"Fragments of China:"

The Pickle Barrel.

Beijing,
9/2002 to 6/2004.

(2006).

THE PICKLE BARREL. BEIJING, ZHONG YANG MIN ZU DA XUE. SEPTEMBER, 2002 TO JUNE, 2004.

The Setting.

This part of the story takes place in Beijing, in Zhong Yang Min Zu Da Xue (the Central University of "Nationalities"). I left my old job in Urumqi because I felt I was becoming too much a part of the scene: too well-known, too prominent. I wanted to disappear and become common. I was also running away (as usual) from the fears that come with stability. I like to drift and be anonymous to most, yet cared for by a few friends.

Min Zu Da Xue is in Hai Dian District, in NW Beijing. It the special university for the ethnic minorities of China. Officially, there are 56 (the Han, and the other minority groups), but I think some anthropologists would divide the total population of China up in other ways and come with many, many more groups. Beijing itself was very different from Urumqi, in Xin Jiang. I wonder why I came back to the "inner-land" of China. I was interested in someone, but that relationship died out. So, there I was, in Beijing, wondering why I had come. In hindsight (it is now May, 2006), I realize that it was a good thing to have gone to Min Zu Da Xue. The two reasons are (a) the Class of 2001, and (b) writing the book about how to study English. Both were a great source of comfort to me, and still are. So, I am grateful. One's career in China, in EFL Education has its ups and downs, and some years or periods are better than others. It is like long-term stock investing: you have good years, and you have bad years. This is why I called this period "The Pickle Barrel", as I felt that I was pickled. However, many interesting things happened. Like London, you cannot discount Beijing; there is a lifetime—nay, several lifetimes—of experiences in Beijing, the mother of Chinese culture.

I followed my former colleague to Min Zu Da Xue. She left Urumqi for Beijing, stayed a year, and then wanted to leave and go back to the USA. I asked her to negotiate for me, so that I could take her job; in time, I arrived. I felt very empty, and just got down to work. My main class was writing (more about that later).

How Beijing is different from Urumqi.

There are many differences between Beijing and Urumqi. Of course, being a capital city, Beijing has the inner feel of confidence and centrality. Beijing is a city of concentric ring roads; Urumqi sprawls in a north-south line. Both are flat, so using a bicycle is easy; however, bicycles are not used in Urumqi, and it is dangerous to do so. Beijing is the main brain, but Urumqi (and Kunming too) are the secondary brains of the nation (if one may liken China to a Stegosaurus). This point is very important. Beijing has many, many years of history and dynasties behind it, whereas Urumqi is relatively new. Beijing is settled with the dust of all that has passed, but Urumqi, until relatively recently, was an outpost; now Urumqi is becoming less of a far-flung provincial capital, and much more of a major regional city, a springboard for massive changes in the 21st Century.

Then there are the facilities. Beijing has almost everything you want. The distemper of hyper-globalization has come to Beijing, with the malls, global brand names, expensive food products, pressure, and so on. More and more, the inner DNA of China is looking more and more like certain western countries: this is frightening. Having said that, there are many

aspects of China that will never change, never be subverted; it is China that will alter the world. Yet, on the surface of things, Beijing is washed by the tide of things external, like an ocean sponge which is wafted and recipient to a constant tide of plankton and other small ocean things. Is it a siege, or is it a co-habitation? Both, perhaps. The dominant impression of Beijing is that of pressure. Time and time again, I saw people walking in armies down the migration-paths of commuting, or about their daily round, and they never seemed to smile. Their heads were down, and they forged on ahead, whether the sidewalks were dry with Mongolian dust or wet with the occasional yet strong rains that characterize this great city. It was this constant feeling of pressure that drove me indoors, inside the safety of the Min Zu Da Xue campus, away from the life of the city. Many foreigners liked to run all over the city, but I often liked to stay inside the campus. Of course, I went to many places in Beijing, paradoxically, but I think the motivations were different. (The old maxim of, "Mercenary, missionary, misfit" holds true; I am the "third estate", here.)

Finally, there is one other difference between Beijing and Urumqi, and that is the spice of life imparted to the larger culture by the minority culture. In Beijing, the dominant trend is to turn, to standardize everything into dumplings; of course, dominant culture the world over do this. Yes, there is a "Beijing culture", but it is subordinate to the greater "nation-force", as in any country. In Urumqi, however, the pungent flavor of the Uighur culture affects everything: it is as if a great bag of ground cumin-seed and chili-pepper were dusted over the whole city. In Urumqi, the (figurative) essence of cumin and red pepper are everywhere.

So, this is Beijing. I lived here for two years. As with the earlier "hindsight journals" which make up the novel "Fragments of China", this document will be a series of topical articles, sprawling and without any planned order. That is why I called it "Fragments of China". The unity is in the fragmentation.

The "Yang Yang" Restaurant.

I lived in a teachers' compound about five minutes walk outside the campus walls, and fifteen or twenty minutes from my classrooms. (More about this compound later.) Inside the compound was a "Sichuan-flavor" restaurant called "Yang Yang". As with the earlier restaurants of this type, I went here for the peace and quiet, for the favor of being left alone to eat what I wanted, to be left alone with my thoughts, to be (partly) guaranteed the freedom of Chinese food without MSG. In time, I became friendly with boss and some of the other workers. In order to help guarantee the kind of food I liked, I would order the same dish again and again, so that the staff would have no reason to slip up. Therefore, I went to various restaurants for certain dishes, rather than alter the restaurant's menu for my changing palate. You, the reader, may think me silly for doing this, but if one presupposes that life in the Third World involves working with "broken things" (whatever the "thing" may be), then the key to survival is not in being pushy, superior, demanding and arrogant, but in being adaptive, gentle with machinery (such as door handles and toilet flush mechanisms), making allowances for life's surprises, and willing to work with life's quirks. The Yang Yang restaurant gave me this.

This restaurant was really dirty. There is no other way of putting it. The other foreigners had their favorite "watering holes", and this was mine. I suspect that, deep inside, I liked it because I could usually stay away from the other foreigners during meal times. To be honest, the

last thing I wanted to see at lunch was another foreigner, and Beijing had many of them. (More about that, later.) The actual dining area had six or so small tables. The cooking area was out back, and it was really, really "raunchy"; you just did not want to examine it too closely. My favorite was, as usual, "stir-fried leeks and tomatoes", with nothing else. This dish, and a few others, went on for many months.

What shall I remember the Yang Yang for, as time goes by? During the SARS epidemic, when many establishments shut down, and I was faced with the very uncomfortable prospect of having to cook my own food (which I detest doing), the Yang Yang was one of the few places that stayed open. In this respect, it was very much a life-saver. Two years have gone by since I left Min Zu Da Xue, and the whole establishment has shown signs of flushing me out of its consciousness. Not so this restaurant (and of course, my remaining students). Sometimes, I stop in and say hello to the staff, but in time, this too will die out. Beijing will never endure in my heart the way Urumqi has.

The Fruit Lady.

In every place I have lived in, I have built up a buyer's relationship with a local vendor, and fruit vendors were some of the most typical. First, a little background.

"Internal migration" is very widespread in China. The migrant and "semi-migrant" workers come from and go to everywhere in the country, but in particular they come from Sichuan Province and Henan Province. Perhaps the living conditions there are difficult. However, one thing is clear: without them, the nation could not operate, for they work like Trojans, day-shift and night-shift. Many people from the "middle class" look down on them, shower them with all sorts of prejudice (but no one would admit to this), and wish they were not in town. However, the migrant workers remain indispensable.

Next, many vendors come from another class of people. These are people who are reasonably well educated (i.e., finished high school), and who seem to have fallen on hard times. I say this, because these people seemed to be more cultured and academically intelligent than the migrant workers (the "min gong") from the deep countryside of Sichuan. I suspect the fruit lady I did business with in Min Zu Da Xue was one of these people.

Both she and her husband worked in turns at the fruit stall, which was built into (and out of) one of the windows of a grocery store. This being Beijing, many varieties of fruit were available at most times of the year—even Thai "durian" fruit were available at times. I typically bought bananas. There was a time when you could use the presence of bananas on the street as a real indicator of economic progress; now, that is history, since the tides of change have run rampant. I liked her because she was friendly; each time I came to buy something, we would share some little chit-chat. Since her stall was right by the gate, it was impossible to go in and out of the teachers' compound without making some sort of contact. Day after day, week after week, I walked in and out of that compound, and she could probably gauge my emotional makeup that day by analyzing how fast I walked past, if I greeted her (even with so much as a nod, if not a word), and if I made eye-contact or not. I, for my part, learned how to walk past her a fast as possible, and either avoid her noticing me, or look at her, smile, pass on some unspoken communication, and move out into the busy street, all in the sweep of the gaze. It is interesting to see what one can do in a minimum amount of time.

Over the months, I watched her, as I like to see people, and try to glean out some small grain of observed truth from a barnyard of raw data. I do this with most of the things I see here. Since it is very difficult to get direct answers and direct observations, learning about the environment here is like snatching pieces of broken pottery when the opportunity affords itself, taking the pieces home, bit by bit, over a period of time, and assembling them on the "basement kitchen table" of my mind to form some "mosaic", according to inference, constant thought and analysis, as well as some wishful thinking and prejudice. It is like making 10-year brandy, I think. Most of the pictures I have assembled are made up of thousands of five- or ten-second "visual snatches" (or, shall we say, "eye-bites"), taken in the course of all sorts of daily activities.

Anyway, to return to the "fruit lady".... I began to suspect that she was inwardly very unhappy, and not over short-term matters, but about the bigger things of life. Sometimes I would walk past her (assuming that she was not aware of my passing), and see the care all over her face. She was probably in her late-40's, had shoulder-length hair, weather-worn skin, work-blemished hands, and a friendly gaze when up close in conversation which changed into a distant stare into who-knows-where when she was alone with her thoughts. In summer, the shirt sleeves became short, and the sun-darkened skin of her forearms appeared. A broad sun hat completed the picture. With winter, she bundled up under layers of thick kapok overcoats, and her head disappeared under a green Soviet-style "earflap hat". A thick, red and white knitted wool scarf, almost five feet long, went around her neck and half of her face. Only her eyes remained visible, but it was enough to whisper out her silent story. Sometimes I would go out to teach class for the third and fourth periods, and not the first and second. The teachers' compound and the road to the university gate were empty of pedestrian commuters, and the "baby-sitting grandmother and toddler" set was out in force. The air was cold and still; the vagrant dust of our unkempt street was temporarily at rest. She sat there, almost immobile, waiting for a buyer. She sat there in almost all weathers, selling her fruit, perhaps the most difficult of cargoes to "unload". She sat there, on her stool, silent, staring into eternity, beyond the grey streets of Beijing, beyond the present, into the distance. Her hands hovered over a small tin-can brazier filled with lumps of smokeless coal. I can see her now, clear as day, in the slide show of my memory. There are many, many others like her, everywhere.

"Jiao Shu Yuan."

When I was working at Min Zu Da Xue, I lived in the teachers' compound. This area of housing was about five minutes away from the east (small) gate of the university. Getting there meant walking past small "Mom-and-Pop" shops, along a capillary street which should have been a one-way lane, but which carried insane amounts of traffic in both directions, past school children flowing to and from school, and braving whatever tricks nature was blowing at humanity. It was an ordeal. However, once inside the teachers' compound, life became calm, almost in an "ox-bow" sort of way. The university had two gates into housing area, but the second one was locked; this meant we did not have to suffer any reckless drivers who wanted to cut across our land (the Beijing drivers know every short-cut, like water understands every crack in the dike).

Over the two years, the complexion of the teachers' compound changed. Areas of wasteland were cleared of their trash and debris, and became an open area for a weekend market. A set of one-story buildings were built and became grocery shops. The old hot water building

(for the compound's central-heating) was gutted, and a very attractive and new hot-water system was installed. Exercise machines in the playground area appeared. (This happened all over the country, as if by decree.) It seemed that, in the wake of the SARS epidemic, there was a drive to make the whole compound self-sufficient, able to be shut off against the outside world if need be. A row of shanties was demolished, opening up a whole new avenue to the outside world near the back gate. However, there were some things that did not change. The main restaurants, hairdressing parlors and grocery stores near the front gate remained the same, and the general feel of the place, as a haven for teachers, retirees and others, was peaceful and undisturbed.

Who lived there? Apart from the teachers and their dependents, there was another category of person: those who were not a part of Min Zu Da Xue, but who rented apartments and lived there. Certainly, living in a fairly safe "gated community" was worth having, and I suspect that there were many outside people who rented space. Wouldn't it be great if retirees from other (i.e., western) countries could live there in peace and quiet? In return, the retirees could give some tutorial time to selected students. The main idea is this: these teachers' compounds are very peaceful places, where no one will bother you.

In the evenings I liked to wander around the teachers' compound, walking up and down side paths that had hitherto escaped notice. I examined people's postage stamp gardens to see how their sunflower plants were doing; I enjoyed the peaceful seclusion of forgotten corners; I traced out outlines of my future "dream house" in the hard earth of the open wasteland. It was a place where I could forget myself. The architectural power of courtyards and compounds to create peace in the midst of strife is one of the great gifts of Beijing, and this power should not be underestimated. Beijing is a high-pressure city, yet once inside a courtyard, the outside world vanishes, even though it is only half a block away! Therefore, I liked to look at courtyards wherever they came into my life. The best place was Guo Muo Ruo's house, with its unique inner architecture. However, to live in the "Jiao Shu Yuan" was a pleasure.

About the "expats" I knew in China.

Perhaps some of you are wondering why there has been little said about expats in this book. The answer is simple. Although there were many who were kind to me, I did not really want to know them. They had their agenda, and I had mine. I wanted to disappear (for a season) off the western radar screen, into obscurity, and I did not want to be constantly reminded of what I was trying to leave (for a season). Don't misunderstand me: I love my home earth. I learned more about "nationalism" from the Chinese (ironically), than anywhere else, and I applied it to my own situation; I learned more about "love of native soil" from my land in Maine, than anywhere else, and I am happy that I "own" (for a season) part of the American republic. However, here in China, I did not want to live the "expat life", with the small parties and get-togethers, the dinners, the semblance of western life, and with it, the implicit social obligations. I wanted to be a lone American iceberg floating in a vast sea of soy sauce. It goes without saying that my offer was often fully reciprocated by many expats. When I look back on the bulk of my social contacts, they were as follows: my students, my ex-students, the local tradesmen, a few others, and the immense void. Hey, I just wanted to be alone! I wanted to live in peaceful obscurity, away from what troubled me! One of the great kindnesses of the Chinese was this: they left me alone, and let me live alone in peace. One of the great advantages of China was this: the

"geographical cure" worked, at least for a season, "sometimes yes, sometimes no". Do not ask me more about this topic, for I will not tell you!

There were a few expats that I liked, and that is because they were like celestial comets: cold balls of ice hurtling through the immense darkness and oblivion of outer space, coming from nowhere, and going onward into the unseen depths of the future. In a sense, they were my "cousins", plying the expat universe alone (of course, alone), doing what was in their heart. I wish them well. We, the swallows of Asia, have gone everywhere.

About the SARS epidemic of 2003.

In 2003, after much incubation, the SARS virus attacked China. If you want the details, go to the newspapers; here, I will focus on some local events, and my impressions.

The virus attacked China in slow motion. The official response was slow, but once the government got into action, it moved forward with resolution. Make no mistake—when the leadership here wants to do something, there are few things that can resist it. In Min Zu Da Xue, people did not seem to take the impending danger seriously, even as it crept deeper into society. However on one Friday, the Beijing government announced that a quarantine would begin the next Tuesday. That was the trigger for many strong reactions on the part of the people. Shoppers flooded the supermarkets, and stripped many shelves of their goods. Of course, many people were afraid to go out shopping, for fear of catching SARS. One of my friends, Amanda, was disgusted by this fear, and so was I; we therefore decided to go shopping in the local Carrefour supermarket, not for the food, but just to be deviant by mingling with many strangers. We went shopping, and had a great time, just being there.

As for Min Zu Da Xue, about 60% of the students fled the campus to return home. One evening, they descended on one of the in-campus supermarkets and bought all the suitcases. They boarded buses and trains, then returned to their homes—all over the country. I heard a story of one man who left his job, his house, and his wife, and fled to his old hometown, but the SARS was there too. People threw their cat or dog out of their apartment window, because there was a report of pets being contagious. After a day or two of sustained (mild) panic, the city settled down to its siege.

I wore a cloth face-mask, like almost everyone else. Sometimes I had to walk from the teachers' compound to the main campus, and to do this, I was given a special pass. Of what use were precautions around our school? I wonder. If someone had "relationship" with the security guards, he could leave the teachers' compound, go to Carrefour supermarket and buy what he wanted. You could tell these people easily as they came back home by their plastic grocery bags. Sometimes, I saw students—boyfriend and girlfriend—talking to each other; one came from outside, so they met at the perimeter fence and held hands and kissed through the bars. The "Yang Yang" restaurant stayed open (thankfully), so I had food enough, although I often worried about what would happen if they closed down.

On the Min Zu Da Xue campus, something of far-reaching significance happened. Since most or all of the "normal" courses had been closed down, there was nothing to do. Over a week or so, many informal courses sprung up all over the campus parkland, like field mushrooms after rain. I called it the "Beijing Spring" (after Prague, in 1968). Courses like "ethnic group dancing", folk customs, provincial history, singing, crafts, and many others sprang into being, and

continued for some weeks. They were very popular among the students and staff. This is very important, as there are few, very few "elective" courses in Chinese universities. This was perhaps the first time that "elective course education" at university came of age. I wonder what the future effects of this almost unnoticed revolution will be. I also wonder if other universities had the same experience.

For me, there was one very important consequence of the SARS "quarantine". I had much free time on my hands, and I started to write. The book "Where there is no Lao Wai" began as a three-page article, but soon it grew and grew, and after six weeks it was a handwritten, 400-page book. So, I am glad I was alone in my room for many weeks, wandering from writing table to the "Yang Yang", to my bed, and back to the writing table again.

In time, the SARS epidemic was brought under control. The government learned much and made improvements. Life returned to normal. Students came back to the university. I am glad that I stayed, and did not go out to somewhere. (Besides, where would I have gone to?) In fact, I am glad that I spent my "55 Days in Peking" at Min Zu Da Xue. I hope I would do it again… but I would not want SARS to come back again, that's for sure.

The Classes of 2001, 2002, and 2003.

I taught a number of classes at Min Zu Da Xue, but the ones I remember most were the classes of 2001, 2002, and 2003. Of all the classes I taught in China, 9801 in Urumqi was the best, but in Beijing, 2001 was a very good class.

I taught 2001 the Writing class, and we had many good times together. Many of them came from ethnic minority groups; their homes were scattered all over the country, especially the south of China. They were smart, and some of them were really smart. It is this class that kept me sane during those months of "anomie", depression and lack of direction. We had a good textbook, "A Handbook To Writing", and we did many exercises together. In our free time, there were many "free talks", especially in the foyer of the International Student building, or in their classroom. I did not like to "go out" with them to local sites of scenic interest, as I felt such activities were good for "relationship-building", but a waste in terms of hard-core, "time spent in English learning". The students of 2001 were kind, had their own mind, and had the confidence of youth, mixed with the cautiousness of country / minority girls. Since their graduation, most have done very well. They are definitely "blue-chip babies". With one, I taught "composition planning" under one of the university's wisteria arbors. Another, who wanted to know something about Africa, I met in the university garden; we went through all the nations and territories of Africa, and talked about them, using a very small globe, which I had bought in the bookstore. Others came to talk about their writing; some came just to talk about anything, because they wanted to improve their English. A few were student leaders, but they were different from the usual batch of student leaders, as they were gracious and free of that infuriating mixture of arrogance / low brain-power / laziness in class / "blinker-mentality" / hyper-loyal to the "system". One student talked about an interesting concept—the "freeman of the world". I think she was referring to the concept of quietly doing your own things, being free of the oppressive social control of peers, having a dream, and living it out—in short, a quiet individual. It was she who will be the prototype, the symbol of every other free-thinker that comes my way: in fact, the dawn of such characters in China has come (again), and I look forward to the results

with interest. There were many others in 2001, who I ate with, talked with, laughed with, and much, much more. We also had a "Video Appreciation" class one term, so I had them watch the classic black-and-white films of the 1940's, as well as "King Kong" (1933). That was a fun class, although I hated the technical problems; fortunately, one of the students was technically gifted, and he made things work. It also goes without saying that many of them were extremely beautiful, attractive individuals. They often teased me about this. The class of 2001 also gave me a very good birthday party one year. It is natural that the book "Where there is no Lao Wai" is dedicated to them. Some of these students had connections with other foreigners on campus; this presented its own set of circumstances and difficulties. I did not want to get closely involved with these other foreigners, as they had their own doings with these students, but I wanted to talk to my students. I do believe in "turf", as it applies to time invested in a student. If I feel a student is deeply involved with another foreigner (intellectually or culturally), I do not want to be involved deeply, lest I lose out in some way. Among many foreigners in China, students are gazelles on the Serengeti, some ripe for the picking.

The class of 2002 was very different, just the way one year of Beaujolais is different from another, even though they were produced from the same vine, with only one year between them. They were, perhaps, more casual, more naughty, more "liberated", a little bit more openly lazy (sometimes), more modern (a bit)… but above all, more modern. Each year, the age-old patina of Chinese traditional culture is rubbed off, and the gloss of "contemporary global culture" is added. However, make no mistake: under the surface, the core values remain intact; a mere phone call from home would determine everything they did. They are, therefore, a transitional age group. There were a few students I spent a lot of time with. One girl, a Hui, wanted me to teach her French; we spent quite a few afternoon hours in the lobby of the International Student building, going over some grammar book. I do not know what became of her French aspirations, although I always had the inner impression that I would be discarded when the time matured. Actually, she did make contact with me. Another student was very, very clever and hard working. I do not know how social she was, but she loved Harry Potter books and would relate much of her dreams to that "matrix". When I received information that some foreign student was looking for a Chinese tutor, I would tell her (as well as another student from 2001); in this way, she developed various job experiences. In time, she was accepted for graduate school. Hard work pays off, here. Some other students in this class were rather naughty and carefree; I couldn't help but encourage their naughtiness and carefree attitude, just to see the aura of youth play itself out in the classroom. (By the way, "free talks" in Min Zu Da Xue were often in the students' classroom, as it was quite a long walk for them to get out to my classroom, especially after dark. Later, a few "free talks" were held in my apartment.) Some students had tragic demeanors, but at heart they too were playful. Some took me out shopping; these experiences were not so much about the act of shopping, as in providing a context for "field dialogs". A few students wanted me to help them with their writing problems, so they sent in optional essays, and I corrected them. Then there was one student whose English level was far below her classmates'. We decided to have special tutorials. For many months, we met in the International Student building, to go over her material. Although her English progress was modest, the effect on her self-confidence was significant. I think the time spent with her was worth it. This tendency to spend time with some of the "lesser" students comes from my training in special education (learning disabilities); my heart is sometimes there. There were others of note in 2002, but I will stop itemizing here.

There was one difference between 2001 and 2002: many students from 2001 will maintain contact and various levels of "friendship" over the years, but I suspect that most of 2002 will "vaporize" into society, and quickly at that. With 2002, there was no binding glue to hold us together. (There almost never is, but with some groups of students, a partial "inertia against time" is possible.)

The last class, the class of 2003, was also different from the other two. I had them at the beginning of their four college years, and even though I am not at Min Zu Da Xue now, I have kept in touch with many of them; this has given me continuity with them that 2001 and 2002 did not have. There were a few high-octane super-achievers in this class (one went to the USA to study for a year), but most of these students were ordinary people—although for me, they were special. I watched some of them come of age; I read their autobiographical letters to me and gleaned much; we talked in my room, or in the International Student building. A few students got the tutorial treatment. (There is always someone like this in every class, and helping them takes the monotony out of generic teaching.) By this time in my teaching career, the young students really are "babies", in that I could have been their father. What could pass for ridiculous paternalism in the USA is accepted here; thus, I can call them my "babies". (Older students would never tolerate this.)

There were some other classes in Min Zu Da Xue, but they had no impact on my life: only a few other students affected me, or else became friends. The classes of 2001, 2002, and 2003 were very important to me, each in a special and unique way. As I write this (May, 2006), 2001 has been in the workforce for one year, and 2002 will graduate very soon. Next year, 2003 will leave Min Zu Da Xue. They are my only real tie-in with my old university work-site. There is something evaporative about Min Zu Da Xue, in that the place does not seem to welcome me the way the Urumqi place did. Only the students and some street workers / vendors remember me. There is no permanence anywhere else. One reason for this may be that the student body comes from various minority groups hailing from all parts of the nation; when these students graduate, they really do scatter. There is no permanence. I hope that a long-term minority of students from these three classes will maintain a lifelong connection.

"Yuppie Shopping."

In Beijing, you can buy almost anything you want; in this respect, China's capital is the equal of any world-class city. The underground system is efficient, and new lines are being built; the bus network is extensive, but the traffic is horrible; taxis are available and effective, yet they are expensive. There are malls in every major node of the city; most are Chinese in flavor, but many are straight out of Europe of the USA. The modern Chinese consumer has decidedly international tastes, and as a "demographic group", they spend vast amounts of money. First, it was basic items like watches, DVD's, TV's; then, it was cars and holidays; next, houses, interior decorating and overseas education; after that, who knows? I suspect it will be "second houses": summer cottages in upper Heilongjiang, the Tian Shan, or western Tibet, and winter hideaways in places like Hainan Island, Yunnan, or in a few cases, one of the South China Sea islands. Flush with cash, anything is possible. All kinds of purchases are going on every day; the appetite of Chinese "yuppie spenders" is enormous.

However, this article is not about the emerging Chinese middle class. I wish to talk about

the "yuppie shopping" of the high-end expats in Beijing. These are the diplomats and their families, the business executives, the long-term expats, and others. As the newspaper "21st Century" so cruelly put it, English teachers, drifters and dropouts fall into the lower category of expat life in China. Thanks a lot.... These high-end expats come from their home countries, but they bring all their habits and expectations with them, and the ability to shop and buy everything they are accustomed to is high on the list. Some people want the perks of western life because they are used to it; some cannot live without it; some are reluctant to be in China in the first place, but since their spouse was sent or wanted to go, they, the "dragged ones", demand compensation in the form of "home in a bubble, overseas". Reader, take note: there is nothing so miserable as being linked to someone who does not share your vision of the overseas life. Others go overseas because the union of western-level salaries and Chinese cost-of-living makes for explosive, giddy levels of luxury, a standard of living which is unthinkable back home. Many high-end Beijing expats, especially the diplomats, like to go shopping in the "Yan Sha" shopping complex, on the eastern part of the "Third Ring Road".

The "Yan Sha" complex has everything imaginable: medical centers, car dealerships, all kinds of regional headquarters offices, five-star hotels, restaurants, shopping malls, and an underground supermarket. I went here because they had German brown bread ("beer bread"); I am a brown bread lover. They also had everything else an expat stomach could desire. The "Yan Sha" management knew this, and charged sky-high prices. However, what did the expats care, since they were living on corporate salaries and expense accounts? All the usual luxuries were there—Japanese sushi tuna fish, all sorts of rare fruits and vegetables, jams from Italy, French cheeses, American soft drinks... and, on one occasion, ostrich eggs! (It was the ostrich eggs that took my stomach, as they were so unusual. I bought one and took it to the home of a friend. We drilled a hole at either "pole", blew out the contents, and made a 24-egg omelet. Now, I respect those Bushmen and their lungs, as they blow out ostrich eggs for lunch in the Kalahari Desert.) The "Yan Sha" supermarket was straight out of the west; it was a bubble far from its native soap, a consulate of luxury, a temporary escape from the hyper-reality of aspiring, compressed, stressful Beijing. It was a "Swiss bank account" of "comfort food" (which for me means brown bread), and a touchstone of home culture (which even I needed) in the middle of an endless lifestyle-sea of Chinese experiences. I went there about once a month. Normally, I like to live apart from most of the "expat experience", but the western food stores, as well as the newspaper kiosks of the five-star hotels, were my "cultural watering-holes". They were a necessary part of life in China.

Films, Baths, and Day-Trips.

I don't know why I threw these three topics together, but here they are. Life in Min Zu Da Xue was a compressed sequence of classes, "free talks", meals, and more meetings with students. I suppose I was addicted to student life, for a variety of reasons. However, I needed other outlets, since I had no (real) personal life. This is one consequence of living overseas as a bachelor, and little contact with other expats.

Films were an obvious emotional outlet. There were many cinemas in Beijing, and most of them played Chinese films, or foreign films that had been dubbed into Chinese. (This is a pity, as having foreign spoken language with Chinese subtitles would have been one excellent way to

help improve the English-language skills of the Chinese listeners.) However, there was one cinema, quite near to Min Zu Da Xue, which focused on the expat community, as well as English-loving Beijingers, by showing well-known western films in English. I usually went there alone, but sometimes went with one of the male students (Kevin) for his language experience. As with the "Yan Sha" supermarket, it was a cultural escape from China, which I loved but which sometimes became heavy, and my isolationist lifestyle, which I craved but which often degraded me. That is what cinemas are for—a place to forget in; perhaps this is why "Bollywood" is so successful. At times, one's own culture is a breath of clean, fresh air when breathed from outside the "home matrix"; it has a feel and an elixir-like effect that people back home either forget, or just take for granted. The feelings I had after leaving the cinema—going out of one oblivion, the film's world, down a flight of anonymous concrete stairs to the cinema's back door, and out onto the next oblivion, the streets of Beijing late at night—were complex: the images remain clear in my mind, but the thoughts are blurred and unable to speak to me.

Another cinema was in the eastern end of the city, and had to be reached by taxi, subway, and a short walk. (You may ask, why not take the taxi all the way? It was too expensive, and I tried to never tell the taxi driver where I really wanted to go—just the subway station—lest he try and take me all the way, and charge me a lot of money. You are successful in China, to the extent that you can hide your true intentions, act in polite secrecy, act alone, and bring back the results you originally wanted.) I would show up early, eat some obscure meal in an equally obscure restaurant a block or two down the street from the cinema, wander through the night-market and look at the usual rows of produce and household goods, say a few words with a friendly stall vendor (these people were common), ignore some prejudiced comment from some other stall vendor (these others were thankfully not common), wander out again and drift down the dark street in a fog of obscurity, and approach the cinema… a beacon of light in the empty street. If the doors were still not open, I wandered down the street to the other end, to where the hair-salon was hidden behind some bushes. I went in, hoping nobody would question my presence, and had my hair washed. "Water wash" is safe; "dry wash" (shampoo, with a little water, carefully massaged into the scalp for five or ten minutes, then washed out) is more problematic, as the girl then asks if you want massage, and more…. In time, I went into the cinema and watched the film. After the film was over, the feelings of that neighborhood, the feelings of "anomie", were even more powerful, and I had to forcefully walk myself to the nearest subway station and go home.

There were two expat magazines in Beijing that catered to the information needs of the many foreigners living in the city—*That's Beijing*, and another magazine. They listed all kinds of useful information, including cinema and film information. Many bars in Beijing had big-screen DVD systems, and they advertised the films they were showing. I sometimes went to one, to see the film they were offering. What an oxbow lake of my soul! I bought a soft drink or a cup of tea or hot chocolate, and sat down for the film. Only two other people were there, besides the bartender; they talked the talk of "another Friday night with a friend" in quiet tones. I ignored them, and they ignored me. About one or two minutes before the film was due to start, a few other people came in, the film started, and … it was the wrong film. Same name, totally different film. After ten minutes, I left the bar, went out into the night, wandered back through the housing estate and darkened streets to the subway station, and returned home.

I am deliberately painting a picture of futility, meaninglessness and "anomie", because this

was the underlying reality, the emotional bedrock of my life in Beijing. In time, it ceased to be a disturbance, since it was a constant companion. I made it my home. I suspect that, for many, many foreigners (and Beijingers alike), it is the same story.

Next, the baths. Beijing has many public baths, and so do all Chinese cities. Some are just that—public baths for the masses, with several shower stalls inside, and in the poorer cities, a coal-fired boiler outside. Others are more sophisticated: showers, hot / warm / cold water tubs, a "back-scrubbing service, massage, steam baths, saunas, and in some, "other" services. They were immensely popular. The one I went to was located in the north-east corner of the city, somewhere near the "Third Ring Road". To get there, I went by subway, and then took a motorized "motorcycle-tricycle" with an enclosed "box" of a passenger compartment behind the driver, facing to the rear. It dropped me off near the bath house, which was run by a Japanese business operation, and I walked two hundred meters to the front door. Like a small water organism that has strayed too close to the trapdoor of a "bladderwort" plant, I was sucked in through the front door by the zealous doorkeepers, who loudly shouted, "Welcome! Welcome!" I registered, chose what services you wanted, paid, and was led to the men's changing room, followed by more shouts of, "One man to the shower room!" I felt like the leopard being shouted at by unseen, persistent lemurs from the branches above the jungle trail.

I went in, changed, and showered. The shower room had all the equipment of a typical Japanese establishment—squat-stools to sit on while showering, and low-mounted shower-heads. Every move I made was shadowed by the male attendants, who wanted to do everything for me—scrub my back, soap my back, give me a towel, or even turn on the water for me! I had to be patient with them, as they were just following orders from someone. After the shower, I went to the hot / warm / cold baths, and soaked. Someone brought me fruit punch as often as I wanted it. I often wondered, was that punch "spiked" with something, to make me feel as if I were on a visit to the Island of the Lotus-eaters? Nonetheless, I ordered another punch, and another, and dozed in the hot water, changing to the cold pool when I felt a little too drowsy and wanted to wake up again. In one corner of the pool, a "false rock-face" had been built, and hot water came out of it, like a humorous waterfall in the city of the damned.

All sorts of (moderately well-off) people came here. They were ending their youth and entering middle age; most seemed to be businessmen of one sort or another. On one evening, some people brought in a sick man. Whether he had AIDS or advanced cancer was uncertain; however, he was so thin and emaciated he could have been wrapped up in a beach towel, as in his burial shroud. Everyone was silent as he was gently lowered into the hot water pool; nobody wanted to pay attention to him. Normally, the Chinese are some of the world's most curious (and nosey) characters, but they are morbidly afraid of death; therefore, they did not want to look too closely at this old man. Maybe he was in his 50's, but his illness aged him considerably.

After the soak came the scrubbing. I was brought into another room, with many tables that looked like a doctor's "examining table" arranged in neat rows: there were about ten of them. I lay down on one and was soaped, scrubbed with a harsh sponge, rubbed and pounded, soaped again, and then rinsed off. A multitude of dead skin pieces came off me like wetted sawdust off a rip-saw. I was dried off (the attendants were very insistent about doing this for me), and then I had to make another decision—dress and leave the place, or go to Stage Two? That is how these places work: they never ask for everything up front; the walk "down the garden path" is carefully arranged, so that each decision is a small thing. Of course, I went on....

I put on shorts and a bathrobe, then I left the lower level. On my way up the stairs, more "lemurs" shouted, "One massage customer going upstairs!" Truly, there is no privacy in China. Someone led me down a hallway, past many open doors with more "examining tables" inside them, past another room with four or five women sitting doing nothing and waiting for their call, around a corner, down another hallway, into a quiet room. I was told to sit down and wait. Tea was brought. I waited. In about five minutes, someone came in. The massage lasted one hour (longer, if you wanted more), and the masseuse was competent. Reader, in case you are "wondering", this place was respectable (at least, on the surface of things); the "naughty" places were elsewhere, and believe me, Beijing is full of them. However, on my way back down the hallway, I often wondered if there was a secret back door that only the "regular customers" knew about, a door that led to the "naughty room". I never asked, never knew.

Once again, I had a choice. At this point, I went into the bath-house's canteen. Various simple Chinese dishes were available on demand, and I usually ate the same things. I actually planned my visits to this bath-house around my meal-times! Arrive, wash, soak, scrub, have the massage, eat, and then move on. Don't eat first, then have the massage; that is not good. The canteen was very clean, the attendants were careful, and the food was pretty good. Nowhere was there a face. In this world, there are no faces—that is, faces with a smile to them, hearts within them, souls around them. The life of a person is carefully hidden behind competency, service, and silence. Only necessary words are spoken. No one is rude, no one shares what is in their heart, no one is a real person. That is, perhaps, what the customers want: they want to enter a world so far removed from their own, actual lives, and enter another world, where they have an identity (the "lemurs" know who they are), but they have no real name. It is the land of the lost, the unhappy, the wanderers, the hidden ones. Customers and service-people alike are "hidden" people, who do not want their actual life and their dream life to intersect in any way. If the two worlds intersect, it means collapse and disaster.

On another occasion, I went with two friends to a "Water World"-like place, a huge affair with swimming pools, water slides, simulated sea-wave pools, and water rapids in which your floatation tube was whisked around and around by the periodic waves the machines sent you. It was a place begging for a drowning, but on the whole, the Chinese seem to be unaware or unconcerned about such things. If I had a child, I would be very wary of letting him or her play in such a place! There were also medicinal "hot-tubs" in this place—small pools with a thick layer of red and pink flower petals floating on the surface, and what looked like a huge teabag drifting about here and there. The "teabag" was filled with Chinese medicinal herbs which, when absorbed through the skin, were supposed to be healthy. It was very "family-oriented" sort of place, but very hard to find… I mean, <u>really</u> hard to find: there were no signposts to lead the way, which made me think it was only for those who were "in the know". We soaked, scrubbed, slid down the slides, and did the usual things.

Finally, the day-trips. The leaders of the Foreign Affairs Office at Min Zu Da Xue sometimes planned day-trips or evening banquets for the foreign teachers and the foreign students of Chinese. On one occasion we went out to one of the rural scenic spots about one hour north-east of the city, to visit a pretty valley, some underground limestone caves (with stalactites and stalagmites, and glaring green florescent lights to highlight them), and a huge Buddha on top of a hill. The day was so-so, but the Foreign Affairs Office really tried. Hey, some offices do almost nothing except pass you your salary each month. Ours was professional and competent.

On some occasions, we were taken out for dinner. Usually, these evening banquets were to honor the foreign teachers and students, and they coincided with an important Chinese festival. Sometimes, I wondered if some of the leaders wanted to have a night of gluttony and drinking; if some "foreign teachers" were invited and honored, this validated the spending of school funds for a party. Once, one of my colleagues said that the evening's entertainment was embezzlement, sanctioned by the presence of the foreign teachers. I suspect this happens often; it is a form of "social grease". However we, the foreign teachers, felt upset at being used like this. After nine years of teaching English as a Foreign Language in China, I am tired of these banquets. At first, I used to be morbidly afraid of being forced to drink something alcoholic, but now I don't care about this as much (however, I hate the Chinese liquor). One other thing. There were some other foreign teachers there who taught Russian, Japanese, or Korean. I never really spoke to them much during the school year, so at the banquets I felt strange: I felt I had nothing to talk about. Of course, this was not their fault. Sometimes, the "bubble of isolation" was so strong and resistant to being broken that making any form of conversation was very difficult.

So, here are some accounts of life in Beijing as it applied to films, bath-houses, and day-outings. In hindsight, I realize that the school made a lot of effort to entertain the foreign teachers and students; in addition, I actually visited many places in Beijing over the two years I was there. It all adds up. As for the visits to the bath-houses, it was a symptom of the emptiness that was raging inside of me at that time. I suppose that life is like that: one must taste the full range of experience, from pleasantly-lighted rooms with delicious food on the table, to dark and empty streets and nowhere to go.

The "Liu Xue Sheng" Building.

In Min Zu Da Xue there is a building that contains the Foreign Affairs Office, as well as the classrooms and dormitory for the foreign students. It looks and feels like a youth hostel, and is called the "Liu Xue Sheng" Building. ("Liu Xue Sheng" means "a student who studies in another country".) Although I lived in another place, I went to the LXS building many, many times, as I used the entrance lobby, with its easy chairs, as an unofficial office.

The university authorities strictly forbade the Chinese students to go upstairs into the foreign students' dormitory: I suspect they were afraid of sexual affairs, or political subversion, or missionary activity. In this respect, the landscape of Chinese universities is as timeless as a waterhole in the Serengeti during dry season. As a result, the foreign students held their language tutorial classes in the lobby; in addition to the easy chairs, there were many study tables available for use. The Min Zu Da Xue students coveted the chance to tutor a foreign student in Chinese, in exchange for money or an English (or Japanese) tutorial. There were many Japanese and Korean students at our university, as well as a fair number of Europeans and North Americans.

As I used the LXS lobby as my office, I saw much of the tidal flow of life coming in and going out of that building. There were two or three old men who acted as gatekeeper, manning the reception desk phones, closing the swing doors that everyone else opened and forgot to close, and keeping an eye on things. Every so often, one of them would step outside to squirt out an enormous glob of phlegm into the bushes. Nobody cared. Both men were taciturn men, and it was all the harder to make conversation with them, because they had seen all that happened, and there was nothing much to say, anyway. They smoked the day away, and their lives. Who can

blame them? They sat there like seagulls, watching the tide bring in debris one hour, and carry it out again later, day after day, after day. They presided over a polished stone floor universe, a cosmic tidal pool.

In the back of the lobby, behind the elevator shaft, was the LXS mailbox. It was full of "dead letters" to long-since departed students; there were also many misplaced letters to people in other departments. Nobody seemed to care. At first, I would scan through the piles of letters, hoping for a letter; after a while, I gave up, "tuned out", and did not care about whether I got mail or not. When it comes to communication with home, I like the telephone, as I can hear my father's voice. Letters are opened and rifled through by the university Foreign Affairs Office staff, and e-mail is a pain. Therefore, this mailbox was a monument to futility, to the practice of (as it says, somewhere) "wearing one's eyes out, longing for the return of a loved one."

Next to the mailbox was the LXS convenience store. The women who ran the cashbox were friendly, and were pleasant to chat with from time to time. As I mentioned before, the "fu wu yuan" (service staff) were often helpful and friendly in China, as they are in most places. The convenience store sold all the usual junk food, toilet paper, soap and bottled water, but little else. To get "real stuff", you had to go some distance to the local Carrefour supermarket.

Upstairs was the Foreign Affairs Office. I would go there on official business from time to time, and rarely for social reasons.

I used the LXS lobby as an unofficial office, to have free talks, special tutorials, French tutorials, informal meetings, and oral exams. I do not know if the two gatekeepers resented my being there so often; I pointedly did not ask. To me, it was a "forward base", a rocky outcrop somewhere in the South Atlantic for a wandering albatross to rest on for an hour or two, and keep some long-range appointment. When I look back on that place, I realize that many, many meetings and tutorials were held there, and many hours invested. It was a sort of microcosm of education and friendship.

I have been away from Min Zu Da Xue for two years now, and the LXS lobby is more than ever the rocky outcrop in the South Atlantic, as my wanderings become larger and longer. I see those students that remain (2002 and 2003), but in time they will also disappear. Only the gatekeepers will remain, and like the same old elephant seal, they will grudge my dropping in for a brief meeting with an old friend.

Dai Ying Chun.

During the height of the SARS crisis in Beijing, all work units were under quarantine. When I was not writing the book I was in the formal garden of Min Zu Da Xue, having "free talks" with 2001 students and others. Throughout some of these talks, I noticed a woman sitting beyond the fringe of the audience; she was far enough away to avoid interaction, yet near enough to hear what was going on. I sent one of the students over to her to ask her to join us, as she seemed too shy to join the discussion group openly. In this way, I met Dai Ying Chun.

She came from Hunan Province—always a good province when it comes to rice, "stinky tofu" (chou doufu), scenery, history, gold, generals, leaders, and pretty women. She was slight of build and with a small head, but she had one of the best sets of pigtails ("bian zi") in the country. (The best belonged to ZXB in Karamay.) Her pigtails were enormous, with great fluffy ends. Since we were thrown together by circumstance, we started talking and began to develop a

friendship. It was a familiar pattern of behavior in the "Chinese girl meets western boy" syndrome… (or should I call it the "western boy picks up Chinese girl" syndrome?). We talked about "English-language problems", walked about the campus together, met in the classrooms for more English talks, which became discussions about 17th Century poetry, and (after the SARS crisis) went to a teahouse in Fuxingmen to listen to Chinese classical chamber music. We talked about "us". However, there were two things I did not like. Her dress was really quite good, but she wore high-heeled shoes. (There is something about women who wear high-heeled shoes that makes me very suspicious.) Her manners were good, but every so often, some mannerism popped up that belied a different character within. It was the occasional "errant five percent" red flag that I did not like. On one occasion, she even said something like, "I need you." (I like my women to be very autonomous.) Well, this went on, with me skittish, and she miffed, until the point of our breaking up.

She was however, rather sweet. On my birthday, the 2001 students gave me a birthday party, and she came too, and even danced a Hunan ethnic minority dance. (Why do I, all of a sudden, think of Herodias' daughter?) She was not afraid to be seen as "with me"—something I have never really learned to do, not even in my dreams. It has been a few years since that time; I heard she was now a graduate student in Beijing. I wish her well, and all the others, too.

The visit to the tree-planting lady.

One day in the *China Daily* there was an article about a woman who had devoted her life to planting trees in a very inhospitable area of northern China, on the edge of the Gobi Desert. She was a latter-day Johnny Appleseed, and had been awarded a civic prize by the Chinese government for her environmental service. This prize was for notable Chinese women, and was given each year to about ten women. Her story was very moving: getting married off at a young age, sent on her father's donkey to the husband's home in the middle of nowhere, crying over cruel fate until there were no more tears, the "epiphany" moment, the decision to plant trees, the long and hard route towards reforesting her part of the countryside, official recognition, the award, and the greatest challenge—fame, attention, and celebrity status. It was this last part that pained me the most; a return to relative peace, seclusion, and anonymity (with some government funding for more tree-planting, of course!) would have been better. However, there it was. I read her story, and on impulse, I thought about visiting her. I contacted the reporter, got her contact information, spoke to her on the phone, and set off.

Throughout much of my time in China, I have thought nothing about jumping on a train or an overnight bus and going to some place or visiting some friend. At times, I would go as far as 750 kilometers away! (These days, the urge to do so is much less.) Getting a ticket from Beijing was fairly easy for me, as there was a "satellite" train ticket booking office not too far from Min Zu Da Xue. The overnight train took me to somewhere in Inner Mongolia, I took a minibus to somewhere else, and one of woman's cousins took me the rest of the way.

Her part of the country was between the dry lands of northern Shaanxi Province, and the even drier region of the Mu Us Shadi semi-desert, on the southern fringe of Inner Mongolia. It was a very beautiful, gaunt, stark, dry and simple place. Most of the land was composed of sand dunes, some covered with scrub trees; in a few pockets, there was land suitable for growing dry-land corn or millet. So, it was like a cross between French-speaking West Africa and Cape Cod. It was

the kind of land that breaks your heart when trying to cultivate a living from it, and which restores it every peaceful night, when the sun has gone down, the sweat evaporated and the skin a little chill, the moon has risen about fifteen degrees into the chameleon evening sky, and nothing is moving. Such land reminded me of Niger, especially during the time after Gordon died in 1984. She was very kind, very gracious, and this was all the more striking after knowing the privations she had gone through. Her home, a mud-brick single-story structure and a few outbuildings set in a depression among the dunes, was very simple. Inside were the bedrooms, the living room with its small coal-burning stove, and the winter kitchen. The summer kitchen was outside; it was made of mud-bricks and looked like a permanent soup-canteen. Behind the house was a very small electricity-generating windmill, such as one can see on two-mast yachts, and a photovoltaic solar panel. I think they had been given to her by some people.

One of the reasons I had come out to see her was to discuss an idea I had for a mechanical tree-hole drilling device, mounted onto the back of a tractor or "dune-buggy". I thought it would be an alternative to having "the masses" come out every March to plant tree saplings as they had done in the 1950's. I wanted her opinion. That first night, I went out with her onto the dunes to see how she planted trees. It quickly became obvious that in this landscape of 15-metre dunes, such a machine could not be used (although I still think it could work in the great semi-desert flatlands of Qinghai and Xin Jiang). She was a very practical woman, indeed. I forget where I slept that night, or how, but I am glad I did. Some of the best places I have visited have been in the desert, with its absolute silence, save the noises of the farmer's animals, and the occasional passing tractor, with its two-stroke engine. (The other place was a shanty in the desert outside Turpan in Xin Jiang. It was in the middle of "gravel-nowhere", and such a haven of stark isolation I have not seen anywhere else.)

After a day, I left her. She had to attend someone's wedding, and she wanted me to attend, but I wanted to return to Beijing. She put me on (yet another) minibus, and I left, passed through miles and miles of almost-empty land, and made it to some bus terminus. After that, who knows… in time I was back in Beijing. How strange it is that, even now, I can remember the very tracks I passed over, but other things are consigned to oblivion.

Although I do not want to share some other things, I think for the sake of others I think I should. I made some whopping cultural mistakes during that visit. One concerned the issue of "house gifts". Thinking that she lived far away from the city and "civilization", I wondered what she would want. I asked a local fruit-vendor in Beijing to pack me a crate of oranges. Well, a crate of oranges is a very heavy thing, especially when you are traveling alone over northern Shaanxi Province in rugged minibuses! I gave up and gave the oranges to my Min Zu Da Xue students (of course, they were happy). Instead, I gave her a bag of Dove chocolate pieces—about 200 of them. This was a very, very bad mistake, far her child found the bag in no time, and began to eat them. In a few hours, there were chocolate wrappers all over her compound. Oh, you ugly, ugly, ugly westerner! Moreover, the child's mouth was filthy with chocolate smears. Next time, it will be a small bag of oranges…. Second, I think I made her unhappy by not attending her friend's wedding: it was a real, northern Shaanxi country wedding, and the people there were very friendly. On the other hand, I was fixated about getting back home. This was a classic "cultural misunderstanding", straight out of the "cross-cultural" textbooks. Based on these, and other events of that weekend, I wonder what she ended up thinking of me, for she has seen many people on her land in the past year or so.

My final impressions of her—and I have chosen to keep "her" anonymous—are these. First, the burden of fame is almost as vexing as the burden of years of hard living, existing near or inside the condition of poverty. Second, she was a very admirable woman. I wish to believe—I hope—that she had "arrived", that she had found her destiny, that she was not where she was "meant to" be, but was where she *wanted* to be. I hoped that the world she had married into, cried over, developed, nurtured, cultivated and loved was the world she loved. I hoped that she liked what she had—especially all those trees that were her "babies"—and was not like so many other people—myself included—who strive after the "world beyond". Yet, perhaps, her patch of semi-desert *was* the "world beyond", and it had been given to her, for if she had remained in northern Shaanxi, her life would have been very, very different, and perhaps the lesser. So, dear comrade, you are very cool, and in my memories, whenever I think of the hushed semi-desert of Niger, standing atop Gordon's Toyota Land Cruiser and looking out over the infinity of sand as it changes shape and color under the chameleon evening sky, I hope I will also think of you. As for the desert, the campaign must go on, until the worst effects of the desert have been contained by a net of flowering desert bushes.

On "dead-end relationships".

Throughout my years in China, I had many dead-end relationships. This was, and is, mostly my own fault… but not exclusively so. When I look back over the years in China, as well as the preceding years in the US, I can see emotional bodies littered all along the long and sometimes tortuous trail I followed.

For the most part, I am afraid of any close relationships, as I fear the total loss of autonomy and independence. Of course, women are not (all) monsters, or some thing to be feared, but in the dark and dusty recesses of my mind, they are so. If I had married, then most of my life in China would, very simply, have not been possible. Think of it! The (possibly) hundreds of thousands of kilometers traveled over so much of East Asia, the thousands of hours spent with my students, the pages and pages I wrote (as well as the volumes I thought about, but never wrote down), the myriads of dreams and crazy ideas, the whole "gestalt" of the new career found in China. I believe that all (or most) of it would have been neutered. "If you want to do something well (or do it at all), then do it alone." Or, "For every one person who wants to advance himself, there are nineteen 'turkeys' trying to pull him down." So, do I have any regrets, when my own college classmates have their marriage, two or three teenage children, their careers, their house mortgage (mostly) paid off… and whatever else? Jamais! Jamais! Jamais! I am glad I did what I did. However, who were these people that made up the other half of these "dead-end relationships"?

Once again, a little background is needed. Most Chinese women have this emotional profile of the typical western (i.e., American) young man: He will leave you one day. Many westerners have this view of the typical Chinese young woman who falls in love with a foreigner: she really wants to immigrate to the boyfriend's country, enjoy the material prosperity there, "switch" him for another if this is expedient, and (this is the most important part) retire in comfortable circumstances back in China (i.e., going "out" is just about the money; the heart never left China, as native, latent nationalism cannot, and will not be erased). Of course, these are

exceptions to this way of thinking: many couples do form, and live happy lives. I hope that the population of expats who marry Chinese women (men are a decided minority, here) will be a statistically significant, if small, group of people. It is good for international understanding.

However, back to my situation. Most of the relationships I had were "dead-end" because I really did not want to go anywhere with these people. Impulse, dark desire, naïve and wishful thinking, and others reasons were reasons why I tried to construct a relationship with the Chinese women I knew. Note how I said "construct": I had a definite, preconceived notion of what I wanted. It was something like a "blended, composite woman", a mix of San Mao (the traveler/writer from Taiwan Province), Liu Hu Lan (the 1940's revolutionary martyr), and the archetypal "Red Guard" (with her pigtails). I even wrote a "marriage/personal advertisement, but I never published it (that would have been very dangerous indeed). It went like this:

LOCATION—LIFESTYLE—LOYALTY.

Me: American expat, 44, infertile, English teacher (9 years in P.R. China), masters-level education, lived in 25 addresses, traveled in 35 countries, never married, no children, quiet, thoughtful, creative, speaks French and Chinese pretty well, loves land, homestead farming and a simple, non-competitive, "back-water" (i.e., obscure) life seeks Han Chinese wife from P.R. China to share life/career with him in "developing" countries (in other words, another person like "San Mao"?).

Her: 28 – 38, Han Chinese, childless, willing and able to: live in "hardship" places (e.g., Xin Jiang, Qinghai, Tadjikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and other such places), talk and communicate daily in basic, everyday English, live on a low budget, have no children, keep her Chinese passport, move frequently and travel lightly, (i.e., no fixed, permanent home; we follow the jobs); also willing and able to make her own life and local friends in the places we live in (i.e., not exclusively psychologically/emotionally dependent on me; this does not mean that I will neglect her!). Prefer someone with countryside/farming background (able to thrive, and enjoy life in "rugged" settings).

Anyone seeking U.S. passport, "Green Card", their own political, religious or personal "agenda", life in a "developed" country, the "good life", children, power, money, etc. is not welcome: leave me alone. Not interested in other nationalities, or other Chinese ethnic groups. Call, after 9:00 p.m., at (010) _____.

Well… most people said that I was crazy. Maybe I was, but this "advertisement" was more of a psychological self-portrait than an actual advertisement. Later, I had an artist draw a set of portraits of this "composite woman" for me: the scroll hangs in one of my rooms. Together, the advertisement and the portraits summarize my views and desires concerning relationship. Perhaps it is better they remain frozen on paper—untouched, unmodified, "safe", naively ideal, locked up in a box or on a wall. Real women are a very different proposition.

Every year I was teaching in China, there was at least one woman (usually a student of an ex-student) who tried to "chase" me. I usually blew them away as fast as I could. They were naïve, although a few were intentional, and therefore dangerous. Perhaps it was just as well for the Chinese women involved that I was indecisive, cowardly, isolationist and unresponsive: I have heard of some foreigners who have been despicably cruel, ruthless and exploitative with their "girlfriends". One story I heard goes like this: A man in Beijing had a Chinese girlfriend, and when he was about to board the airplane home he called up his girlfriend and said "So long" to her. It may be an "urban legend", but I tend to believe it.

One ex-student "chased" me for some years. At one point, we had been interested in each other, but after a journey together, I decided she was certainly not suitable for me (too delicate, too selfish). As Mark Twain said, the way to find out if you really love someone or not is to travel with them: all the "dirt" will come out and be exposed. She still calls me from time to time. Imagine a wet slug chasing you over the desert sands, melting away bit by bit, leaving her slime trail on the sand, and gradually drying up and disappearing.

Some women had very good "talking" relationships with me. We spoke on the phone—whether constantly or intermittently makes no difference, but the timing does—but did not make any concrete "plans" or promises. These women were truly waiting for Godot, even though they often talked with him.

I think most of these relationships were "dead-end", because I was "dead-end".

What a Chinese woman wants is so different from what a western person wants. Some people will say, "It doesn't matter what country or race you come from; if you are willing to 'work things through', then all will be all right." To a point, that is true, but I also disagree. I believe in "Location, lifestyle and loyalty" more than the usual criterion. Also, Chinese women have very different objectives and goals: parents rate higher than spouses, all forms of stability are of prime importance, they believe the proverb "the tree-leaf always falls back to the roots". There are many more. Then, there are the issues of caring for the aging parents (in different countries), who would normally have nothing to do with each other. The Chinese like "relationships" and people a great deal; I liked walking in a forest of trees (for the Chinese have always been a forest of talking, faceless trees to me, trees that let me be what I want, and do what I want). Then, there is the issue of children: the Chinese like children very much. There are many, many other variables, which I will not delve into.

Then, I too walked up "dead-end" streets, and got myself hurt (whether I felt hurt or not makes no difference). I made many, many friendships with my students. (Don't worry: here, I was typically having "talking" relationships with them, as would many other teachers.) What made these relationships "dead-end" was this: there <u>was</u> no future with such as these. They would graduate and go away, follow their own (legitimate) boyfriends, get a job, and disappear. This is exactly why I liked to be with them: they automatically self-destructed, with no "blood". You may say, "You cheated yourself", and I would agree. These "relations", if you can call them such, were safe. They were clouds without water, buckets with pinholes in them, portraits without a "hanging wire". The more work that went into them, so much the better. They kept me occupied, and kept the "anomie" away—if only for a season. That was a drawback; well, get more! If my interlocking "web-of-social-contacts" became to complex, then it was time to move on to another school.

There is much more that I could say about this, but I won't. It is just a sketch. I do thank the Chinese for this, though (among many other things): they left me alone, to wander the forest as I pleased, within certain limits.

About Amanda.

Amanda came from Heilongjiang Province to Beijing in order to study for her Associate's degree. She was introduced to me by my sister Vicky. From time to time, while I was working in Min Zu Da Xue, I would meet her for English "free talk"; however, Amanda soon became a

good friend, and we visited parks, ate dinners, walked along the boulevards of Beijing, and just enjoyed short-term life together.

Amanda had a very alert, "I want to see what is in life" attitude. (She is the one who was so disgusted at the SARS-related paranoia sweeping Beijing in the summer of 2003, and who wanted to visit the Carrefour supermarket with me, just to be socially deviant.) She could well have become the modern-day equivalent of Miss Maillart (?), who accompanied Peter Fleming on his epic journey across China in the 1930's. However, I remember she was afraid of spiders.... I cannot say, "She was pretty", as almost every woman here is attractive in some way. Her English grammar was atrocious, but she had the unquenchable desire to "have a try" in life, and she was willing to launch out into the far corners of the Chinese inner-galaxy. I think she would be good in the business world. Like most aspiring business people here, she thought nothing at all about asking me, on the strength of our acquaintance, for my help in registering her a "front company" in the USA (a somewhat shady business move, in order to gain some advantage): needless to say, I declined her, and I suspect that out contacts dropped off for a while after that. Variations on this theme have often happened to me; that is just the way it is between "them" and "us". There will be no change, I believe. However, I must say this: we did get on well, even if there was always the spectre of an almost-transparent plate glass window between us (like the feminist's "glass ceiling", this social phenomenon will always be present, and indestructible).

Once, when I was traveling in Heilongjiang, I visited her home town. She introduced me to her father, who very kindly found a driver and took me around the upper borderlands of Heilongjiang. We walked in parks, talked, and had a pleasant enough time. One look at her hometown told me why she was an aspiring young woman: the place was dead, or almost dead, a place with no future for a woman with dreams. Yes, there was a coal mine there which would probably keep on producing for another generation. Sure, if she wanted to be "leveraged" into a city government job through father's influence, marry some local man of property or influence, and fall into the groove, then well and fine... but I think this life was not for Amanda. While walking in the parks with her, I saw some of the famous "Siberian pea shrub" bushes, complete with seed pods (it was late summer), but I was afraid to take the seeds, for fear of US customs. I wish my garden was full of those plants! They are perfect "drop-forage" for free-range chickens. However, one thing happened which showed me the "ever-present glass plate". Her father checked me into a hotel, and as we were leaving to go out, he said, "The massage parlour is on the second floor". There was an encyclopedia of innuendo in those words. Oh well, fathers will be fathers.

In time, Amanda left Beijing and went to Guangzhou (Canton) to find a job. Guangzhou is the money-magnet for all the would-be Dick Wittingtons of China; it is all money, sweat, grime, pressure, hardship, risk, profit, followed by a (hopeful) return to one's true home, and the first down-payment on one's house. She had some entry-level job in some company, in some part of the Pearl River Delta "matrix", lived very close to the line indeed, stayed in the company dormitory, and occasionally called me. Those phone calls were dispatches from the far reaches of the inner-galaxy, notes from the mayfly on her first sortie, sketches of a very ephemeral landscape. She has been silent for some months now, but I have no doubt that Amanda is this generation's equivalent of the first Lowell "mill-girl" who left the family homestead and struck out on her own. She is a "real woman". So it is, think I, writing this in a dusty side-room in Urumqi... so she is. What a pity there are two or three plate glass windows between us.

About Calypso.

Of all the new friends I made during the time at Min Zu Da Xue, no one was more influential and important than Calypso. Of course, this is not her real name, as I think it best to cover it. You may wonder, why use some name out of a Bond novel? Well, it sounded appropriate, and our times together certainly justify its use in this article.

During my first term at Min Zu Da Xue, I was asked by the university to teach oral English to two classes of graduate school students. Each class had about 50 students. Many of these people were not really interested in learning English; in fact, the whole concept of this class was a joke from start to finish. (It is a sad thing that English learning in China has become a business, and not a real art. In fact, the best way to teach English is to have a class of 16 students—4 x 4 groups—for a whole year, and in this way mentor them through to English proficiency.) Usually, when I taught the class and told the students to speak about some topic in small groups, the majority just got into groups and did anything else they wished—such as speak Chinese or send text messages on their cell phones. The exam time was even more of a joke—it was like "sheep-dipping" on an Australian sheep ranch! Each student would come in and give a name; I asked a few questions, and then let the student speak a few sentences. In no time at all, the exam was over, and the student would leave. This went on all afternoon, until about the 30th student.

I did not notice Calypso when she came in. Nothing about her struck me at first sight. However, after two minutes, she said that she had been adopted. I sat up in my seat, and realized that an interesting person was sitting across the table.

She was medium height, of slight build, with black shoulder-length hair. Her eyes and her face all screamed "intelligent" at me, but there was also a complex life and thought process behind those eyes, that face. She was the third of three daughters, and soon after she was born, the parents "farmed her out" to another family, as they knew it was not feasible to adequately raise a third child. Therefore, Calypso joined another family, and grew up with them, not realizing that she had been adopted; indeed, she only learned of it about six months before I met her. In our first meeting, I introduced to her the concepts of "blood family" and "adopted family", "biological parents" and "adoptive parents": these turned out to be very useful "cognitive pegs" to her, as she restructured her understanding of her life. We would have talked for an hour or more, but after 15 minutes, I realized that the other students were becoming restless; Calypso and I exchanged telephone numbers, and she left. At this point, everything should have ended.

Calypso called me a few days later, and confessed to me that she was not my student, but a "substitute", as the real student was terrified of taking my oral English exam. Since Calypso had reasonable English, she had been a natural choice. Besides, she came from an excellent university. I decided not to report this matter for the following reasons: perhaps other students had done the same thing, she had been honest to me, the class was a farce in the first place, and most all, I was intrigued by the whole affair—I was tickled by the audacity of it all. I was now very interested in her, and the prospect of more interesting stories, so I told her not to worry. We planned a meeting.

Thus began a friendship, which still lives on. It was not an easy journey. Both of us have had "complex" childhoods, and this has been reflected in our conversations, imaginations, mistakes, disagreements and dreams. Although she got her masters in Sociology and is very clever, she often doubts herself. She has said that many people call her "naïve", but she is no worse than the rest of us in our early-20's. There is an abiding insecurity within her, but I

attribute this to the "adoption issues" that need to be worked through over a period of time. This insecurity has been compounded by Calypso having two super-achieving (biological) elder sisters, and very expecting (biological) parents. In her adopted family, she is the only child. She cries at the drop of a hat, and is extremely sensitive and "teary" at times. Her voice is the pure Chinese "Putonghua" (Standard Mandarin Chinese) that is coveted by radio announcers. In fashion, she is immaculate—as my mother used to say, she who masters the use of the scarf has mastered all one needs to know—and Jenny knows how to use a figurative "horse-blanket" and turn it into a work of art by Hermes. She once came to an appointment with me, wearing the Chinese equivalent of a Burberry raincoat, and her hair had been lightly tousled by the Beijing wind. It was enough: she was living proof of the maxim that the "finishing touches" of nature are the pinnacle of fashion and beauty. She is extremely articulate in her own culture, and has made much progress in English-language matters, although there is still much to absorb. Although her English proficiency has not increased significantly over these four years (when I met her, she was already quite good), her breadth of knowledge has grown a great deal. This is where her linguistic strength is. (Remember, many Chinese learners of English are not very good, once you take them "outside the box", and out of their chosen area of expertise.)

Our acquaintance went through at least two "ups and downs" before settling down somewhat. Like two other Chinese friends, this friendship was also very telephone-based. We have spent a lot of time talking about issues related to the ups and downs of life, and she has had many of the latter. Still, "life undiluted" is the best source of topics for English conversation. We have covered almost the entire spectrum of scenarios in our conversations, and done so in English. Sometimes, I think I am "grooming" her for something far above and beyond mere, paltry me. This is probably going to be the end result: she has known a number of foreigners, especially Germans, and has a German boyfriend who I suspect (and hope) she will ultimately marry. If she is the celestial rocket, then I was one of the "first-stage boosters". However, this "grooming" motif is suitable for me, as over the years I have noticed how life has often thrown me in with very clever individuals, people of destiny, and those who will achieve something in the future. Therefore, I see one of my roles in life as encouraging such people, even though I may never see them again, or know how they did. It is not a "crap-shoot"—it is one of the legitimate risks of life, and to a point, I accept this.

We have held our conversations in many of the interesting places of Beijing, which certainly is one of the world's cultural centers. We once had a very pleasant ride through the "hutongs" (small alleys of Beijing) on a "tricycle-rickshaw", where we planned a visit to Paris; we have visited tea-houses in Fuxingmen and Zhongguancun, and enjoyed classical Chinese chamber music or jazz; we have eaten in all kinds of restaurants, and discussed our lives, or others; we have communicated in my place, sharing the ups and downs in our lives; we have visited Guo Muo Rou's old courtyard house, with its fabulous courtyards and covered quadrangle walkways, and appreciated architecture. In all these things, she was able to hold forth with "reasonable-to-good" ability, and have what my father calls "meaningful conversations".

I appreciate Calypso for her ability to tolerate my "sweet words"—and I have beehives full of the stuff—as well as my shortcomings. (In fact, she often chides me for my "sweet words".) She, in turn, has had her share of troubles in life, and I have listened to them on the telephone. We have become very good friends, now that the early turbulence has settled down, the boundary lines have been established, and her German boyfriend has occupied the future. It is this stability

that makes the future bearable; however, I still have this feeling of being a booster rocket, lying somewhere on the floor of the Atlantic Ocean.

On Chai Ling, Zhang Qing Ning, and Liang Hong Ling.

Chai Ling and Zhang Qing Ning were also part of the class of naughty / apathetic graduate students that I taught for one term. I would never have known them except for one chance encounter with CL. I was taking roll-call one day, and noticed one young woman with short, stubby "double pony tails" (i.e., "shua zi"). Anyone with such attractive "shua zi" gets my instant attention, so I wondered who she was. Shortly, I found out she was #13 on the list; then she had a name, CL, and a friend, ZQN. This was how our friendship started. Her pigtails have disappeared into legend, but CL's character and kindness live on.

We started having "free talks" in the "Liu Xue Sheng" building, and these talks ranged over all kinds of topics. CL and ZQN were both Party members, and this made my talks the more interesting, for they were very articulate, interested in the world around them, and anything but stiff and cumbersome "apparatchiks". At first, their English level was "so-so", but in time, as they gained confidence in saying something, and as their English ability improved, the latent knowledge and curiosity within them bubbled out in profusion. They were both graduate students at Min Zu Da Xue—CL studied Sociology, and ZQN studied Anthropology. Unlike many students in these departments, and especially the Anthropology department, they were earnest and energetic students. (I say this, because there was a "dirty rumor" going around that many undergraduate students would sign on to the Anthropology department when they graduated with their Bachelor's degree, and study Anthropology for their Master's degree. This graduate program was very easy to enter, if you were a Min Zu Da Xue student, and if you had some "connections". Bear in mind, there is a huge surge of "education speculation" and "degree-chasing" going on in China today, due to the current hardships in getting a decent job; it is certainly understandable.) Anyways, they took their studies seriously. CL was asked to be a translator for some foreign anthropologist from Europe, so she spent some time with me, going over speech transcriptions and correcting / polishing them. We also had "free talks" on specific topics as we needed them. CL also went out on field trips to various parts of China. However, when it came to field trips, it was ZQN who had the really interesting projects and social issues to investigate. (Remember, China is an anthropologist's dream-land, since there are so many "people groups" there to study, and most of them are very interesting.) In particular, ZQN was studying the effects of a certain social issue on one sector of the population (I will not say which). She was a true field researcher, willing to go out to the source area, talk to the people, and consider some anthropological problem. Sometimes, both CL and ZQN would bring me their assigned articles (some photocopy of a western book), and ask me to explain difficult passages. That was good English practice, but also hard for me to explain, as I find "hard-core" academic texts hard to understand myself: doctoral material I am not.

As the reader might expect, I was interested in one of them. However, the other was interested in me. This naturally posed a dilemma: in true fashion, I gave up on both. If only one had been in the picture, something might have transpired.

One day, CL asked me to proofread and correct the doctoral application of her friend, Liang Hong Ling. This third graduate student wanted to be an overseas student at Yale, or somewhere

like that; however, the option to study in Lyon was also there. I corrected the papers and moved on, but LHL and I kept up an e-mail correspondence. In time, Yale fell through, and LHL went to Lyon #2 University to study for a year—and so too did CL.

The next summer (I forget which year), I flew from Boston to London, saw Susan, and took a side-journey to Lyon. I am often going on these crazy "pilgrimages-to-nowhere". There are all kinds of mini-airline companies in Britain that serve various secondary cities in western Europe, and if you buy right and are willing to put up with a little travel-hassle, the prices are very good. Someone told me of six pound flights (the return part, that is) back from Barcelona. For that, I would be happy to arrive in London at two in the morning. Anyway, I arrived somewhere, and took the shuttle bus into Lyon. CL had a Chinese friend who was studying medicine, and he let me sleep on his sofa; considering the hotels were charging 70 euros a night, I was pleased.

Lyon is a really cultural city, with all kinds of history from the Roman days to the present, architecture everywhere, everything that France can offer, without the pressure of Paris, and wonderful streets, markets and restaurants. In addition to seeing CL (why else would I have come out?), I wanted to make sure they got to see some of the culture which is special to Lyon, eat the essential French dishes, visit the important museums and "covered back alleys" of Lyon, and the like. It is amazing how many Chinese overseas students will spend most of their two or three years abroad holed up in their apartment or classroom, so close yet so far from the local culture. However, this was not the case with CL and LHL: they were hungry for anything. We had our "epiphany" sitting on one of the stone benches in the Roman amphitheatre, looking at the ruins around us, and through the empty air, the past. We had another "epiphany" while walking down the dim streets of the medieval Jewish quarter on a busy market night; one street might be still with the accumulated ages and presided over by the silent gargoyles and even more silent house-number plates, but two streets over would be full of the noise and commerce of the present. We ate in the "bouchons" (the Lyon restaurants serving the local dishes), and tried many things. We bought dried lavender. We visited old bookshops. We visited the museum showing how the Lyon lace (?) was made, and the covered alleys of the silk workers. We looked at everything, climbed the riverside park hills, strolled through squares, and shopped our way through the open markets looking for "wild-boar and truffle pate". Reader: be certain, there is nothing on earth that can compare with France!

I went because I wanted to see how CL and LHL were doing, and perhaps because I was once again chasing impossible dreams. Anyways, the trip was a success, and in time I returned to London, and to Susan's home, the only place on earth where I can be at (almost) perfect rest, in mind and heart. I suppose that is what the word "home" means.

Where are these three people now? CL and ZQN are studying for their doctoral degrees in good Beijing universities. Unlike so many people, who are merely studying for a "piece of paper", I have confidence that CL and ZQN are the real thing—that is, people who earnestly love knowledge and its pursuit. I wish them luck. As for LHL, she stayed in France, in Lyon, to study for her doctorate, which she will do in the French language. The first year in Lyon has truly emancipated her mind, and with work and preparation, she may go many places. It is her progress through life that I watch with the most interest. How strange! All this started with a pair of "shua zi", a woman who was #13 on a class-list, and it has spread all over the world, through all kinds of thought, and who knows where else? Being with these three people has been an "epiphany" in itself. However, the last "epiphany" was this: graduate students are the most

interesting people to be around, as they are capable of real thought (not "baby thought", as with most students). I sometimes wondered that, if I had focused my attentions on a graduate student, and not the "lao bai xin" (the common, earthy people) of China, I would have found my "someone" a long, long time ago.

The trips in Japan.

I forget if I wrote about this topic somewhere before, but here it is for now. During the years I spent in China, I visited Japan twice. The following is a brief summary of those trips, as well as some general impressions.

Since Japan is on the eastern side of every map of China, every time I looked at the map, I wanted to go there for a visit. The first trip was mainly to see my "adopted mother", Kato, in her hometown in the north of Honshu island. I also visited Hokkaido island, as well as some other places. It was a very expensive trip, as I did not use the "Japan Rail" pass. On the second trip, I used the two-week rail pass with a vengeance, and went to many places; I mean, I sat on those train seats for most of those two weeks, and went as far as I could, to see what land I could.

When I think of Japan, I think of a host of things: the "capsule" hotels, the hot springs, the public baths, the trains and the rail network, the "bullet trains" on the main lines and the mini trains which serve the branch lines, the ferries, the total feeling of exclusion as one walks through Japanese society, the plastic "demonstration" dishes in the restaurant window, the bureaucracy in a bank when changing money, the forested hillsides and even some hillsides covered in concrete, Kato herself, the "ryokan" (guest houses), the quintessential Japanese neatness in everything, backyard gardens, seafood, the castle at Himeiji, Kyoto, the Zen temples, the shopping malls, green tea powder, the train stations, the vending machines, the "convenience" stores with their Asian snack food, the "onigiri" (rice wrapped in dried seaweed "paper"), the sensuous curve of a castle wall, going barefoot inside, islands by the hundred, and much more. It is absolutely impossible to write about Japan and say it all, and foreign writers have been trying to do so for a long time. I will just stick with a few sketches.

The small-town, local public bath houses left a deep impression. It is so pleasant to walk into a public bath house, pay your shilling, walk into the men's part, shower yourself clean, and then soak in the hot tub. What we westerners assume is a decadent luxury is considered as common and essential as brushing your teeth. Of course, having a nation that sits on a volcanic island helps a lot. In Japan, most bath houses are taken for granted, and have no stain of decadence or immorality about them, as they do in other places. Here, you can escape and be at peace, and go back again the next day.

The "capsule hotels" are mini hotels, in which your bed is like a torpedo tube; you crawl in, draw the curtain, and sleep in the capsule. Your locker is beside you, your shoes are in a special locker by the reception desk, the shower room / bath house is in the basement, and it is normal to wander downstairs in your bathrobe. It is "bachelor heaven".

I enjoyed staying at the "ryokan" guest houses, but I really felt like a "cultural illiterate" every time I went to one; perhaps it would be better to stay in the utterly impersonal business hotels, where everything is so utterly sanitized, even "anomie" cannot survive. I mean, I liked the food, but I had absolutely no idea how to comport myself; I certainly did not know what to say. It goes without saying that Japanese food is exquisite.

Since Japan is an island nation, it has a very good ferry network. The ferries are very clean, and traveling on the longer one-day or two day runs was a very pleasant experience, almost like slow-motion, passive psychotherapy. The best sea-journey I ever took was the two day trip from Kobe to Shanghai. It had a dreamlike, peaceful quality throughout, as one left the Japanese "matrix", crossed the grey, mildly swelling sea with its occasional, diminishing flying fish, and into Shanghai and the Chinese "matrix". I look forward to the really long routes, from Osaka to Okinawa, at some point in the future.

One night, as I was lost in soul, drifting and hungry—as I often am when traveling—I entered a noodle restaurant. It happened that the waitress spoke Chinese, as she was a language student from Taiwan island. Instantly, the "anomie" disappeared, we spoke, and I ate. She made a great difference to me. On another occasion, as I was looking for a "ryokan" to stay in, an Australian exchange worker, who worked at the local information bureau, helped me to find a place. Many other people, in many other places, also helped. Here, I think of the scene in "The Old Man And The Sea", when a small bird lands on the old man's boat to have a rest before flying on. In a third scene, I was in an underground mall, the ultimate temple of "anomie" and crowded, impersonal society; I sat down by a fountain. This was one of those "intelligent" fountains that squirt water here and there, and the children were having a joyful time playing, running among the squirting water and getting gloriously wet. I sat and looked at them, too tired in my soul to criticize them for getting wet. Their innocence and happiness transported my inner being to somewhere, I know not where, and for a few moments I was at peace, just by watching them. I think of that line, "Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings...". That fountain and its children was a small shelter of peace in a continent of "anomie". Since I have traveled over much of East Asia, I have learned to make mental notes of all the quiet backwater places I have seen and appreciated. They were parks, courtyards, silent alleys, bamboo gardens, public toilets, bus stops, and much more. I will not share them, so as to help preserve them.

The Japanese "mini-trains", which served the many branch lines, were very impressive. The Japanese government has done well in connecting many small towns, and these small trains are a very good way to do it. (I hope the Chinese will learn the lesson, and do a similar thing in their remote, mountainous areas, such as Tibet and Qinghai.) Each train was diesel-powered, and had only three carriages. Traveling on these trains gave me a very good view of the Japanese countryside.

I happened to be in Japan when "Pearl Harbor" was first screened. It was a strange experience to see this film in a shopping mall "multiplex" cinema. How time, place and circumstance have been altered! After the film, I wandered back to Kato's home.

Although the Japanese are a very controlled people, they had their "blow-out" traits. One such place was the "love hotel". I was in Niigata one night, waiting for the ferry to points north. I could not get into a business hotel, so I had to pay up and sleep in a "love hotel". This is a place where harried Japanese parents can escape to for a night away from the children, or where lovers can have their "night together". The room I stayed in struck me as a very "kinky" place to be, with luminous stars on the ceiling, monster-size black porcelain bath tubs, and strange-colored glass windows. Sometimes, I opened the windows to reassure myself that there was still a "real world" outside. Outside, the impersonal skyline of Niigata slumbered on, and those luminous stars never dimmed or went to sleep. The other time when the Japanese "loosen up"—and sometimes to a crazy degree—is during their Buddhist or Shinto religious festivals. I am not a

"party-lover", so I did not like these festivals much; I just wanted to go to sleep. However, during the festival I attended, the local villagers made a small sailing ship out of reeds, loaded it up with items of religious significance, and towed it out to some place beyond the harbor, and let the straw ship become saturated and sink. Then they danced the night away: now I know where that phrase comes from.

I liked the Japanese politeness, efficiency, and the way they manicured their landscape. Both the Japanese and the Swiss are what I consider "anal" people, and one good effect of this is the extraordinary degree to which they keep their landscape well-groomed. It was always a pleasure to look out of the train windows, and see the farmers trimming the edges of their rice-paddies with "weed-eaters", or see some other farmers bringing in the rice harvest with a "mini-rice combine harvester", or seeing them plow the rice-paddies with something that looked like a roto-tiller / plow with "side-paddle steamboat" wheels, allowing it to wade through the mud. Everything was well organized. Of course, this reached its height in the Zen temples of Kyoto.

If I visit Japan for a third time, I would like to spend one or even two weeks in Kyoto, and walk slowly through the temple grounds, soaking in the aesthetic beauty of the Zen Buddhist gardens, courtyards and temple buildings. Kyoto is one of the aesthetic mainsprings of my landscaping ideas in Maine; I cannot explain how it works, but I know I owe Kyoto a debt, because of the way I visualize land and buildings. One afternoon, I sat somewhere in a temple, just looking at a strange-shaped pine tree, and sat there until one of the monks came out to shut down the place. In various parts of East Asia, there are certain courtyards, buildings or other "architectural islets" that have caught my attention.

Of all the old buildings in Japan, my favorite was the castle at Hemeiji. Everything there is "building perfection", and the downward sweep of the castle walls was sensuously beautiful. Inside, there were many old items from the samurai days. At the top of the main tower (all made of wood, and roofed with ceramic tiles), the cross-blowing wind made the open room a very evocative, historically romantic place. People say that the carp which live in the moats are old and very smart, for whenever someone approaches them, they swim together towards the bank and open their mouths, begging for food.

Japan has many vending machines, especially for soft drinks. They are a kind of culture in themselves. I especially liked the soft drink called "Pocari Sweat" (like "Gatorade"), and the chilled, canned "English tea". These drinks are expensive, as is almost anything in Japan. You can almost see money evaporating off your fingers in Japan, life is so costly there. That is why I like to spend my money on rail passes, cheap "capsule" hotels, and convenience store food. Scenery, sleep, and sustenance: forget the rest, as it costs too much.

As for the convenience stores, I liked them a great deal. They were culturally familiar, their food was easy to look at and identify, they were air-conditioned, they were everywhere, they were almost always open for business, and I felt emotionally comfortable there. This last point is very important. The "7—11" convenience stores are a transient thing, and they cater to transient, almost shadowy people—like me, and (I hear) a whole subsection of the Japanese population that wants to take the terms "social recluse" / "social drop-out" to very intense levels. So, these places were very helpful to me. I just didn't want to burrow into mainstream Japanese culture; I only wanted to live in a sort of benign "floating world". In this respect, Japan is a very suitable place for well-groomed, respectable, short-to-mid-term "floaters". Bear in mind, for those who want to "penetrate" the culture, the Japanese are extremely exclusive. I said to myself, "Why

bother? Just float around, and enjoy the sights and tastes." One last thing. In the convenience stores, there was a snack food called "onigiri"—a piece of fish or meat, surrounded in a ball of white rice, and wrapped in dried seaweed "paper". These saved my stomach on many occasions.

So, these are my impressions of Japan. I have always liked traveling there, and hope to return for another one or two visits. After that, I will treasure the memories, and play them in my brain, like a well-liked film. However, most of all, I liked the public bath houses.

On Wandering The Streets.

(This is the last article for "The Pickle Barrel", about my life in Beijing; the article on the first trip to Burma will serve as a sort of "appendix"; besides, I wrote it earlier (Summer, 2005), and decided to throw it in here. It is now June 28th, 2006.)

I gave this part of the book "Fragments Of China" the name of "The Pickle Barrel", as I felt that I was like a pickle, thrown into a tub full of powerfully salty brine. Life seemed wasted, and I felt that I was going another step lower in life. Indeed, there was degradation in my existence. However, there was redemption, even here. The Class of 2001 gave me much hope to live, as did the crisis of the SARS epidemic, along with the opportunity to write the book "Where There Is No 'Lao Wai'—How To Learn English On The Go, On Your Own". So, looking back on those days, I feel that all was not wasted; in fact, many good things came out of it all. Here today, back in Urumqi, I can see good things that have developed out of the two years in Beijing, while working at Zhong Yang Min Zu Da Xue. The time was not wasted.

However, I want to end with this sketch. On several occasions, I left my apartment and wandered the streets within a 1/2-mile radius of the university. Some of the streets had a few people walking about their business; some streets were dark and quiet. I would go to the "Sculpted In Time" teahouse to drink some Earl Grey tea, but that did not work. I wandered more. The main thoroughfares were busy at all hours, for Beijing sleeps only a few hours. The people went about their business, but what was mine? In shops, pizza restaurants, barber shops and many other places, life went on. Mine was not, and I was living in salty brine: that is why I have called this part of the book, "The Pickle Barrel". My mind was unstable, and occasionally wild. I did not want to talk to others, especially any foreigners. Calypso knew this, and frequently warned me against doing stupid things. In Beijing, it is so easy to do stupid things. It is one of the global capitals of "anomie". In part, I hated Beijing, as nobody seemed to smile. They were mostly too concerned with "getting ahead", or getting out. The queue outside the US Embassy was a vivid symbol of the pernicious yearning, almost to the point of being cancerous, of many people's desire to move up. Yes, people had their lives, their picnics in the park, their concerts, their parties, their small communities in the "hutong" district (what is left of it; the developers are destroying Beijing's native culture voraciously, and all in the name of "progress" and "development"). However, in Xizhimen District, it seemed to me that no one ever smiled: they lowered their heads against the (paradoxical) winds of everlasting inertia and wrenching change, and forged on ahead. In summary, this was a low period in my life, as life in a barrel of brine was symbolic of living under a curse. However, should I receive good every year, and not hard times on occasion? China is still the good place to be, although my life was not functioning properly, the way it should have. I make these observations, as they are part of the whole.

Dear Fanny,

Call me idiot. From the very first moment I arrived in Burma, I made mistakes. I changed a good portion of my dollars at the airport;even the government-appointed moneychanger raised her eyebrows when I said I wanted to change 120 dollars. She then kept a straight face and gave me 50% of the value that was waiting for me on the streets. I walked out of the airport and into the hot sunlight....

It took me a long time to decide to go to Burma. I was afraid to go--no, not of the local people or their government, but of my own, and what they would say of me. At last, I heard that my aunt had gone, and this gave me the courage to try. I flew in from Bangkok, following the usual route of the backpackers today. In the airplane, looking down, the first impression was of the dust. I think one can often get a feel for a country by the dust--or the lack thereof--one can see. Those that have covered up the dust under grass, trees, and even pavement seem to be more "developed"--but I should not use that term.

In this manuscript, I will try to remove all "feelings", and stick with bare description. Probably impossible, but I will try.

The taxi driver who took me to the train station and who was kind enough to buy me a ticket said that the exchange rate was $1 for 900 "kyats"--not the $1 for 450 kyats in the airport. He was very distressed to hear this news. In buying the ticket, he made negotiations with the clerk behind the barred window, who now appeared to have the power of a judge. I did not dare say anything to him, but just sit quietly, waiting. The driver went off, with a tip in his pocket. Before leaving the US, I had collected many small bills ($1, $5, $10) for use in S.E. Asia. They proved to be very usefull in travel situations, but the people there always wanted new, clean and crispy money; the old bills were rejected. I walked into a teahouse. The tables were very greasy, but the people there were unintrusive. Not speaking a single word of the local language, I pointed at some 3-day-old deep-fried spring rolls, and some tea, and waited. The rolls were cut up with scissors right before my eyes, and the flies brushed off. The tea was very good; it was the local variant of "chai", such as is found all over India, Thailand, and elsewhere in S.E. Asia.

The Burmese are very polite, and they do not harass you. In the train station, the under-stationmaster let me sit in his waiting room for a few hours, as the time for the train to Mandalay dragged by. I stared at maps, drowned in wild plans.

Before fleeing to the north and Mandalay, the train squeezed its way through the railside slums that permeated Rangoon. The tracks were narrow-guage, and the train rocked back and forth, even at a slow speed. The slums came right up to the tracks: shanty-houses perched over the untreated waterland, filled with wild weeds looking like hyacinth, and mixed with all kinds of filth. Outside one house, the way to the outhouse was an old plank over the gray waters, to a few plastic sacks stitched together, so as to screen off the toilet from the train passengers. Plastic wrapping waste was everywhere. After half an hour or so, the train escaped--and I mean, "escaped"--Rangoon, and made its way north, as the glorious stillness of a tropical evening stole over the land.

Burma is a very "north-and-south" country; it is very long, but since so much of it lies in the Irrawaddy River basin, one has the feeling of being in a perpetual flood-plain. Mile, after mile after mile of flat land, with the eternally unchanging village landscape of 500 years ago, rolled by, as pigeons flew home in the dwindling light, and the passengers turned their attentions to the newly illuminated landscape of the train carriage. I looked out.

The fixtures in that railway carriage were symbolic of almost everything in the country--old, very worn, lovingly maintained, and expected to last for another generation, or more. I suppose that a country that exists under so many foreign embargoes would have to make the best use of whatever was available. The seats could recline back, the plastic coverings were torn off by time and constant use, exposing the metal skeleton of the inner chair, and every seat was taken. The train carriage wobbled over the narrow-gauge tracks, as vendors made their way up and down the aisle. Once again, I ate the three-day-old, deep-fried spring rolls. They were cut up with scissors, and left on a very obviously unwashed plate. I had no idea how to ask for anything else, and perhaps there was nothing else to eat. Many passengers had extra shopping bags, stuffed with food for the night's journey. Next time, come prepared....

The land outside grew fainter and darker, allowing the imagination to wander. I wanted to dream and think about what would come next, but I could not. I woman sitting next to me, just accross the aisle, wanted to talk to me. She must have been in her late 40's, her youth eroding away like the surface of a London monument in winter's rain, and otherwise nondescript. What struck me about her was her forwardness. From the very beginning, she wanted to talk, and as the conversation progressed it became obvious that she was looking for something from me. What was it? Her name was, I think, Cherry, so I instantly began thinking of Julia, in Herrick's poem. "Cherry ripe, ripe, ripe/ Come and buy them...." But she was no Julia (as I imagine Julia to be). She wanted to practice her English, as so many people do in Asia, but there was more. Was she looking for a quick husband? No, I don't think so. Anyway, the night was long and Mandalay was far away, so we talked accross the aisle. Soon, she asked the person sitting next to her to change places with me. That was forward! In Asia, such things are just not done. We continued to talk. Didn't she think others would criticize her for talking to a foreigner--and a man, at that--on a crowded train? Oh no, she didn't care about that. So, the night went on.

She was preparing to emigrate to the US, to a part of America where many Burmese people tended to congregate. (It seems that immigrants like to settle in places where there are many of their own fellow countrymen.) She seemed to have it all figured out, except that she was waiting for that last piece of paper from the INS. The train went on; by now, the countryside was totally obscured, and I could only imagine waht lay outside. She asked me what my travel plans were, and I told her. I wanted to travel up the Irrawaddy River, not down, like so many other foreign travelers. So, she said, let me show you parts of the city in Mandalay before you go on. I was too cowardly to refuse, and thus began a strange sequence of events over the next few days in Mandalay.

When we arrived at the station in Mandalay, her family was waiting for her, and I felt like the stray dog that was picked up on the last day-excursion. She met her folks, and then she presented me. Perhaps I should have "disappeared" at that time, but in the Third World, for a foreigner to "disappear" is very hard, unless the police do it for you. We returned to her home.

Mandalay has its streets arranged in rows and columns, which in a Third World city is very useful (the alternative "spaghetti" is very hard to deal with). The roads are packed, there are no

rickshaws (like in the old movies), but there is something like a teddy-bear sized pickup truck, with benches running down each side. They are blue, and they are everywhere. The old royal palce sits in the middle of the city, like an enormous, derelict old manor house, surrounded by the walls and moat, and beyond that, the city life goes on. Since Mandalay is popular with the tourists, there are many of the "Lonely Planet"-type guest houses available. I got dug in, and then Cherry and her family rushed me out to lunch in the city's only Chinese, "dim-sung" snack restaurant. It was huge, a mausoleum of a place, with polished stone floors, round tables, and able to handle any large lunch or wedding function. By now, I was getting concerned. Why such hospitality? I was sure that something would be asked of me, and soon. Anyway, they brought out all kinds of snacks, and we ate. Later on, we went inside the old royal palace. The foreign tourists who come to Mandalay assiduously boycott that place, as it serves as the garrison base for the army. We went inside, and I felt nervous. The inner word was so different from the busting universe outside. Yes, there were soliers inside, but they were quiet. Families went on with their daily life. It looked more like a run-down housing complex than anything else. The palace was there, but it was not striking. The grass was long and tufty and and the feeling of the place un-remarkable. We passed out into another part of the city, and with it, the bustle. The part inside fell away into the land of dreams. We did some other things, and looked at some stores selling rubies, then I returned to my guest house.

Rubies? Yes, Burma is famous for its rubies. I had imagined that the rubies there were a deep red colour, and the size of pigeon eggs. Well, that was not the case; they were small, flakey things, looking like lentil-sized flakes of red glass. Yet they charged exhorbitant fees for such flakes. I think that rubies are vastly over-rated! Yet, people come from all over to get them and take them home.

Next morning, as I was having breakfast, talking to the two French tourists sitting nearby, someone sat down at my table. I did not look up at first, but when I did, I was astonished. No less than three feet from me sat a woman who must have been Indiana Jones' sister. I say that because she looked like that, not some soft tourist (like me). Adventure clothing, the casual, yet very experienced demeanour, that indescriable sweep of her hand over her forehead to keep the hair out of her eyes. She was French, so we began talking in French. I had long ago despaired that such as Indiana Jones' sister ever existed, so it was a pleasure to be able to actually meet one, and have conversation. She invited me to join her group on a driving trip somewhere in western Burma, but as I had already bought my boat ticket north, I had to decline and see her go. Bad move.... I later wondered, and still do, as to where such people live, where they can be found, and most of all, why I have been unable to see many of them. (I have the ability to find people who do not look and behave like her. It may be necessary to move in a different circle of friends....)

That night, I could not sleep. There was a monastery very near the guest-house, and all night, the abbot or one of the monks would read and chant from the Buddhist scriptures, using a large loudspeaker. The sermon went on all through the night hours, and the sound floated over the neighborhood with no letup, save when he drew breath. (As I write this some months later, I prefer the sound of the imams in Niger calling their people to prayer).

The next day, Cherry helped me to get the boat ticket to Bhamo. If only I had listened to reason and hired my guesthouse to get it for me! We did get the ticket, but had to run around to various offices, stand there in respectful suppliance, and then be told that it was to be had somewhere else. In the end, we put down the $54 at a ticket window on the riverbank, and were told to return later on that day. All you can do is to trust.... We wandered around Mandalay, doing I remember not what for some hours, and then had dinner.

Cherry had cooked some of her own dishes; with them in hand, she took me back to the "dim sung" restaurant, and commandeered a small function room. The usual surplus of dishes was ordered, and we ate. The atmosphere was tense--at least, for me, it was--and she asked me if I liked her dishes. I told her that I was very nervous about all her kindness, and what it might mean, and this made her cry. However, after that was past, and we were eating some more dishes, she dropped her idea on me. Here we were, all alone in some KTV/function room, and she asked me if I wanted to buy some of her rubies. So... that was it. All that "relationship-building", so she could sell me some (presumably) black-market rubies. I looked at the KTV machine, and imagined that there were some cameras in it, and some plain-clothes or army policemen outside, waiting for their move. However, it was not fear, or caution that directed me; the rubies she was letting me see were pathetic chips of "I know not what", which did not excite my eyes. I said no, ate some more dishes, and the dinner wound down. Then, we went back to our homes.

I had agreed with Cherry to see her when I came back through Mandalay, to see how her immigration affairs were going. That night, I was in another guesthouse, and barely slept. It was in the depths of the night, about 4:00a.m., that the taxi-driver came for me, and took me to the jetty. The dusty roads had made me very afraid of eye infection (conjunctivitis), so as we went on down the empty roads, I tightly closed my eyes. I tried to forget the night before, when I had wandered aimlessly through the streets and dusty markets of Mandalay, asked for help from a very kind bicycle-rickshaw driver, who ate dinner with me, and then took me to an eye-clinic, and an even nicer eye-doctor. I was disoriented, depressed, and despairing. I tried to forget all that, as I got out of the taxi by the Irrawaddy, and walked down the gangplank to the floating ticket office and the boat.

Here, and here only, is where the trip really began. The floating boat-platform was brightly lit up, people were coming and going with all sorts of baggage, and there before me was the river boat. It was a "three-decker", built in China, and it sat there quietly as supplies for the various river ports along the route were loaded on. I was shown to my cabin, did not like the door-lock, was moved to another room, got in, locked the door, and shut myself off from the world around me. For three days, this boat was home, and the cabin my refuge. At first, it had seemed that $54 was an exhorbitant amount to pay, but now, in hindsight, it was one of the better purchases in my life.

After about two hours the boat pulled away from the dock. There was a slight vibration throughout the boat, but I paid no attention. I just wanted to get away from the noise of Mandalay and the memories of the past few days. I stayed inside for a little longer, and then came out. We were now making out way up the Irrawaddy River.

This river is the very backbone of Burma. It runs up and down the whole main part of the country. However, the water does not flow very fast, it gradient is almost imperceptible, and it has the air of a river the moment it reaches its delta stage. How languid is the Irrawaddy! Everything seems to pass by so slowly, so slowly. In fact, the current is fairly fast, but the width of the river, the almost total absence of visual references like floating objects (except other boats), and the extreme murkiness of the silt-laden waters make it very hard to gauge the speed of the current. The Irrawaddy never revealed its inner face; I never saw the bottom. It seemed to be one everlasting, languid bargeway one bend away from the still, waiting sea.

The boat had about ten cabins on each side, towards the front, and I think most held two beds. In the very front was a large room that served as a Karaoke TV room; sometimes, one could hear the blaring of KTV music or dubbed kung-fu movies. There were no "middle-class" berths. In the back, around the loud diesel engines, were the common berths. They were white-painted areas on the hard steel deck, each about 3 x 6 feet in area, where the local people traveled. No mats, nothing. The bugs, the noise, the heat of the day or the chill of night would all erode your spirit. The toilets were the usual "squatties" found all over Asia, except the that they were perpetually flushing, the brown river water momentarily turned transparent as it flew out of the pipe into the toilet bowl, before turning brown again. The crew had the bridge and perhaps some space behind it; before the bridge was a row of deck chairs that looked imperially over the river ahead; it was a day or so before I had the courage to ask if it was all right to sit there, and found it was open.

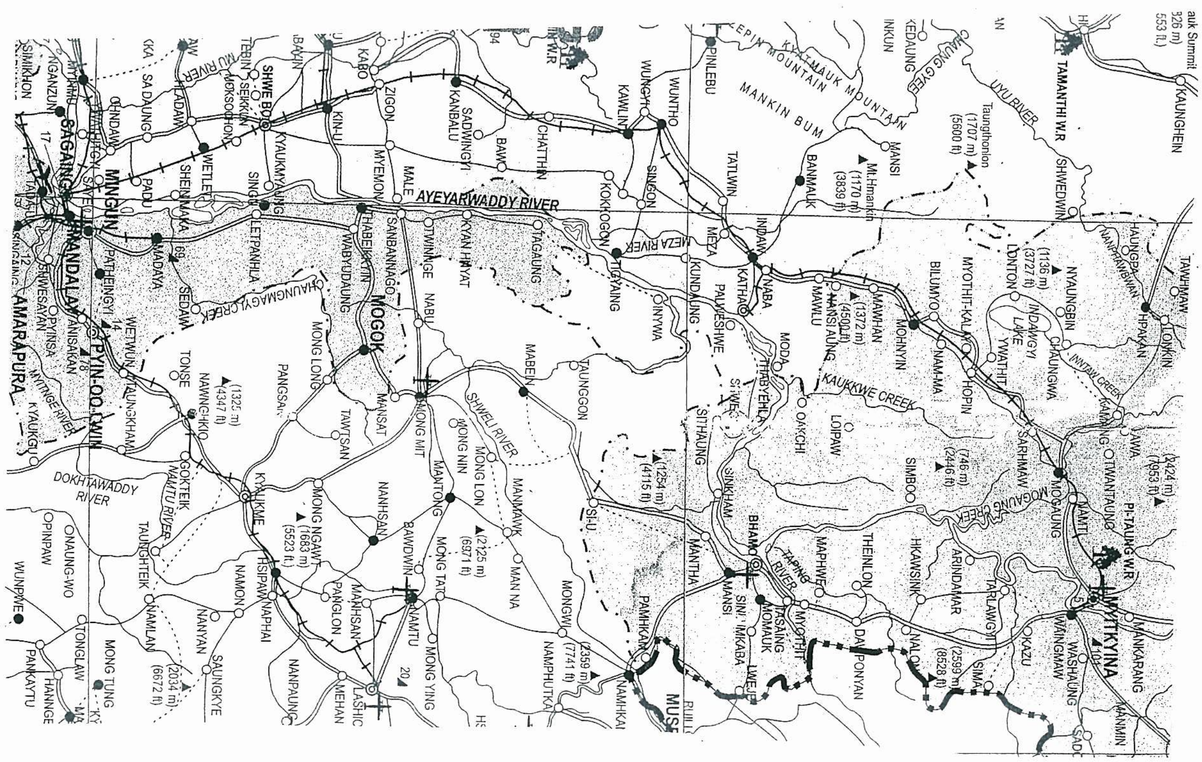
In the middle parts of the boat was a lot of open space, which was filled with river freight and some vending booths. These booths sold the usual snacks, dried potato chips, powdered milk tea mix, and travel necessities. Towards the front of this deck (the middle) was a galley that served a small range of stir-fried dishes, soups and tea. I soon learned how to order up vegetable stir-fried dishes. These meals helped to make some noticeable breaks in a pattern of life that now became constant, like the constant throbbing of the diesel engines. Breakfast, lunch, dinner, and some excuse to come down again in the evening broke up the day, spent either in the cabin, or looking out over the rails at the passing landscape, or in the freight area. I must admit that I was very unsocial, and kept to myself a lot, reading, sleeping, or just looking out. Yet, that was what I really needed then.

The dominant impression of the Irrawaddy is that of being on a mirror, between two skies. The muddy waters, the absence of any firm horizon (apart from the banks), and the sky above gave this impression. We were suspended in a sort of "visual eternity", a visual limbo, as we wandered up the river, now following this direction, now following that way, to reach our next somewhere. To either side, the river bank rose up or else smoothed out, depending on whether the water was cutting the bank or laying down sediment. The river banks were very high--about ten or fifteen feet--and I wondered how someone who fell into the river would climb out. That would be impossible, unless he swam across the river to the other side, or swam downstream several miles to the next bend. Nothing changed: the river in this manner continued on, and on, and on. It

was the dry season, when brown, tired dust covered everything, the banks were very tall over the boat (it seemed), and the land was prostrate in exhaustion. It was a perfect place to relax, and read books.

In fact, I read a lot. The Irrawaddy journey was the perfect place to read books that few would venture to read on other occasions, such as Bede's History of the English Church, or Longus' and Chloe, or the words of Sappho. I was particularly upset that so much of Sappho's manuscripts were destroyed, for she seemed so far ahead of her time, and her words occasionally delicious to read under that hot, languid Burmese setting. I would read in the cabin, holding my breath and keeping silent like a young fawn in the grass when someone went by, or in the early morning or late afternoon, when the sunrays were beating up on the other side of the boat. Everything was determined by the sun--or rather, the avoidance of it. In the hot tropics, the only thing you can do is avoid the hot sun, whenever possible. I had a large bunch of bananas, packs of biscuits, bottles of ice tea (all warm now), and other snacks--and a map of the river, which I often looked at, to try and estimate how far up the river we had progressed. I knew better than to ask the crew, "Where are we?"

The boat went very slowly. After a day or two, I estimated the speed at 13 miles per hour. That was about as fast as a bicycle. Look at the map: from Mandalay to Bhamo the journey is three days; from Bhamo to Myitkyina on another boat it is another day. Here is a rough map:



Along the river bank were the navigational markers. These were white-painted balls, possibly made of canvas, with "wings" on them (like the devices on sailing boat masts to show up on another boat's radar screen), and attached to the top of bamboo poles. They appeared on the bank about every kilometer. At first, I criticized the Burmese government for not spending the money to make a decent set of navigational aids, but then remembered that the country had next to no money for much infrastructure development. Even though the Irrawaddy is a major river, it cannot attract the necessary funding. Upon later reflection, I realized that both the government and the people had done a commendable job in using what little funding was around. (Of course, I wish more was spent on infrastructure.) These navigational markers would follow their course on one side of the river, and then would jump over to the other side--why, I do not know. During the day time, I could see them fading away into the distance, and sometimes used them to gauge the speed of the boat, which was very slow.

However, at night the picture was very different. There was a large searchlight mounted on the roof of the bridge, with the control handles inside the bridge itself; at night, this light was used to locate the next navigational marker. The boat's progress was slow at night, as it was difficult to see where the next marker might be. At times, there were two or three channels to choose from, and of course there were the sandbars. Sometimes at night, I could hear the rasping sound of the hull going over a sandbar, the silence of the engines in idle, and then the shaking as the crew tried to reverse the boat off the sandbar. On one night, the boat was forced to tie up to the bank and await the dawn, and better visibility. The searchlight's beam was very thin, electric-arc white, and drew in the moths for miles. Not only would the insects fly up against the glass part; they would dart in and out of the light-beam itself, arriving out of nowhere like Caedmon's sparrow, but instantly disappearing into the oblivion like a meteor seen for the first time. The crew had to be on their toes during the night watches, as the river gave away no secrets, or any facts about herself: by day, the surface refused any glimpses into the heart of murky water; by night, the whole river tried to hide herself, and at times even the navigational markers disappeared.

I loved those night visits to the upper deck. I could not sleep well: there were many thoughts passing around my mind, the engines always vibrated the ship, my imagination was in overdrive (how I wish I had put away my fear of being seen writing down notes, as well as my laziness, and recorded everything that I saw or felt, this whole three-day trip being a "stream-of-consciousness" of epic length in my mind!), and there was so much of interest to occupy me. I went up on deck two, three, even four times a night, at different times of the night, as the river passed by in the darkness, the stars rotated in their paths above me, and I sped through the universe, utterly freed from any sense of belonging to this earth or being on the ground. These evenings were the closest I will ever come to the feeling of passing through outer space, as if I were actually in it. That is the unique quality of the Irrawaddy--you are completely detached from earth, horizon, or sky, and float in both elements at once. I paced up and down, back and forth on the deck behind the bridge, looking into the distance at pinprick forest fires that glowed afar like dying embers in a fireplace (until you came closer, and saw thin lines of fire licking their way across a hillside), staring fixedly at dim objects on the deck, or else throwing back my head and looking into the eternity of the stars. How beautiful they were! Even now, I can

close my eyes and imagine myself on that deck. It was a kind of limbo, a kind of oblivion, for although all the visible signs of time passing by were there, I felt utterly detached at brief moments. At times, paradoxically, I would look east in hope of seeing the smudge-gray lightening in the heavens, telling me the dawn was coming.

These three days were a unique time to experience oneself as being totally cut off from the rest of the world. There was hardly a sight of modern life, save the river-traffic that passed by, going up and going down. In fact, some days later an airplane flew over, and I asked myself, "What is that?" Seriously. Although the Irrawaddy was a major waterway, the view from the deck was into the past, perhaps 500 years into the past.

The countryside was dominated by three things: the green forest, symbols of the Buddhist religion, and agricultural activities. There were many trees around in general, although in places the land was denuded. The trees were not enormous, as all the good lumber trees had been taken. Still, people were looking for the big trees, for a steady procession of barges loaded up with teak logs came down the river, their "long-tail" engines thumping and clattering, making a noise which could be heard long before and long after they had passed us. The Irrawaddy was indeed an artery; the teak logs were the lifeblood of the nation, flowing south. At various points, there were log depots on the river banks. They were the open warehouses, as it was, of the produce of the local forest, brought to the river by elephants, tractors, and trucks. The only sign of anything modern was a yellow logging crane, surrounded by hundreds of logs, waiting for the next boat. The traffic seemed to flow south. (Indeed, it wasn't until I came to more northern parts that the log-traffic seemed to go east and maybe north-east by trucks.) Some of the log-barges were huge; the teak logs must have been five or six feet in diameter, they were stacked high, and the barge rode very low in the water. In the front were workers holding black-and-white painted bamboo poles, marked for each meter. They would plunge their pole into the muddy water, and their assistant would give a hand-signal to the bridge to say they were "all clear". Sometimes, the barge would have a pilot-boat ahead, roving back and forth, poling the river for a good channel. These boats also had "long-tail" engines, and were very noisy, and seemed hard to manage (yet they were experts). Very few boats seemed to have more "modern" engines. Indeed, on both the Irrawaddy and Mekong rivers, the boats had a long, sagging-in-the-middle look (like the Oscar Mayer "weinermobile" vehicle), they used the long and loud "long-tail" engines, and they were everywhere. A family's whole life took place on these boats, and they made the country run. As the region gears up with the new "super-highways" that will radiate out from Kunming, I hope that the traditional river traffic will still have a place, for it is an integral part of the identities of Laos, Cambodia, and Burma. I could say more about boats here, but I will hold, to move on to the second point.

There were many symbols of the Buddhist religion in Burma, and certainly they were clearly visible from the river. The "stupas", which look like "Hershey's Kisses", and were painted white, or white-and-gold, were very common. I think they held the ashes of famous Buddhist abbots and monks. Some were twenty or so feet high; others towered up fifty, or even one hundred feet high. In a country where money was very scarce, much effort and maintenance was devoted to them. It seemed that every village or hamlet had a "stupa", as well

as a small monastery. The Buddhist religion was taken very seriously here. Early in the morning on the first day, incense was burned and a bunch of leafy twigs were placed in a metal vase which was tied to the forward flagpole, so as to bless the boat's journey up the river. The bright saffron-orange clothing of the monks was very distinctive in a landscape where greens and browns predominated.

As for scenes of agricultural life, it was these that occupied my interest for hours, as the boat made its way up the river. I have no idea what life in Burma was like, save for what I saw near the river banks. In the three days to Bhamo I saw only a few trucks, no cars, a few bicycles, and some ox carts--the ones with big wheels and wide axles. Fishing was fairly common. Fields and cultivation did not stand out, for some reason. In one place, a work crew was splitting firewood. The logs were cross-cut, then split into quarters and tossed a little distance away. Next, someone else took the quarters and split them farther. With each step, the wood moved closer to the river-bank. There seemed to be no hurry. In many places, the land seemed half asleep; in certain river-bank flats (which were sometimes very large) the sense of desolation and total isolation from the doings of the general world was powerful. Perhaps the center of village life was out of sight of the river traffic. At certain points, there would be a jetty for a river-crossing ferry--another "long-tailed" boat packed with local passengers. The river is long, the land is vast, the sun is hot, in the dry season (now) the leaves are covered in dull-brown dust, and travel under almost any circumstances is slow and tiresome. Nothing was in a hurry, which is why I recommend any boat passenger to bring along many books, buy a cabin ticket, and take the time to think about many things along the way. Otherwise, travel would be a miserable affair.

There were fresh-water dolphins in the Irrawaddy river. I had heard about them; they were supposed to be very rare. At most times, I would keep half an eye out for them. In time, they were spotted, in small groups of two to five. They appeared in the invisible horizon that was meant to bound heaven and the river, black shapes which broke the dream world's mirror, breaking the illusion briefly before falling back into the silver eternity they came from.

Every so often, we came to the larger river towns. The Mandalay to Bhamo ferry was vital to them, as the boats brought heavy supplies and many staples. Vegetables, rice, mechanical parts, powdered tea and other snack foods, cement, and other unknown commodities were piled up in the central part of the middle deck. As soon as we docked, the unloading crew would come on board, with shirts draped on their shoulders, to haul off the sacks. At first, I was afraid to get off the boat, and stayed inside my cabin; later, I went out with some people to drink tea in some riverside tea-house. Some villagers sold food from their canoes. Remember, this was not a tourist boat--they went downstream from Mandalay. This was a working transport boat. As soon as the heavy bags were carried off, new cargo from the jetty was loaded on board.

What went down the river? I already mentioned teak, but there was also bamboo. It was cut into lengths of about ten feet, tied into bundles, the bundles were joined, and enormous rafts were put together. These rafts must have been over one hundred feet long and thirty feet wide. At the corners, there were stations for a long sweep paddle, so as to direct the raft as it followed the current's pleasure. A family or work crew would join up as much bamboo as they

could, or else team up with another family. One or more sun shades, similar to those found on a sampan, were placed on the raft, laundry lines were strung up, and the raft went down the river. The crew would return home on the next ferry boat. Like everything else, they seemed to float on an unseen horizon, placed between two worlds. They were yet another reminder that we were totally cut off from the rest of the world, and its doings. I drank powdered milk tea, ate at the canteen (the same dish of vegetables), and spoke to few people. It was, in a way, comforting to live in so detached a way in this laid-back country, and especially on this boat, which seemed so removed from everything else. There were two French tourists--two men--on the boat, and we did not say anything at first...just a few nods. However, after a day or so, we began to talk; at about this time, I "discovered" the deck chairs on the bridge deck. We sat there together, looked at the approaching scenery in silent contemplation, and shared the usual travel stories. After another day, we got off the boat together with someone else, and had tea in a river-stop tea house. Time on a boat can allow aloofness to evolve into some form of communication, and there were stories to share. The two French men slept in the 3rd class area--on the open iron deck with its painted off areas for each person. I think they were brave, as the people they were traveling with had almost nothing at all, and the stress of eating snacks when they had none would have been too hard for me; I liked the secluded exclusion of the cabin. The insects would have driven me crazy, as well. I would deal with the insects by getting ready for bed in the dark, so that the bugs would not see the lights, and want to come in.

I traveled this way for three days, reading books, looking at the map, and enjoying the passing countryside. Most foreigners pass down the Irrawaddy river to Pagan, but few go north to Bhamo; this trip was certainly worth it--after the Kobe to Shanghai boat trip, this was most probably the best water journey I had ever made. I recommend it to people who are not too "soft". Just bring enough books and snacks, buy a cabin ticket, have no urgency in your timetable, be very patient, know that Bhamo is not the end of the line but a resting place for more, and enjoy being totally disconnected from the larger world. In Burma, you must be patient. Also, have your guest house buy you the ticket in Mandalay for you--it is easier!

At the beginning of the fourth day, we arrived in Bhamo. Clouds of dust blew off the river banks, and I knew something was lacking. For the most part, I believe you can estimate the poverty or lack of infrastructure in a given place by the extent to which loose dust has been controlled. If there is a lot of dust, then the area is poor. If the ground is "clothed" in vegetation, or even concrete pavement, then that area's development is better. The boat tied up to the bank, and the boat's heavy plank was thrown out. However, all the passengers had to climb, crawl, and scramble up the steep riverbank--now exposed by the dry season--and be very careful getting to the top. Small footholds had been chopped into the earth, and people went up in single file, some carrying heavy bundles. It was not easy. In short, there was no jetty, perhaps because the difference in riverbank height was so great, and because there was no money for a real place to get off the boat. A strong wind was blowing, and dust blew everywhere. At the top there were several taxi drivers (for this place was some distance from the town itself), who operated horse carts having narrow-width "cart beds", and large wheels. I went with the two French men, and they negotiated the fare; they were more

assertive than I was, and after a few minutes of bargaining arranged the fare. By now a strong wind was blowing, and the talc-powder fine dust was everywhere. I was very afraid of getting dust in my eyes and getting eye infection, so for the whole journey I hunched over by small travel bag, my eyes tightly shut closed. The two French men thought this was strange, but even though the wind sometimes calmed down, I kept my eyes shut. Getting sick in the middle of nowhere, with almost no medical infrastructure available, is a terrible thing. You might ask, "Then why travel in places like Burma?". To this I say, some things are worth risking for, but even out in the farthest ends of the "developing world", one should take precautions.

In time, the powder-dust became packed earth tracks, and then pavement. We stopped at a ticket office, but it was closed. Someone said to just show up at the jetty the next morning for the next boat to Mytkyina. I was too neurotic withing, but said nothing. Once again, I ways with the two French men; they went to another hotel, but I stayed at the one recommended by the "Lonely Planet". This hotel was a bit pricey, but after three days on the boat, and no courage to shower in Irrawaddy river water, I needed a place to clean up in. Two or three days in the rough, and then a day in relative comfort, to recover myself. The philosophy of travel in middle-age is somewhat softer than in my twenties: in Africa, I was crazy in the pursuit of travel. After cleaning up and sending out the laundry, I wandered around Bhamo.

Once again, I found the experience of wandering around a strange city on foot, in a place where I knew nobody and where I was an "outside oddity", to be a difficult experience. All through my life, I have traveled best as the "flash observer"--that is, as one looking out of the bus, train, or boat window at the world passing quickly by, and making my observations, assessments and feelings in a few seconds. I have avoided personal contacts, in-depth relationships, and ongoing friendships. The sum of my travel knowledge is a myriad of mental snapshots, which when taken together and sythesized over time, form the bedrock of my travel experiences. I love the land, the geography, the infrastructure, but not so much the city, the society, the social networks: the journey, with its traveler's pilgrimage, its "joy of the journey", its unfolding views I appreciate, but not the destination, finding a community at road's end, the contentment of objective reached and a new city to explore. In any case, I wandered around Bhamo as a lost sheep, looking for a place to eat, as well as some jewelry shops; I was hungry, but also wanted to buy some bracelets for my sister. The jewelry stores did not have what I wanted, but after walking about, window-shopping after nothing, I found the restaurant I sought. It sold "Shan-style" food, and I went in for dinner.

One thing I like about the roadside eateries and restaurants of Burma--and indeed, of much of South-East Asia--is the way they serve their food. Each dish is cooked in a large pot, the pots are ranged in order on a table, and the customers can walk down the line of pots, lift the lids, and see clearly what is available. No need for menus here. People might criticize me for being so illiterate, but with so many languages in the region, where to start? Besides, I have seen one character in every culture, one who has little or no language, and who is able to get by on a survival level--the "village idiot". If you are willing to accept this character (played out appropriately, mind you!), you can "muddle" your way through many situations, and in many countries. Any way, I ate, and the food was delicious. The two

French men showed up again and we ate, but at different tables (we were very fragmentary people). They wanted to take the land route from Bhamo to Mytkyina, but I suspect they were blocked (the route was being rebuilt for the coming "super-highway" from Kunming to eastern India). I drifted off and went back to the hotel.

Very early the next morning, I took a bicycle taxi to the new river-boat station. This one had run-down concrete steps to the river, or at least, near it. Nobody was around, it being 4:00 a.m. After standing around a while, a man came out from his house and started talking to me. To my delight, he spoke Chinese, and the relationship greatly improved as we had something to talk about. He had been in Burma for thirty or forty years, had married a local woman, and had a few children. He invited me into his home, where his wife made some noodles. All of a sudden, the trip became personal and interesting. Having another language, a "third language" when traveling is very helpful, and makes life more hopeful. I have spoken to Chinese people in Portugal, used very basic Russian in Vietnam, French in many places--and Chinese here in Bhamo. To avoid having to speak your own language, or the local target language, when trying to communicate with a stranger is very liberating--both of you are equal, for nobody is linguistically superior. Anyways, we talked. I wondered how he met his wife, how he found work and made a living, and how his children were raised in the bosom of two cultures. It was a two-storey house, with concrete floors and wooden walls--open, airy, and still. The family was getting up. Humidity, the encroaching vegetation from outside, the feeling of "plenty in simplicity" were in this house, which became more and more visible as the grayness of dawn lit up the world. I don't remember everything we talked about--I was glad to find someone Chinese with whom I could have a real talk. His daughter spoke reasonable English. Later, the father got me a ticket on that morning's boat to Mytkyina, since it was his boat.

This boat was very different from the boat from Mandalay. It was like a "souped-up" canal boat: long, thin, with bench room only, one deck with a roof cover to stack light baggage on, a powerful engine, and very fast. During the dry season, Bhamo is the highest a larger boat can go, so the smaller boats have the advantage for some of the year. They make the journey in one day. We left at 7:00 a.m., and after some extra loading, went up one channel. This boat must have done 25 or 30 m.p.h., compared to the 13 m.p.h. of the other boat. River spray often flew into our faces, so the plastic covers were put down on the sides. If a person wanted to go to the toilet, he had to squeeze through an opening just forward of the middle part of the boat, climb carefully up until he was standing on a very narrow pathway that ran down the side of the boat. The pilot would not slow down, so he had to move down the outside of the boat, at 30 m.p.h., just above the water, holding onto the railings attached to the roof of the boat. These railings were not very firm. I went back. One false step, and I would be into the river. I passed over the drone-shouting engines. Just next to the tiller bar was a screened off stall--only three feet by three feet--with a hole in the bottom. The Irrawaddy river raced by at the speed of imagination, and seen through the slop hole, it was hypnotizing. I looked up. The bellow of the diesels, the air ripping by, trying to blow off my hat, the receding waves, the addictive pulse of power and speed were wonderful. This could easily have been the Mekong as the Irrawaddy. I ceased to dream, but started to shout my "stream-of-consciousness" dreams into the wind, where they were whipped away into the greater oblivion.

I shouted. "I like the smell of diesels in the morning! They smell of victory." That, and similar stuff. I gathered up a large spittle in my mouth, and in the relative stillness of the toilet shelter, let it drop down into the hole. For a moment it hung there in almost-perfect stillness; then it fell down and at a certain moment it just--disappeared into the infinity of rushing water. As for me, I cautiously made my way back to my seat.

The character of the Irrawaddy changed. Two or three times, we passed through a belt of limestone, part of the great limestone empire of mountains and hills which show themselves throughout southern China and South East Asia. The channel became narrower, and the hills, which often lurked out near the distance, now hemmed in the boat. Other boats, usually with the "long-tail" engines, passed clattering by. Some used just one of their three, enormous, gimbal-mounted, "long-tail" engines, leaving the others to balance horizontally in idleness; others had to use all three, blasting the whole valley with their unmuffled clatter-clatter-clatter. I would hate to be the oilman whose job it was to look after these engines. The sun was still strong, and I hid on the "safe" side of the boat, under the coverings. Sometimes, there were dangerous rocks in the middle of the river, and the pilot weaved his way among them.

Along this stretch of the Irrawaddy there were river-gold diggers. They ran small operations. A high-pressure water pipe would bring water up from the river to a higher gravel bank, where the workers would blast the gravel with the hose water. On the river's edge were screened gravel-sifting platforms. Some workers had small "dredge-boats", about fifteen feet long: a small dredge boom would bring up buckets of gravel from underwater and dump it onto the screens, where the workers would pick out anything interesting. The gold-diggers worked in small groups. It was here, in the landscape of mid-upper Burma, that the nature of humanity changed... changed in a very fundamental way. Life became coarser, more rough, a place where anything might happen. Some of these people who lived in and around the forest and the mountains carried Burmese swords, had a tougher-looking feel to them, and bore that feeling about them of the rough frontier. I don't think there were many solitary gold-diggers out there. I think someone said that the real bosses of these operations did not work there, but would come by every week or so with a briefcase to pick up that period's gold-pickings. As the boat moved further northwards, I could sense a change in the land, its character, the unseen events happening out of sight of the river traffic. Joseph Conrad talked about this in his work "Heart of Darkness"--the unseen forces at work in the people, the very soul of the land through which the river passed. What, exactly, did I see? Nothing. What, exactly, did I perceive? I saw only this... that prostitutes from the logging camps were riding the boat, saying nothing, just being there. A new species of flower growing on the fern-covered rocks told me I had entered a new ecosystem, so to speak. They were belwethers of great and unseen forces at work in the unseen depths of the land. As for me, the eye for small details, a rampant imagination, and the ability to draw creative conclusions (a story from a few pollen grains, a tuft of threads, a few bars of music hummed in the utter darkness of an alley at midnight) are all that matter. Do you follow me, here?

At some point, our boat got stuck on the sand-bar outside a village jetty. It took a while to get unstuck. Some passengers got off, to complete the journey to Mytkyina by bush-taxi. The Irrawaddy river made a great bend to the east, and I stayed on board to the end.

There is one detail I forgot. Lunch. At about the half-way point in the day's journey, we passed a large open area of sandy ground, far from any large villages. Set out on the flat area were two restaurants, designed for the river-boat lunch business. All the food and drink one could want for lunch was there, with plastic chairs, a tent without sides covering everything, and stoves and stalls. The place must have seemed very unusual during the "off" hours, just standing there, but now it was busy. In a preview of what was to come, a plank was thrown out of the boat, the far end biting into the sandy riverbank slope, but only halfway up the slope. The passengers had to manage for themselves as they scrambled cautiously up to the top. The food was all right, but here was a perfect monopoly.

Going on.... When we finally arrived at Mytkyina, there was no jetty! There were a few planks, spanning some rocks, that pointed to the shore, but constant use by heavily-loaded cargo carriers had sagged the planks. All who walked to the shore got their feet wet in the water of the Irrawaddy river. I did not want to do that, as it would ruin my shoes; going barefoot was out of the question. As for asking someone to carry me over, I saw I was rather big (as a westerner), and I was afraid of being dropped. People laughed, but some were a bit angry with me, as they wanted to carry me, and I was trying to avoid talking to them. At last, I took off my shoes and went on the planks very slowly. My bags were not heavy, as I had deliberately come to S.E. Asia with a small bag. (Regardless of the size of your luggage, you will fill it up. So, why not have a small bag?) I dried my feet with my socks and went on.

Mytkyina is the most northern major town on the Burmese railway system. It was as far north as I could go. I would have liked to do more, but that part of Burma was "closed". Of course, that is the most interesting part of the country. Remember, Burma is a very "long" country, covering many climate zones, peoples, and other interesting things to see. For those who want to do the "northern loop" when traveling around Burma, it is an essential place to pass through--there is no other way, unless you want to re-trace your way back down the river. Infrastructure is extremely basic, and options are rather few. However, I had the feeling that, in a brief period of historical time, Mytkyina would change radically, becoming a stopping point for one of the major arteries coming out of Kunming. Now, it was sleepy, oh so run-down!, and shrouded in the darkness of a winter night in Burma: that meant it was cool.

The first priority was to get a train ticket down to Mandalay, about one day's journey to the south. There was nowhere I saw to buy a ticket, and I had no idea of how to navigate the bureaucracy. Wait for this person; come back later; return tomorrow. However, one of the officials, who spoke English, came up to me. He had been put on the job, as he knew it well, and did it well. In the night time, many of the railway workers had flashlights, which they only turned on for brief flashes, such as to see the time, or identify someone. It made me think of fireflies courting each other reluctantly. Since he spoke English I was relieved, and agreed to come back early the next morning. I wandered the streets in the now-familiar ritual of lost and hopeless drifting, trying half-heartedly to get supper, and not really liking the choices. There was a Kashmir-cuisine restaurant along the main neon-light drag, so I went in, and ate. The hotel was soul-less. Double-glazed windows, heavy false-velvet curtains, "rubberized" curtains (there is a giveaway, there), ancient cigarette-

butt burn marks on the carpet which had been swept countless times, a bath-tub with faulty plumbing, an air conditioner, dim lights, the feeling of being in a place that had nothing to do with the outside world, or even being a part of it. I have spent a lot of time in such rooms, in public toilets, in bus station waiting rooms, and should write a review of them all for future road travelers. The air was still, and when I turned off the light, I became "frozen" in a kind of eternity.... I thought about the coming journey. Only hours later, my alarm rang and I lit the candle. The whole hotel was asleep, and not one light burned. I wandered down the passageway and down the stairs, down to the reception desk, like a lost Florence Nightingale in a new ward. Nobody stirred. The clocks, from five different global times, clicked and told the wrong time. After a few minutes I woke up the night watchman, and he let me out, as so many of his kind had done, and thought me crazy: it was 4:00 a.m.!

Another day, another journey, another pre-dawn patrol. I walked cautiously down the street I had only seen for the first time six hours ago--also when it was dark--and turned at a certain place. The early shift workers were going somewhere (who cares where?) on their bicycles, and a few shadowy dogs looked at me; I felt nervous. I walked, or rather felt my way down the tracks to the end of the station platform, got on, and entered another darkened world that was rapidly filling up with people--hundreds and hundreds of them! It was still the utter dark of night, and the crowds for the train to Mandalay were gathering. I went in nervousness to the office appointed the night before, but there was no one I knew there. After an unmeasured period of time, someone helped me. The friend of last night was nowhere to be seen. Around me, the glow-worms flashed more rapidly. I followed the new man to another side of the station and saw the ticket room, and almost a thousand people waiting to buy a ticket. My helper spoke to the man behind the bars, got sent somewhere, then back, then on, then back again, and got the ticket. Let me tell all future travelers through Mytkyina: if you want to move on, and out, you need a helper; I had two. I retrieved my passport and then the ticket. At this time, the helper from the previous night showed up. I think I had not been good to him, but I had been afraid of spending another 24 hours in Mytkyina trying to get a ticket out. How ephemerally vital are tickets! He showed me to the seat, encouraged me, and showed me another kind face, another beautiful heart of the Burmese people. I told him, in no uncertain terms, to expect a total change in the life of the railway station in about five or ten years, as trains passing through from Kunming on their way to Mandalay and then Rangoon would make the place busier. Several minutes later, I left Mytkyina in great relief.

Like the Irrawaddy river, the Burmese rail system is mostly a north-south affair. It is a narrow-gauge system, travels slowly, stops at every chance (to the delight of countryside vendors), is very run-down, hot, almost obsolete yet running--and staffed by some of the kindest conductors and service workers I have seen. There were no beds (I think they had all been taken--if there were any), the seats were hard, and I grew tired of staring at my feet. How would I pass the night? The countryside swayed past us at an excessively leisurely pace, the forest reaching right up to the train itself. Sometimes the forest was gashed open, where a fire had passed through; the teak trees grew out of ashes and a few weeds that had somehow escaped. The people of S.E. Asia often let fires burn each year to keep the low-level vegetation under control. At first, there were not many rice

fields to be seen in this part of the country--mostly forest and the occasional small village. The sun was up, climbed higher, made us all hot, went down, and disappeared. The vendors sold the now-familiar deep-fried spring rolls, cut into pieces with old scissors and covered with red-pepper sauce. Outside, were steamed rice snacks, with the rice in six-inch bamboo tubes. Other vendors sold fruit, cold noodles and their condiment in small and tautly-inflated plastic bags, betel nuts (yuk!), chicken joints all roasted, and soft drinks. My seat was protected for me when I went to the toilet, which was a lot. I was bored. As I had done on the boat earlier, I looked down the slop-hole at the railway line flashing past below. The wooden railway sleepers passed by, too fast to be seen clearly. I let the urine fall through the hole, staring closely at the ground. Due to some "stroboscopic effect", the falling drops of urine were "slowed down" and could be seen as individual, round, yellow drops, slowly passing through the hole. It was mesmerizing. I cannot remember if I spoke to anyone, as I have gone on so many trains. One of these scenarios emerges: first, nothing is said; sometimes the usual questions are asked, which lead to a dead-end; or, the talk is fruitful and goes on for a long time. It grew dark; I should have felt the press of bodies, the sticky dampness of sweat, the cocooned entrapment of the moment, but I was too far gone in thoughts a thousand miles away.

The miracle happened. One of the conductors told me to get off the train at the next station, which I did. We walked up the platform, already filled with the surge and eddy of people riding changing places with people waiting for a ride, and got on the train again. There was a blue-cloth deck chair! It was placed crossways, between two carriage doors, in an otherwise crowded "hard-seat" carriage. The conductor locked my bag to the rack, gave me a blue neck-pillow, and let me be. For Burma, this was the height of luxury and of kindness. I wish to say very plainly that the Burmese were an extremely kind and polite society to me. Yes, not everything was perfect, but they were good to me. I was tired, but happy to be here. The night continued, my water-bottle fell over and rolled around, unseen stations came and went, and the windows, all opened, let slightly cooler air wash up and down the carriage. It was very noisy: the couplings had no padding, the iron wheels clanked and clicked over the tracks for hour after hour, people's feet brushed lightly over my legs as they stepped over me in the darkness. The door before me was wide open--anyone could have jumped or fallen off the train in the night--and nobody seemed to mind. Perhaps the common-sense of self-preservation makes people more rational than they are in other places. Still, to be a young parent with a young child would have been a trying experience on this train. I was so happy that people were being kind to me like this. Was it because this trip, up and down the upper part of Burma, was the fulfillment of a dream that had been in my heart for several years? I think so. On every map of China, there was Burma (Mian Dian) in the lower-left part of the map; every time I looked at it, the blue line of the Irrawaddy and the red line of the train line made me "hungry" to go there. So, here it was at last. "A dream fulfilled is a tree of life"--and this tree was growing up quickly and well, all in the space of about one week. That night was a dream where I did not fall asleep, and a vigil in which what I saw were shadowy, dream-like visions... all interspersed with the bright, solitary florescent lights of obscure railway stations, and the noise of the carriages, like high-speed steel glaciers passing through the geologic ages of a single night.

I never really slept, so I never really awoke. I opened my eyes and got up out of the chair to look at the countryside. At that exact moment, the train passed by one of Burma's very famous "stupas", and there it was, clearly visible from the deck chair, looking out of the open door. This "stupa"--I think it was in Saigang, not too far from Mandalay--must have been three hundred feet high, was painted a bright white, and could be seen for miles. Anyway, the rest of the journey took a long time, as the train went very slowly the last twenty miles into Mandalay. I found a guest house, and hid myself in it, as I was afraid of bumping into Cherry in the street.

All this, from the beginning in Rangoon until now, had taken about one week. Travel in Burma is not easy, and the infrastructure is constantly straining under the pressures of a partial international boycott. How things run is a bit of a miracle. The burden of merely "existing" in hot places like Burma, and perhaps India too, is really hard, and it takes careful planning to get through a day's goals, let alone the day itself. I can't even remember what I did in Mandalay that day, save buy snack supplies in the best grocery store in the city. I did this because running around cheaper stores was a drain. I just wanted to walk into the store with products that were guaranteed clean and safe, put down the money, and walk out. Period. I also asked the hotel to get the next boat ticket, this time down river, to Pagan. Lest any of you wonder why I did not spend more time in Mandalay, doing the "usual" tourist things there (that is, viewing temples and "stupas", taking day trips to the cluster of nearby satellite cities, and climbing the hill overlooking the city), my answer is that I wasn't interested. I don't like walking about in my bare feet, as I afraid of the parasites; the sights do not really catch my attention--not even the big bell of Mingun. It is the land I like, land seen at a glance. As for the people, what would I say to them? I also could not rest as I had that harried feeling, that restlessness which always drove me on.

The next day, I got on the boat, and spent most of that time going down river to Pagan. There is no doubt that the "sweet" part of the river, from a jaded traveler's point of view, was the Mandalay to Bhamo section. I like it because there just were no other foreigners to look at (save the two French men), the land was sleepy and quiet, and everything was unique. The part going down to Pagan is famous for all the "stupas" and other Buddhist monuments one can see from the boat. However, there were not as many as I had expected there to be. I ate the same food, read some book, and minded my own business. People in foreign countries tend to cluster into "like-minded" groups, and those who do not "fit in" are often automatically excluded. This mechanism of society is still working when in a foreign country, and perhaps more so than when in the home country. It can be useful when one wants to be alone, but is tragic when one wants help. There seemed to be a fair number of tourists from Europe. Were the Americans boycotting, or afraid to come? I must admit, it took me a long time to get up the courage before coming, and I am glad I did.

At the jetty in Pagan, there was the usual crowd of taxi drivers trying to persuade the tourists to take their vehicle, and go to their recommended hotel. Some had horse-carts, and others had bicycles with mini-sidecars attached to the right side. I wanted a hotel that was far away from the "tourist hub", and the driver often asked me to go to "another" hotel. I stuffed five dollars in his hand and said, "Just go!", and he shut up quickly. The hotel, and a few others, were some distance away from the jetty, but they were quiet, and clean.

The most important factors in choosing a hotel were security (a good lock on the door and windows), a decent shower, peace and quiet to be left alone, and extra services such as "ticket-buying" (in many of the "developing" countries, having someone else do the paperwork for you is a major help in staying peaceful and sane).

Two things I forgot to mention: the "area fee", and about small bills. The Burmese tourist authorities have treated the Pagan area as a "mini-country", in that every person who arrives there must buy a pass, a "visa" as it were, to get around and see the ancient sites. I think it was ten dollars. There were no exemptions, and it had to be paid in dollars. Concerning dollars, I found that it was very useful to have a large bundle of crisp, new U.S. dollars to use when traveling. Many tickets had to be paid in dollars, taxi fares were expedited with a few dollar bills, and so on. Of course, much of the usual financial commerce that a tourist does can be done with the local "kyats", but there were times when dollars were needed. If you go, bring lots and lots of 1's, and 5's, and 10's, and 20's. No change is given, so have lots of small bills. I found that each type of bill was useful for a certain range of tasks. The tourist with lots of money is not "king", but the tourist with sufficient small bills. Old bills were avoided as if they were fake money.

Most people go to Pagan to see the thousands and thousands of old "stupas" on the dry plain. I never saw them. Instead, I treated the night at Pagan (or rather, the village outside the "tourist part" of Pagan) as a rest-stop. I read, ate various types of ethnic food, and slept. The hotel staff were astonished. I just wanted to finish my "travel loop" (I like to travel in "loops" and circles over a given country, so as to avoid having to retrace my steps); I wanted to return to Rangoon and fly back to Bangkok. Looking at the bookstores, and making judgments about the menus in the restaurants, I could see that many of the tourists who were coming to Burma were from Europe, especially the Scandinavian countries, France, and Germany. I ate many papayas and melons, and drank "smoothies" made from them. In the past, I used to criticize my students for not eating the local food, and for eating their own country's food when away from home, but I was doing it too! So, I will shut up, here. The narrow roadway from the hotel to the restaurants was in darkness, there being few lights, and the restaurants themselves were subdued. Perhaps this was the result of taking lodgings in the quiet part of the tourist zone: but, this was what I wanted. Diners eyed each other from a distance. The food was cold, and calmed you down, and that was enough. Not far away, the few businesses that offered services like basic travel goods, wood-carvings, body massage, and the like began; not far from the hotels complexes themselves, the poverty appeared in gradations, getting stronger and stronger. You may wonder why I didn't go to the ruins: it was like going to Xi'An and not seeing the Terracotta Soldiers (Bing Ma Yong). I just was not interested, and didn't want to do it because everyone else was doing it. However, the Burmese people were helpful in that they did not force views on you as to what you should do, or should see.

The next morning, I took a bus to Pyay, which like most of the other trips in Burma lasted the day. The roads are very narrow, in deference to their "ancestors" in the English countryside, and driving through Burma is like passing along the lanes of a huge plantation, or some English squire's country holdings. Of course, everything is "tropical". The road infrastructure was being pounded to pieces, and there seemed to be little money to keep things going and operational.

However, there was some development aid from other countries in progress. This was usually in the form of funding for bridges and reforestation projects. A number of countries have contributed to the needs of the "developing" world, but in East Asia, the one that stands out is Japan. I saw many projects that were funded by them, over the course of my travels. We passed through an oil field, but much of the infrastructure was really run-down. Alongside the road were many palm trees. Some had ladders tied to the trunks so that the workers might go up easily, and at the top where the branches met the tip of the trunk, there were small rubber buckets. Was it palm wine, or palm oil? Some fields had hundreds of these palm trees in rows; otherwise, they grew along the boundaries between fields. The earth was a rich red, and with rain, the land seemed reasonably fertile. Of course, this was towards the end of the dry season, and everything appeared tired out and covered in reddish dust. However, for traveling it was good. We made reasonable progress that day, stopping at another point-and-eat lunch place, filled with spicy, adventurous food.

Pyay was yet another road stop (although there is a famous temple there, and it is on the Irrawaddy river). If I come back to Burma, I would like to take the boat up river from Rangoon to Pagan. The next day, I continued on to Rangoon, to await the flight out of Burma.

The highlight of those two days in Rangoon was the guest house, the "Motherland Inn 2", somewhere on the eastern side of the city. The staff there were really friendly, the place was cheap, the food was all right, and the rooms comfortable. I would certainly want to go there the next time. However, what really made this place stand out was the sapphires they sold. Burma is famous around the world for its rubies and other gem stones, and the markets are full of places to buy them; however, the gems are outrageously expensive, and they are rather small. I think jewels are grossly over-rated as a luxury worth having. They were sometimes good to look at, but to buy them was a whole different question. The "Motherland Inn 2" solved this problem, by selling three-carat sapphires (about the size of a large pea) for three dollars each! The stones were very flawed, and had "cloudy" marks within them, or else were scratched. I bought one, and hope to get more the next time. After all, if someone looks at a three-carat sapphire swinging from your girlfriend's pendant ear-rings, from ten feet away, they will not know the finer differences. Why spend ten thousand dollars (each) for the jeweler's version?

I spent the remaining time wandering around Rangoon to buy some items for home, which could not be found there--things such as temple bells (think of Kipling, here), a field hoe for digging, and other hardware for my new house and garden. Rangoon is hot, crowded, and very tiring to walk about in: markets, markets everywhere, and nowhere to rest. It was better to stay in the guest house. I visited the "Shwe Dagon Pagoda", which is the ultimate Buddhist temple to visit in Burma; a college student hired himself as my guide, and he took me around the temple, and a park.

The last day, I flew back to Bangkok, in Thailand. By this time, I was tired of Burma, and "things Burmese". However, this trip was only the beginning, and I feel sure that I would like to go back again--go up the river to Pagan, to explore the Shan State area in the east, and maybe to go down the long, thin part of the country in the south-east. Of course, the best part (I feel it is the best) is closed, and that is the far north. I will have to dream.

Fanny, you have inspired me throughout to write this account. I dedicate it to you, dear sister. I hope others will visit Burma!