"Fragments of China: Urumqi Once More. Urumqi, 9/2005 to 1/2007.

(2007).

FRAGMENTS OF CHINA—URUMQI ONCE MORE.

(September, 2005, to January, 2007.)

Introduction. This part of "Fragments of China" was written while working in Urumqi, at Urumqi Vocational University (for the second time), between September, 2005 and January, 2007. Since I expect to be going home for a protracted time, I will focus on topical events, people, trends, and other observations.

Throughout this time, the sense of foreboding concerning the return to the USA has been a dominant presence, affecting much of my thinking. I will try to keep such "writing influence" to a minimum. Nonetheless, it is there.

Urumqi has changed, the students have changed, life has changed, and very little is what it used to be four years ago. China is changing so very fast. Once the Olympic Games in Beijing (2008) and the Shanghai World Fair (2010) are over, a line in the historical sand will have been crossed; the region, and even the world will not be the same. Therefore, I wish to chronicle as much of the old order as possible in this part of "Fragments of China". As with the rest of this book, "the unity is in the fragmentation".

How Urumqi has changed. The city of Urumqi is now a very crowded place. The population is over two million, and it is growing. Every day (I hear), a few trainloads of "internal migrants" from "inner China" come in, looking for a new life. I suspect that many of them come from Sichuan Province and Henan Province—both impoverished regions with a surplus of population. I wonder how many of these internal migrants are leaving Urumqi and going into the other parts of Xin Jiang. At times, it seems that many of them stay within the city limits. My students tell me that many do go out, but I wonder. There is plenty of construction work available here. The "min gong" (the internal migrant workers from "inner China") work very hard, and do all the unpleasant jobs. Nonetheless, the swelling city population has changed many aspects of city life, and it is this that I wish to discuss.

First, the pressure of living has gone up noticeably. Each time I go down the street, I can feel an unseen pressure about me: this comes from there being too many people and vehicles on the roads. The drivers, and especially the bus drivers, are very "pushy"; they blow their horns more, and have an indifferent arrogance towards others on the street. Sometimes when I take the bus, I hold onto the seat rail in front of me, close my eyes, and try to "visualize" myself somewhere else. If I do not, as a driver myself, I will internalize all the cursing, the dodging, the fear, the curious mix of passive arrogance and bottled up anger that now courses up and down the roads. I wonder if the people here know this is happening to them. I must say, however, that this change in temper exists mostly on the roads, and not on foot, in the crowds, as the Chinese people have been in surging throngs for a long time already.

Second, buildings are popping up faster than ever. Construction of large buildings has always been a dominant theme in my observations, but now, the pace is really fast. Serious earth-moving projects, the conversion of not one football field of land but fifty football fields of land, the disappearance of whole niche-neighborhoods is now quite common. Urumqi is well on the way to becoming the hub of Central Asia. However, as I was going past one building, I felt the surface stucco was doomed to crack and peel in a few years: what was the inner core like? (However, that was only one building.)

Third, there are also changes in the inner life of the people. I do not quite know how to define them, but they are there. One of the purposes of this book will be to explore these changes. Life goes on, but not all is well; it is not a visible malaise, but at various points it appears. Xing Fu Road, the only way from Zhi Da to the downtown area of Nan Men (South Gate), will be the main observation area. There is something tugging at the insides of this people, but what is it? Here is an observation; it happened in mere minutes. One afternoon, I walked through an underpass / underground market, so as to go beneath a very busy road. While going up the steps on the other side, I walked past a knot of people who were staring at a man who had collapsed on the stairway. A small pool of dark blood lay by his head. I looked at him dully, then mounted the stairs. Whether he had fallen down from above, or had cut himself, I did not know. Someone stood next to the man, talking to him. In a moment I was up the stairs and into the press of people on the pavement. The next day, there were some marks on the stone stairway, but most of the blood had been mopped away. Here is another observation: just before that same incident, as I was going through the underground market, I noticed how many "accessory stores" there are here. These small shops—almost stalls, really—sell cheap ear-rings, bracelets, hairpins, and the like. They are everywhere, and are heavily patronized by young Chinese women. There seems to be a huge surge of interest in looking beautiful, dressing right, being better, and keeping fashionable; all sorts of exterior aids are being used to make this happen. This "appearance revolution" is being waged with cheap accessories, and not with Hermes products or the like. (Here, I think of my mother, who said if a woman can master the use of the scarf, she has it all, in terms of being fashionable.) What is going on here? The Chinese have always prided themselves on dressing well throughout the ages, but something is going on here today. I have the sense that something is amiss, they are trying to correct it, but to no avail; soon, the figurative internal chain that holds them will snap violently taut, with destructive effects.

All is not well inside; there is something under the surface of the Chinese nation trying to come out, and it isn't pretty. The former optimism, the "growth forever" euphoria, the crises that arouse public unity are not here these days—they seem to have walked off the stage without asking permission. Is this the banality of peace, or is it the uneasy prelude to a crisis of inner confidence that the actors of the earlier euphoria refused to recognize? It is like this: a brave runner ties a rope around his waist, ties the other end to a tree, and then runs away from the tree. At a certain point, the rope is jerked taut, and the runner is stopped and hurt violently.

Something is not right in Urumqi, and there are no clear signals as to what this might be. I think that, at a number of places in the social existence here, people have been living without regard to reality; they have been living on borrowed time; they have overspent their "social capital"—and real capital, too—without really acknowledging or caring about it; they have amassed huge deposits of "externalities"; in effect, they have been living in something of a fool's paradise. Deep within, they know it; the figurative barometer glass is falling down, and in people's inner hearts there is the unvoiced, quiet, never-really-leaving sense that a storm is coming. Maybe I am superimposing my own inner concerns on what I observe, but I do plead this: for many years, the Chinese have been spending borrowed capital (and I don't refer to money, here), and I have often wondered about the day of reckoning. Soon, the rope will be yanked taut. Yet, some of my friends remind me of this society's amazing ability to swallow inordinate amounts of wrong, and still somehow continue onwards. Is there anyone out there who feels like I do? From time to time, I will make other, fragmentary observations about this matter.

There are also more facilities in Urumqi. The buses are becoming more modern, the fashion clothes shops are everywhere, and different kinds of food are now available. In the past, having bananas on the street was a sure sign of progress; in time, it was lemons on the street corner; after a while, passion fruit and durian fruit came along. With the arrival of winter, many roast chestnut vendors have appeared on the streets along with the other fruit vendors. It is always pleasing to see a mix of older-vintage products (like apples) being sold next to the newer types of food (like passion fruit). In this sense, the streets are more reassuring.

However, I think the social morals are degrading. Of course, I have nothing to crow about, yet I can feel this trend gathering apace in Chinese society. The younger generation has sprung up, and wants everything, with few of the "checks and balances" that earlier people groups in other countries faced when they initiated their own sexual revolutions. Under the surface, there is an almost universal seething of passion; the young generation's appetites are almost limitless. When the "corrections" come, they will be devastating.

There is something about the new generation: they do not seem to behave like the generation before. In terms of youth culture, the distance between the 27-year olds and the 19-year olds is, functionally speaking, a generation. Deep inside their psyches, the latent restraint of their families, their countryside traditions and their culture is still strong—all it takes to change them is a mere phone call from home. However, they are so different from the ones who came before. Their different worldview translates itself, in part, to sobering statistics: very high co-habitation rates, and also high abortion rates.

Just as Urumqi has changed since the last time I was here, so too I have changed. My life views have been shaken up; in disentangling and cutting myself from many forms of social restraint, I have become harder inside... although I am still naïve at many points. Since buying some land in Maine, I have taken on the perspective of most landowners (more about that later). The crisis of "finding a wife" was never solved, and this has now become an abscess. I travel less, and spend even more time in my room (although this is good for writing, though). However, the most significant theme is this: a life solely based on my students ("breakfast, lunch and dinner") is no longer a sustainable form of life. Therefore, I am drifting. Enough said here.

The Decline And Fall Of Zhi Da. There have also been changes in Zhi Da (Urumqi Vocational University), where I work. Put simply, the school is rotting out from the inside.

Zhi Da was never a famous school. In fact, for quite some time it has been known as a school that is looked down upon by the employers of Urumqi; this fact was not lost on my earlier students. However, in recent years, the school made a fateful decision: they opened their doors to certain students from "Nei Di" (Inner China) who had poor scores in their college entrance exams, but who could pay some money to the school. Therefore, a bad thing became much worse. The 2005-2006 academic year, my ninth in China, was one of the worst. Many students just did not care about learning; they either slept, did not come to class, talked to others in class, or used their cell phones in class. There was always this background hubbub of low conversation in the classroom while I was trying to lecture. Copying, cheating and the like were common. Exams were farces: in one exam, the department put a "difficult" class together in a small room, with the students right next to each other; the proctors could not control anything, and the scene that followed was not of cheating, it actually became a *market* for the exchange of exam information. (In spite of this, the whole class failed the exam, for their scores were still low.)

The change in the attitude of the students has also affected after class activities. On many occasions, the students did not come to "free-talk" sessions in my room; when I came into the classroom in the evenings sometimes, and asked if there were "any questions", there was silence; when I loaned out a DVD player and disks for the students to watch films, some problem knocked the project down. There is not the motivation to learn that there once was. There are different priorities these days. For a while, I wondered if I had "outlived my mandate", and was barren and useless for the task, but even I (the pessimist) doubt that. No. Today's students care about something else, and follow a different rhythm, another call. It is almost as if they, as part of this contemporary society, lives in a world of accessories and dreams, like a town that has established itself on top of a huge limestone "sinkhole". The day of collapse is out there somewhere. However, the whole world is like this, waiting for some "correction".

One of my informants reported these statistics to me; in my heart, I take them to be true, but I would not force them on others. Assume that half the population in Zhi Da is female, and the other half male. Of the females living on campus in the dormitories (at least, in the Foreign Language Department), about one third live off-campus secretly with their boyfriends, in the usual "student crash-pads"; their dormitory roommates "cover" for them when the "dorm mom" goes through the rooms every night. Of these women, about 50% have had abortions. This seems like a very high number, but I take it as an indicator, a bellwether, of what is going on in the "big picture". Just as there were consequences to the sexual revolution in the USA, so there will be here, but I think these results will be much more violent, as there seems to be less "cushioning" in this society, to reduce the pain of what is, in effect, a social train-wreck.

Once the students leave college, they run up against the hardships of finding a suitable job; for some students, the problem lies in finding any job. It is so easy to go down to Guangzhou city (Canton), where the might of China's manufacturing industry is located, and make money. I detest Guangzhou; for me, it represents all that is ugly; however, that is where the money is, and that is where so many people must go. Xin Jiang is still seen as an economic backwater, a place where the trickle-down effect of China's eastern boom will never be truly seen. (However, Xin Jiang, and especially Urumqi, will take on its own special significance as the hub of Central Asia.) It is always sad to see one's old students working in jobs far below their real potential, just because the economic reality, their parents' will, small-minded bosses, and other factors skew it that way. They live in student crash-pad apartments for years after graduation, barely make enough money, and yet the general society lives on beyond its (social, economic, environmental, ethnic) means. How long will this bubble last? I wonder. Many of my students live in a "brick wall" reality, while the dreams and aspirations of the general social matrix exist within a fool's paradise. A few students are industrious and enterprising; they make money, buy their apartment, and move up. Many seek to marry the money, and with it, the power to move up. So far, I have heard of no one inheriting their money. This tension between induced dream and concrete reality is really pernicious, and this generation of students feel the full effects of it. The widespread dissemination of dreams on the TV, as well as the uncontrolled proliferation of the car, have both exacerbated this problem. One final thing: the "hidden crisis" of too many "soft loans" being used for house mortgages has yet to manifest itself fully. Some think that China's ability to absorb huge amounts of systemic corruption, yet not collapse, as in the West, is keeping this problem at bay; perhaps the "problem" will never materialize. However, I have long wondered about the "crooked cash-flow" here, as it relates to house mortgages; I think the day of

reckoning is coming, and must come, although I do not know how, or when.

There is more that I could say about the decline and fall of Zhi Da, but I will stop here. The students are in the vanguard of society; they represent society, yet they are the first that society "pinches". These students are the one to watch.

On Various "Out-Of-Class" Projects. As I said before, the attitude of the new students was not the best, and made me upset. (Of course, many students were eager to learn, but the overall effect was certainly depressing.) Therefore, I took my energy elsewhere. This I had never done before, as for years, my students were almost everything to me. Before, they absorbed almost all aspects of my life. There were good consequences to this, and bad. The good consequences were that the "educational product" was very good. The bad consequences were that I did not have my own life (I am 44 now, and the results show).

Since the current students were not really interested in learning (beyond the mere passing of exams), I decided to find my own private tutorial students. I now have eight, and I do not charge fees. For me, it is not about the money, but about "lifestyle", and the addictive craving for "results". China is a "face" country; I like "results", first and foremost.

One student is the son of the boss of my favorite restaurant. I have seen him grow up over the past seven years. Now he is in his mid-teens, and is more often reluctant to talk—sometimes even a bit surly—but that is alright, as I give him more slack when he needs it. We get on well, and his English ability has improved slowly over time. His mother now refuses to take my money when I eat at their restaurant.

Next, there are the two children of the local hairdresser, who is Uighur. The girl is one year younger than the boy, and they are both in middle school. Working with them is my chief pleasure in these "out of school" projects. They often playfully compete with each other for my attention and time, and they know how to push all of my "attention buttons". The mother likes it all very much. Last term, both children rose to the top of their respective classes in English language, so the "results" were sweet. However, it is more than mere results; it is just plain fun to be with them. If they ask, "Will you come back tomorrow night?" I say, "Maybe yes, maybe no.", in my best Clint Eastwood impersonation. They love it. Many Uighur students from Zhi Da visit this hairdressing shop, as it is not far from the campus. I can tell if a certain day has been good by just looking at the pile of cut hair on the floor, to see if it is large or small. This family lives in a very cramped set of rooms. In fact, their shop, which is part of a long line of shops, is no more than a whitewashed stone shanty: yes, it keeps the weather out, had a VCD player, has electricity, enough customers, but it is still a shanty, and the effects pinch the life of those living there. Everything is so fragile! In the front part, next to the entry door, is a curtained-off area where the children sleep. In the middle is the actual hairdressing shop, with all the usual, basic tools of the trade. At the back, behind a flimsy partition wall and curtained-off doorway, lies the mother's bedroom. Her bed takes up most of this space, so it must act as her bed, the family social meeting area, the dining table, the children's homework area, and rest couch. Just next to her bed are the stove, and some shelf space to store dishes. Out of this shanty, this brave mother turns out two delightful children. Sometimes, I wonder if I spend too much time in that hairdressing shop with those children, but they would never consent to let me go. Teaching them makes the overall career of being an English teacher in China much more worthwhile. I usually go there in the evening, after supper, and before the nightly phone calls to old students.

Next to the Uighur hairdresser's shop is the photocopy shop. I have known the boss for seven years, and she knows me very well. Her daughter is now five or six, so for the first time I can say of someone that I knew them from the time they were inside their mother. The girl has just entered her first year of elementary school, and seems to be alright in her studies. I am very laid-back in teaching her some simple English phrases—a little here, and a little there—but her mother is very conscientious in priming her daughter's mind with all sorts of education. Sometimes the girl does not want to study, so she does something else; in that case, I leave the shop and go into the Uighur hairdresser's shop to teach those children. In a few minutes, the little girl from the copy shop has followed me into the hairdresser's shop, then she sits down and takes part in her neighbor's class. At this point, the best thing to do is to let her accept what she wants to accept. However, she is very clever (she gets it from her mother).

I have three students from my real students who I teach extra English; two are junior students, and one is a sophomore. I am sure there are a few other "keen" students in my classes, but they have not shown themselves yet. The two juniors are friends, and they have come during the lunch hour on many occasions. Usually, we practice pronunciation, "free talk", certain questions from their textbooks, and other things. We have become good friends. On one day, we went together to the city museum, and to other tourist sites in Urumqi. Their English has improved somewhat, but I am glad with the effort we all made. As with the other projects, it is all about "results"—since my real students have not been very forthcoming, I have this craving to see results harvested elsewhere. The sophomore student comes less frequently, but she is also "keen"; I have to be more formal with her than with the other two, or she will not come back. Some Chinese students are difficult to manage, as their "face" (a.k.a dignity / pride) makes them sensitive to all sorts of things.

Then there are the day students. There are only about five or six day students who come to my place during the Wednesday lunch hour, but they have shown an interest in talking quite out of proportion to their numbers. After a while, I realized that they liked the following "free talk" format—introduce a topic for five minutes, then leave the room for fifteen minutes, so they can talk by themselves (lest the "free talk" become "free listen"!), then come in again to wrap up the topic. What many students need in their English learning is not more English knowledge, but a psychologically secure environment in which to practice and develop what they already know; their own "face", as well as the constant tendency of their peers to "snipe" at them drive them underground. The day students do not always come, but I hope that, by the end of the year, they will be better English speakers.

There are a few other individuals I meet outside class, and even outside the school. They include a few teachers, two government workers, and others. There are now many contacts in my life here in Urumqi.

One day, as I was quietly reading a book in one of the foreign-operated coffee houses, a young woman walked up to me and asked me some questions, and then some others. I thought, "Oh no! Another 'English vulture' has come!" We spoke for a few minutes, and she wanted to talk more; for some reason, I agreed. It soon became apparent that she really was interested in learning English, to the extent that she asked so many questions in her own university classroom that her classmates hated her. I took her on as another tutorial student, and from that moment on, we became good friends. She is ruthlessly determined to learn English, and we have had a very high concentration of meetings, all in a very short period of time. She is a good student as well.

I think some people think it strange that I should be so energetic with strangers, in teaching them English. Well, I pick my students carefully. One of the advantages of living in China is that the "politically correct" social disease is mostly absent. Here is a land where one can say hello to little children, where one can have a student at will (at least I can usually do this), where one can be a fool because one is a foreigner. Much of this would be impossible for many reasons in the USA, where the resident taboos hold sway. (Of course, there are some things which one cannot do here.) Last night, as we were talking in a Uighur restaurant about English and everything else, I noticed some people staring at us: after all, she is 20, and I am 44. She did not care, and neither should I. The restaurant was packed to bursting with diners, as it was one of those Uighur restaurants that cater to the hard-core "halal" crowd—and it was Ramadan, when families were getting together for the welcome evening break-fast supper. Waitresses roved everywhere, there was the steady background noise of dozens of dinner conversations, mixed with the sounds of clicking chinaware and chair legs on the tiled floor. We forgot the crowds around us, and focused on our own business—recent events in our lives, current English textbook questions, and the as yet unsolved problem of where to hold our meetings.

This has been a real and persistent problem. She follows a very strict observance of the "halal" food rules, which is all right, but crosses out a large pool of meeting places. We went into one café, and she met someone there who had given her a very unpleasant experience in the past; no sooner had we sat down at a table to order something than she began to cry. We left in a hurry, and in ten or so minutes, she was better, although I did not probe her too deeply about that man. Another place was not suitable, although I asked her to look at it briefly, in the hope that she would see what kind of "meeting place" I was looking for. Basically, the Uighurs are really, really "ethnocentric", and it is hard for them to step into a social milieu that is different from what they have become used to. We then went to a third place, but it was besieged with foreigners, who were crowding in for some function. I certainly did not feel it was a suitable place for us to go into. I gave up and we got into a taxi to go to the Uighur quarter. We went to the ultra-conservative Uighur restaurant and ate there; at this point, I did not care about what other people were thinking. On two occasions, she noticed some of her classmates, so she went over to them to talk about something. This is something I like about being with Uighurs: when they talk among themselves, I can understand almost nothing; with them, I live a very split, compartmentalized existence; with the Han Chinese, there is a lot of linguistic overlap, and, after nine years in China, it is hard to isolate myself from Han affairs. Going back to my student... it will be a while before we can systematize out meetings. After the meetings, I bundle her into a taxi back to her mother's home, while I wander around the Uighur quarter for a while, before returning to my own place.

I did something unprecedented: once I had discovered that she really wanted to learn, I gave her 800 yuan (about one hundred dollars), and told her to buy all the Uighur books she had ever wanted. I sent her to Kashgar, in southern Xin Jiang, but she went to Turpan, in central Xin Jiang. No problem. She got the books, and brought them back over the October holiday. You, the reader, may wonder why I did this. Well, I have come to the point where if I find someone who is "worth the investment" (in terms of education), I will make a concrete choice. (As my house builder in Maine likes to say, "Money talks, and b------t walks.") I was pleased to see that she took the money, without the usual refusals and "indirect no's" that so many people here like to use, and then actually went and got the books. We will get a bookshelf in a market soon.

In time, we actually did go to the furniture market and buy the bookcase. The Hua Ling market is enormous—it is the Babylon of markets in Urumqi—and has expanded so much that a whole new building the size of two or three zeppelin hangars has been constructed to cope with the overflow. The particle-board furniture was substandard, so we settled on office furniture with sheet-metal skin construction. We chose one, bought it, and hired a delivery truck to take it to the student's house. Her mother wasn't enthralled with the idea of her daughter taking possession of her own bookcase, and like the Little Red Hen, didn't want to help; the student's brother looked out of the sixth floor window down at us with less than a friendly expression. However, he did come downstairs, and soon he helped me to carry it up to the top floor. In half an hour, the bookcase was in her room, and she began filling it with books, lest her mother decide to put the family quilts in it. Sometimes I wonder at the social and personal dynamics seething beneath the surface in this mini-drama. The daughter was very strong-willed, and wanted to get an education, at any cost. Her family seemed to be either against—or at least ambivalent towards—her educational dreams. As for me, I was a stranger, just walking into her house, putting a bookcase into her bedroom, without so much as an explanation to her mother and brother as to why I was doing this, helping her to assemble it and put in the shelf-pins, and then taking her out of the house for a lunch-date. I cannot begin to count all the cultural "false steps" I made then: however, neither she or I were sorry for it; her education came first in both our minds. I find it strange that I, a social coward, should have been so brazen about installing that bookcase. Now, I wonder how long the bookcase will last. Probably the mother will resign herself to having the bookcase and its books in her daughter's bedroom, but I also wonder if she will call me one day, sorrow in her voice and tears on her cheeks, to say that her family threw everything out the windows. (I am too melodramatic.)

After leaving her house, we went back into the city, had lunch in yet another foreign-run café, and continued our English tutorial. She had so many questions, and would have asked more, except that I had to move on to another student appointment. I call her "Tadpole", as she is so young—not even a frog. Tadpole is an emblem of what is lacking at Zhi Da, and what I am looking for in my tutorial students. We will see how this thing goes in the months to come.

There are other out-of-class activities in my life here in Urumqi. I like to read literature books, especially British literature. Since the bookstores here are not good enough (yet), I bring in my books from the USA, or from bookstores in Beijing and Bangkok. Slowly, ever so slowly, China is being absorbed into the "Lonely Planet" empire, with its coffee houses, internet bars and other trappings of 21st Century youth travel culture, and with it, there has been a very slow appearance of "book-swap" bookcases in various places: the end of the tunnel is still a very long way off. Anyways, I like to read, but I am very slow at it. I have been writing (this book); I have also picked up writing poems, after a drought of twenty years. I think the poems have returned because I was happier with my life; anomie is death to good writing. Now I have over fifty poems, but I do not want to publish them yet; the Muse has not told me what to do at this point. I often call my old students, who live all over China. The proliferation of the "IP Telephone Bars" to all corners of the country has made "reaching out and touching someone" very cheap and easy. In this, as well as in many other areas of life, China is way ahead of the USA, where the service sector of the economy has a "dog in the manger" approach, and the behavior of the medieval guilds. I can do ten times the dreams here than I could at home: is it any surprise that I am happy with being productive here? (However, home is still home.) I also work on the

promotion of the other book on how to learn English without a foreigner, which should have translations in Chinese, Uighur, and Kazakh. I watch films at home, and visit some of the foreign-run cafés. At times, it is a very marginal life, but at other times, I feel I am at home, in a psychological sense. I could stay here for a long time.

Why I built a compound in Monson. Two years ago, my uncle died. He left me a little money, and I used it to buy twenty acres in Monson, Maine state. My family was against it from the start, and they still are. Nevertheless, I am happy with what I have done—although I feel I overspent by 20%. Oh well, it is too late to worry about that. I had dreamed of a "small-holding", ever since I read John Seymour's "The Complete Book Of Self-Sufficiency" when I was fifteen (1977). The dream never seemed to materialize, and as the years went by, the abandoned dream became poisonous to my inner life. I have noticed that I am happier when I throw out the taboos and restrictions, and get on with my dreams: case in point, China, travel, and the land in Maine.

Two and a half years have gone by, and more money has been spent (I will not say how much). About 20% of the land has been cleared, the driveway put in, the land stumped and stoned, and the septic system, garage, office, summer-living cabin, winter-living cabin, foundation pad for the future main dwelling, secondary compound and "Zen-rock garden", storage areas, compost bins, terraces, and other items put in. I basically have everything—except the actual house, as well as all utilities. It is not a home, not a house, but a "global crash-pad"—which is exactly what I wanted in the first place. It is a kind of home base for my global work-wanderings. I went to Maine, as the land there was much cheaper than in Massachusetts, and the social climate much more bearable. (In many "Third World" countries, the lack of "rule of law" is a terrible thing; in Massachusetts, the rule of law has metastasized in the opposite direction. Maine, with its almost "Third World" flavor and relatively primitive legal oversight, suits me very well. No offense meant, you Mainers.) I developed the land, and then literally walked away from it, leaving it into the care of a local friend. It was bought for the future, long after I have (almost) no immediate family to telephone on dark evenings. It is on the southern fringes of the "Bei Da Huang" (the great northern wilderness) of New England; I suspect that "suburbia" will be lapping at Monson in the 2030's, but by then, I hope all the groundwork I did now will be too deeply established for me to bother about it. Who knows: the future cannot be seen. All I want is a place to come back to between foreign work assignments—even if that place is only a handful of shipping containers and a long garage with nothing in it. It was not a house that I built, but a sort of philosophy book I wrote in wood and sheet metal, and not in paper. How strange it is! Although I have not spent much time there, I am there in spirit almost every day, and I have walked over and pored over much of it many, many times. In some strange way, it *has* become my home, a sort of psychological home. The other home is here in Asia. I wanted a compound home that looked inwards, not the typical "wooden ship on a green sea" (the usual house surrounded by exposed lawn) that almost all of the USA favors. It is very strange, but I like it. However, this place in Monson (in the woods, next to a country road, three miles out of town—population 700) has probably put the last nail in the coffin of my ever getting married, for I suspect that no one would ever want me, since the property shows, very clearly, what sort of a person I am. Who would ever join me in such a life? Well, this life, I still feel, is vastly superior to the shame of prostituting myself to social convention, which I would regret.

The second trip to Burma. In the past year or so, there have been a cluster of trips, which I want to write about; they can be included in this part of "Fragments Of China".

During the winter holiday of 2006, I traveled again to S.E. Asia with a Beijing friend and her daughter. We went to Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand. I am glad we went, but when they had departed to Beijing, I went back to my run-down hotel in Bangkok in a sorrowful mood. There were only ten days left before I had to return to China! The expected trip to Burma was cut in half. What to do? Stay in Bangkok and mope? However, I chose to go to Burma anyhow, and make the most of it. (I am very glad I did, as the next trip, in 2007, has been cancelled). I booked with my favorite Bangkok travel agent, and went on the next plane to Rangoon, with both money and time running a bit low.

In term of travel routes, this trip was much more limited than the first trip. I took two journeys: one trip went down south-east to Moulmein, where George Orwell was stationed with the police in the 1920's, and back to Rangoon; the other one took the overnight boat west to Pathein, with the bus back to Rangoon. They were "little wings" etched onto the long map of Burma. Make no mistake, Burma and Kyrgyzstan are the two best "neighboring countries", next to China, for interesting travel—Burma in the winter, and Kyrgyzstan in the summer.

Rangoon was pretty much the same as before—noisy, dirty, dilapidated, crowded, the capital of anomie, full of friendly strangers who are a thousand personalities away from you, the perfect place to go emotionally penniless, mad and commit suicide in. (Only Lhasa comes close in this respect.) However, after getting used to the local emotional and cultural climate, Rangoon has its own peculiar attraction, one that brings people back for more. Mountain crocuses do indeed bloom among the rubble, so to speak. Like certain other countries, Burma maintains a tight hold on an essential quality that hardened travelers crave: that abiding feeling of living on another planet, in another epoch of history, somewhere far from the groove of today's globalization trend, and wherever or whatever it was they came out of. Well, that is not quite right, but there is something about Burma that one just cannot find elsewhere.

I went straight back to my Rangoon watering hole—the Motherland 2 Inn, and dug in. (All over east and south-east Asia, I have picked up these "watering hole"-type places, and carefully filed them away in my consciousness. Maybe I should be a "Fuller Brush" salesman after all, with this huge landmass as my sector.) The Motherland 2 Inn is typical of the "Lonely Planet"-style enclaves that have sprouted up all over S.E. Asia. It caters to foreign tastes, with the inevitable dishes that tourists and backpackers alike crave when they are away from home—New York cheesecake, apple pie, fruit smoothies, the usual range of basic Italian pasta and Mexican dishes, and chocolate cake. It also offers some of the more well-known local dishes, but cooked to western sanitary standards. Laundry service is available all day long. The rooms are air-conditioned, and also have ceiling fans. The toilets are clean. The staff can speak basic English—and sometimes even more—and they are scrupulously polite. Bob Marley, as well as all the usual reggae, fusion, pop and country musicians can be heard during the "happy hour"—or at many hours. The floors are very clean. Day trips of all shapes and sizes can be arranged. (How strange it is that similar trips are available in most of the other guesthouses all over the entire region! How did such standardization ever evolve?) There is a front porch / patio, or a back courtyard somewhere nearby, for quiet reading. A bookshelf near the front office holds all the usual travel books, along with a sign that warns, "No pop psychology, religious, classic literature books, please!" (What does that leave, then, I wonder.) There is a computer with

Internet connections in the lobby; either that, of there is an Internet bar down the street. Foreign tourists come and go: the typical "Lonely Planet"-type guest house is like a swallow cave or bat cave in Indonesia, Thailand, or Mexico, with backpackers constantly coming and going. They are symbols of the rich symbiosis that has evolved all over the relatively stable parts of the world, between the local communities and the wandering, usually young backpackers. It is, in short, a very helpful infrastructure to "hop-scotch" over vast parts of the "Third World". Some would say this is one of globalization's "externalities", but I have come to appreciate it. Sometimes, I cannot handle the undiluted, full-strength local culture. One other thing: these "backpacker communities", like certain ecosystems in harsh environments, are razor thin; step one or two paces away from the familiar, and you are plunged straight back into the ammonia-strength, raw local culture, with all its interests, inconveniences, and dangers. It is indeed a very delicate balance.

I first went down to Moulmein, south-east of Rangoon. I wanted to go farther down the south-east "arm of Burma, but was afraid of being too far from the capital, with too little time to return in a hurry, so I took a night bus to Moulmein. I figured that I could arrive in Moulmein in the morning, look around, and then get on another bus going back to Rangoon. (At this time, I was not very adventurous or imaginative.) I sat down in the seat (not reclining), zipped up my light jacket all the way up, crammed my hat onto my head, and tried to sleep my way through the night. Good luck, traveler. The roads were paved but narrow, and our route wound over the alluvial flat-land that seems to make up much of the country. At three in the morning, we stopped in some mid-journey tea house known to the driver, drank strong milk tea and ate some unknown, deep-fried dough, or something like that, and scouted for the toilet. It was the usual truck-stop latrine: that story from "The Decameron" always haunts me, every time I step onto the latrine boards, with no clear view of what is below. We got back into the bus. On into the night we went, until the new day came up, and revealed Burma in its cool, early morning beauty.

Although Burma near the great rivers is flat, and although the scenery is very repetitive, it never seems to become boring. The gold-and-white stupas, the wooden monasteries, the green rice fields, the dull-black ribbon of pavement winding its way around natural obstacles like irrigation ditches, the come-and-gone-again-in-a-minute settlements all exist in a world quite beyond time, without need for aesthetic improvement, and harmoniously beautiful. Living in Burma is like living in statically vibrant amber. The days come and the nights pass by; the land is soaked by the monsoon rains and then it dries up under a make-up of unwashed dust; the people follow the dictates of the growing seasons and life's many rituals. Everything is held together by countless glasses of strong milk tea, shielded by "thanaka" (the natural sunscreen used by the Burmese), and governed by the sun.

The sun was driving the last grey out of the sky and painting a little color when the bus went over the Thanlwinn (Salween) River bridge, and began the final approach to Moulmein. This bridge is quite long, and very narrow—I think just two single lanes, with a single railway track in between. The Thanlwinn is not navigable to big ships as it is too shallow for them, but it is very wide at this point. In half an hour we were in Moulmein.

This is the place where George Orwell worked during his time of service in the Imperial police. I enjoyed reading his "Burmese Days"—and his other work, too. However, at this time I was in bad humor, so after buying a cheap plastic fan, visiting yet another public toilet, and looking around the bus station, I did the unthinkable—I bought another ticket, and prepared for the long journey back to Rangoon. (I still have that plastic fan, which I keep in my travel bag.)

The journey back was just as long, but since it was daylight, I could see the countryside we passed through. When riding a bus in S.E. Asia, it pays to guess which side the sun will shine on, and choose a seat on the shady side, as the sun is very strong. The buses are often very old, and maintained very carefully, as Burma has been under various sanctions for a long time, and spare parts are either rare or must be machined in local workshops. Some buses were 1940's vintage British buses, and still going strong. I wonder if Cuba is the same way. Living in conditions of strict hardship have an effect on the people, and either pulverize them, or bring them together. I sensed more of the latter, in a quiet sort of way. Once the bus had re-crossed the Thanlwinn River bridge, the driver stopped briefly for some reason, and I got out to look at a bread-oven that had caught my eye.

All over south and S.E. Asia there are bread-ovens, tandoors, which are used for baking various forms of flat breads. In Xin Jiang, the Uighur "nan" breads are baked in this way: a coal fire is lit at the bottom of the clay (or brick) oven, and when the bricks are hot enough, the coals are removed, and the "dough disks" are slapped onto the vertical sides of the oven, and they stick there, like limpet mines; when the bread is baked, it is peeled off the brick wall, and is ready to eat. The Uighur ovens make a good bread, but it is hard to make the "dough disks" stick to the wall of the oven (at least I think so). The Burmese variant had a big hole on one side of the clay fire-chamber, and some form of tray or platform on the floor of the fire-chamber, inside. It seemed a very good way to make bread. The people there thought it very funny that a tourist would take such interest in a common, mud-brick tandoor.

The bus went on. As usual, music was piped in. In Laos, Thailand and Burma the popular / folk music seems to have a lot in common, especially with the twanging guitar and the wooded knocker percussion instrument. Frequently, there were charity drives along the road. These drives were organized by the Buddhist monasteries, but I did not know where the money went—I assume it was for local community development. Strong loudspeakers blared out religious music, chanting, or encouragement to donate. Children with silver-painted alms bowls waited for the money. Since there were so many collection points along the road (in eight hours of driving, we must have gone through fifteen or more), and since stopping the bus and paying would have taken so long, the bus conductor folded many small-denomination bills into thin strips, and tucked them behind a long elastic band (mounted on the bus door) that was able to hold a row of ten or more folded bills. Each time the bus came to a collection point, he drew out one folded bill, and flicked it to the waiting children. He was very accurate, and sometimes scored a hit in the collection bowl. The bus driver did not have to stop. The Buddhist religion, the monasteries, the monks, the charity drives, the all-night loudspeaker preaching services are totally a part of the life of the people here. Nowhere, no, not even in Tibet, have I seen a people so totally absorbed in and a part of their religion, and their religion a part of them.

It was a long drive back into Rangoon, a long drive. At times, I wanted the city to suddenly appear and the ride to over, but at times it was better just letting Burma "happen" around me. It is sure psychological and cultural death to allow agendas, timetables, objectives and petty personal projects to dominate one's life in a place like Burma; you have to be a part of, or at least benignly accept being a part of the "vibrant amber". The roads in Burma are often like paved English country lanes—without the immediate hedges, mind you—and they meander everywhere at times. This is not surprising, given Burma's colonial past. Potholes were not really a problem, although it appeared the people were forced into doing the corvée, which is really

horrible work. At noon, the bus made the lunch stop. I liked the curries, stews and grilled fish, but never liked the "side salads" of watercress, half a small lime and thin chili pepper, as I was deathly afraid of schistosomes and other evil parasites lurking in the raw vegetables. The cooked food was fine. The restaurant had no walls, contained ten or fifteen small food stalls and tea stands, had a concrete latrine out back, and was fine to eat in. I was in my usual "culture-shock / lone-wolf" mode; I ate my food, and talked to nobody. On many occasions, I am afraid to speak, or don't know what to say, or just want to be alone. It was hard to choose the dishes, as the serving pots were covered, and I did not know what was inside. With some vendors, I could pick up each lid and look inside, but here, in a busy lunch canteen during the lunch hour, I did not feel comfortable doing that. Language was essential, but since I did not have it, I either pointed, or was helped by someone. I thought: one must adapt to the conditions one faces... one must adapt, and never complain, or one will fall down one more level into anomie. Since I was isolated, almost completely, I felt that the best way to deal with these surroundings was to float, to drift through the Burmese cultural sea like a piece of plankton in the Sargasso Sea. When one is with the general population in a place like Burma, there is no viable alternative. In time, I came to think that this "drifting through life" approach is not a "cop-out", and it is more than a survival strategy; it is a way of life, and a way of coming to terms with one's surroundings, transcending them, and even enjoying them. When one reaches this point of acceptance, then Burma can take on a new level of meaning, and life becomes easier.

After lunch, the bus continued on its way to Rangoon. We passed oil-palm trees and small settlements, passed some more charity drive money-collection points, and crossed the same rail line from yesterday. Every five or ten minutes, somewhere amidst the interminable green sea of rice fields, resting on the horizon, sat a gold-painted stupa atop its whitewashed base; some rested inside a small grove of ancient trees, since there was a monastery there, and not out in the open field. The irrigation canals started to become bigger, and down some of them chugged "long-tail" boats carrying their freight, as they had for such a long time. In time the dream ended, the bus passed through the thronged streets of Rangoon, and we arrived. I went straight back to the Motherland 2 Inn, and with it, the archetypal "Lonely Planet" guesthouse culture, showered, ate, and slept.

I stayed in Rangoon for a day or so before the next side trip, to Pathein. During this time, I did my shopping. It seems strange that, in all of Asia, I should consider the Aung San market in downtown Rangoon to be the place where I "do my shopping". I have dragged my sorry tail through countless bus stations, train stations, cheap hotels, trash restaurants, public toilets of all descriptions, airports, a few genuine tourist sites, wayside cafés, markets, barbershops, and much else besides. I feel as if all of S.E. Asia, east Asia, and now, a slowly growing part of central Asia is becoming my playground. I like to wander around the Aung San market. It is a two storey affair, built in drab late-Imperial style (1920's?), with a colonnade around much of it. There are six parts, or blocks, to it. Inside, as in any major market or bazaar of the East, one can find almost anything one wants. There is cloth in profusion, ethnic products made in lacquer or hardwood, as well as Burmese musical instruments and recordings. However, the market is most well-known for its jewelry. "Licensed dealers" are packed into the central block, and their shops overflow into the surrounding blocks, and into the upstairs spaces. Jewelry made with rubies and gold is most common, but there is a steady trade in the other stones too. The tourists come here with the inevitability of rainfall; the dealers are waiting for them, and charge very high prices.

I went to the markets without a purpose, and with a purpose. First, I will discuss the "without a purpose" part. There were many times when I wanted only to drift about, buying nothing, letting the dreams of purchase or observation wander where they would, seeing something and letting the imagination carry me forward through five dream sequences in the space of one or two minutes. There is something about S.E. Asia that makes drifting, wandering, aimlessly blowing around like cottonwood "fluff" very easy; in fact, many people from the west have done this. In the Aung San market, as in many other places in Asia, one can disappear and drift among people, as if they were walking trees—people in shape, and appearance, but not in speech or interaction. This is highly addictive. While wandering among the stalls, I had to "sweep" the immediate area with one glance and move on, all in the space of one or two seconds. If I lingered, even for so much as a second more, the shopkeeper would call out to me, and try to persuade me to buy something. Two things are very clear here. First, the Burmese have extraordinary powers of knowing what your eyeballs are looking at, even at oblique angles; they can pull off the item you were looking at, even when the range is fifteen or twenty feet, and the item is small, and surrounded by other objects. Second (and this I resented), the culture of the local salesmanship seemed to follow the dictum, "We will do your choosing for you. We will choose for you; you just pay." I prefer, "I will do my own choosing! Don't choose for me. You are here to serve me, and not the other way around." So, here is another point of "cultural misunderstanding". Therefore, I would walk somewhat quickly around the stalls, scanning globally for general things, always trying to stay one step ahead of the shopkeeper's eyes—and they were so very perceptive! They did not like this. I think the best thing to do in these Asian bazaars is to know exactly beforehand what one wants, know which stall or stalls the object can be found, and then launch a "hit-and-run" raid on that dealer: walk in, strike a deal, and leave quickly, before the others realize what has happened. Do not bring a friend, especially a "browsing shopper"! Keep your "close relationship" shopkeepers separate from this strategy: they can be cultivated, and the relationship enjoyed; the "one-off" shopkeepers are expendable. Also, use small change, especially when dealing with the poorer dealers, as they hate "breaking" large bills. Keep your money in various places about your body, so as to make life more difficult for the thieves: the "big stuff" deep against your bosom, and the "small stuff" in different, easily accessible pockets. If you know the price of what you want, you can have it near at hand. Successful bazaar buying is like planning and executing an assassination in a busy café. Of course, if you want to be "social" and "culturally appropriate", then you should not behave this way. Social etiquette has its place, and "getting results" also has its place… but do not, under any circumstances, mix them! The truly successful social misfit / wanderer itemizes and subdivides and compartmentalizes everything—and keeps it that way. The way of "integrity" leads to dissolution, and the path of fragmentation holds you together. This has been my experience, as a "global wanderer".

Second, I also went to the Aung San market with a purpose. My sister Fanny likes jewelry, so on most of the S. E. Asia excursions I bought her hairpins, bracelets and ear-rings. I like Fanny: she takes anything of interest and value; hold out a Burmese bracelet made in *lapis lazuli*, and she will take it from you in a flash—and she is grateful, too. Burma is a jewelry shopper's paradise, so far (2006) equaled by none. Usually, the Burmese taste in jewelry is much too heavy; their women are literally dripping in precious stones, and it is way overdone. However, if one looks for basic materials, or the occasional stray piece of jewelry, one can satisfy one's taste in

minimalist jewelry. So, in my quest for basic jewelry for Fanny, I found some useful stones. One gem merchant provided me with six sapphires, for three pairs of ear-rings. Some of the stones were two or three carats. Of course, they were flawed all over, but at a distance of ten feet, with the stones dangling down from the ears, who is going to know they are not gem-quality sapphires? In any case, Fanny liked them. Going back to the market, there are good purchases out there, but one must be willing to wander endlessly around the market, both downstairs and upstairs, paying very little attention to the shopkeepers, who want you to follow their own ideas. Wander, scan and digest; digest, scan and wander. Hour after hour, throughout the day; hold your own counsel, and don't heed what they ask. The day outside, with its impossible hot afternoons, passes very quickly. Inside, the light is a little bit dim, and gets dimmer when the city electricity supply fails—which is quite often. As a result of power problems, there are many small generators inside the building, so during a power outage, the air is heavy with exhaust fumes. All this is normal operating procedure here; this is one of the stranger reasons why the East is such a liberating place to be. Kipling was right when he made the comment in "Mandalay": "Take me somewhere east of Suez, where there ain't no Ten Commandments…."

Of course, life here was not always a party; at times, the East is ruthlessly destructive, the way overpoweringly sweet honey is destructive to the insects that are drowning in a bowl of it, on a hot summer afternoon. Burma is one of the archetypes in this matter. There was a restaurant section in one of the central blocks of the Aung San market. Inside, there were about four or five establishments, delineated only by their tables and stools. The light was poor, the dirt was hidden to a point, and the noise was enough to fray the nerves of anyone who liked a quiet place. The restaurant bosses all shouted at me to come to their place. After I had chosen one place, I kept on coming back there; the other bosses did not like that one bit, but I did not care. (Here is another "cultural pointer": when you are depressed, it is so much easier to "blow off" or passively insult someone, so be careful! At these times, the stakes in the "cultural game" are raised very high, at once, almost as if one of the demons playing roulette over your life throws down a huge pile of chips onto the table and says, "I'm raining the stakes". These times are potentially very dangerous.) I sat down and ordered some kind of curry (I do not remember what kind; I was too drowned in syrupy depression), coconut juice, and lemonade made with real lemons or limes, and which had a strange taste. The noise around me became a sort of sound shield, tuning out all that was happening around me. A little sound can disturb any deep thinking; a room full of loud people threshing out the day's commerce somehow turns into the isolation of the grave, where no one disturbs you. You are left utterly alone with your thoughts: only hope that your thoughts on that day are peaceful and pleasant. Yet, when one is unhappy, dispirited, down-and-out in one's heart, or depressed, the combination is very effective—the world goes "zoom-poof!", and you enter a new reality (or unreality), and everything is different. Was it also the heat, and the complete anomie of Burma? Probably all of them…. How strange it is! Here I am in Xin Jiang, just before my next sophomore writing class, writing this before getting dressed to go to work, and yet that restaurant in Aung San is as real to my thinking as if I were there now. Sometimes, I wish I *was* there now, just to wander around.

A few days after I had returned to Rangoon from Moulmein, I decided to go west to Pathein. To get to Pathein, you can take an overnight boat through the network of waterways making up the lower Irrawaddy River, or you can take the bus. I went out by boat, and back by bus. Everything takes so long to process in Burma—as in many other countries—but the secret to

dealing with slow paperwork is to book your tickets two or more days in advance, to use very new and crisp dollar bills (they detest old bills, and big bills too), and bring a book with you when you are waiting for the ticket seller to show up. Losing your patience will profit nobody. As before, I booked a cabin, for the sake of privacy; I just wanted to stare out at the passing river-banks, with no one to disturb me. If you have the money, then the ticket comes—but not always.

Two days later, I came to the booking office a few hours early, just to establish my position; I sat down and read. Somehow, the local snack bar was not suitable, and the staff was not so welcoming. I just wandered around, looking at the world going by. The river is forever muddy, and never lets you see into the deep waters. Boat traffic goes back and forth, up and down without rest. Sometimes the boats are tied up parallel to each other, so that to get to your boat, you have to walk across two other boats, all of them full of baggage, passengers and screaming children. I locked myself into the cabin and waited for the boat to leave Rangoon. About an hour later, the flow of life seemed to become quieter and the engine beat a steady, reassuring background sound, and I came out onto the middle-level starboard deck to have a look. The imposition of the city was gone, and the high banks of the ferry channel hemmed in the boat. Over the banks, the flat rice-bowl of Burma stretched away into the distance. As the sun had just gone down, the light quality was very pleasant, and the colors were peaceful and subdued. The workers had left their labors and gone home; the fields showed no sign of movement. The "puh-puh-puh-puh" of the diesels bounced back off the river-bank walls, and the splashing bow wake washed the mind free of all the unhappy thoughts of the city, and of anomie. There was no one on the deck at that time. This peaceful time lasted about twenty minutes before the boat passed under a large bridge under construction. After a while, all was stable again. I did not stay out on the upper deck at all hours of the deep night, the way I had the year before, but that short time looking out over the evening landscape from the boat was very peaceful. There now remains one last boat journey in Burma—from Rangoon up the Irrawaddy to Mandalay, a journey of three or four days. Hopefully, I can do that later on… soon.

The boat's galley served up some stir-fried vegetable dish, as well as the usual Burmese milk tea. The food was hot, safe and clean enough; the deck was shabby; I would not have it any other way. If everything was spotlessly clean, with a sanitized world inside, the landscape passing by through the plate glass picture windows, and that land outside a living version of a magazine picture, what good would it be? I would far rather ride up the muddy-brown river, appreciating the variations in the light and shadows on the floor of the galley, as the naked light bulb swung gently about from the ceiling. What a paradox…I was obviously among the Burmese people, going up their river, sitting with them, eating their food, happy to be there; at the same time, I was a million miles from them in terms of identity, communication and purpose.

The boat arrived in Pathein the next morning. Pathein is famous for its parasols; these locally made "sun umbrellas" are essential equipment here, since the sun is so strong. Once again, I shocked the local restaurant owner, as I had in Moulmein: I chose to take the first available bus back to Rangoon. What?! No trip to the coastal beaches? No visit to the parasol workshops? This time, they really thought I was crazy. I saw something that really turned me off in Pathein. There was a foreign couple in that restaurant (I will not say which country), and they also wanted to go to Rangoon. The husband was placid and stoical, but his wife complained to him about the dirt, the poor condition of the bus, road safety, and so on. I could not wait to be rid of them; I also pitied the husband, for having to live the rest of his days with someone like her.

The day was very, very hot, and the sun was harsh on the skin. I can see now why Pathein became famous for the manufacture of parasols. In time I was given a seat in the front of a bus. I waited there for a while, "cooking" some more; after twenty minutes we set out for Rangoon. The roads were the usual "super-capillaries" that Burma runs on; it is very rare to see anything bigger than a dual-carriageway, save on the major routes approaching Rangoon. Again, I saw some local people doing the corveé, laying crushed stone, by hand, for the road-bed. Why didn't they use machinery? It seemed very cruel to do that. (I also saw such road-bed, made with broken, hand-placed pieces of limestone, in certain mountain roads in Yunnan. Most of S.E. Asia lies in an enormous limestone belt.) As usual, I looked out at the land, and thought about many things. I will not bore you with other details; besides, I have forgotten them. We reached Rangoon, and I retreated back to the cocoon-like security of the Motherland 2 Inn. I cannot understate how significant places like Motherland 2 are! It is almost like home.

A day or two later, I left Burma, and went back to Bangkok; in a short time, I was on my way back to Kunming to see friends. Was this second trip to Burma worth it? I made some seemingly pointless trips, bought a lot of jewelry for someone else (not Fanny), who I later broke up with, got hot, spent the usual money, and not much more. However, I am still glad I went, for I have come to realize that both Burma and Kyrgyzstan are the best travel countries around China to visit. They each have their own charm; moreover, since they are located at different latitudes, one serves for the summer, and the other for the winter. It is the almost perfect seasonal rendezvous for an "Asian expat snowbird". I like Burma very much. The people there do not bother you. The country is still charming, because of its remaining behind while the rest of the world got drunk on globalization and modernization. However, even I hope that the basic "pillars of infrastructure" (i.e., roads, schools, hospitals, railways, bridges, tunnels, forests, reservoirs, basic agriculture, cottage industries, and so on) will be developed, making the life of the people happier. I hope I will not, in my lifetime, see the Burmese forests raped, and the land discarded for lack of any further use. In today's crazy, hyper-developed world, we all need back-water, sleepy, laid-back, seemingly unconcerned nations like Burma. I do not want people to be angry with me for saying this (although I think they would be); however, I do think that Burma and its people have something valuable to offer all the rest of us. If I did not run off to Central Asia, or stay in Xin Jiang, I would consider buying an apartment somewhere in Rangoon, and setting up shop as part-time English tutor, hack-writer, and short-term traveler. In this respect, Burma has it all.

However, perhaps it will not turn out this way, for the winds of change, the pressures of geopolitical reality, the demands of trade and grand strategy are encroaching on Burma in a way that may prove to be irresistible. Burma is one of the most important of the "border nations" surrounding China, because China needs south-west ocean frontage to engage in its future African and Middle East interests. (This is why Kunming in Yunnan, and Urumqi in Xin Jiang are such important regional capitals; they will play a major role in the unfolding events of the 21st Century. Both S.E. Asia, as well as Central Asia will be influenced through these two cities.) In addition, there is an extensive network of trans-national highways appearing throughout S.E. Asia, and the increase in commerce and trade will affect how the region looks. Much of this is good for the well-being of the people, but I, for one, wish to enjoy Burma and the other S.E. Asian nations in their present form, and now. In the future, when they are doing well, I hope to be running around in old buses in Afghanistan, or Turkmenistan, or Tajikistan, before they too "come of age".

The third trip to Kyrgyzstan. Yes, there was a third trip, and it happened like this. (It is now the summer of 2006.) I was in the USA, visiting my father, and attending to my interests in Maine. At the end of the summer, I had planned to travel with my sister Valerie; however, for some reason, she told me that we could not go. I knew better than to probe deeper, so I let it go. Of course, I did not tell anyone about this, and went back to China as planned, for I had already made plans. Kyrgyzstan is one of those "strategic travel countries" that can be visited many times; each time, one can carefully travel down a certain road in a certain part of the country, not seeing "too much", for that would affect the next time. I came back to my apartment in Urumqi, dropped off the heavy baggage, and made plans to fly to Bishkek. Fortunately, one of my old students is a travel agent, so I went to her. I flew to Bishkek, with the aim of traveling by road to Naryn, over the Torugut Pass into Xin Jiang, and on to Kashgar; I had wanted to see that scenery for a long time. However, the logistics are a little bit tricky. One cannot just appear at the frontier and cross. The stages from Naryn to the border, and the border to Kashgar have to be arranged by travel agents, one Kyrgyz and the other Chinese. The paperwork was done, but it was a bit inconvenient for the travel agents, as I appeared at such short notice. However, they were very helpful, especially the travel agent in Bishkek. Sometimes, I cannot just breeze about Asia on the buses like a local; there must be some form of control. I accept this, as long as the price is not too high, and the authorities are willing to let me pass through; it is all about the scenery, and the accomplishment of "been there, done that".

In time, I left Bishkek by long-distance taxi, and arrived in Naryn four to six hours later. The travel plans called for staying the night at a certain guesthouse, before leving early the next morning by another taxi for the Kyrgyz-Chinese border. I wandered around Naryn, wondering what it would be like to live and work there. If it were not on the major route between Bishkek and Kashgar, Naryn would be less than nothing; as it is, it was a very sleepy place, except for the area around the bus station. (This is exactly how I liked it.) The mountains around the town were quite stark and ugly under the harsh noontime sun; the grass on those distant slopes looked not-quite-green, and not-quite-burned. However, in the transitional lighting of sunset, they were very, very beautiful: light made all the difference. There was no room in the guesthouse, but the manager put me up in one of the permanent yurts on his compound. This is worth noting. Living in a yurt is possibly very romantic, but not having a shower and sufficient reading light at night is certainly not romantic. So, at this guesthouse, the yurts were right on the property, and the dining hall, showers, toilets and other conveniences were right at hand. Since I am not a "backpacker", and hardened to life in the real mountains, these creature comforts are important to me. I do not live from mountain peak to mountain peak; I exist from bus station to bus station. At night, the yurt was cold, but that did not matter. The air in rural Kyrgyzstan is really clean and fresh; after living so long in filthy Chinese cities for so long, being in Naryn for the night was like living in a huge, huge oxygen tent. The stars were all up there, waiting to be seen; the night air was still and peaceful, save for the yapping of street dogs that rippled and subsided throughout the night. One day, I would like to return to that guesthouse, and just stay in one of the yurts for the fun of being there. They were decorated with all kinds of functional textiles: there were felt "shyrdaks" (felt carpets) on the floor, patterned quilts of many colors folded and stacked to one side, strips of colored woven cloth that were tied to the wooden "ribs" of the yurt, which serve to hold it together, and of course, the plain, wool felt "shell" of the yurt itself. Without good light and ventilation yurts are dismal places to live in, but with a hanging electric light, all that changes.

With a light, you feel the master of the place; with no light, you are trapped inside an unseen wool-felt cage. The inside of this yurt had two iron beds, two bedside cupboards, carpets on the wall, and tapestries hung on the surrounding lattice-like wall. I went to bed. If I ever return to Naryn, I should like to live in this yurt for a week, reading books and showering in the guest-house itself, but spending the heat of the day or the almost dark and starlit nights inside the cage-turned-shelter.

There were some other back-packer types staying at the guest-house, as Naryn was one of the staging points for travelers going on to the Togurut Pass, and Kashgar. One couple had bicycled together from Turkey, and passed through parts of the Middle East before arriving in Kyrgyzstan. It was a long journey for them. They shared their adventures–fragments of their own odyssey. We all met in the basement-level dining room. During the afternoon, I left the guest-house and went into town to look at the local wool-felt carpets, called "shyrdak". How strange: I bought several of these "shyrdak", but only two managed to arrive back home; the rest were jettisoned for various reasons, usually because I could not carry them back. I also met a local woman, who had studied overseas for four years, and whose English was very good.

The next morning, early, the long-distance taxi arrived to take me to the border. I was alone, as two other people in another taxi did not want another person in their taxi. This happens. I had hoped to stop for a while at the ancient caravanserai at Tash-Rabat, but the driver wanted to go on. The road was long, the scenery modest. However, on the map, I had coveted this route for so many years! After many journeys, it sometimes becomes an anti-climax. However, I am glad I went, just to join together in my mind two areas of Central Asia. I got off at the border, went through the Kyrgyz checkpoints, and waited along the actual border (along with several other travelers) for a minivan from Kashgar to come and pick us up. The air was chill, the sky a brilliantly clear blue, and the peaks around us impressive. In time, the minivan came, took us through two Chinese checkpoints, and on into Kashgar.

By now, I was sick and fed up with traveling, and did not want to run around Kashgar–not even for a day. Now at yet another "Lonely Planet"-like watering hole, I arranged for a ticket back to Urumqi, and flew back that night. This journey was a short one: I was crazy to have gone so far for a mere road-cruise. However, there it is. For the third time, I was able to try out my primitive level of Russian language, and appreciate the special conditions in Kyrgyzstan. Needless to say, I knew I would be going back, at least one more time.

The fourth trip to Kyrgyzstan. There was one more trip to Kyrgyzstan, around October, 2007. It happened like this. Many second-year students in Zhi Da had to do a form of "social service" (in this case, picking cotton for two weeks) in October. In order to compensate for lost class time, they had to come back to school in August, three weeks before the real end of the summer holidays. Around the same time, many first-year students had to do their military training. I realized that if I had no first-year students, I could take three weeks off during the cotton-picking time, as well as the week of the October National Day holiday–one month in all. Make no mistake: travel is one of the major reasons why many foreigners like to teach English in China, or other foreign countries. Anyway, I arranged things, a good friend booked my air ticket to Bishkek, and I went back to Kyrgyzstan for two weeks.

Why did I go this time? There were many reasons. At that time, I was sick of the attitude of the students in Zhi Da, and wanted to go somewhere else. I had been thinking of Kyrgyzstan as an alternative work site, in part because it was a beautiful and interesting place in which to travel, in part because it would be easier to "springboard" into the other Central Asian countries

from Bishkek, in part because I wanted a new beginning. Above all, I wanted to see if it were feasible for me to be introduced to a local woman seeking marriage, to continue teaching English and share life with her, and generally fade away into the Kyrgyz woodwork. So, I decided not to travel anywhere, but to stay in some guest-house in Bishkek, practice my elementary Russian, and see what life in Kyrgyzstan was like... all in two weeks. Some contacts introduced me to a guest-house somewhere in Bishkek, so I booked a room for two weeks. How unimaginative, you might think, but I just wanted to "plunge" into the Bishkek scene.

The flight was the same, as was the taxi ride into town. By now, entering Kyrgyzstan was more predictable–show up, pay $35 to the visa officer, and get a visa. The airport was host to various supply aircraft servicing the U.S. airbase in Afghanistan, so it seemed that entry and exit for U.S. tourists was simple–for now. I have the feeling that this state of affairs will not always continue, and that a "rollback" of friendliness will set in; therefore, I decided to "enjoy" Kyrgyzstan while the going was good. As I write, there is only one more journey that I wish to make there, and after that, I will shelve Kyrgyzstan, and take my feet somewhere else. However, as a travel destination, Kyrgyzstan is excellent.

The staff at the guest house were expecting me, and gave me a small room with a toilet; it was in a building not a part of the main accommodation, and as a result, it was very easy to completely cut myself off from the other guest house visitors. I could study Russian, wander around Bishkek, and try to feel what life in Bishkek was like. There were two Russian staff members, almost like matrons, and they ran the place under the authority of the manager. One was an ethnic Russian, and the other was ethnic Kyrgyz. They were very patient with my low-level Russian, as they were kind, and had a lot of experience dealing with foreigners with various levels of Russian. Breakfast was served in the guest house, but lunch and dinner I would have to forage for myself.

As usually happens, I was too shy to really explore around the neighborhood, and after some lost wandering, I found the very place that I had sworn I would not go anywhere near–the "Fat Boy" café, about fifteen minutes walk away from the guest house. This café was a typical "Lonely Planet" watering hole; it was a place that had a mixture of the usual Western "give me something from home" dishes, as well as some local dishes with a western interpretation. There was nothing wrong with that café; the food was good and the environment secure. I just felt I had given up and sold myself into the Westerner's "food and culture enclave", rather than try to navigate around Bishkek in Russian, like I should have. Oh well. I went back there many times (as well as to other places). Perhaps it was for the best, as it gave me some confidence for the real language work. I ate, went back to the guest house, and slept.

I had told the manager of the guest house that I wanted a guide and language helper, and they found one. Balzac (not his real name) was as local as they get, about 23 years old, and very competent. He was a short-term helper, translator, guide, and general asset. His English was pretty good, and he was full of energy. Ostensibly, I hired him to be a language helper, but in reality, he took me all over Bishkek, shared many anecdotes and experiences with me, and was an immeasurable help to me. He had finished college, and had another job in the service sector. He was very intelligent. He came from another part of the country, not Bishkek, and had family and friends, as well as contacts, everywhere we went. That is something I have noticed about certain Central Asian men of destiny–they seem to know everyone. Balzac was slight of build, had a very modern demeanor, and was alert to everything. Yet under his "modernness", he knew how to be traditional. He had ideas, dreams, and hopes, and seemed quite capable of actualizing them. There was something he said though that stuck with me, as we were discussing out plans

together: "With money, anything is possible." If ever I wanted to wander over the truly immense spaces of Central Asia, I would like to take him with me.

During those two weeks, we did so many things together. We visited many different restaurants together, from the simple and functional "plof" houses at the bus station with their local version of "plof" (rice pilaf and lamb chunks"), to the upper-end Kyrgyz restaurants with their regional specialties, to places where hurried Kyrgyz business people would have gone for lunch, to Western places, to the American Pub with its high-end expats listening to local musicians playing Vivaldi (we were lucky), to other places. We saw films, as we both liked action movies. We also practiced some Russian phrases together, and when I left, I felt I could survive (very basically) in Russian. However, there were two major events that came out of our two weeks together.

The first event was a three-day journey to his hometown. I had not visited his part of the country, and when I realized where his hometown was, I suggested we go there together: he could visit his family, and I could see some new country together with him. He called home, and his family agreed to welcome us. It was another long journey over the mountains–and this country has enough of them!–over lonely roads through high-altitude landscape, and over bumpy roads, and five or six hours later, we arrived. His village was one or two dusty roads, with old Soviet farm-laborer quarters on each side, and very few motor vehicles passing by per hour.

Balzac's grandparents were in. They were the ones who had raised him for most of his childhood, and the affection ran deep. The grandfather wore clothes in the old style, from before the Soviet times. He had long leather boots, and an embroidered coat–almost a gown. His beard was certainly dignified, as was his entire countenance. There were three or four girls of various ages who were also living in the grandparents' home–they were Balzac's cousins, I think. They were shy, but in time some of them drew closer. The grandparents served us tea, "nang" bread, thick cream, and other snacks, while Balzac told his family what he had been up to over the past several months. The little girls listened to everything he said.

In both the front yard and back yard, there were many apple trees. Indeed, this part of Central Asia is very near the "home town of the apple". The apple trees were straggling, with branches wandering off in every direction. On the ground, the grass was long, with bare patches where the visitors had passed through and the children had played. Out back, the apple tree branches crossed over the footpath to the fields beyond, giving the impression of a jungle of apple trees, with "switch-grass" underfoot. Yet this place was a true garden of childhood, for out of the seeming disorder, the grandparents raised four girls as pure and secure as could ever be found on this earth. They ate apples from the messy ground–for their home was, in fact, a kind of messy playground, inside and out–the same ground the dogs and chickens wandered over, but they were as strong and resilient as the apple trees themselves. This was a sort of neo-Eden, an earthly paradise existing in the worn-out remnants of this rural, post-Soviet, backwater village, somewhere seven hours drive away from Bishkek. If there is such a thing as an earthly paradise, it is here, in this dry, seldom-showered landscape, protected by poplar trees and conservative rural mores, in sight of the distant mountains, and reached by the outside world by a quiet, dusty lane. Every so often, a rider on horseback or on a bicycle would come past, and the local dogs would take turns to harass that passer-by, barking furiously and trying to bite the riders heels... but only in show-off play, and only as far as the boundaries of their "territory". Each dog knew intimately the bounds of its land, almost as well as a land lawyer. When the rider had passed on, the next set of dogs began their bullying, and the former dogs would return to their resting place, their tails hoisted proudly high. Throughout it all, the four girls passed their day, as through a

garden in the sort of earthly paradises that one imagines Persian farm girls to wander through in the ancient tales.

As I said, there were four girls. Felfel and Namak were not twins, but they seemed to do so much together, they had the appearance of un-identical twins. It seemed they were about seven or eight years old. They played with the dog, pulled apples from the straggling trees or off the ground and ate them direct, had the occasional mild quarrel, and sat at Balzac's feet like adoring cousins hearing the latest tales of the outside world. Their clothes were old and a little dusty, but it was obvious that their grandmother had washed their dresses lovingly, and that the dust came from that day's play in the orchard-playground. To them, a handful of apples had as much inspiration and interest as a whole room full of toys and other things. They were shy, at times very quiet, at others noisy and scampering around, reserved when in front of their grandfather (the ultimate picture of dignity and honor, with his beard, coat-gown and calf-length boots), playful with each other, at first reserved with me, and then a little more open, utterly innocent, almost painfully innocent. It was like being blind in soul for a lifetime, and then, at once, the blindness was ripped away, and the full strength of heaven's innocence and glory was shone, one million candle-lights strong, directly on your face. That is the power of children raised in innocence; there is nothing on this earth that can compare with it. After the "twins" was a girl of nine or so, Zaferan. Although older than Felfel and Namak, she sometimes played with them, but that was only sometimes. I think she came from different parents, but in this family, she was certainly one of the "grandchildren"–maybe she was a cousin. She had a reserve of character that filled everywhere she went, like the delicate fragrance of long-dried rose petals, still in their water-less vase, still filling the room with a faint, enduring, unchanging memory. You would not want to engage her in conversation, or force her to be merry like her cousins, for that would be like telling the weeping willow, bowed over the quiet waters, to be something else. There was, it seemed then, a sort of wistful reserve deep in her soul. She was also extremely beautiful; happy the right man who finds her ten years later. The last was Zeytun. She was about fifteen or sixteen, and she kept out of sight for most of the time. This is part of Central Asian culture, and an accepted part of life. She worked with the grandmother in the kitchen, and could be seen sometimes, when she brought in some dishes at mealtimes. Maybe she was another cousin; I do not know. Many families here are very big, not so much in terms of how many children each set of parents have, but in terms of the "lateral spread" of the family–cousins, and distant cousins scattered all over the village, and even more distant cousins in various places all over Kyrgyzstan itself! These four girls lived with their grandmother, and had a world all to themselves. There were books available (mostly in Kyrgyz, with some Russian for the older girls); the house was secure and loving; the village was like an extended household, with all sorts of social events going on daily (for the Central Asian peoples are very, very social); the apple trees were strong, beautiful, strained by the harsh climate, and yet resilient. I will never forget these four girls as long as I live.

News passed through the village very quickly that Balzac had returned; it was impossible for him to hide in his grandparents' home. Soon the invitations came in, to visit the neighbors first, and then to attend a wedding in another town about twenty kilometers away. Balzac very kindly invited me to come with him, and so began a day of socializing and feasting, the likes of which I have never seen.

First, we had lunch at the grandparents' home. As is typical in Central Asia, we had "plof" (rice pilaf, with chunks of mutton), some pickled vegetable dishes, sweet tea, "nang" bread, and other local snacks. The hosts are always very generous, and getting enough to eat is never a

problem. Then we left the grandparents' home, walked a few houses down the lane to one of the neighbor's homes, and went inside. Of course, they were very happy to see Balzac home again, and wanted to talk about everything with him. They treated us to another lunch, just like the one we had just eaten. Politely refusing was out of the question, so we sat down in the neighbor's dining room. It was about twenty feet long by ten feet wide, and there must have been about twenty-five people there. Plates of "plof" were passed around, and they gave me a large piece of lamb. The neighbors, men and women alike, talked about various things in Kyrgyz, which I could not understand, with a few questions to me, either in Russian, or translated into English by Balzac. Everyone had their legs tucked under them as they sat on the floor; I could not do this, as I am so inflexible in my knee joints, so I tried to point my feet somewhere harmless, which was something almost impossible to do in such a crowded room. Some of the children stood in the corner, looking at everything but saying nothing. This went on for about half an hour. Then we went to another household, so that Balzac could greet them... and the same thing happened. I think Balzac visited three or four of the neighbors' houses before we returned to his house.

It was not over. Only one or two hours later, the grandfather told us to get ready to go to the wedding. Someone came in a car–a simple car, like a Lada–and drove us the twenty kilometers to the nearest town; it was the same town we had arrived in on the "shared taxi" the day before. The wedding party was going to be held in a restaurant's "function hall". I had been told that one of the couple was well-known in that town; I forget their connection to Balzac's family. As a sort of village notable, the grandfather had been invited. It seems he knew all the important people for miles and miles around. We entered a big, but very simple room–simple to the point of severity. There were about five long tables in the room, and on the tables were huge plates of wide noodles and chunks of stewed horsemeat. I thought that this was the wedding feast. It seemed so simple, but I assumed that since this was a rural part of a not-very-rich area, this was the wedding feast: nothing wrong with that. Balzac said this food was for the wedding guests to eat before the wedding feast itself. I thought: if you want to eat, do it here; up above, in the actual wedding party room, you must not eat a lot of food, as it is really "demonstration food", and not food for satisfying your hunger. Therefore, I ate. The horsemeat was very good, as were the noodles. We ate, along with other guests. Then we went upstairs, and I knew that I had made yet another cultural blunder, for the wedding hall was sumptuous and well-equipped beyond my wildest imaginations.

The wedding party was for three hundred or even four hundred people. Each table was loaded with all the usual Central Asian banquet dishes, and over the evening, more and more dishes came. Many things came onto the tables, but one detail stands out. Towards the end of the dinner, a type of street-food called "samsa" was brought out. (A "samsa" looks like a Cornish pasty, but it is square, like a square hockey-puck; it is filled with lamb, and lots of lamb fat, so it is very hard on the heart.) Rather than eat their "samsa", the guests began to wrap them in their table napkins, and then stuff them into their bags to take home. After all, the "samsa" is an admirable travel food. Some people put them away stealthily; others made no effort at concealment. I asked Balzac about this; he said that everyone did this, but they were supposed to do it without being seen. There was one lady on our table who began to put away other dishes (usually the drier, and hence easier to remove ones).

There was dancing, there were speeches; there was feasting, there were drinking bouts. I watched, for after a while, it just got too heavy and pointless. The hours dragged by. Even the grandfather wanted to go home, but he was asked to stay, as his status gave him a sort of figurehead presence. In time though, he became sick of it all, and we left. Since we had arrived

early, it was impossible to drive away, as there were many other cars parked behind us; the people parked at the back held everyone else hostage to the party. In time though, we were able to escape, and we did. We dove back in silence, and slept a long time. That day, I think I ate about four complete day's food, over a period of about twelve hours. That is disgusting. However, the culture expected it. If I had refused, I would have offended many people.

The next day, or the day after, Balzac and I returned to Bishkek. We first looked at a local monument, then drove back in a long-distance taxi. The roads were long, the hills by now familiar, and the music a bit loud and obnoxious. I cannot list all the genres and authors of music I have indirectly listened to, in countless "bush-taxi" journeys, over the past twenty or more years... it is beyond listing. There is only one detail to share here. Somewhere on the high plateau, we stopped at one of the countless roadside vendors in Kyrgyzstan that sell "kumis" (fermented horse's milk). However, let me clarify. Yes, it was "roadside", but there was nothing else. The road passed through this almost totally-uninhabited plateau, with "steps" of mountains rising up to one side, and nothing but endless pastureland on the other, and went past one or two isolated "yurts". A Kyrgyz woman of about sixty years old lived here alone with her sheep and horses, and sold "kumis", "nang" bread, milky tea, jam, and a Kyrgyz version of Devonshire clotted cream to the travelers. We four people were the only souls, it seemed, on the entire plateau. She was very hospitable, and kept us supplied in tea, sweetened with jam. I wonder what it would have been like to live there for a few days. Romantic as it was, I think I would have preferred the yurt at that guesthouse in Naryn, on the third trip; in that place, there was running water in the guesthouse itself, only one minute's walk from the yurt. After eating and drinking, we returned to Bishkek.

That trip to Balzac's hometown was the only time I left Bishkek and went far away. Ths trip was really about learning to live in Bishkek itself. The days went on. Balzac had his job to do, but we would meet in the evening to do some activity. In the days, I fended for myself. By now, I did not have much to say to the two matrons at the Bishkek guesthouse–not because they were unfriendly, but because I was withdrawing into the classic symptoms of culture shock. This is something that makes learning a new culture difficult. If you want to learn a language or a culture well, you need much time, a local friend who speaks the local language you want to learn (and not English), and the courage to go out into the streets each day to forge a new identity under new conditions. If I had wanted to study more Russian (and not just basic travel Russian like I was doing), then I should have done things differently. However, all I wanted was to know some basic Russian for travel purposes; in this respect, I came fairly close to meeting this goal. You go out on the streets, and have short, functional conversations with the street people–those such as vendors, bus conductors or "mashyutka"drivers, waiters in cafés, or friendly passers-by. There were many street vendors out and about, as Kyrgyzstan is certainly not a well-off country. They sold many products, but the most interesting was a kind of fermented barley drink–sort of barley beer that was trying to become very watered-down gruel. The other drink was a kind of sour milk drink–but not yogurt. To be honest, my Russian did not make much progress, in part because I did not take this task seriously enough, and in part because I spoke to Balzac in English. However, I was able to get around, and in that sense, I was happy. I sent a few postcards to Susan (the first postcards I had sent in years and years), and had some pleasant experiences using my "baby-Russian".

For me, travel is all about traveling very intentionally from town to town by public bus, looking carefully at the beautiful countryside, and then wandering about aimlessly about the town, totally unsure of what to do. I had no idea of what I really wanted to do. My clocks were

the daylight and the darkness, as well as my stomach and the three meals. In time, I began to passively absorb the basic elements of things Russian; the Kyrgyz-language things I screened out, as I had not come out for that (at least, not yet). I went through parts of the city center, thinking of doing one part each time, but always seeming to return, as if by magnetism, to the Fat Boy café. I visited the post office to send a post card, the internet bar to communicate with people back in China (who were very understanding and helpful), the phone bars to call some others, various restaurants to try the ordering of food, to travel agents to talk about tickets (but the lady there–very helpful–spoke English, and I liked that), to the grocery store to buy brown bread, to the taxis to get from here to there (they were cheap), to the hotels to ask questions (and there was a very friendly woman there in the hotel bookstore), and other places. Only the bus station "stumped" me. If I go to Bishkek again, I want to succeed at the bus station. I went with Balzac to the train station, to have a look at it... just in case.

Along with Hanoi (the old French quarter) in Vietnam, Bishkek is my favorite city in Asia. As Boris Yeltsin said, it is a "big village". There are parks everywhere, and statues of Soviet-era and Kyrgyz-national heroes are very common. Many buildings are beautiful, especially in the university, or at the city hall. Bishkek is a pedestrian's city, with many quiet pathways in the parks. There are oak trees everywhere, and the squirrels have an expression and a demeanor that is unmistakably attractive. However, it is also very run-down and neglected. I saw something that I also saw in Burkina Faso in West Africa, and in Ho Chi Min City (Saigon) in Vietnam: the magnificent trees that were planted in the colonial times along the main avenues of a town or city were not being replaced by the new generation. When the old trees died and were cut down, what would there be to follow? I wandered in the parks time and again, and after a while, they started to grow on me.

In time, I came to Panfilov Park. It is a very run-down park during the week, with an amusement park that was built during the Soviet days; in the amusement park, there are the usual devices like a Ferris wheel, roundabouts, coconut-shy, and the like. I wandered about like a lost soul, as usual. I visited the underground public toilet, to relieve myself, but also just to look at it. (Maybe I should author the first Michelin guide to the world's public toilets and bus station eateries, for I have developed a fearsome expertise here.) During the weekend, the park is full of holiday-makers and happy children; during the weekdays, it is a very run-down and depressing place. There were many listless and aimless people sitting on the benches, reading a newspaper, drinking beer, or avoiding any pretense and doig nothing at all. I wandered around everywhere, and in Panfilov Park (Panfilov was a WW2 general and hero of the Soviet Union), I realized that I wanted to re-experience–or rather, experience what I had missed all along–my childhood. I looked around at the amusement rides, chose one I liked, asked the operator if my adult weight was too heavy for the machine or not, and came back to it a few times over the next few days. People looked at me, but I did not care. It was happiness enough to fly through the air, mere feet over the grassy wasteland that claimed the very edges of the amusement machine. I also went up the Ferris wheel–a big one–and enjoyed going up through the trees, over them, and into the open sunlight. In the distance, over the patterns of "concrete, Soviet shoe-box" buildings, I saw the distant mountains. Lest the reader think me strange to say these things, I believe that it is important to enjoy (some of) those things that were denied or neglected in childhood. Panfilov Park was the perfect place to do this in; I would certainly not want to do this in another place. In some way, the run-down and "falling-apart" world of the post-Soviet world is the perfect place for people of melancholy disposition to find themselves again. I do not say this to insult those places, who have enough problems of their own to solve; rather, I am grateful to them for

helping me out. It is those who do not get the past out of their inner system who have problems in the future, I think, and this is why I made every effort to "play the child" again.

Among all the diversions in the park, there was an air rifle range. For some small sum, you could buy five lead pellets, load them singly into an old air rifle, and shoot beer cans. The range was about eight meters. I bought fifty pellets, and started to work. Fortunately, the air rifle I used was pretty good (the others were very poor), and I started to knock down beer cans. Soon, I thought, here is a cheap opportunity to really practice my shooting skills. I came back to that place five or more times, and shot off over a thousand rounds of air rifle pellets. The man running the range learned to recognize me at once, and was helpful. There is something very therapeutic about "blowing away" beer cans–some carefully sighted, and others knocked down in sequence as fast as possible. If you hit them low, they fall down one way; if you hit them high, they fly down in another manner. After a while, I learned to develop a rhythm and almost unthinking way of loading the pellet, throwing the butt up into my shoulder, sighting quickly, and squeezing the trigger without thinking. I liked to "blow away" the other people's targets, just before they were ready to take aim (a few times). If I have the chance, I should like to make an air rifle range in my own place; with beer cans and a fair gun, who needs anything powerful and noisy? All the excitement is here.

Back to Balzac.... The second thing which happened with him concerned my wish to see if I was suited to making a life in Kyrgyzstan–especially in terms of meeting someone I might want to marry. Lest you think this is outrageous, this is a very well understood phenomenon in Asia. I had mentioned to Balzac that I wanted to consider settling in Kyrgyzstan, and showed him my "looking-for-bride-advertizement". What surprised me was that in two or three days, he said he had found someone! I had not expected things to go so well, so fast. I think the time we had spent together in his home town had given him a clear impression of who he was dealing with. He told me about the contact–I shall call her Daphne. She was presently by herself, and had one daughter and one son. Balzac had contacted her, with the help of another two people, and told her, "There is a foreigner here who wants to meet a Kyrgyz woman, with the possibility of marriage." Daphne thought Balzac was joking, so when we actually did meet, she was deeply shaken and taken off-guard. Our initial meeting was polite, but I knew this one would not work; I found myself talking *to* the interpreter, and not *through* the interpreter, and I realized that there was very little to talk about with Daphne. During the dinner, she said little, and I said little. She left to go home, and I thought the affair was over. (I should add here, for the reader, that I am not ashamed to meet people like this, as one failed meeting does not constitute an insult to a lady. However, I was surprised at how quickly Balzac carried out my wishes.) I said to Balzac that we should let her go, and "good peace" to her.

A few days later, Balzac told me that Daphne wanted to see me again! Now I was really surprised. I think I agreed to accept Balzac's encouragement, and try again. It seemed that Daphne had felt embarrassed at being so reserved the first time. She had taken a deep breath, decided to give it another try, and called Balzac. We went to her house for dinner, somewhere in the depths of Bishkek, to a place I could never find again. There was someone living with Daphne as a Kyrgyz-language student, and she was present at that dinner. We ate "plof" (again), along with the usual Kyrgyz home-cooked dishes. This time, the conversation was a little more open, as we were ready for another attempt at socializing. The children came in from school, and went promptly into their own room (this surprised me, but it was a "culturally appropriate" action, given that we were in Central Asia). However, I knew in my heart that, in addition to having no sufficient language skills to talk about anything, there was no emotional, social,

cultural foundation for us to develop a relationship. She was a nice woman, I suppose I am "all right", but we had nothing to build upon. Others might be able to make something in life with Daphne, but not me. Balzac and I ate well, talked adequately, and left. I told him that this would never work (through no fault of hers). That experience may have been embarrassing to me, but I am glad that Balzac arranged it for me, as it gave me what I had been looking for–a glimpse of whether I could make something of, and for, myself in Kyrgyzstan. The answer for now is no. Of course, I could teach English there, but by now, I realized that my reasons for coming were a sort of "seven-year itch" against China. Later, I came back to my true lover (that is, life in China, and especially in Xin Jiang), and continued with the life I was familiar with. You may say, "Isn't it dangerous to raise a "career" to the importance of "marriage?" Maybe, but there it is, for now.

I saw Balzac a few more times, usually at Kyrgyz restaurants, and we continued to talk about various things. He was very helpful to me over those two weeks, and he gave me everythiing that I had wanted. If I actually do go out for a travel in other parts of central Asia, then I would like to go with him. No doubt, both he and I will be on a constant lookout for "someone suitable". Lest you the reader misunderstand me, I am only referring to intentional matchmaking activities, not other, lesser, activities.

In time, I left Bishkek and went back to Urumqi. Although the experience seemed to be a huge waste of everything, I am happy with the results, as some questions were answered, and a little more travel and language learning accomplished. Travel is not something that can be consummated in grand schemes and vast projects: it is developed over time; it is approached in a very intentional and strategic way; it follows a "bigger picture"; it is planned carefully; it is also executed spontaneously according to life's circumstances; it follows a pattern; it usually follows a "circle route" within the target country; it is a way of life. Kyrgyzstan is still one of my favorite countries to visit, and I am looking forward to the next time–if there is a next time to have and enjoy.

On the tutorials with WYJ and CP. During my last term at Zhi Da, I taught extra classes to two of my third-year students. Both WYJ and CP came from 04 Class, and they were highly motivated students. I forget how we met, but in time we had extra classes in my apartment. Usually, the content of these classes was pronunciation, oral conversation, writing, and exam preparation. We also went to local restaurants, the park, some museums, or just around the neighborhood. Spending time with them was satisfying, as I felt that I was seeing some concrete results for my labor, and something to counteract the frustration of dealing with the many students I had who did not really care about learning English, for English's sake. WYJ was interested in becoming an English teacher, and CP wanted to work in business. They were different, but this difference made the whole project interesting. By the end of my time in Zhi Da, I started to think of them as being like daughters. I think I needed to work with some people who really wanted to learn. I needed to "relate", period. Right now, they are looking for short-term jobs in Urumqi, to satisfy their last "social practice" obligation to the school. I hope that in the years to come, I will be able to keep in contact with them.

On the writing class, and the "sentence and paragraph" book. Once again, I taught a writing class. This course is usually unpopular among the foreign teachers, as it consumes so much time, especially when correcting the students' homework. However, I like this, as I am a reclusive type of person. I went through the textbook as usual, taught the material, and corrected

homework. However, I became tired of doing so much work for so little obvious "return-on-investment"; that is, many of the students were making the same mistakes, they copied other people's homework without caring about whether the other person's writing was correct or wrong, and they did not seem to care about the course. At the time, I was piloting a new way of writing sentences and paragraphs, and I gave the students examples to copy from the blackboard. Some students actually copied this material very neatly, and I saw it. From that time on, I had the five classes I was working with deal with many different sentences and paragraphs, someone copied that day's work neatly, and I copied their work. In time, I had enough raw material for a textbook. During this time (February, 2007), I am writing a textbook on how to write simple but effective sentences and paragraphs, and hope to release it onto the internet. In the class, I came to the point where I was tired of throwing my favors to those who did not care; therefore, I decided to use the class for my own ends, and if this textbook is successful, then all that time by the blackboard will have been well-spent.

On coming home. In December of 2006, my father asked me to come home and look after him. This concern had been in the air for a very long time, but now it arrived in a very unambiguous manner. In August, I had wondered about this, but I returned to China with a sense of having been granted an "extension". Now that I am back in the USA and looking back on the past term, I think that decision to stay in Urumqi one more term was a good one. For all my complaints about many uncaring students, the term was a good one, and many goals were achieved: travel, writing, extra tutorials, personal development, seeing old friends, and other matters. Therefore, when I decided to return home, I had a certain peace inside about it. (Of course, I want to return to Xin Jiang.) Going back will give me the following advantages: I can see my father; I can develop my land in Maine state, as well as the compound; I can travel in Burma, and other places; I can close down various projects, and start others; I can rest my mind from the demands of Zhi Da; I can think about where to go next (although Xin Jiang is still a good place). The one thing that worries me is this: when can I go back to China? I am fine in the USA for now, but the heart is in China, and with EFL teaching... and, of course, in travel.

One thing disturbed me. I wondered (and still do) if I had been stripped of my mandate to be in Xin Jiang. The details of this question I will not divulge here; however, I have been wondering about this. I will have to let time play out, to see if I was right, or wrong. However, this much remains clear: Xin Jiang is still a glorious part of China, and the deep parts of my identity, care, concern, as well as enjoyment of life–all these things remain in this part of the world! I am still grateful that I have been given the chance to be here, to make friends with many people here, and work out my destiny here. Xin Jiang still remains China's most glorious place, and the place where my hopes have been realized!