

FRAGMENTS OF CHINA: “Into and out of the cuckoo nests of Ziklag:
Altai, Xin Jiang, P.R.C.” July 2011 to July 2013

Introduction: Dear Lychee, Once again, I am writing to you, my earthly muse. It has been a long and hot day, with long exploring walks in the morning and late afternoon, and confinement inside during the middle hours. The walks took me to the back roads of the Kazakh quarter of Altai, and I looked at every quarter of Altai, and I looked at everything I could, to remove the lingering introspection. However, that did not work. Writing to you has always made me feel better, so I am doing it now. Even though I have not yet finished "The Poisoned Quilt" (about the third period of work in Urumqi), I think this is a good time to begin this next part of "Fragments of China".

Summary: I will start with a brief summary (which you know already). After my father died in February, 2009, I made plans to return to Xin Jiang. In late August, I returned to Urumqi Vocational University, where I worked for two years. Quite soon into this tenure, I decided to leave, for a variety of reasons. Some are listed here, as follows: the students I now had did not really care about their education, and just played; I was sad because of another failed relationship; Urumqi was changing into the sort of city I did not want to be a part of. These and other reasons can be seen in more detail, in "The Poison Quilt". For now, suffice to say that I wanted to leave Urumqi. Some things I cannot write about, for they are too sensitive or controversial to reveal: I am referring to the expats, who I wish to bury out of these pages....

I first came to Altai in October, 1997 (I think), when Karamay "Dian Da" took its foreign teachers on a weekend pleasure-outing. There were few strong memories of that trip, save the grey and dingy facade of the Soviet look-alike hotel we stayed at. Some years later, I came again, and discovered, the soft, home made cheese made by the Kazakhs, call "irimqik" (i-rim-chick). I still like it, and the local yogurt. In Altai, I discovered Hua Lin Park, which remains the best park in all China, I think.

In October, 2010 a friend gave me some names and numbers of schools in Altai, which had the right to take on foreign teachers. I called one contact, "Linda" from the Nian Zi Gou bus station in Urumqi. It was all very "off the-cuff" and spontaneous. I said to Linda, "I am at the bus station, and will be in Altai tomorrow. Please can I see you?" She agreed, and the next morning, I had the first interview. It was a career move straight out of "What Color Is Your Parachute?" I liked Linda's offer; she liked me, and we kept in contact. I went up again in December. By now, I felt like a defector, planning my exit from Urumqi, and my school. However, by March, 2011, I knew very well I wanted to do this. My time with Urumqi was past expiry.

Getting a visa was horrible-- as it was in Karamay, and all three times in Urumqi. It is part of the price one must pay to work and live in Xin Jiang. Even now, as I write, this, Lychee, I do not know what the outcome will be. Maybe, I will find out next week. So...Option A- work in Altai. Option B- dump everything, go home, and settle some home affairs and travel/read/write for a year in the backwaters of Asia. Now this I, would also like.....If the visa comes, then I will be happy. In addition to work, I can continue to study Russian, Farsi, and Kazakh-- and read. So much for the introduction. I will try not to talk about visas much!

Moving in: I moved my baggage in stages. Some went in the back of the company car of Linda's husband, on three journeys from Urumqi to Altai- about 670 km. Some was cached in various places in Urumqi, to be picked up later on. Some came up with me on the final bus up. All told, there are about 25 to 30 boxes of "stuff" belonging to me in Xin Jiang. Perhaps that is too much, but I am a happy pack-rat, curriculum

devotee, and language student. The room I now have is small, so the boxes are stacked here and there. I feel like a well established transient.

First teaching: The past few weeks have been very busy. The school was in summer session, so what were usually weekend classes were being held every day. The outgoing teacher wanted to leave his job early, so as to move on to the next job. So, for about 16 days, I taught about 8 1/2 hours of classes daily. The students were of various ages and abilities. More on them, later...

2012/7/20: Lychee: it is now a year later on. For various reasons, I did not want to write as I progressed through the year. I let one year, full of many spontaneous reflections and colorful observations go by. Was it all a waste? Probably, but there it is. From here on, this is a retrospective account, which is fine, as I have a year's perspective to play with and a constant theme I follow. I will sit down somewhere and write it out.

Lin Da School (named after Linda, the boss) is a private "training school" and kindergarten. After many years of working in state-controlled universities, this was a big change. Although no one would say so, "business" and not "education" came first. This simple fact had profound effects on every aspect of the children's life at Lin Da. I never counted how many classrooms/ teachers/ students there were, but I would estimate 250 students. They came from all over Altai city and many of the nearby villages. The kindergarten classes took place from Monday to Friday and the "training school" classes were held on the weekend. Friday was my day off. More on that later on....

Teaching. I only taught 1 1/2 hours / day on Monday to Thursday. As my boss said during the interviewing stage, my job was to draw in fee-paying parents. That one comment, said in passing, did more than anything else to clarify for me my role in Lin Da School. Even my 1 1/2 hours were not safe. The time was often stolen by other teachers for "urgent, other, daily concerns"; blind chance often robbed me too. I managed to do a fair amount with the kiddies, but still, it was a miracle....

Use of time. So, rather than burden myself with so many frustrations, I chose to see my real life at Lin Da as the time outside class. The boss wanted me on campus during working hours, in effect consigning me to one year's house-arrest. I decided to use a lot of that time making language-learning cards, studying, and reading. I saw very clearly, while I was filling in the departing teacher's summer hours that the kiddies were being "warehoused", for tuition money and the foreign teacher put into semi-solitary confinement. More on the kiddies, later. As for the foreign teacher, it would be enough to drive him into near-insanity. As it was, he looked in bad shape, and on the verge of verbal warfare with the school establishment. He left, leaving me a bedroom in shambles, and was rarely heard from again, if ever. Thus, I armed myself for this form of "deprivational warfare" by arming myself to the teeth with books, CD's, DVD's, cardboard for language-card projects, tins of sardines, writing paper, ideas, various major and minor projects, Russia/Farsi/Kazakh dictionaries for copying - all for use while in the room. If I had not made these preparations, I would have been in real emotional and occupational trouble. So, in terms of language study and my own curriculum work, the year was very profitable.

Bedroom. My bedroom was about 15 feet x 15 feet, and was taken up with the assignment furniture. I told Linda I didn't want the T.V. and ordered it to be summarily ejected. Soon, I began filling in the remaining space with the 25 or so plastic storage boxes I had brought up from Urumqi, with cases of water, coat-stands for hanging

laundry on, and all manner of “impedimentia”. Soon I had to step over or around things to get around the room. The bathroom was very small- about 5 x 7 feet- and it too I filled with clutter. Obviously, I like this state of affairs; somehow, it rested me psychologically, and gave me a paradigm to work within. I never saw more than a few square feet of open floor-space. The “office room” across from my bedroom was merely an overflow room for extra storage boxes, and lots of street-scavenged light-cardboard, which I cut up into study-cards. The refrigerator too, was stuffed with odd food, mostly way beyond “date of consumption.” Needless to say, I was happy with this state of affairs. Very, very few people bothered me, and I got down to my personal business quickly.

Food. As usual, I did not cook. After the years of pandering to my father’s “graceful, meaningful cooking- cuisine” fetishes, I decided I would not cook- ever. (Of course I will do some little thing, from time to time.) Compared with the many family restaurants outside Zhi Da in Urumqi, my corner of Altai had very few typical- Han Chinese, stir-fried food eating places. Altai has many ethnic-minority restaurants, heavy on meat, noodles, and cheap vodka. Also, the price of dishes had gone up a lot due to inflation, and the “reported” cost of transporting goods up to Altai from Urumqi. Many years back, one dish of “da pan ji” (big-plate chicken) was 35 Yuan; now it was 75 Yuan – and the amount and quality of the chicken was going down, being “inflated” with more red chile-peppers and potatoes. (This sounds like the debasing of the silver coins with lead, in the later years of the Roman Empire.) One nearby restaurant charged 24 Yuan for a plate of stir-fried string-beans! Obviously, this state of affairs could not go on, and I was in trouble. Also, the food at Lin Da school was mostly starch-based, to “warehouse” the kiddie’s stomachs, until their mother’s dinner-time. For a while I was a “lost food soul”, drifting from shoddy dive to shoddy dive, trying dishes at various sources. China has not come to terms with many restaurant bosses using recycled cooking oil – a public health mega-disaster that everyone knows in unfolding right before their eyes. (The recycled cooking oil is said to be very carcinogenic.) Meanwhile, the savvy consumers are quietly buying Turkish olive oil, and cooking at home. As for me, I drifted about-- Sichuan-- style food one night, in an under-ground dive that was badly lit, had poor ventilation, and turned out all the porcine delicacies the Sichuan migrant workers crave, so far away from home, an opium-den of pork in a sea of unfamiliar purity; a strange restaurant that catered to the Han elite-aspirants (the second or third tier, that is), with dozens of specimen photographs on the wall but only one or two I liked, where I sat at the waitress’ off-duty table in the front hall, rather than be taken upstairs to the eating-rooms and the disapproving gaze of others, where I ate my shredded kale and peanut soup under an idyllic landscape portrait of happy deer by a lake, while desperate fish in the restaurant’s holding tanks tried to leap out of their turbid water and onto the restaurant floor; a pseudo-yuppie, Western-imitation joint, which mandated one spend at least 80 Yuan per person, the haunt of failed-elite on the way to becoming hussies, dimly-lit and cocooned from the world outside; another dive that gave each customer a shrink-wrapped, plastic dining set of plate/bowl/ spoon/teacup, where everything was glass or plastic, with nothing at all that was living and natural, not even a cockroach, and a plastic-jade mega-toad on the cashier’s counter, its mouth crammed with a plastic-gold coin, and sitting on a dragon’s hoard of plastic-gold coins. Then there were other restaurants, whose doors I never even entered, for I knew I had the stigma of the illiterate

gazing into a library from the outside, the poor wondering at the rich, the barren watching children playing in a kindergarten. Even had someone welcomed me in, I still would not have known what to do – what to order, what I even wanted, whether I would be able to make myself happy with a plate of steaming food I could not taste critically, let alone smell. What shall I say? For after all I did come to China to live in a culturally-imbued, socially-mitigated world of de-sensitization, a work of morphine without the morphine where people became trees and the smiles became wallpaper, covering what was behind. However, it was during these times that the forests of shelter became forests of sadness and torment-- the “other side of the mirror”....

Thoughts. Lest anyone say, “He is mad”, I say in return: “This land is the abode of madness, and it is I who will try to chronicle it.” Lychee, my dear earthly muse, in whom I trust all my writing observations, do you still choose to read what I write? Fortunately for me, I found a Hui-ethnic-minority restaurant, and I went there. It became my home, my “food-home” for a year. The people there were kind to me. More on them, later....

Transition. Lychee, in this account of the year in Altai, I will be jumping around from topic to topic, and not following a strictly chronological narrative. I want to do it this way....

The Lin Da building. The Lin Da school building was brick, six floors, and made up one half of a larger, U-shaped complex, with a courtyard in the middle. (The other half was made up of private apartments.) Viewed from certain angles, at certain times of the day, this brick building reminded me of a mill-building in N.H. my father once owned. (However, after a while I forgot that association. After all, Altai was my “cuckoo’s nest”, the place I flew into and out of, where I could enjoy my own reality, and not the proscribed reality of others; Altai was my Ziklag where the likes of Saul would not find me and bother me.) I taught my classes on the 5th floor for the kindergarten class, and on the 3rd floor for the weekend “training-school” classes. My bedroom was on the 5th floor, only 15 meters from the kindergarten classroom. Since Xin Jiang was in a security crisis, the school was very carefully sealed; I could receive no visitors, and this pleased me greatly. Next to me were two dorm rooms for the unmarried teachers- one for Han Chinese, and one for the ethnic Kazakhs. Both rooms were very much off-limits, although I would occasionally knock on the Han door for daily-life questions. I think being a kindergarten teacher is a very hard and cruel life for a young and unmarried woman, as she struggles with semi-independence from home, has a hard job, and waits for a suitor. For them, life was like a holding-pen, as for sheep. They had very long and grueling days. I think all the disadvantages were with the others. When a woman left, it was usually by surprise; when their “ship came in”-- a better job, a husband-- they would pack up and leave, without any notice. Such behavior must be the result of an intense disgust with the social and occupational system they lived under. Everyone “wanted out”, in some way; they wanted a better life.

The K3-K4 class. For the first year, I co-taught a kindergarten class of about 27 students. The students had a Han Chinese head teacher, other teachers who taught basic maths, Pin Yin (the Romanized form of Chinese), singing, dancing, and basic Chinese language-arts skills. I taught 30 minutes of textbook and 30 minutes of self-cooked materials in the morning, and 30 minutes of review in the late-afternoon: that was all. In between I sat in my room and studied. Since the tuition for the Foreign Class was

significantly higher than for the same classes taught by the local Chinese teachers, my students generally came from well-connected or wealthier families. This could be seen in the clothes some kiddies wore (Power-Barbie or Power-Princess), or the cars their daddies drove (black Audi's, with heavily-tinted one-way glass). They were products of the "invisible oligarchy of patronage"-- but not all. Some parents were struggling to keep afloat! Status was addictively necessary for quite a few of these families. However, in the class, all children were exposed alike to the hard rigors of being "socialized" -- especially by their first teacher, but also by "the system" in general. Generally speaking, they represented part of the elite-- the old, political elite, and the new elite of "money-- to--power", or "power-- to --money".

Home of the new `elite. That was something else I noticed about Altai -- it attracted the elite and concentrated them in a way I had never seen before in China. When I see Altai, I think of Sagres, Whittier, Colorado Springs, Davos, and places like that! As I write, the sleepy valley town is being developed and re-built on a scale that the locals don't quite realize, with an end result they cannot yet fathom. In fact, I should enjoy this place while I have it, for in time, no one will be able to come here. In my dark moods, I imagine myself dead from an unknown illness not long after my transfer to a new work --site. In my better moods, I feel myself very privileged to be here, at this time in my life. So, when I feel down-and-out, I remind myself that Altai is a once-in-a-lifetime place to be, and that I should be thankful.

Overview of Altai. The following is a basic overview of Altai city. It is indelibly influenced by its location in a long and somewhat narrow valley. People came here because of the local gold deposits. The Kazakh ethnic minority group have a strong cultural presence here. All that will change, for Altai has been "discovered" by the elite from outside, and the re-development money is pouring in. A river runs through the city, and very attractive riverside walking paths are being constructed. On the west side is Camel Peak (Luo Tuo Feng), with some trails behind it, and a stone stairway leading up from the city. On the east side is General's Mountain (Jiang Jun Shan), with an extensively-developed trail / 4WD play-route system in place, with more to come. This is the kind of place where some "fat-cat" will take his guests after their sumptuous dinner-banquet, and show off the impressive views of the city. On General's Mountain, there are several of these "all this and more I will give you" vistas, expressly designed for 4WD access. I have enjoyed walking these trails while they are relatively ignored and unsurfaced. Not for long, though. Soon, the place will be hopping with 4WD and mini-bus parties.

Different parts of Altai. Generally speaking, the middle-section of the city has the newer and glitzier buildings, the power-architecture buildings for government, and the real-estate value. The south is older and more run-down, but is slowly being re-developed. The northern part of Altai is the part I live in, and therefore most in my eyes. In colonial India, it would have been called "the native quarter". There are many one-story brick-and-concrete bungalows, lived in by Hui, Kazakh, and Han. This is where the real character of Altai can be found (as well as in the semi-shanty areas on the edges of the middle section, where the gradients begin). I often liked to walk along the lanes of the northern semi-shanty town, and let the local ambience calm me down. I would often give irreverent names to some of the mini-neighborhoods, like "Dirt-Ville", "Fu Man Pig", "Dog Alley", "Middle Earth", "The Seven Circles of Hell", "The Forest of Death",

and so on. For, some reason, I had a compulsive desire to name everything, and turn a normal, working class district (not to mention the whole of Altai Prefecture) into my own very imaginative fairy-land, with me as the sole inhabitant, and those people living there as illusions or walking trees. Of course, no one knew, so no one cared. Actually, the people there were kind and indifferent to me-- except someone from "Dirt-Ville", which is why I chose that name. All the bungalow residences were walled in, with small courtyards. In some courtyards, there were odds and ends, the family tractor or motor-tricycle-- a typical picture of daily use and necessity. In others, there were vegetable and fruit gardens, full to bursting with species in "bountiful chaos"-- sunflowers, beans, all sorts of vegetable, pumpkins and wax gourds, and of course, apples. Altai, and Ili, and the mountain areas going into Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, are the "ancestral homeland" of the apple, and many of these semi-shanty bungalow compounds had working specimens of the "old breed" of apples, such as one will never find in a supermarket today. Just as Hardy noted the slow disappearance of the old Wessex ways in this novel, so I note the end of the semi-shanty neighborhoods, with their ways, their people, and their wonderful gardens. In a very few years, most or all of these neighborhoods will be razed to the ground (and below), and a new generation of multi-story concrete buildings, will come in. Of course, the old apple trees will disappear. Just a few days ago, as I was coming off the mountains, I counted at least twenty construction cranes in one part of the northern semi-shanty town. The mandate from above, or without, to rebuild Altai will remove most or all of the old bungalow architecture from the earth. Having walked among those buildings for a year now, I will miss them. I hope, over the following pages, to make sketches of the people who live there, and the neighborhoods themselves.

There are now four bus routes in Altai-- the 1, 101, 2, and 201. Since Altai is a very north-south town, they cover most places. Very soon after I arrived, I followed all routes to their terminal stations, to see the lay of the land. My desire to get out and explore was beginning to kick in. There are also some bus routes that serve the outlying villages; I also went on some of them, too. The villages have their own character-- Karagash, with its almost Soviet sunflower-belt feel, I would like to live in for a season; Hong Dun, with its red-pink painted road-front houses; Handagater, the last village before the brooding frontier "empty-zone"; 181 Bing Tuan, a jump-off point to areas of solemn silences and very impressive views; finally, Qie Mu Er Qie Ke, which I have not yet been to. The area of land inside Altai-Hong Dun-Karagash I called "the Vale of Glory"; the geographical extension to the east, "The Vale of Laban"; the geographical extension to the west, "The Vale of Li Fei" (after a student); the different patch of semi-desert to the south, I called, "The Wilderness of Judah". On it went...the whole area became a new Middle Earth for me, to be explored, named, and etched in experience. The bus routes, and the long-run taxis to Bei Tun and Bu Er Jin provided the excuses to get out and see this corner of China given to me. Truly, "the lines have fallen in beautiful places".

The river runs through a changing landscape. Through it all ran the river. Altai was divided by the river, but there were many bridges across it, and paved cut-stone walkways along it. For some reason, China is becoming a land of heavily-populated cities, with fewer and fewer people living in the actual countryside. The city itself contains all the elements for a synthetic form of society, where nature is only known in the parks and distant mountain views. Even the views are being lost, one by one, as the

new buildings go up. Outside the city lies a belt of urban wasteland, new developments, industrial farmland, and small “pocket-factories” or mysterious work-units that are not to be identified. Population is also concentrated along the roadways. The days of “the game-keeper’s cabin, at the head of the glen” are over: no one really lives apart. Thus, the mountains are empty, save for fewer and fewer Kazakhs in the summer pastures; one can often see derelict sheep-folds in the hills, made of well-built dry stone walls. The areas of rock wasteland, the open areas of semi-desert (the “ge-bi tan”), and the vast areas of land between cities and mountain areas are also empty. This emptiness goes well-beyond the dictates of geography- it is the result of choices made far away, a new round of social engineering. The ancient apple trees are displaced by hybrids. Through all this, then, runs the river; down from the mountains, the playground of the elite; through the “Hot Gates”; down a wide irrigation channel and in turn, the river bed; through the riverside urban parkland, where the people can see nature on their terms, after dinner; down to Hong Dun, and skirting “The Vale of Glory”, where the first of the new-rich from the hinter-land are buying up peasant properties; skirting “The Vale of Laban” and going right through “The Wilderness of Judah”; heading west, past 181 Bing Tuan, and going towards the sunset. Thus, if you follow the river, you will learn everything.

I have watched the river from near its banks, its large expanse of round river-boulders like the long-bleached bones of whales above the high-tide mark, and listened to the remaining waters flowing swiftly along. From the high sky-line goat-- paths, I have looked down at the river. At some points, I can hear it, feel it, imagine it; in some other places I cannot, for the clamor of “development” drowns out everything the river has to say.

Transition. Lychee, there is more to say about the natural order, but I will cover that somewhere else. Like the river, this account of Altai-- my “New Ziklag”-- goes many places.

Shopping. As you know, Lychee, I do not like to cook. I eat at the local restaurants, or at the Lin Da canteen. However, I do go out to shop for fruit, nuts, dried fruit, basic groceries, and the like. Since I am not very good about getting exercise, and since I feel that my social relationships with the local shop-keepers are fragile, I shop for different goods, in different shops, in different parts of the city. This gives me a lot of walking, and spreads out the “social risk”. As a foreigner here, my social position is always tenuous, and I want to protect my food-supply. Remember I want life in China on my terms, and not theirs. (Here, I am referring to my common, daily life) At each shop, I buy one or two items, always the same. Usually, this predictability works in my favor. The boss knows what I want, and sometimes keeps an eye out for me. It is when I ask for something that is off my usual routine, or new to both of us, that I fall into trouble. China is a land with huge choices of food, but each individual choice is hard to alter-- one must often accept each item as it comes, whether it is something on a menu, an object on the shelves, or a social situation. The Chinese, like any waitress in a busy diner, dislike “substitutions”. As for me, I am like the adult person with dyslexia, who always orders a hamburger at the same restaurant from the same waitress, because he cannot read the menu, and cannot socially interact with the other waitresses in the restaurant. The Chinese are able to discern this, I am grateful.

The fruit and nut lady. There is the dried fruit and nut lady, who always wanted to make a sale to me. She asks, “Where is your family? Why aren’t you married?” When

I tell her my condition, dreams, and standards, she back-tracks to, “it will be hard to find such a woman here.” These conversations do not bother me, for it has happened so many times already; now, it has no more significance than talks about the weather, or the price of duck eggs. I like to go to her stall because she sells large, dried figs. If I close my eyes, I can imagine they are Turkish figs, which in my imagination, are the world’s best. On this matter, a strange thing has happened to me. When I go shopping, now more often I ask for and buy the best--and not the cheapest. Maybe I do this because I feel that “the best” will have relatively fewer health or food quality-control problems associated with it. Food and drink quality-control is a ticking time-bomb issue in China, which has not been squarely confronted and dealt with.

The “bok-choi” lady. There is the “bok-choi” lady, who works in a special type of vegetable and fruit market. This market’s prices are controlled by the government, and maybe the product quality standards, too. I like this “two-track” market system in China--both the socialist and the free-market systems, often in different rooms of the same building. I think the government sets prices lower, and standards higher, so as to protect the poorer consumers-- which is a good thing for all. Besides, the quality and the cleanliness of the vegetables in the “socialist market” are generally much better than in the “free market”. In China, the free market surges forward in a “wild --cat”, profit-over-consumer-care way. It is easy to think of Upton Sinclair, and the characters he wrote about, when one considers this matter. As I left the free-market today, I saw dead fish of dubious quality, dumped on the floor of the fish section, and awaiting sorting into different buckets. Then, as I left that free-market, I saw a dead black-and-white kitten, lying on one of the stairs on its side, as if sleeping. It must have been there for one or two days, and half its face had been mauled. As for the “bok-choi” lady, over in the “socialist” vegetable and fruit market, there is no need for me to tell her what I want. I walk into the hall, heading straight for her stall. Her eyes catch mine, and by-passing chit-chat greetings, she hands me a plastic bag. At times, she tries to pick the “bok-choi” for me, but I don’t want that. I want the non-verbal ritual of picking through the pile myself; it calms me. Sometimes, I think she regards me as a foreign-devil version of the “village idiot”, but, like all polite Chinese people, she lets me be, and takes my money. Thankfully, money is one of life’s great pacifiers-- although it does not always work. Some vendors will quite happily forgo a sale, if there is a chance of amusement, or a social situation demanding the security of their face. But not his lady: she is far too astute and polite to do that.

How I use the “bok-choi”. With seven or eight heads of “bok-choi” in hand, I walk out of the “socialist market”, and then through the outdoor free-market to the open streets. One of the exits has three functions: it is part exit, part staircase, and part mini chicken slaughter house. Without any doubt, if the condemned chickens and pigeons could write, they would use their bleeding neck-stumps to write, “Abandon all hope, you who enter here”, on the walls and entryway. The chicken-ladies, when they are not dealing with the chickens, wash their hands, take off their aprons, and do their own embroidery, or else craft many-- colored sandals. Meanwhile, I go to the local Hui-minority restaurant, and sit down at an open table. All eyes are on me; some discuss me openly and with audible voices, as if I had left; they dissect me, making up their minds who I am , where I am working, what my salary is; they never consult me, or would they want to? It is beneath their dignity. I ignore them. It always amazes me that they

typically discuss such mundane things-- nothing abstract, or cultured, or intellectually, and even spiritually conversational. From this, I have decided that ego and money are the prime movers in transforming the mind of humans to near the levels of the animals. (Mind you, I am not much better, myself.) Then, with the utmost indifference, I take out the bok-choi heads. I rip off the green and leafy upper parts, tear that into small parts, and put them back into the plastic bag. The off-white heavy stems, which I do not like, I leave on the table for the boss; she will chop them up, and cook some other dish. I give her a nod – we understand each other well--and I walk out. (Later that evening, I will come back to that restaurant, and eat the green part.) When I leave the restaurant, the shocked silence is tangible. I go home and do something else.

Other shops. There are many other small shops and big markets I go to. As the only foreigner in Altai, everyone sees me. There are at least three big supermarket/department store complexes in town; I go to the nearest, which also happens to be the best. The food part is under ground, and has the usual products.

Typically, I go there for steamed bread-buns, juice, and peanuts. I like to wander around there, gazing at the products during the afternoon break (when the kiddies are napping) but buying nothing but the shell-peanuts. The peanuts are an excuse for being there, and I eat them while I watch films at night. There are many, many “Mom – and – Pop” grocery stores, fruit stores, “little- nothing” stores I also go to, again for one discrete item.

These shops are my “psychological lamp-posts”, for me to visit on a fairly regular basis. They actually make life more interesting. The bosses know me, and help me to get the “little nothings” I want. Fight fire with fire. Fight meaninglessness with daily measured doses of meaninglessness.

The three breakfast restaurants. In the beginning, I went out for my breakfast at some local breakfast joints. They each had a unique and memorable character.

The first. The first one was run by a husband and wife team from Sichuan Province. The “min-gong” (internal migrants) from Sichuan powers the nation, and breakfast joints like this power the “min-gong”. All over China, the food is the same, or almost the same: steamed buns, (pork or veggie), deep-fried dough-sticks, eggs boiled in old tea-water, duck- eggs, soy-milk, corn gruel, rice gruel, salty pickled vegetables, and sometime, re-incarnated stir-fry dishes from the previous night. The boss and his wife were “earthy” to the core, asked the usual questions and then broadcast their findings to subsequent customers, with interesting variations, said, “Ha-largh !” instead of “Hello”, and gave me a corner table, from which I could get away from the swirl of society, and still see its comings and goings. As usual, I did not venture into the back kitchen; it is a gentleman’s form of agreement, observed everywhere in China: everyone knows; no one asks.

Tradesmen came in, bringing that day’s supply of milk from the dairy, or corn meal for the week. School-kids came in, alone or with a parent, ate their hurried breakfast, and left. One mother even impressed the obligation to “hustle” on her daughter so much that she did not let the girl take off her heavy book-pack. Husbands or children from nearby ducked in for takeaway supplies. Long-distance truck-drivers came in, ate, and passed news from the grapevine with the boss. By now, the breakfast joint was filling up, and the boss and his wife were working hard to keep the customers supplied with trays of steaming buns, eight to a tray. I think of Nelson’s powder-monkeys: working furiously to keep the heavy guns supplied with powder. People like the boss and his wife also supplied

almost insatiable demands. Armies of pigs and vegetables; frantic fingers and rolling pins; tidal surges of hungry mouths...In any society, there are “bottleneck zones”, but in China, they are especially pronounced. Sitting in a sociological “bottleneck zone” and watching the world go by is like watching the wildebeest surging down that narrow pathway down to the river, and across the kill-zone of the crocodiles. When the room filled up too much, I left. The early bird gets the worm, but is also left alone.

I like to add my own subversive ingredients to the breakfast offerings, such as hot chocolate powder to the soy-milk, or honey to the corn gruel. This certainly raised eyebrows, since the act, the ingredient, the combination, the setting were so off the beaten track. A free-thinker mixing hot chocolate powder into his soy-milk on a busy Monday morning at the breakfast joint, saying nothing in the corner is a hundred times more subversive than any number of orators on their soapbox. In any case, I do not care what people think of me: Altai is my “cuckoo’s nest”; I want to go out and come in as I please; I retain a very selective domain of cultural illiteracy and social interpersonal incompetence, so I can better tune out what people are saying about me-- and they do talk about me, as if I were not there; I have my own life to live. They are social; I am a loner. They discuss the day’s events among themselves; I sit alone in the corner, reading French translations of Gogol short stories. They look at me as incompatible with everything they hold to be true in their universe; I am far, far away, walking down a dark street in St. Petersburg, wondering what Gogol’s character will do next. Everyone in China tries to dress up for clothing makes an impression that people crave to garner, and the people in the breakfast joint are no exception; I have a scandalously shabby bag that I carry everywhere, and that certainly makes an impressions, wherever I go. They go out to their unknown lives; I go back to the school.

As time wore on, and autumn nudged into early winter, and as the boss and his wife left for the hinterland, they were replaced by another couple, who were not as polite. I looked around for a new breakfast joint. It was time. There were two other places up that street, which I had seen on my morning walks. Incidentally, I saw how long it took to put in public services along that street, such as curb-stones, new drainage ditches, and sidewalks; there were other priorities, elsewhere. Now, one year later, with a frozen winter of hibernation in between, that street is almost ready.

The second. The second breakfast restaurant was very different. It was operated by a Uighur couple, with adult children. Once the first restaurant became untenable, I tried the second. It was quieter, immaculately kept up, and had that well-groomed “Soviet sunflower-belt” feel to it. There was very respectable, still-life art on the walls, the tables were covered in heavy plastic, sunflower print spill-protectors, and there were flower arrangements on the window ledges. The Chinese national news, in Uighur, filtered into the dining room. Everything was clean, and had a down-home feel. I often chatted with the boss and her husband. They were quiet, respected each other, were very intelligent, and made me feel I was in their home, and not a place of business. The Kazakh milk-deliverers also came here, on their motor-tricycles, as well as a few old gentlemen from the “old settler” class. The kitchen was just behind the dining room; one could very easily stick in one’s head and see what was going on. It was reasonably big, by local standards-- say 15’ x10’-- and the ingredients, processes and “substations” were sprawled all over the room and its tables, but it worked, in a relaxed, almost--ready manner. The boss and her husband spend almost all their time there, peeling the outer skins of Chinese leeks or onions, or the local variant of chives (jiu cai) , or stuffing lamb meat-buns. Eat two of her lamb meat -buns, and one would have enough energy to climb a small mountain, or get fat. Slow-cookers boiled eggs, or steamed the buns. Out of the basic trio of lamb, certain local vegetables, and flour, came quite a

variety of Uighur dishes. This was not a fast-service place, so I brought a book with me and read, while the buns or milk heated up. Generally speaking, people did not analyze my life and status within earshot. I gave more of my life-story to the boss and her husband, and they reciprocated. In time, they let me look around their own garden, which was a real treat.

Asian gardens are private, set on the inside, in courtyards. As a result, while I was wandering the streets of Altai, it was very hard to glimpse into people's gardens. Sometimes I would happen to pass someone's house as they were coming out and the gate was open, but if they saw me looking in, they would scowl, and close the gate. The only way to see anything interesting was in the unannounced, spontaneous moment, while passing by. "Lady Chance" is always faithful; take her sudden crumbs quickly, absorb cumulatively, and move on!

This courtyard garden was built long before the current building boom, in a time when the common citizen could design with plenty of living space in mind. Now, the mad rush of real-estate wealth has altered everything; one must build small, and have no garden. This, garden was bounded by a wall to the east, the neighbors to the south and west, and the boss restaurant and extension to the north. There was also a long building in the middle, running east-west. Thus, the garden was like a rectangular donut. As with many gardens I saw in Xin Jiang, the plants were not organized into rows and zones, but grew in what appeared to be a state of chaos. First came the fruit trees, which appeared to be planted with no logical planning as to where they should go. The pathways were planned. Pruning and training appeared minimal. In between the fruit trees, the vegetables were planted in what appeared to be total chaos and randomness. The overall result was a very natural, "jungle" sort of feeling. This would be the perfect place to "get away from it all" and return to nature. Yet, behind all that rambling carelessness and apparent neglect and chaos, I suspect there were some ironclad rules of gardening going on. Beauty and primal innocence were for the visitor, and maybe not the owner, so I wandered around a few times, thus relishing the moment.

I returned to the restaurant, sat down at my table, and read. This place was too idyllic to last. The boss and her husband had to go to the south of Xin Jiang on family affairs; besides, the real winter was coming. I stopped going. The next spring, I dropped in once or twice, but did not go again. I now wonder why there were so few customers in that establishment; after all, the food was very good, and the ambience almost perfect. Sometimes, I wondered if my being there was an offense to the other clients, and made them go out elsewhere. I will never know. A few days ago, I walked past their gate and it was locked tight. Who knows if the immortal ancestral apples of Altai dropped into the long grass and rampant spinach leaves with nobody around to pick them up?

The third. Once again, I had to move on, in search of somewhere to eat my breakfast. Down that same street was another breakfast place. It too was run by Uighurs. The kitchen was in the entrance court. The food was average. However, I liked this place because the eating area was deep into the house. I could disappear from the world in complete safety, eat lamb meat-buns, drink milk, tea, and read. However, in time I also left this place.

Transition. In time, I gave up going out for my breakfast; it was simpler to stay home and eat there. Usually, breakfast was last night's leftovers' (or earlier), cold, greasy, and with the faint tang of age on it. I also ate fruit, yogurt, milk, nuts/raisins/dried fruit, bread, old rice or noodles--whatever was left over in the fridge at that point. I have a bad habit of buying fruit in the local market, putting it into the fridge, and then neglecting it--like the past 25 years of lost girlfriends or female admirers. In the end, I ate the fruit over-ripe, or threw it out.

The walks in the morning. Eating was only a necessity; I really got up in the morning to take a walk, and get out of the Lin Da school buildings. Lychee, I sometimes feel that my existence here was very much like “house arrest”, with some windows of parole here and there. No, it was not that bad, but sometimes the allusion is strong. I needed the exercise; I wanted to know what was going on in the local neighborhood; I wanted to be undisturbed. The early morning was the best time to do this.

Building of the pavement. After breakfast, I would walk up the long hill, going against the flow of students on their way to school or workers to their job, and a new day. The pavement took such a long time to repair, maybe because the unseen minds planning Altai’s reconstruction were allocating labor resources elsewhere. Every day, the street work moved forward, in very small increments. Most of the work was done by hand, with heavy objects trucked in. The work included; laying pipe and electrical wire, installing curb-stones, the concrete foundations for street-lamps and the lamp-posts themselves, and repairing the neglected storm-water drainage ditches. Altai’s old city infrastructure is too small and narrow for today’s super-sized urban planning ambitions. Put bluntly: the cars people like to drive are too big, the new urban lifestyle they espouse is too wide and sprawling, and the social demands which will inevitably arise are too heavy for the current infrastructure to carry well. This problem is also obvious in Urumqi, and many other cities in China-- or anywhere, for that matter. This problem of “growing pains” falls hardest on those who must maintain it...in this case, the workers who were upgrading the pavements I was walking over each morning. These Sichuan “min-gong” are hard-core heroes. Now, one year has passed. Most of the construction objectives have been met, although the aesthetic landscaping between the pavements and the adjacent properties has not been done--nor do I think the unseen minds will do this at any time. It is not high on their overall list of priorities.

On the blue trash-dumpsters. On the side of the road was a blue trash-dumpster. All over China, but especially in Altai, the blue trash-dumpster, designed to fit on a six-wheel dump truck chassis, has become the chosen container for neighborhood waste disposal. Everything goes into it: household waste, in small carrier bags; broken branches; coarse weeds scalped off the pavements or verges with blunt shovels during the first chill mornings of autumn; old and broken things, either inside or outside the dumpster; garden waste; chicken feathers and other avian body-parts, coming from some of the local, illegal “mini-workshops” that everyone knows about, but no one will mention; finally, low-grade toxic waste, PVC and complex-molecule plastic products. I overheard that the job of hauling away the full dumpsters was sub-contracted out to a local company in the area. Every so often, the sub-contractors throw kerosene into the dumpsters, and burn the waste, so as to reduce the waste volume by 60% or more. Then the dumpster is filled up with trash again, and emptied. Some dumpsters are left, full and unserviced, for a long time. The smoke from the neighborhood incineration is very dirty and poisonous, since it contains so much plastic, and “unmentionable substances”. On a cold autumn morning, when dawn has broken and only a few people are about, if one stands on a hill overlooking Altai city, one can see several rising columns of smoke rising into the air, until they are stopped, and forced to spread sideways by an “air-temperature inversion effect”. At the same time, a “ground fog” spreads over the city, and especially in the northern district, which is poorer, and has more one-story, bungalow housing. Since the dumpsters were installed to serve local neighborhoods, they are evenly spaced out, thus assuring an even distribution of poisonous smoke to each and every citizen of Altai. Is this not Bhopahl, in slow --motion? As I walked up the street, past a blue dumpster, still smoking, I held my breath, and ran a short distance.

One local neighborhood. The road continued on up the long hill, but I turned right,

and passed through a small neighborhood. In the middle was what appeared to be a local coaling depot, where outside coal was brought in for the winter. Also, there was a type of restaurant called “nong jia le”- a sort of family-run suite of banqueting rooms. It seemed that some of the “fat cats” of Altai liked to come here, for there were often one or two black Audis parked out front. Thus, I called this place “Pig-ville”, and one place in particular, “Fu Man Pig”. It was a dreary, point-chipped, grey and dirty white area, with broken off branches woven into the barbed wire fences, fading notices on the local commune propaganda board, the last authentic wooden double-gates from the 1950’s. A poured-concrete lane ran through it. A row of coal-shabby red lanterns on the eaves of the “fat-cat’s” restaurant contrasted with the coal-spackled walls, the ground black with coal-powder, and the polished clean forms of the Audis, all black. Yet, out of this ambiguous wasteland, out of many unseen households, I saw a trickle of well-groomed students, on their way to school. Some were the children of workers, and carefully dressed up, and endowed with dignity. The others bore the unseen but unmistakable hallmarks of privilege. One thing was clear; in this town, what lay inside the homes was different from the outside appearance of the building. Put another way, Altai was a nest of hidden, sleeping tigers.

On the mountain skylines. Pig-ville had one asset; from the poured-concrete road, one had good views of the mountains to the east of Altai. As I left the neighborhood glancing down obscure, weed-fringed alleys leading nowhere, I would look, up out of the city, over to the mountains. One of the distinguishing marks of the Altai landscape is the mountain skyline, and the stone cairns. By cross-referencing two or three cairns, one can figure out where one is; this is important, as it is very easy to get lost in the hills. Some people say that the Mongols after Ghengis Khan and the Kazakhs later on, designed the system of cairns. Whoever did it, it works very well. The horse-trails between the cairns were also well-planned, with attention given to the most time and energy efficient route over and around the mountains. However, this system of cairns and horse-paths is fading, and the culture it has supported is slowly being taken down and removed. The cairns are falling down, and I suspect a few near the city have been thrown down. The horse-paths are less and less used; long grass obscures many trails; evidences of nomadic, pastoral life are fewer and fewer. The “ silent spring” of Rachel Carson is not just for the birds; it is coming here too, with an inertia of an approaching wintertime.

On the dogs of Altai. Next, I turned left and went up one more street, past the home of Mega-Pippy. This is a portly dog that guards one of the gates. (She is named after Pippy, a similar but smaller version, now living in Urumqi). After a few suspicious, passing encounters, we treated each other with semi-detachment. Mega-Pippy was one of the better dogs in Altai. At present, there is a large number of unattended or semi- neglected dogs in Altai. They run around everywhere, and no one seems to care. Fortunately most of them are middle-sized mutts, or small “mop-dogs”, which were rejected by their owners. Here, “animal rights” don’t stand a chance in cat-hell. In the early morning, between dawn and sunrise one can see the lost dogs of Altai, usually in or around the blue dumpsters. Some of them have very wolf-like faces. Thankfully, the really mean and vicious dogs are chained and shut up in courtyards.

One tidy shop. Next came the mini-shop with the perfect “out-front”. Most property holders (I say “holders”, and “not owners”, deliberately) do not make the effort to keep up the narrow strip of land between their front wall and the road. Many just let the rain-wash, or trash, or weeds, have their way--either because they don’t care, or they are lazy, or they are trying to hide their new wealth behind a façade of assumed poverty. Whatever the reason, the “out-front strip” is a shambles. (One owner, in good hill-billy fashion, put the half-

stripped chassis of his truck on the roof of one of his buildings! Over time, the property was upgraded, but the old truck remained on the roof, as before). However, this owner had taken the trouble to deal with the water-flow/trash/weed problem permanently, and make his shop-front look more attractive. This caught my eye.

On the “perfect street”. The next left turn took me to Altai’s “perfect street”. Like Min De Road in Urumqi, this street was “perfect” in my mind, because it made me feel I was somewhere else, and not in China. Min De Road had a certain peace and quiet to it, in marked contrast to the restlessness and chaos of Nan Men, only a few blocks away. This street was well swept, the property holders had money, or at least a sense of aesthetics, there were many planted birch trees between the houses and the road, there were many, many sparrows in the trees and pigeons on the telephone wires, always singing away, and there was that feeling of “just maybe” being somewhere else.

Every time I walked this route, I would stop at the bottom end of the road, order my mind quiet, and walk slowly past the high and gated walls and the birch trees, absorbing every minute detail, trying to exclude every other detail, perception or thought. I wanted to absorb the moment and the place completely. Over the next year, I walked past this place many times, and like the details in Millet’s hay stacks over the course of a day, I noted many small changes in the trees, the walls, the air, the birds, my feelings-- everything of each moment. It never grew boring, though I tried of many other things in life. I wonder: could there be a few other such moments in a day, where I could forget some of the more unpleasant aspects of life, and sometimes, the unpleasantness of life itself?

Memories and details. That street, and the ones after it, had many small details that I want to include here, and not abandon on the back page of my 2011 calendar. Someone had piled up many small quartz stones. Why? Who knows... In a small, neglected corner, someone grew beans and onions... the morning sunlight on the high red wall, with chilled houseflies basking on it... The color of the leaves, under many different lighting conditions... The leaves on the trees, or falling off, or on the ground... The leaves, moving, or still, in all shades of green, yellow and brown... The solitary pavilion amidst silent trees, the encircling fence torn and broken down, and the big white nanny-goat brought in to keep the weeds down... A place to look at from the outside, but not a place to enter, and contemplate life... The quarrelsome dog, the would-be ankle-biter... The sand pile, dumped on the verge, for the coming winter... The edge of Altai, and the mountain skylines behind and to the front... My almost daily perusal of the next hiking route, seen from a distance, from a height... The abandoned workers’ glove on a rock, which I called “Grendel’s hand”... The walk back to the school...

The three outhouses. My walks took me through the poor part of Altai. (The rich “developing” areas were in the central part of the city, and I did not often go there.) Thus, there were many public latrine/out-houses, each with its own unique aspect and memories. Three stand out in particular.

1st: At the end of the walk was the Summit Outhouse; I only call it by this name, because it was the highest of the three. Like all outhouses, it was carelessly used, with cigarette butts and “detritus” scattered everywhere. It always was a puzzle to me why so many men did not even bother to piss or spit into the holes, but just let it out onto the floor, only several inches from the hole itself. I can only surmise it came from some form of latent rage against the system they lived under. So, maybe they were “repressed” in their public life, but were “anal-expulsive” in their secret, latrine-centered life, in those few moments when no one was observing them. It always amazed me how quickly the average Chinese man could “squat-and-void” in my case, it takes so much time and effort to make anything

happen. Well, I come from an “anal-retentive” background, and maybe this explains my own hang-ups. I will never be able to understand theirs, but only try to imagine, to surmise, to feebly extrapolate what they are thinking. All I have are “tea-leaves”, stray pollen-grains, and the whiff of garlic on their breath: they will never tell me anything directly-- no, never.

However, there was one incident in the Summit Outhouse which caught my attention. I was on the middle hole, minding my own business. Two men came in, squatted on either side, and began talking to each other, over my head, as if I did not exist: this often happens in China. One was a truck driver, who took the ore from the nearby mines to a processing plant somewhere. The other man asked him to keep an eye out for certain “green stone, of such-and-such a description”, and to reserve them for him-- for a fee. So, a deal was consummated, right over my head. Sometimes, being over-looked has its advantages in life. I suspect that many truck drivers are approached in this way.

2nd. The second outhouse was about halfway up the morning walk route. Thus, I called it “Middle Earth”. It too was messy, so I claimed the left hole as my own, and tried to keep it clean and tidy, by scuffing the area around the hole with my shoe, and kicking the scattered cigarette butts into an obvious pile in the corner.

The morning sun rose over the hills outside Altai, and the early rays streamed through an open window-hole. On those mornings when I was alone, it was peaceful, warm and pleasant. I could forget about any other thing. Sometimes, all I wanted was to sit inside a sunlit room with no other people, no sound, no worries, not many thoughts or none at all and just sit in the sun, doing nothing-- just being in the sunlight. Why do I strive; why do I fear; why to I react? Give me an empty room, a chair, and a window full of good sunlight, and no troubling thoughts. Then, I might find some happiness. Lychee, in home in the forest in Maine state, I have reserved a site for a sun-room. In the winter, I would like to sit in the sun, and be peaceful. If I have done any bad thing in my life-- not including the usual sins of “omission and commission”-- it is this: I denied myself this simple and easily obtained moment of pleasure.

3rd. At the bottom of the morning walk route was the third outhouse. The men’s side had seven holes. Thus I called it “The Seven Circles of Hell”, after Dante. This was a filthy and disgusting place. Towards the door, where some light came in, the stalls were “raunchy”; as one moved down the line, each stall became even more disgusting. No one cared where they urinated, spat, or threw away their cigarette-buts, boxes, or wrappers--even the walkways were polluted! In the summer, the cesspools seethed with maggot larva; in the winter, the turds rose up like stalagmites, and cautious rats walked over the thin, lethally risky film of frozen crust, looking for undigested sunflower seeds in the waste. In the dumpster just outside, the workers from the not-so-legal chicken processing workshop openly rejected their chicken-feathers and avian body-parts. Altai aspires to becoming “China’s version of Davos”, but in terms of public health, it is a biological and epidemiological time-bomb. “The Seven Circles of Hell” are just one example, of many.

Usually, I went to the Second or Third Circle, as they were relatively safer to use. Most of the men who used this place were “min-gong” migrant workers. They came in the early morning, in the “sleepy hour”, slowly, dazed or thoughtful even before the day’s work began. Some of them squatted down, “lit up”, voided, and then played pop-music on their cell-phones. In an instant, the relative quietness of the Seven Circles Of Hell was destroyed. Sometimes, the pop-music was non-verbal, techno-noise. For me, silence is a sanctuary; for many Chinese, silence is a void or horror which must, in any way, be filled in--hence the cell-phone music, a kind of “auditory nose-gay”, to blot out the abyss, if only for a brief moment.

Why I liked to go to the outhouses. The three outhouses, and many others all over Asia, were my areas of sanctuary. Usually, they were quiet, save for the dripping of water, the ebb and flow of the flushing systems, the coming and going of the customers. It was also a refuge from everything feminine. Very, very rarely was I looked down upon as a foreigner in the public toilets, for there, if only for a brief moment, all men were truly equal. We came to void, and be alone with our thoughts. For me, the public toilets were a kind of Zen-space, where I could blot out the real world of chaos, conflict and competition. Maybe, I should do my writing in a converted cubicle or in a city morgue after business hours. Frankly, the public toilets of Asia were some of the only places where I felt at ease, able to open my soul to the soothing influence of the dripping water. As a global traveler, I found them the perfect traveler's help, much better than VIP waiting rooms.

The "well-planned retreat" compound. On the morning- walk route; there was one family compound that always held my attention. From the outside, at first glance, it looked very run-down, shabby, "hill-billy", with odds and ends everywhere against the walls and fence. The house was at the base of a very small hill. Towards the top of the hill was a vertical-board, red-roofed shack; it made me think of a Down East coastal fishing shack. This side of the hill had many small trees on it. Since I walked past this home on the morning walks, I would often look at it intently, in the ten or fifteen seconds it took to walk past. Gradually, it dawned on me that this was not a hill-billy place at all, but the home of a very clever planner and builder. The secret lay with the trees. They covered one side of the hill very densely, and the spaces in between each tree were allowed to run wild with long weeds. The owner's boundary ran along the crest of the hill. The other side was bare rock and dust. Each of the tree--planting holes had been hacked out of the rock, one by one, and then filled in with better soil from elsewhere.

The shack sat in leaf-muffled peace and isolation --at least, in summer. The windows of the main house were of a better quality than generally used. Thus, upon careful, repeated inspection, I realized that each item of apparent shabbiness was in fact an item of camouflage. Who knows what really goes on inside? However, it was the "Maine shack" at the top of the hill that really held my attention, since it appeared to be an ideal location for a retreat, away from society's chaos. I never dared to ask for a visit.

Transition. As the seasons changed, so did the walks; in summer, I went out early in the morning and in the evening during most people's dinner-time, so as to avoid other people; in winter I went out at noon, to get what little sunlight was then available, to combat depression. Most of my time, I was inside the school, teaching classes, writing, or doing my zany language-related projects. Thus, these two years were a kind of very creative "house-arrest". If I did not have the language projects, the DVD's, the books, the Friday walks, the CD's, and other "diversions of marginalia", I would have gone crazy. I spent my time going into and out of the "cuckoo nests of Ziklag", and it worked.

A meeting, with no results. This noon, at a cafeteria-style restaurant, one of my first year kindergarten students, came up to me, and said hello. I did not recognize her at all. When I said, "I am happy to see you" she did not answer. The past year's kindergarten classes might as well never have happened! It was just an exercise in "warehousing" and breaking the kids into the socially accepted norms. Upon retrospection, my role in that whole year's class was as "advertising bait". Most of that class learned little English, save a few "children-of-the-elite", who are being methodically groomed into 21st century Janissaries. So, it is time to return to the classroom and say a little more about it.

Various observations about the classroom. The first teacher was sometimes very cruel to the students. There were some kiddies who were little horrors, and who got

everything they deserved, but there were others who did little or no wrong, and who were also broken. At times, I wondered if one of the “unofficial objectives” of the Lin Da School was to break each and every student, the way horses are broken, before they are used for riding or carrying baggage. Time and again, I saw that “people-management” was of paramount importance. When I came to the school for the first interview, I plainly told the boss I was not able to control the class, and that I would need an assistant. My words were heard, and usually, someone was with me in the “lion’s den”. It is worth noting that all the students knew I was a “soft target”, and whenever the main teacher was out, classroom order fell apart and quickly descended into chaos. When she came back in, she quickly found out the troublemakers, and beat them. Order was attained through fear and beating, and communicated through an incessant stream of shouting and harangues. All teachers did this to some degree or other, but if they had not, what would have been the end result? Chaos. Creativity rarely existed, and it was progressively neutered out of the children. As the saying goes, “Everything I learned about life, I learned in kindergarten”. Appearances, social conformity, acting as one, owning received views, sitting most of the day on a hard blue stool, with one’s hands behind one’s back and one’s eyes on the teacher-- all of these values were drummed into every student. Here, kindergarten is about social conditioning, “breaking” extraneous character traits, and warehousing a person’s life. With the possible exception of art class, there was never a moment when the children were left alone to be themselves, creatively. However, I cannot blame the individual teachers alone, for they too suffered verbal abuse and harassment at the faculty meetings. In the bigger book stores, one can find books on the Montessori method, but what use is that? It is like trying to teach a society of corgis how to grow their tails back.

Comments on my teaching situation. I am not writing this section of “Fragments of China” so as to beat up on the Lin Da School! These observations are my secondary theme, a by-product of the other things I like to write about. I would far rather sit up on the mountaintops and look out over the valleys, and over at the other, distant mountains. My own subject has always been land, travel, and beauty of nature, and isolation. Like many expats in China today, my career trail followed the visas. Lest you (the reader, not Lychee) think me shameful, I am not ashamed of my conduct--I was brought here as a form of “advertising bait”; I saw very early, very clearly, that my role here was superficial and for the sake of appearances, and that anything enduring I tried to build up would be reengineered after I left the room. Therefore, I chose to take my best energies elsewhere, and do the best I could with the superficial moments assigned to me. Sometimes, my class time was “used” for the urgent needs of the moment. I chose not to break my heart over things like this. Now, a flight of pigeons outside attracts my attention, but when some child down the hall cries, I carry on with my writing.

On the lovely students. Many of the students were very lovely and endearing. The beauty of innocence should never be disclaimed. There are few things more beautiful in the world than little children playing and being happy. In between the “blue-stool” classes, the children had time to chat and play, and one could see their native playfulness. Of course, I heard it through my door, at the far end of my corridor, so it sounded better than on site. I do suspect that the students here got a better deal than in the other, similar schools in Altai. However, since Altai is a small city, competition between the various schools was severe.

Moments of peace. There were moments when the bliss of “teachable moments” fell on the school and the river of learning glowed in a free way. In this matter, the “analytical math” teacher was undoubtedly the best. When her oboe-reed voice started up, the whole class followed her. There is a lot one can learn from life with only one’s ears and

imagination to inform oneself. As I write, the river of learning down the corridor makes a pleasant backdrop, a help to this writing, and a bulwark to the noisy clatter of the world outside, trying to survive.

Transition. It is late morning, another day. Outside, the snowline is beginning its merciless descent down the mountain slopes. I am glad I got in some good walks, for all too soon my mountain playground will be denied to me; for at least six months. Inside, the young children swarm out into the corridors, splash water everywhere as they wash their hands, and then return to their own classroom for another “blue-stool” class.

My own psychological state. It is cold inside my room as I write. The socially mandated time for turning on the central heating has not yet arrived. I write, and keep silent. Being silent and hidden, out of the way, is my only defense against being seen and made use of. If the Chinese see me, like water they will try to seep into me and take me. If I am out of sight then I am usually out of mind. My door is locked, the curtains are drawn, I keep “radio silence”, I do not show my face, and I talk to no one if possible. In my room, I have become a ghost. I live, as if enduring a siege. Here the siege is psychological, and usually silent. My mind is elsewhere; my projects are elsewhere, my dreams are elsewhere. Teaching has become even less than a shell. I stay alive on my terms, by being hidden.

Good to be here. I have always felt that being in Altai was the right thing for me to do. I do not regret being here, Lychee, even though I live like a ghost. With the crumbs of opportunity and time assigned to me, I can have a good time with the young kindergarten students. When the head teacher, or the Kazakh “third teacher”/ cleaning lady is in the room with me, things flow well. Here, I have a paramount view of the socialization process.

On using sign-language in class. Lychee, as you know, I like to try out and play with new ideas. It makes my life more interesting. For about one year now, I have been using sign-language in conjunction with teaching new words, and speaking sentences. As I speak a word, I make a sign with my hands to visually signify that word. It all started because of verbs. The Chinese are very “elliptical” (and negligent!) with their use of verbs in a sentence, as they seem to believe that nouns are more important. Thus, “This afternoon, I will go to my home”, becomes, “This afternoon, I to my home”, (jin tian xia wu, wo dao wo jia). Thus, the verb is “lost”, both in the native Chinese and in the translated English. I wanted some way to “signify” the presence and existence of a verb... so I chose to use a form of sign language. It all began with verbs, but very soon, the idea mushroomed into the nouns, some adjectives, prepositions, and finally simple sentences. I deliberately chose to ignore the existing systems of sign-language being used in China or the USA with people having hearing disabilities. Instead, I created gestures “on the fly”, as the need arose in class. Lychee, I feel I am onto a very big and significant idea, for helping young students become better able to speak simple sentences in English – and not forget the verbs. However, I do not know where all this “trench-research” will go. Maybe one day, I should write a “monolog”, and throw the idea into the open, for others to hear about. The system is still extremely basic and primitive, but the students seem to like it. I certainly believe in it. I hope that sign language, at the word-level, and strung together up to the sentence-level, will help the young students to associate a new English word with a gesture, and not with the Chinese. I want to break the latter link, so that their English can grow up as an independent entity, and not as a subsidiary of their own mother-tongue, that is, Chinese. At least, I want to have a try!

Lychee, I want to go back to my first love in Altai-- the walks. Even though it is winter now (2012), I look back over the intervening months, and see the many memories of

the walks I took. In time, I will forget most of the people I met, but the mountains will always remain with me, a source of happy memories!

Altai, and the land around for several miles, is a day-hiker's paradise. Until I came here, I never really cared about foot-hill walking; now, I cannot wait to go walking in Nepal. At first, as I got used to the city, I looked up at the surrounding mountains, afraid to venture up into them. What was I afraid of? The police scowling at me for overstepping unspoken boundaries. For a few weeks, I went up the one "legal" peak, and looked the next peak... until one trip, I said, "The hell with it", and kept on going, and going, and going. Over the next year, I systematically visited most of the peaks, ridge-walks and upper valleys in the areas around Altai city, as well as parts of the semi-desert to the south of Altai city. I was like a dog driven to leave a calling card at every lamp-post for miles around.

Here is a list of some of the routes I took, over a variety of terrain, at different times, and in different moods:

- Altai to Karagash, a small village, and my favorite site for a home if I were a local. This was the best of the walks, which passed through a variety of strongly evocative landscapes. The quiet road passed through open stretches of open land, shimmering in the late-summer heat.

- Hong Dun township to Karagash, over another quiet road, closed to trucks. On this road, one could turn all 360 degrees, and see the immense majesty of the land around, and the peaks to the west, north and east. This was the "Vale of Glory", and it could easily have become the setting for a Faulkner-like saga. It was prime sunflower-growing country with small patches of poplar trees, areas of rock and uncultivated land, and small settlements. Towards the south, the land became less and less fertile, until it reached the semi-desert.

- Behind Camel Mountain (the "legal" peak). There were many walks in this area. Some overlooked Altai city; the rest went to the other side of this range of hills along goat-trails. Here, I learned a rule for hill-walking-- always keep your "contour-height" even if it appears you are walking farther. Going up-and-down is very tiring, even if the distances are shorter. Behind Camel Mountain and its companion hills were others. One could not quench one's desire to visit all the tops, as there were too many of them. In the in-between valleys, it was very easy to get lost; in certain places, all useful reference points became hidden or else confusing. The landscape may look beautiful, but it is dangerous in places. Also, there were many places where almost nobody went--certainly not the Han Chinese, and only a few of the hardy mountain-Kazakhs.

- The "General's Mountain" area, and beyond. Camel Mountain was to the west of Altai city; General's Mountain lay to the east. It was the biggest mountain nearby Altai city, and the view from the top was very satisfying, well worth the climb. Over my two years in Altai, I went up there a number of times. Since General's Mountain will become a nationally important ski center, there were some rough dirt roads up most of the way, just about suitable for motor freight tricycles. I would often hire one, and get a boost up to 60% of the mountain. Alas, I fear the top will be developed into a vista hotel and be changed forever. Once over the top, one entered a new world--an "upland plateau-valley", with many upland partridges playing hide-and-seek among the boulders and rock peaks, with surprising groves of birch growing out the crack; a drop-off on the far side, with that "edge of the world" feeling about it. However, it was not the end; there were even more trails waiting to be found. What happens when organized tourism finds and systematically develops this place? To come here now is a rare treat. If I turned my back on the city and looked the other way, I could imagine myself in a land untouched by people, going out for many miles.

-The lower levels of “General’s Mountain”, near to Altai city. The local government was actively developing the lower levels of General’s Mountain into a day-hike system of roads for both 4WD vehicles and walkers. Altai is a long, north-south city, and this park system paralleled the city for some kilometers. A lot of work has been put into this project. Large teams of migrant workers from Sichuan Province were brought in to dig tens of thousands of holes in the rocky hillsides, plant conifer trees, and lay the steel water pipes for the watering system. It was a lot of work. At various places, there were parking vistas, where tourists could survey the city from their 4WD’s. The project was done on a grand scale, but I wondered, what about the problems of water? Runoff from the hills went down the dirt roads; this will have very serious erosion effects. As for the tree-irrigation pipes, many of them were made of very low-quality steel. In a few years’ time, they will become a repair/maintenance nightmare.

-From La Si Te, east, to “somewhere”. North of Altai was the village of La Si Te; it sat on both banks of the river, under an escarpment of sorts. There was nothing much here, save several dozen cottages, and an over-sized village government office that looked and felt like a Dutch patrol’s country mansion. Up river from the village was an old abandoned yurt – site, where Roxanna used to play in the days of her youth. This was all on the western side of the valley, five kilometers north of Altai; on the eastern side of the valley was another tributary valley, and it was this valley which caught my attention one afternoon when I had several hours free for walking. I knew of its existence, from looking out over surrounding vistas, and I wanted to see where it went. It was a warm autumn day, and the poplar leaves were yellow to perfection.

The road was paved for a few hundred meters, and then became unpaved and rutted; it remained on the left side of the river, and followed the conveniences of the landscape-- now close to the water, now threading its way around areas of higher ground. At many points there were “silent areas” where I could stand still, look around, and see or hear no trace of the inhabited world, save for a brief stretch of the road. It was perfect autumn picture-postcard country: the poplar trees stood silent and yellow by the slow-moving river; the cows rested aimlessly under the shade; the mountain slopes above were detailed and frozen in time under the warm autumn sun and the clear blue sky; the slopes all around cut off all awareness of any outside world. I wandered along this road for some kilometers, stopping to savor the views, until I came to a rise, and stopped. The vision of the idyllic, secluded valley, hemmed in by proscribed vistas suddenly gave out into another, enormous valley with really big views. Up in front, only a few kilometers ahead, was one of the Altai gold-mines. Clearly it was off-limits to me, so I returned home by the way I had come.

-Across the “Appenines” One day I was walking behind one of the older ski-slope areas, not far from the now-disused cement factory. Far away, over some hills, I could see a peak I had climbed earlier. Now it was time to “connect the dots”, and walk over. The distance was not so great, but in between were four or five ridges--each one time up, and one time down. Thus, I called them the “Appenines”. They were steep and very tiring, with slippery slopes, and a sheer-sided, dry water course at the bottom. It was water--whether present or absent-- that made hill-walking dangerous. In some other places, the sheer sides of the water courses were 15 or 20 feet high. The afternoon was waning, and the western slopes of each Appenine ridge were out of the sunlight; it was difficult to see where I was walking down. All was quiet; all was hidden from the city, which was not all that far away. I suspect that very few shepherds passed by this way.

Finally, I made it to the top of the last ridge, and decided to not go back there again. Even now, when I look at the “Appenines” from other vantage points over Altai, I think how crazy I was to have walked there.

-Bei Tun Park. About 61 kilometers south of Altai was the city of Bei Tun. What a flea-trap that place was! For every good thing that Altai had, Bei Tun had its opposite: Bei Tun was mosquito-ridden in summer, hot, dusty, a symbolic divider between the semi-desert of the Junggar basin, and the distant mountains to the north, a place where heavy machinery was bought and repaired, a rail-head, an outpost between two nowheres. It was a place one “passed through” in a hurry. Like Lubbock, Texas, one appreciated it in one’s rear-view mirror! However, Bei Tun had a good park, situated on a naturally-occurring stretch of high ground. The city fathers were quite right to have put the park there: since it was slightly higher, it was cooler; the side-hills and their half-valleys made for some interesting footpaths. I only went there one time, but it was a pleasant half-day outing.

-Hua Lin Park, and the surrounding areas. Hua Lin Park is still one of the best in all of China, on account of its natural trails through the birch forest. On most days, one can sit on a quiet bench by the river, and watch the world float by. Since I like to walk the hills in the summer, when the weather is good, the park is best in the winter, on days when most people are busy working, and after the trails have been plowed. I find my favorite stone bench by the now-frozen river, push off the snow, lay down an old mat, and sit down for an hour or so, the cold not with-standing. Generally, after an hour or so, it is time to pack up and leave. The cold seeps in, no matter how much extra clothing one has put on. Those who pass by look on me as crazy, but I do not care what they think; I want to be alone with my thoughts. It is always beautiful to see snow fall off the birch branches, and dissipate as fine, white, crystalline powder.

There were also various “mini-bus rides” to places farther afield. These trips took me up to 100 kilometers from Altai, on occasion:

-From Altai to the Vale of Laban. One day, a friend tried to take me to a hot spring. However, at a certain checkpoint, the militia refused to let us pass; thus, we had to go back. However the land up to that checkpoint reminded me of Laban’s pasturelands, as I imagined them. The sheep and other livestock were scattered here and there over the wide-sweeping landscape of long open valleys, low hill lines, and vast skies above. Perhaps it is best to not see that land again, so as to preserve it intact in my imaginative memory.

-The “Desert Triangle”. If one goes from Altai, to Burqin, to Bei Tun, to Altai, one makes a triangle of about 200 kilometers, or three mini-bus journeys. The route to Burqin crosses vast and varied arid pastureland/semi-desert, which I never grow tired of looking at. This is one of those journeys that remind me just how privileged I am to be living in Altai. Burqin is the transport hub for the northwest corner of Altai prefecture. At the bus station of Burqin, the travel touts for Kanas Lake try to attract my interest, but my interest is firmly across the street, with a certain family restaurant that sells chopped-vegetable filled buns (jiu cai, cai bao zi). I have been known to go to Burqin, just for those chopped-chives buns! The next leg of the journey from Burqin to Bei Tun, takes me through the extreme outposts of settled farmland, and the beginnings of the brooding, black-stone and sand semi-desert. I like to look at the emptiness, and dwell in it, as it passes by. (However, I also like my room at night, and another form of emptiness and quietness, when everything in the school is peaceful.) Next, at Bei Tun I change rides again, and come back to Altai, watching the changing landscape-- the salt-lands; a few hardy farming communities; side-roads going off into absolute nowhere; the brooding escarpment to the east, and the desert death-zone, devoid of horizons, two water-courses under the road, passing from east to west; the “Desert of

Judah”, another patch of isolation; the grand view of Altai city’s extreme farming communities, various scattered town-ships, and the Vale of Glory; above all, presiding over everything, the mountains visible from even 100 kilometers always tantalizing. I make this part of the journey under a variety of moods, under different weather conditions. Thus, on the Desert Triangle, one can see many of the landscapes which characterize this part of Xin Jiang. This is a good day-tour.

-Bei Tun to 181 Bing Tuan, to the Vale of Li Fei, to Altai. There is a back-route from Bei Tun to Altai; it passes through 181 Bing Tuan (a quasi-military farm). The actual “town-ship” of 181 Bing Tuan is a sleepy, two-street affair; to get there from Bei Tun, one must go along quiet country roads, through alternating farmland, as well as large areas of salty land, blotched with stands of tall, dense reeds. Before the systematized invasion and reclamation of the soil, huge areas of Xin Jiang were salty, marshy, and chock-full of reeds; the water came from the mountain run-off, and had nowhere to go. Ever since the 1950’s, a very systematic agricultural conversion has taken place: large squares of land are graded flat, bounded with water run-off drainage ditches, fed with water direct from the mountains, given poplar wind-breaks, and farmed. Here, heavy machinery is of paramount importance. These lands were settled in the Roman manner, with discharged soldiers who became farmers and raised a family. These Bing Tuan maintain a farm of society quite different from the usual Chinese society found in the cities. Among my students, if someone is pure, upright, simple and unadorned in character, and looks/dresses/feels like a character from the 1960’s, then it is very likely that she grew up in a rural Bing Guan. They are the salt-of-the-earth personalities, here.

After leaving 181 Bing Tuan, the road passed the usual outpost farms, and then went through an area of empty land, of uncommon beauty. I was so taken with its beauty that I called it the Vale of Li Fei, after one of my former students. Thus it has remained to this day. One day, I would like to walk this road on a quiet summer day, and drink in the character of the land, and listen to the meadow-larks singing their hearts out.

-Altai to Ba Li Ba Gai, to Sa’Er Hu Song, and back. When in Xin Jiang, do not take day-trips to small “nowhere-villes” at the end of the mini-bus route! If you get out of the vehicle and walk around town, when you get back to the vehicle, it will be full of unflinching farmers, all waiting to go into Altai for their once-a-month shopping trip. So, I stayed inside the vehicle, and just looked out of the window. On another trip, to a “nowhere-ville” south of Fu Hai, I got out of the vehicle, and promptly lost the seat. It was extremely fortunate for me that I found another car going back to Fu Hai. Such “nowhere-villes” are the sorts of places that everyone wants to get out of to find a better life, and never return.

-The visits to Urumqi. The distance between Urumqi and Altai is about 670 kilometers, or twelve hours by sleeper-bus. Since my day-off was on Friday, I went down on Thursday night, did my affairs on Friday, and came back up on Friday night, arriving back at the school on Saturday morning, just in time for the training classes. On most trips, I went to Urumqi to buy special foods, such as Persian dates or pomegranate juice, or brown bread. Having something special from far away is a real source of psychological comfort. I also went to Urumqi to see a few hard-core friends from among my former students. I did not visit many expats.

Over the past few years, my wish to visit old friends, students and expats has fallen through the floor-boards. This has come from many sources: I have become even more introspective and isolationist; I have less and less energy and ambition in life; I want to be alone, and do my own thing, for I believe I can achieve more when there are no people around me to interfere with my unorthodox methods and plans; I find I am now having less

and less to do with other people, from all walks of life; more and more, I feel that conformity, and “fitting in”/ “going with the flow”/ “being flexible” (for others) is a waste of time. Everything I achieved, which I consider to be meaningful on my terms, I achieved apart from the crowd, in privacy, in secrecy, in an unorthodox manner. My problems have multiplied when I have stepped out of my “test tube”, and into the wind-currents of what people call “life”. Sometimes, the problems were very severe. Thus, only a handful of old friends have survived this ruthless triage. However, I have been very glad to see them. These days, those who have remained close contacts have been those who are connected with my language projects or my travel and supply infra-structure. Lest you think me incurably cynical, Lychee, I will say that I also like to see them for their own sake, too! However, I should say that I am in a stage of life where I just want to be alone. Whereas many people dread going home to a silent room and an empty bed, I like it; for me, it is a source of comfort.

As for the expats, I see them even less. At times, I will see a few, but for the most part, I wish to stay on my own, apart. I was always something apart, but I never admitted it.

On the “sleeper buses”, I rarely sleep, and mid-night “ban-mian” noodle-and-toilet stops have long ago lost their exotic appeal. On arrival at the Nian Zi Gou bus station in Urumqi, it is a vilely early hour, and I am in a shell-shocked mood. With the coming of winter and bad road conditions, and after an especially horrific bus-crash in Shaan Xi Province, I started to take the train, from Bei Tun to Urumqi. All over China, people retreated from travel by sleeper-bus, after news spread of the bus-crash. For some reason, the Bei Tun to Urumqi train terminated at Urumqi (west) station, and not the main station at Urumqi (south); that was a real hassle, until things got straightened out.

-On the walks in the “silent-zones”. Probably the most important discovery I made in Altai was that I liked to walk in the mountains. I hope I can do real day-trekking in places like Nepal or Peru in the future. I also realized that I liked silence-- real silence, where one can hear the blood fizzing past one’s ear-drums. In Urumqi, the noise of cars, advertisements, people and urban construction was oppressive. Even in Altai, there was noise pollution. Thus, it was with considerable pleasure that I discovered the existence of “silent zones” in the mountains. Noise from the city travels directly, or indirectly through ricochet-echos, for a long way; however, it does not curl over the crest of a mountain and spill down the other side, like low grey clouds driven by the wind would. In certain places in the mountains, there were areas free of all intrusion of sound--not just from Altai city, but also from nature itself. Not even a fly could be heard; it was “la silence absolute”. I came across my first “silent-zone” by accident, and stood there amazed, as if I had walked into an unknown room of heaven by accident. I was afraid to move, lest the effect fall apart leaving me with only the memory of a dream. Yet, it was no dream. The last patches of snow on the slopes around me also concentrated the sun’s warmth onto my face, and I felt peace, for a moment. Maybe the good things one finds in life are ephemeral, in order to be outwardly beautiful, and inwardly lasting. From then on, I had a better idea of what I was looking for – an outwardly silent world, rather than an inwardly silent one, which I have not yet experienced.

Sometimes, all I want is to visit the “silent-zones”, to sit there, and not exist or at least feel that I do not exist. Over the next several months, I visited several places, just for their “silent-zones”. One such site I called the Vale of Silent Hills; it was near the Emplacement, so called because it had a commanding artillery position over the whole northern valley. The Vale of Silent Hills was a good place to stand stock-still, or else eat lunch. In between bites of dried fig I would stop, and let the silence wash over everything.

However, there was a dark side to the silence. It was another king of silence, brought about, like Rachel Carson's "Silent Spring", by the strange absence of most living animals. I never saw wild goats or wild sheep, saw few birds, and very little else. It was as if the wildlife had fled the mountains around Altai, and gone deep into the real mountains, where most people did not go. Thus, there were two worlds: one was crowded, noisy, and full of pollution; the other was almost completely void of life, under attack by water erosion, and silent. Both were a form of desert. There was no "in-between land", which had a more moderate, yet alive feel to it. This is very disturbing!

So, I sat on the mini-peaks, looking out over the northern valley, with the soft sounds of agriculture floating up, or else looking west, over new hills, and just day-dreaming. I should have done this a long time ago. Well, at least I have a little time left, to redeem in silence and isolation. I watched, listened, let my mind run everywhere in imagination, and plan future walks. When it came to future walks, I had no inhibitions, and plenty of imagination. Sometimes, I met Kazakh shepherds or drovers, or else we surveyed each other from a distance. I tried as much as possible to keep to the highest points, or else have deep valleys or ravines between me and other people-- and their sheep-dogs. I listened to sounds whose origin I could not see, and from these sounds imagined the "big picture". In this, respect, the rock quarries gave out the sounds which made me to imagine the most, and think.

Always, everywhere, I would look up at the skyline, and cross-reference my position with known peaks. I wanted to know where I was, in terms of what I already knew. This was a world of hidden secrets, of an imagined or inferred reality. In a place where going into the low spots meant losing perspective and getting very lost, I wanted to stay up high, so I could see where I was, and also to be alone. I wanted to be away from seeing or hearing other people, and even my own shadow or my own sounds. I was happy to be alone.

Re. the cut-cardboard flash-cards. On the flashcards. Enough of the hills, and far-off places, Lychee. The focus of this account now goes to the streets of Altai city, and to my room. I bought a pair of heavy scissors, and started to collect various forms of cardboard. In the evenings, I cut the raw cardboard into 2" x 3" pieces for language vocabulary flashcards, or else 3 1/2" x 11" pieces for sentence comparison/analysis cards. Although I built up a large collection of cut and ruled language cards-- and they are a useful product which does work- I never really used them. There they sit, all bound up in double-knotted string, safe in plastic Tupperware boxes, or in larger cardboard boxes, and going nowhere, save in my steel container, back in Maine state. In short, they were a waste of my time. I write this, Lychee, because there is a story here, and stories are usually worth telling. Who knows? Maybe somebody will use the cards, one day.

I favored two types of cardboard. For the small cards, I visited certain shops because I knew they had certain types of card. For the long cards, I went to those shops that sold cigarettes, since the 20-pack cartons were perfect. Cut up a carton, and you get two long cards, plus some small pieces for scribbling. After a while, I visited certain shops, for certain cards.

Thus, I went around town. It was also a way to meet people, and to see life on the street. Card-picking was also a good autumn and winter activity, since the hills were covered in snow. During the early days, I assembled a vast collection of cut- up and processed card in my room. The room itself, small as it was, soon was filled to over flowing with cards in various stages of processing. All of this took up and consumed a whole month-- but more was to come. I wandered my "trap-lines" once a day, and visited many shops. In those days, my methodology was very crude, and I had a "slash-and-burn" mentality towards the shops. With my "min-gong bags" and old thrift-store clothing, I very quickly reduced myself to the

appearance and status of a “bag-lady”, or a rag-picker. I didn’t care. I learned that the world is divided into two kinds of people--those who will give you their card, and those who will not. This separation of humanity into the “gives” and the “give-nots” seemed almost arbitrary, predestined, and immutable. Some shop-keepers were amusing. I would walk into their shop, see a stack of card, and ask for it. In true style, they would say “sorry no cards” even though we both knew it was there, right in front of us. So, I left the shop. Never, ever get into a quarrel with a local, where their “face” is at stake. At times, there would be two shops, next to each other: one would give card, and one would not. What law of the universe was at work here? I didn’t care what people thought of me, as long as they stayed out of my sight, and out of my consciousness.

Then, one day, I gave it all away to my students. At that time, I was giving “free-talks” to some high school students. I gave it away on impulse. It was a classic case of “hoard-and-purge” mentality. At that time, I also had a (teenage) crush on one of the high-school’s English teachers (her age, late 20’s). I gave her quite a lot of the cut card, “for your students to use for sentence-writing practice”. Needless to say, she very mysteriously disappeared from my radar, and I never saw her again. One of my quasi-friends told me I should “let her go. Will you be all right?” Now, I keep the best of the card, and give the unusable parts to my kiddie-kindergarten students, for scribbling.

With the spring of 2012, and a variety of distracting activities coming in, the card collecting/ cutting/ruling/boxing subsided. I went back to the hill-walking, finished the Russian vocabulary card project, got sick and recovered, and continued to barely exist. However, I continued to think about how to best use the long cards, so when the weather turned cold again that autumn, I returned to my card activities, but in a much more carefully thought-out and systematic fashion. I went to only a few shops, but they were high-end outfits, with a clean, well dismantled product (i.e., collapsed cigarette cartons). My school is in the north of Altai, so I had almost all of my shops nearby, on my daily walking routes. One shop in the south of the city, I kept, because I wanted to maintain the illusion of “getting out, and going somewhere” every Wednesday afternoon, even if it was only 20 minutes away. I convinced most of my kiddie students that if they were good, on Thursdays they would get a priceless reward...scribbling cards! Well, it worked as a “behavior-control, token economy”, until certain parents told their kiddie to not accept “card trash”. So, every Thursday, before the end of class, I would divide the class into two. There were the “wants”, and the “want-nots”; unfortunately for me, the “want-nots” get more numerous every week. By the time there are no students who want their weekly ration of scribbling cards, it will be time for me to move on to another place, and do something else.

I took some of the cut off pieces of card that I could not use, and wrote “cat”, “dog”, “I love Mummy” on them; I drew happy faces and rabbits/flowers on others. Then I put these samples in my daily-use bag. Whenever incredulous people in the cigarette stores would ask me “Err...what do you use those cigarette cartons for?”, I would show them the crudely-drawn samples, and say “My kiddie students are learning to write.” Their faces beamed, the gates of understanding and giving were opened, and my fortune in old card, was established. I felt like a character from a Mark Twain short story, snake-oil and all. Meanwhile, I kept the long pieces, ruled them into 4- line format, tied them into bundles of 100 cards, and assembled about 700 cards into a small, standard-sized cardboard box used for holding 250 ml. milk-bags. These, I sent back home by sea-parcel post, where I hope to see them again in Maine, at some uncertain future point.

As for the small cards, for future vocabulary study, I gathered them from the most unusual shops, since the quality of the cardboard was what interested me the most. The

winners were: whole-sale sized boxes, holding bubble gum, cheap chocolate, candy, and pie-cookies; the card backing to ladies underwear packs. The candy-box card, I only partly cut up, and put in a big bag for finishing off a “rainy day”-- and their future value is great, for there are many, many “rainy days” in China, even when the sun is shining. (This “expansion-tank” approach is very useful in my life here, since what fortune and the leaders assign is arbitrary, unplanned, and also whimsical.) As for the underwear-pack card, I kept the best, as usual and gave the rest to the other teacher in my kindergarten class; she used them for phonics cards.

Lychee, I hope I will be able to use the 7,000 long cards I hope to have by the end of my time in Altai. This time I want to keep them, and use them for some sentence-level, comparative analysis of some text--maybe the Burmese text of something I like? As for those cards in the Tupperware containers, I hope to use them in some field-work.

-Once again, Lychee, I say to you, that Altai city is my “cuckoo’s nest”, which I fly into and out of as I wish. Altai is my “Ziklag”, where I find some refuge from the Sauls in my life. My boss is like Acish (?), who gave David leave to come and go freely and do what he wanted, as long as he remained faithful. There is no other paradigm, no other form of meaning for me here in Altai. All I want is to be quiet, and hidden from everything. To a certain extent, Altai fulfils this need well. Although I feel like an ornamental vase (“hua-ping”), a mere foreign face to draw in students to the school-- and their parents’ money-- not all is lost: I use them too, and sometimes shamelessly. Here, I can be alone, and study Russian, or Farsi, or Kazakh, or many other things. Up on the fifth floor of the school, when the main gate is locked and no one can come in, I can be alone. The other teachers, being young unmarried women, stay far from me; it is perfect to a large degree, the outside world does not exist any more. I have thus intentionally shut myself off from almost everything. At times, I wonder if I am cursed of God--a concept that today’s secular paradigms cannot handle. More and more, I want to be away from people, and society, and live in an emptiness. In the desert, in the mountains, in the park’s forest, in books, in the card-cutting, this is very possible, so I do it daily. Even the holiday trips, when I “go somewhere”, have changed! I do not care as much about the places seen or the miles covered; rather, I just want to go to a hotel, lock the door, and lie on the bed, staring up at the ceiling. In the “back-packers quarter” of Bangkok, I can disappear among characters-- variations of myself --become “invisible in full view”, and be left alone, with (hopefully) nothing to trouble me.

-One day, after a tip-off from a local, I found and began to visit the Altai Three-self church (i.e., the officially-sanctioned, “open” church.) About 90 % of those who attend were women in their 40’s and above, and I was placed on the left, with the one or two men who were there. It was very hard to understand what was being said--even after the 1 ½ years at the Urumqi “open” church, it was hard to understand anything. The people were kind and friendly. From a musicological point of view the music had a distinct, “1980’s Manila KTV--Bar” feel to it. I gave up.

-Winter came, and with winter, the need to clear the snow off the streets. As in Urumqi, the methods employed were little short of medieval. The snow in Altai was easy to predict: it typically came out of the north-east, over the mountains; one could almost see the advancing edge of the storm clouds, as it walked its way down the far slopes, over the out-lying settlements, and into the city itself. The snow came down in all sizes, from fine dust to fat flake-feathers, but much “drier” than the wet snows of Maine. At certain times, it looked like soap-flakes, and squeaked under foot. Thus, it was quite easy to shovel. However, all this early advantage was lost, for it was all trampled down by the people, or else compressed by the car wheels into a really nasty black-ice. Almost every aspect of city-planning and

human nature turned against the people, and made their life wasted and miserable. The layout of Altai, executed in the 1950's, was done with the variables of few cars, many people, and a communal spirit in mind-- the same could be said of almost all Chinese cities. No consideration was given to the most basic rules of quick, easy, and effective snow-management: lots of space to move about in; many, local "stock-piling areas" for snow, big enough for a whole winter's dumping, and with good spring-melt runoff and drainage capacity; quick removal of snow before it compacted; salting and gritting, where necessary; cars off the road during plowing operations; more garages for the cars. Once the snow became compacted into black ice, it was almost impossible to scrape off the road. Heavy front-end loaders, with their front wheels off the ground could not do it; heavy spiked rollers did not break up the ice layer well enough. The end result was a smooth, polished surface of ice all up the main street of Altai. As with so many "copied things" in China, the end result was the semblance of progress, but not the substance thereof.

However, by the second winter in Altai, the situation improved somewhat. New experimental devices for removing snow and breaking up the black ice were field-tested. Areas which formerly used to be left to street dwellers to deal with were given to contractors with front-end loaders; this saved everyone a lot of time. Our school only had to "call up the masses" a few times, compared with many times the year before. However, there were still many streets which had to have patches of black ice banged off with shovels, scab by scab, over time. What a terrible waste that was! Moreover, when the snow finally did melt, the side-walks and roads were pitted and gouged; many paving stones were shattered, from being beaten by the shovels and pointed crowbars. Every time I heard the ringing blows of a shovel banging the black ice, I wanted to hide myself, so nobody would ask me to remove snow. I am so glad I was able to design my place in Maine for easy-in, easy-out snow clearing. The less time one has to spend with snow, the better off everyone will be!

-Meanwhile, my room became more and more cluttered. Projects in various stages of development, or else lying unfinished were strewn everywhere. As you know, Lychee, it is easy for me to imagine or start something, but it is hard for me to finish it. There were language projects of many kinds, clothes needing to be sent to the dry cleaners, gifts of food not yet eaten or passed on, various objects to send home by sea-parcel, winter clothes unfolded and ready to wear, summer clothes folded up but not yet boxed, lesson-plans as yet undone, dreams on the table sketched out on scrap paper, and dreams in my mind like restless swallows on a warm summer's evening. I liked working, snacking, resting and sleeping in this room, for I found a certain security in being surrounded by unfinished projects, marginalia, clutter and worthless, never-used junk, just as a small and frightened animal of the forest finds safety in concealment among the many trees. Once I even overheard a naughty student saying to another student, "He has so much rubbish! How can we ever find out where he keeps his money!" Thus, I am happy among my clutter: it stabilizes my restless mind. If that is what a room full of mere junk can do, then why bother with having antiques and really valuable things? Every thing gets thrown out, sooner or later. I would rather have junk in my bedroom, transient one-year acquaintances with most of my students, ephemeral meals in forgotten restaurants, a multitude of used and discarded hotel rooms, legions of faces I looked at for five seconds or less, dreams that came to me once in the night and never returned, the loneliness of functional ostracism, and endless array of petty projects to do and obscure places to visit, than the dubious quick-sands of respectability, a normal job, a stable lifestyle, children who may or may not respect you, and the like. It is obvious to you, Lychee, but perhaps it is not obvious to the general circle of my friends: I am not mad! I know not exactly where I am going, but I like the road, and I believe in it! If no one wants

to walk it with me, I will walk it alone! An empty bed, a single plate on the table, and undrawn curtains are better than strife, complexity, and the scrutiny of outsiders! So, I like my room, full of clutter. At night, when I wake up to pee, I can see the coat-hanging stand in the middle of the room. It looks like someone watching me, but I do not feel afraid; rather, it comforts me. Someone is watching over me, and the coat-hanging stand is a concrete representation of an already existing reality. It calms me, because I can see it with my eyes.

Finally, when I leave Lin Da school and I walk away from Altai, I will give away 80% of what is currently in my bedroom. The remaining 20% will go to Maine, or into storage somewhere in Urumqi. Then the room will disappear, save from these pages.

- The Russian vocabulary project was finished. Now, I have eight long Tupperware boxes, full of 1 ½" x 2 ½" flash-cards, with English words on one side, and Russian on the other. It took a long time, but it got done. Now, I wonder when, or how, I will use them. Making them was the easy part; now, I wonder if I will review Russian vocabulary. Oh well...it was a good enough way to pass many winter evenings. Doing the second half of this project was a good way to break out of depression, and bring structure to my life for a month or two.

- About recording the three Burma trips. As you know, Lychee, I went to Burma three times, and wrote about it. While in Urumqi, I bought an MP3 "recording stick", and voice-recorded the trip to Indonesia. Now it is time to voice-record the three Burma trips. There were many delays, and a reluctance to find the motivation to begin. Then came the first quiet evening, when I began. The vivid memories came back, as if they had occurred only a few days earlier. There came also the strong exhaustion which comes from making something. Creativity is an exciting, but exhausting affair. Although I did not know it then, that recording project marked the beginning of an ongoing interest in audio-books, and audio-recording language-related materials. Much will come from this!

There was a woman in Altai who ran a "tech-shop"; this shop sold cell-phone and computer accessories, and the boss also ran a wedding video service. So she was very busy. However, as I did one 50-minute block of recording in my room at night, she took the recording the next day, and "burned" a CD for me. We continued in this way, until the job was done. Then she made copies. She had found me a 230GB storage device, and we put many of my digital things onto it. So, the "ark" is filling up with digital animals--but what will I do with them all? I don't know. All I can do is write/record, store it, and move on to something new. As before, I find "out-sourcing" to be a good way to get certain things done.

-It is now the end of 2011, and the time for the usual retrospection. The most significant event of 2011 was the trip to Indonesia. I saw something new and interesting, and it affected me deeply. Indonesia is certainly a place I would like to come back to. Now, it is time to leave this place (Altai), and wander the remote quarters of the big world, and especially the Asian routes. I owe it to myself, to go out, and do these things, before it is too late. So, next year I must go out, and do these things. If not, I will be betraying myself. I must go; I must do it! I must admit being in China no longer gives me much meaning in life. It has become a roost for doing other activities – so, why not move on to another place? What exactly are those "other activities"? What do I want to do next? Lychee, I must write these things down on a list, and then try to do them, one by one. However, I find myself strangely reluctant to write such a list. Every day, I look up at the mountains, like a convict looking out of the barred window of his cell, and at the open world outside. For some reason, the mountains outside have both a literal and a symbolic meaning. In the literal sense, they are real places I can go to and find a certain measure of solitude, exercise, and peace-and-quiet. In a symbolic sense, they represent an invitation, a call to a better way of life than the

one I am living out now. In the valley of imprisonment, I am false to my self and my dreams; I give to others, but my heart is not in it-- and besides, I no longer have the energy to carry on forward. On the mountain, I am free of such encumbrances; my eyes see far, and my feet are willing. For some reason, walking the mountains has become very significant and symbolic. When I am up there, I live in a pure world. The heights make me a partner with the eagles. The vast open spaces between each mountain peak are the swimming pools of unlimited imagination, which nobody will interfere with. The lonely stands of trees on the forgotten back sides of the tall mountain are places of refuge, from which I can look out at all my favorite triangulation points; even if I do not know where I am going with my life, when I am on the mountain I know where I am in the valley, and maybe I will know where to go tomorrow. So, what would happen if I lived in the mountains, and walked them whenever I wanted, and not around the convenience of others? It would be a wonderful thing to live for a while in an alpine cabin, well-insulated, with a really strong telescope, and just sit there, like I did on Perry Island in 1989, and watch the rock-partridges live their daily life on the shores of vast open spaces of air. The rock-partridges above Altai are a never-ending source of interest. So, after looking for meaning in the vast areas of one's dreams, imagination, and the unknown, I find satisfaction in contemplating the rock-partridges. The "cuckoo's nest of Ziklag" only has meaning when it is juxtaposed with the mountains. That is why this part of "Fragments of China" is called "Into and out of the cuckoo nests of Ziklag" Still, I would like to be in the mountains more often.

Lychee, what shall I do if I can no longer send you my writing?

-I am back in Lin Da School again. The first term is over, and I am teaching the "winter break, mini-term" once again. That means teaching between seven and nine classroom hours a day. It is very tiring work. For the students, it means a form of semi-liberation from the straight-jacket of their grade-school. They are ready to "blow out" and revert to their native naughtiness and unruliness at any moment, and they do. They know I am a "soft" teacher.

Lychee, I think most training schools should be shut down. They only care about making money; they are businesses first, and places of education second. However, there are some very devoted and hard-working staff at this school. One is a true "teaching machine", who has very high energy levels. He only comes here on the weekends, but he puts in long, energy-packed hours. There is also a couple here who have been working for years and years. They make me think of the old Red Guards, except that these two never gave up their first love of the Party-- they still forge on. One cannot but respect them for their dedication to their life's work.

Some teachers just walk out the door. They leave unannounced, or else a curt and very safely-removed message gets to the school secretary on a Monday morning, ten minutes before the start of classes. The Chinese are experts at quietly dropping such social bombshells, at the last moment. This school has quite a high turnover level.

There was one bright spot during that winter holiday, training period. I was given a class of two or three kindergarten-age kids-and their mothers showed up too. The Lin Da School does not like the mothers to sit in on classes, as there is a fear that some mothers are spying on the classes, on behalf of other training schools. Indeed, some mothers have behaved very suspiciously with their cell-phone mini-cameras, especially when I am teaching songs, and there is new curriculum on the table, for all to see. However, I like having the mothers sit in on the classes, as they usually control their own child, and the other children, too. I often asked such mothers if they could find middle-school or high-school girls to help as English tutors/ big sisters for their child. However, the usual answer to me was, "They are

too busy”. Maybe this answer was due to the learned helplessness of the parents, or the general level of daily selfishness in society, or the view that only foreigners could be English teachers. It is all a vicious circle--indifferent fathers (save a few notable exceptions), the whole of society’s attitude towards learning English, the social overlays of materialism and despair that covered the entire nation like toxic fog-- and for most of the parents here, nothing will ever change. Nonetheless, there is hope. A few of these kiddie-mommy, combinations have turned out very well, and could provide a conceptual model for better home-based English learning. I would like to see at least these variables working in some way, together: (a) kiddie, (b) mother, (c) home environment, (d) a middle-school or high-school “big sister”, either visiting, or resident, (e) low difficulty/high interest curriculum, (f) real-life activities, (g) a “two brains, one heart” mentality, (h) a “their English-my English” mentality, (i) the chance to “go out” somewhere to use their school/home English in real life. I hope some mothers will do these!

-For the most part, 2012 was a very bad year for me. Almost everything that could go wrong for me went wrong. Yet there were a few pockets of good things, here and there. At the very beginning of the year, I was conscious of living very close to the edge of failure, in all areas of life. I was trying to do something, yet was actually doing very little. The last traces of masquerade were flaking off. Soon, I realized, it is I who will flake off, and be removed for good.

On the 8th of January, something went off inside my body. After nausea, I felt a wave of “evaporative energy” flow out of my lower-left abdomen. It was the darkest, middle of the night time. I went to the teacher next door, and she called the school secretary. Soon, I was being taken to the local Altai hospital. To this day, I am not really sure what it was, but an enlarged prostate in the main suspect.

I returned to Bangkok, this time with a friend to travel with. We saw the usual Bangkok sites, and prepared to go on to Malaysia and Singapore together. We also went to one of the big Bangkok hospitals for routine medical exams-- as many tourists and expats do these days-- and it was there that the troubles began. My friend had some pre-existing condition, and I judged it best that the friend return home to family. Within two days, I was alone again, with wasted and un refundable plane tickets, and a whole month to re-fill.

It was winter in Bangkok, and I returned to the familiar world of wandering about in the temples and the MKB shopping mall, doing the usual, “same-same”, surrounded by fellow lotus-eaters from around the world. The Khao San “tourist ghetto” is very much a modern day Island of the Lotus Eaters. I wished to forget everything I was, and had done. I wished to forget all people, jobs, failures, marginal successes, and the trail of lost chances. In time, it was time to use my half of the lost plane tickets. On the flights to Kuala Lumpur, and then to Singapore, I looked at the empty seat next to me. It came to symbolize amputated dreams. In those places, I wandered about aimlessly, until a certain day arrived. Then I crossed the border back into Malaysia.

I finished off most of my “unfinished travel business” in peninsular Malaysia, and then turned my attention to the other part of Malaysia, on Borneo. I also passed quickly through Brunei. In the future, I would like to come back to Borneo, and “finish off travel business” there, too. There is a lot to see in Borneo, and mountains/jungle to visit.

Before leaving Borneo, I got sick once again--with something else. Within days, I became very sick, and arrived at my boss’ doorsteps in dire condition. The new term, was just about to begin in a day or two, and this was a kindergarten!

Why my boss didn’t do the utilitarian thing and let me go then and there, I will never understand. I was sent to the local hospital in Altai, but the first visit was not successful.

The real action took place in a private hospital in Urumqi; there, in scenes I can only link to “The Count Of Monte Cristo”, (when one of the bad guys is locked up in the catacombs under Rome, and spends out all his money)-- I saw my travel money, and the reinforcements too, vaporize away, to the tune of \$1,000 per day. In all, I lost at least \$6,000... and later on, there were more expenses. Who knows what might have happened, had I sought treatment in the U.S.? My body was ravaged; I received treatments that looked very suspiciously like chemo-therapy (but the doctor said I did not have cancer). Remember: I was being treated for two unrelated but geographically nearby conditions at the same time-- the prostate condition, and the second illness from my time in Borneo.

I suffered prolonged and almost constant psychological torment. I often became disgusted with life, and cynical. I also thought a lot: I have made many, many mistakes in life, but why did the evil consequences of my actions rain down on me here, and not elsewhere? After much thought, I decided that the one “missing variable” was this: I left my test-tube, sequestered mode of life, and ventured my ship onto the open seas of life. I should never have left the “Ferdinand way of life”. In my unique paradigm, good-evil, safe-dangerous, appropriate-inappropriate are of no relevance: only hiding from life-venturing out into life is the important variable. Since then, I have softened my position a little, but not much. In fact, I am now glad this happened for I learned a lot “on the cheap”. It could have been otherwise, and much crueler. Still the fallout throughout 2012, and all the psychological misery I went through, all came out of that sickness.

I learned who my friend was- the one I sent quickly back to China, from Bangkok (her sickness turned out vaguely alright). It was she who carried money to me in the Urumqi hospital, and who remained kind to me. Now, a year on, we still have a good friendship. Indeed, as I write these words, in 2013 in another Bangkok hotel, I await her arrival on tomorrow’s flight. Hopefully, on this trip, we will settle out last year’s list of “unfinished travel business.”

Back in 2012, February, March and April were the dark months. I was in and out of the hospital a lot. I stayed away from people like a self-appointed leper--although actually, it was not quite that bad. The weather turned warmer in Xin Jiang, and I slowly recovered. With the warmer weather, I returned to the semi-desert and mountains around Altai. I also finished by Russian vocabulary project, and filled eight boxes of flashcards. Of course, I continued to collect and cut more cardboard. All of these things helped to calm my mind. Otherwise, I would have gone mad. Over this time, I knew that cutting card was a horrible waste of time, but I did not care; I wanted something to do to fill in the battalions of “anomie” which were rising up all around me. However, I also knew that I was making a good language-learning product. When it comes time to do field-study of my next language, I will have a very useful set of cards, for vocabulary work, and for sentence analysis. There should be enough material for two or three languages!

Spring passed into summer, and the walks in the mountains became longer and more adventurous. I tried to go to as many hill-top vista points as I could. Some of these places were very near the “no-go” areas, which are never far from the city. I went to these places, because I could see them every day from the downtown area of Altai city, and I was inflamed with the desire to get up there and to see the surrounding landscape from the heights. To be alone, and in a high and silent place is what I most like doing. When someone cautioned me on this matter, I answered, “This is not a spying issue: it is a dog-issue”. (That is, like any male dog, I wanted to piss against any lamp-post I saw.)

One day, I walked to point, and then another, and then another...In all, I walked about ten hours, and got to a far-away peak. There, for lunch I rested below the cairn, and

broke macadamia nuts on a rock. I knew this place would be the extreme end of my range, so I looked out over the inaccessible and forbidden landscape before me with an intense observation. For me, it was a sort of Mt. Nebo experience, an “edge of the world” contemplation. That lunch-stop on “Macadamia Peak” was only the half-way point on that day’s hill-walking. By the end of that day I was dog-tired, and in a poor way. However, there was a reward, and a good one. The far-off “bump” of Macadamia Peak is just visible, over the nearby peaks, when I stand at a certain crossroads in the downtown area of Altai city. If I look up at that far-off peak, I will feel happy. Souvenirs never came better.

Perhaps it is just as well that I did my hill-walking when I did, for that autumn, the Altai police came by the school, for a “photo-op” with me. They said don’t go out and wander aimlessly (“Luan-pao”). Well, sorry boys: I already pissed on 80 % of the lamp-posts I cared about. My hunger for hill-walking is in full combustion; it is time to find a new country to walk in, where the locals are not all up-tight about their parish-security. On the day that I leave Altai city--be it at the end of my contract, or as a result of an unannounced development-- I hope I will look up at the far-off bump of Macadamia Peak, and at many of the other peaks, and feel a quiet glow of inner satisfaction.

Over the course of 2012, I drew into myself more and more. The kiddies were fun to be with, and the weekend training-class students became more and more of a pain to manage. However, I was progressively drawing away from everything, and everybody. Even language-study did not interest me. I longed for those times when I was off-duty, alone, and wandering somewhere. I asked myself “Why do I wait for my day off (on Friday), or for my winter holidays? Why not just leave the whole set-up, and take a gap-year, or two, to wander the earth? “I know that since my father was gone, this was more possible. The idea, which had always been there in germ form, now began to develop. Soon, it became a major agenda. Then, I began to plan my exit from China, and where I might go, and what I might do with myself. All of a sudden, “bucket-lists” and imaginative “walk-about” became desirable. I do not know why certain people in society deride “bucket-lists”; taken in moderation, they have their uses. However, 14 years of teaching ESL in China have had one big consequence-- many unfinished, or never-started projects. It is time to solve this neglect!

Even as I prepared to leave Altai, I said goodbye to the mountains-- my truest, companions here, for two years. (Indeed, these two years in Altai/New Ziklag can be summed up in three ideas: mountains, card-cutting, and prostate issues.) Sometimes I studiously ignored them; better by far to leave them on my terms, than to be told “You cannot go walking about by yourself”, and have them taken from me. Sometimes I looked at them from the open fire-escape door next to my kindergarten classroom-- the best of views in all of Altai! My feelings varied, as those of a lover: peace and quiet; adorations; distracted and semi-conscious indifference; out-right disgust; farewell. I could have gone up “one last time”, for another Mt. Nebo experience, but I didn’t. I wanted to remember the former dog-days, when on a very high place; I looked out over the vast spaces, heard bumble-bees as they began inter-galactic expeditions between mountaintops, and sat on lonely boulders watching the natural world around me. Under my feet, the insects and lizards lived out dramas of prehistoric savagery, but in miniature. It pays to be big.

On the back side of a forbidden peak, there is a small grove of pine trees, which look over other forbidden areas. Sitting among the near-silent trunks, I could see, and almost taste, the lands my feet could not walk. I munched on snacks, and tried to forget my own existence. If “they” ever knew I was eating lunch there, they would criticize me, and try to criticize my acts, and, clip my wings. So, I didn’t tell them

In time, the mountains and their allure settled down to an equilibrium in my thoughts. Besides, it was the lambing time, and the feral-dogs were out on the slopes. I did not want to push my luck, and get bitten. However, every time I looked out over the flat, distant horizons of the semi-desert areas, and the “Wilderness of Judah”, the sullenly unsubdued fires of travel-desire rose up in me.

I hired a driver, and met him at an obscure crossroad in the “wilderness of Judah”, and over the course of a day, systematically crossed, traversed and circumnavigated all those areas of semi-desert that had eluded me, or been with-held from me over the past two years. Perhaps the driver thought me strange to be going here and there, with no apparent purpose, but I knew this land in my dreams, and where I wanted to go. Of course, on the ground, I needed a driver who knew his way around. I sat in the back of the vehicle for hours on end, brooding, and vacuuming up all that I saw. Once the lands to the south were viewed, I got bolder, and went out again on another day, to survey the lands to the west. (The north and the east were very much off-limits.) On that day, we covered vast areas of local semi -desert and mountain dirt -road. At all times, Macadamia Peak was in view. So now, my range was a big half-circle, with Macadamia Peak at the center. Again, I sat in the back vacuuming up everything, but also sitting in abstract distraction, my mind roving the world.

Once those two rides were over, Altai became an egg-shell without the egg, a coconut without the milky water inside, and I lost all interest. It was time to go. The very idea of becoming the “golden parrot” at the Lin Da School for a third year was unacceptable. In any case, the Altai police made it known that I should go back to the U.S., and start a new visa application.

I met many people in Altai, but did not get close to many. Only May the ultra-earnest high-school student and Melody, the copy-shop boss, will remain in my inner thoughts. During these two years, I was too withdrawn to reach out, heart-and-soul, to many people. I should note that almost all the people I met in Altai were very kind to me: the police, who knew I was walking the hills, and let me be; parents of some of my kiddie students; my boss, who gave me much liberty to be left alone, and who gave me a good “bachelor crash-pad room” for my room; shop-keepers and restaurant bosses, who indulged my dietary fetishes, and who improved my oral Chinese through many mundane and daily dialogs; all those shop-keepers who gave me their cigarette cartons, so I could have a good supply of language-analysis flash-cards; the doctors and nurses of the Altai Hospital, and especially those in the local clinic, where I had most of the I.V. drips; solitary Kazakh shepherds, up in the mountains; many others. I suspect that most people thought I was “beyond weird” – but that is all right: I came to Altai to be on my own, outside society’s orbit, “and Ziklag has belonged to the kings of Israel, unto this day”. So too, with me, I will always remember Altai; it will remain a way-station on my long wanderings. It was a good place to be for two years-- but no more. It is time to move on. There was always this sense of being on the outside, and that the whole city knew it, but no one told me. Thus, for a Ziklag experience, it was unrivaled. However, for those wanting to “get inside”, it is a closed and exclusive social system. Another expat said Altai was not so--perhaps it was I who shut all the doors. Oh, well; this block of time is over, and I have left, both in body, and in attitude.

Lychee, what makes Altai special among the cities of northern Xin Jiang is its “general purpose” nature. There is a little bit of everything here-- something for all sorts of people. First are the mountains-- large, varied and very majestic. There is farmland, and grazing lands of various quality. There are the brooding areas of semi-desert, and in Ha Ba He, some real mini-desert. There are lakes for fishing, and boating. There are still vast open spaces of tan semi-desert and harsh blue sky, where the mind is free to roam about

unimpeded. There are the “Bing Tuan” (quasi-military, agricultural communes, with their own way of life): here the landscaping is drawn big, on a grand scale. There are the migrant birds, high in the sky above the valleys, following the ancient routes between India and Burma to the south, and Russia and Mongolia to the north. There are the poplar trees, without which nothing could happen. It is a wide-ranging, austere and harsh land-- of gold , and dust, and blue sky. The summers are hard, and the winters even harder. Only the tough and resolute need come here. As long as there is enough water, many things can happen here.

I think that certain people would like to make Altai the “Davos of N.W. China” a playground for the new “elite”, and the old “elite”. This will most probably happen, and people will certainly try to make it happen. A lot of resources have been brought to bear on Altai prefecture--not to mention Altai City itself. Two major highways, and a rail-line are under construction, and they approach their final destination with an inexorable determination.

Migrant workers are everywhere, and new areas of housing development pop up in many places. Once the austere skylines are gone, it will all be over. In the mountains, certain places have a “silent spring” feel. Where have the animals gone, and the “montagnards”? On the land where mountain and flat semi-desert meet, on thin soils, on the farthest outposts of drip-irrigation, new farming communities of pink-painted, cinderblock dwellings have appeared.

The archipelago has become a skein, always a few miles out from the base of the mountains. The high mountains can be seen, but soon they will be only seen. Silent, they await what comes next. In spring and autumn, the main road is choked at certain points, as the local livestock makes the annual migration to and from pasture. The sheep swirl around the camels, laden with baggage. How much longer will this timeless ballet of the seasons be seen? Lychee- not long !

I am now back in my home country, already feeling a stranger, and taking refuge in my writing. Every time I leave Xin Jiang, I feel it is for the last time. Now, Lychee I want to walk through life with the woman who visited me in the hospital. I hope you can meet her.

As for Altai, it is glorious!