually, now I think of it, it was he who took me to the university, but hey, the facts don't have to be watertight....) His English was basic, but it was certainly enough to communicate with. I had the feeling that, along with quite a few people I met in Kyrgyzstan, he was well-educated, but on account of the hard living conditions, he had to find private employment as best as he could. Two short anecdotes come with Genna--helping me to eat dinner, and the trip to the walnut forest.

First, the dinner. At the end of one of our "half-day trips", I wanted to go back to the hotel and call it a day. Somehow, he knew that I was not in a good way (in my own heart), so he offered to take me to a restaurant and help me get something to eat. To my shame, I was too proud to ask for help, or admit what he knew. However, he not only took me to a local restaurant, he helped me to order, he sat by

me as I ate under a cloud of dejection (caused by being in such a culturally unfamiliar setting and unable to do anything about it), and then he talked. He said that people were good, and that I should ask for help if I needed it. I know he is right, and I must strive to do as he said, but it is so hard to actually do it. Genna was right. Every country is defined, not only in the newspapers, but actually in the person-to-person impressions one citizen leaves with another, as they encounter life together. Genna, and the vast, vast majority of people I met in all the parts of Asia I traveled in were kind, helpful and gracious to me.

The next day, we went on a day trip to Alexander's walnut forest. (As I write this, I think of Squirrel Nutkin and his friends going off to the island to get acorns. How strange that Nutkin has become such an iconic figure in my life....) Here is the legend. In the time of Alexander the Great, some of his men got lost in the hills and were presumed to be dead. Some time later, they reappeared, with many walnuts in their bags; these walnuts made it back to Greece and were planted there and became established. So, the so-called "Grecian walnut" really came from Kyrgyzstan, many years ago. This place had a strong, primal attraction to me, just like the island of acorns did for Nutkin. We spent a good part of the morning and noon driving down minor paved roads, listening to an Abba tape again and again (until even Genna got tired of it and asked, "Have you had enough?", then shut it off). The roads dwindled out, and by the mid-afternoon Genna's car was cautiously bumping up an unpaved track that resembled a dry river bed. We were in the real countryside now (remember, the country of Kyrgyzstan is rural to start with), with a few farmer's cottages here and there, and brush-wood stacked up outside their doors. We got out and walked for five minutes... and there we were, in a large forest of wild walnut trees. The idea of a whole ancient forest of walnut trees had seemed improbable, which was why I had wanted to see it. Actually, we were only there for about ten minutes, as Genna reminded me of the return journey to Osh. There was no time to savor and drink in the impressions of being "lost in the walnut forest", and besides, one could see some houses on the opposite hillside, but sure enough, there were walnut trees everywhere. This place must be a great foraging place for wild animals and local walnut gleaners alike. I suppose the appreciation of this place was meant to be in a later, more pensive and undisturbed mood, at a time removed from the travel-pressures of the present moment. Sometimes, far away from Kyrgyzstan, I can close my mind and think of that place and that time, and clearly recreate the moments under the wild walnuts. The soldiers of Alexander brought back walnuts for Greece and the western world; I brought back memories to be enjoyed later, for at that time, we were pressured. Perhaps Wordsworth only had a few moments to enjoy those daffodils he wrote about, before something or someone tore him away from his appreciation of nature. Genna and I returned to his car, and we returned to Osh.

Genna also took me up Solomon's mountain, which is a famous and prominent crag in the middle of Osh: it stands about 500 to 1000 feet over the city, and is a great place from which the local boys launch paper darts, to watch them glide down to the houses below. The shrine at the top, where Solomon was said to have lived, was a pilgrimage site, and many Muslims came here. On many of the bushes next to the pathway up there were strips of cloth hanging from the branches. There were also vendors and the like. Religion is all very good, but the "camp followers" at any religion's holy sites are problematic.

On the way back to Bishkek, I went on a YAK-40 plane, which was different from the other planes I had traveled on, as the take off and landing were very fast, and at an acute angle. Flights on Tupolev-156's and YAK-40's have their own points of interest....

The next day, I went on the bus to Issyk-Kul (Lake) again, with the intention of going around it; on the last trip, I did not do this. There is some sort of fascination among travelers with "going around" things—mountains, seas, areas of vast countryside, and the like. I arrived in yet another hotel, in the town of Karakol. There is an old Russian Orthodox church there, built in the latter years of the 19th Century. It was certainly beautiful to look at, but there was no way to get in, because it was not Sunday; therefore, I just looked at it from the outside. Karakol is a mix of the old Russian influences, the later Soviet architecture and infrastructure, and the local Kyrgyz culture. I wandered around, looking for solace. However, decaying post-Soviet towns are not the best places for finding solace. There was a "sour noodle" vendor, sitting by the side of the road, so I sat down on her stool and tried the Kyrgyz sour noodles. She was able to speak a few words of English, and I had a few Russian phrases, but the micro-experience was significant. She asked the usual questions about my background, my work, and other personal things, and it was gradually clear that she wanted to go into the big world with me. However, I felt there were insurmountable cultural barriers between us. It was a pity, as she seemed the type who could handle the semi-nomadic wanderings of my English teaching lifestyle. In later trips to Kyrgyzstan, I came to realize the desperate desire of many people to just "get out" to a better life. Why is it that so many people "want out", and that many of the people who want in are motive-oriented?

In Karakol is the museum dedicated to Prezhevalsky, the famous 19th Century Russian traveler. He went to many, many places in Central Asia and western China; whereas I went to many of these places by bus, train or plane, he did it on foot or on horse. He was a real traveler, and I admire him greatly.

Outside Karakol was yet another hotel—this one was rather like a youth hostel, and attracted the usual "Lonely Planet"-type of young traveler. The staff were friendly, and they arranged side trips. On one trip, we went to a hunter's mountain home. This hunter used eagles to catch mountain badgers and foxes for their fur, but he also invited tourists to stay in his cabin (or even the yurt, higher up the slopes). This seemed a very peaceful way to enjoy the Kyrgyz scenery. In the future, I would like to live in an "upper-pasture" yurt for a week or so, to get away from the cram of "modern" life. I also noticed the effects of rural electrification, which changed living conditions overnight.

Later, I wondered about the slow "squeezing out" of the ethnic-Russian population by the changes taking place in Kyrgyzstan. Some people were worried about this. In later years, the trend would still be evident, as more and more Russians chose to leave Kyrgyzstan and go back into Russia. I visited the former "dachas" of the Soviet elite; they looked really ramshackle, and I wondered if having power in those days was really worth it. There was another trip to one of the "holy mountains", which was also noteworthy; sitting under an old tree with other tourists and the local imam, I felt transported to another place, another time, and listening to another person. It made me think of Galilee.

In time, there was another ride back into Bishkek, and then the flight back to Xin Jiang. All these things were done in ten days! It was a very compressed experience. However, there was one anecdote: I wanted to get a "coffee-table" picture book of Kyrgyzstan, and one taxi driver who helped me gave me one, from his own home. It was a very good picture book, printed in the 1970's, and he sold it to me because there was almost no money in his home. I felt sad that the former glory of the Soviet Union (for all its faults) now came down to this ending. This anecdote will stay in my mind for a long time.

On The Five Sisters.

During my time in China, I had five sisters. That is, I got five "adopted" sisters. One was older; the other four were younger. Some people have thought this is weird, but I do not care any more what they think. I basically adopted five sisters; since I have no natural sisters of my own, I greatly appreciated the psychological bedrock of their shared concerns, as well as the ability to share in life's conversation. (Here, I will use their English names only.)

Lucy, the older sister, was one of the first students I ever had in Beng Bu, in 1994. She is now a university associate professor, and does very well. She came to the USA as a visiting scholar for a year, and during that time, we explored Boston, New York, Washington, and other parts of New England together.

Valerie, the first younger sister, works in the garment industry as a broker between the foreign market and certain Chinese garment factories. She also came from Beng Bu in 1994. She is my best friend.

Joy, the second younger sister, works in another big city, and now has a son. I met her in Tianjin in 1995; she was also a student. For many years we lost contact, but after dedicated searching, she found me through the internet, and we resumed contact.

Vicky, the third younger sister, was a student in Urumqi, who I met in 1999. She married an American, and now lives overseas. We had long talks on the phone.

Fanny, the fourth younger sister, was also a student in Urumqi, who I also met in 1999. She is a school teacher in Urumqi.

All of these sisters have made my life vastly happier. I cannot imagine a complete life without them. There are many stories associated with these five people, but they will remain in my heart. They represent all that is best about China, women, and friendship.

Conclusion to "The Ghost Of Xin Jiang".

I want to finish this part of the book, "Fragments Of China", as it has languished for too long. There are more stories from this time, but they will be winnowed out by time and forgetfulness. There is only one main idea to share here.

About the end of 1999, I feel I began a descent into emotional and moral decline. It had always been looming, but with the loss of Maka, the operation I had soon after, and other events in my life, things changed. Life in China was no longer as idealistic as it had been. (Of course, it never was really "pure and idealistic", but the veneer of delusion was thicker in those earlier days. Now, the pretenses are gone, and I live a more nakedly intentional life.)

In Urumqi Vocational University (Zhi Da), I felt I needed to get out, to move on, to escape, to go to a place where I was less known, or not known at all. I cannot build up an edifice, without the ultimate desire to prune it back at some point (to stop it from getting too big and pretentious), or to destroy it (to stop it from existing at all). So, I left Zhi Da, and went to Beijing, to the Central University of Nationalities (Min Zu Da Xue). I think there was a time lapse in between, but I have forgotten. In many of the jobs I have taken, there was a "providential link up" in an earlier month, which later became the bridge to the next step of the journey, the career ("Using language, and foreign language, in a foreign country, on the move.") So, I left Xin Jiang. Throughout, I felt like a ghost, or even a doormat to many, with no roots—hence the name of the section, "The Ghost Of Xin Jiang". However, such has been my life, with different sections in it. Xin Jiang is still a glorious place to live in!