

FRAGMENTS OF CHINA: “The Poison Quilt”
(August, 2009 To July, 2010, to July, 2011) Urumqi, the 3rd time.

Introduction: Dear Lychee,

I wish to write to you again, as I was able to write so freely when I wrote “Letters to Lychee, from exile”.) At that time, I was staying with my father in Essex, looking after him. He was dying of cancer. That time was only a few years ago, but it has fallen and faded into the black depths of the soul’s inner ocean. How long did it take for the Titanic to fall down to the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean and plunge into the soft mud at the bottom? I feel as if that chapter of life is still sinking, falling down. I wish to erase most of it from my everyday working thoughts and consciousness. This theme is central to this part of the book, for I worked very, very hard this past year: I was driven by the desire to “make up for lost time”, time spent doing what was necessary, expected, and even futile (although much good also came); I was also driven by the constant sense of “work now, for the time of ejection is at hand” (more about that, later). I wish to write to you, Lychee, because in my own “writing world”, I can tell you, dear muse, almost anything I want, and for a writer, that is everything.

The story begins with two deaths. They are the threads, the under-currents guiding and driving the past year. I will deal with them in summary, as I wish to focus my account on “events on the ground”, and on specific commonplace people. From these “fragments” will come the mosaic; out of the pieces comes the unity.

Father. The first death was my father’s. He died in February, 2009. My brother came a few days later, and I went back to China, to try and arrange a new contract with Urumqi Vocational University (Zhi Da). In a sense, my father’s death took us by surprise, but I had made my plans, and wanted to go irrespective of the family’s consternation. So I went, initiated an agreement with Zhi Da, and came back to Essex. My brother was dealing with the lawyers (we had agreed to divide the work, concerning our father’s closure). Over the next few months we emptied out our father’s house, as all families must do. In life, our father left behind him an Augean trail of legal and social messiness. His death did not solve any of those problems. All I can do is to commend my brother for picking up each piece of toxic legacy, and dealing with it, as best he could. Even now, the work continues, although my brother has made real progress. Maybe it will all be over in about two years, and then the last bog-fires, the last candles will flicker out, sending a final wreath of thin smoke into the emptiness.

Some of our father’s furniture -- mostly 3rd – rate stuff -- tools, and various “miscellanea”, I asked for, and got. These, I took up to my “container home” compound in Maine. My brother helped me to move this baggage up, although I do not think he was impressed with what he saw there. After we had jammed dozens of cardboard boxes full of questionable acquisitions into a container, along with old tables and chairs from the Goodwill charity store, it started to rain. Of all the days to show my place to someone else, this was the worst. We stood at the entrance of one of the containers, and looked out at the rain. There, the past was confirmed, and the future established, probably for good.

Other parts of our father’s furniture were set aside for my brother to bring to his land/home in Alaska. The rest was sold, given away, or dumped. All this took time, effort, frustration, and dealing with the outside world. My brother once commented that our mother, who died in 1988, left her affairs in order, and we, the survivors never suffered any logistical fallout. This was not the case with our father. So, I ask all the readers of this book: please put your own house in order before you die! It is common politeness to your family, and to society.

Family gathering. In May, 2009, there was a family gathering in Essex, and many relatives came, along with friends. Formalities were accomplished, the ashes were scattered. Our extended family does not often meet as a large unit, except for marriages and funerals; therefore, such gatherings were very social, like an extended cocktail party – which is exactly how our father would have wanted it. People stayed over or in local hotels; the food, and drink were plentiful, and prepared by many willing hands; the conversations flowed, like rivulets after rain.

I must tell you, Lychee that my father's house was emptied out-- book by book, table by table, box by box, and bag by bag-- until it was almost empty, and the rooms had that peculiar echoing quality. Outside, the rental truck was full to the very top with my brother's new possessions, which we would drive up together to his home in Alaska. The lawn grass was still growing, but there were no longer any mowing machines in the garage. Decay, futility, and "rank growth of the unwanted" were everywhere. At this time, I started to accelerate the unpacking of my "psychological house" – as it pertained to my father, the role he had played in my life, and especially over the past few years. "Let Carthage be destroyed" – stone by stone, thought by thought, memory by memory- and then, let the land be sown with salt. For the past year, even up to now, I have systematically and coincidentally reviewed all manner of memories, as if for the last time, and then released them and watched them slip below the surface of the silent, inky-black, glass-- still, and eternal surface of a nameless ocean that others conveniently call "consciousness".

"7-5" The second death (or would you, or others, say "the third"?) is one that you, and all the world, know about. I am talking about the ethnic rioting in Urumqi that is "7.5". Lychee, I do not plan to discuss those events, as they have already been discussed in many places –both sides. However, I do wish to say this: something has died in Urumqi, and the effects of this death permeated my life, and the way I looked at my life. My father unalterably affected every part of my "psychological landscape"; so too, the events of July, made me so very aware of how transient and impermanent is my existence as a foreign English teacher in China. For some months, not knowing if I could come, or stay, or return was very debilitating. Unable to write creatively I turned to massive curriculum- writing projects. Therefore, I do not want to focus on the "the big picture", but on the lives of common people. The fear, the resentment affected everyone, and covered the city as completely as volcanic ash. I did not feel safe writing while I was actually there – indeed, I did not want to. Only now that I am back in Maine, away from it all, can I feel secure to write.

When the news first comes out over the media, some people said it would be better to not go back to Zhi Da, and look for another job. Imagine if I asked you to give up being Chinese! How totally unthinkable! I was afraid of losing most of my "raison d' etre". Nonetheless, I got a tourist visa, and hoped it would be accepted and then converted upon arrival. Quite a few people in my family are neutral or against my being in China, but in those days, I was determined to get back. Life is so easy to be broken, and I wish to use the opportunities, before they are taken away!

To Alaska. Finally, in August, 2009, my brother and I left Essex, and drove to Alaska in the moving- truck. The journey took eight days. We drove from our father's home in Massachusetts state, to my brother's home in Alaska. On the way we stopped in motels for the night, as well as countless gas stations. We passed through: Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Vermont, New York, Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, British Columbia, Yukon, and Alaska. My brother liked the local radio stations and the national "current-affairs" discussion

shows on the radio, while he was taking his turn driving. - Meanwhile, I would put on a set of noise-reducing earphones, so I could study my Kazakh-language cards in quiet. When I was driving, the radio was turned off, and I communed with the road, as it unspooled beneath me. Canada is a very big and beautiful country, with many variations of land to look at. Now, I have travelled between New England and Alaska four times, and felt the vastness. One memory that remains is standing next to the Yukon River, in some weedy park in the city of Whitehorse, staring down into the endlessly passing river water. I needed to be alone with myself, looking down into the turbid waters, hearing nothing but my thoughts, and Nature's unprepossessing voice around me. I like to look at the natural world in certain places, and leave behind troubled thoughts, for a moment, so as to look upon Nature's own beauty, forgetting (of necessity) that this very world is violent and very unforgiving. At some point, I would like to travel alone in Yukon, the North-West Territories, and Nunavut, to experience the upper north country, and its vast silences. Hopefully, this will be possible in a few years.

In time, we reached Alaska, and unloaded the moving truck. After a few days, I returned to Beijing, spent some time with Calypso, and saw some old Zhong Yang - Min Zu Da Xue students. Beijing is still the gateway to China, and I like to see friends, get some new books from the Foreign Language Bookstore, and feel the place. It cleanses the palate, and prepares me for what is to come. However, at that time, I was very worried about what would happen to me in Urumqi.

My new apartment. Upon returning to Urumqi and Zhi Da, I began to teach classes. The school gave me an apartment, which was in the same building I had the last time, but in a different section. I vaguely remember the last occupant from the earlier days: he taught Russian, came from Uzbekistan, and held very social parties with many of the Russian-speaking teachers/students business people. He was now long gone. The apartment was smothered in old dust, the curtains barely attached to their railings, the fluorescent light overhead barely functional. I swept the bedroom once, considered it done, put my suitcases in a corner (without bothering to unpack them), then did no more. The school leaders said this apartment was only temporary, as the building was faulty, and had to be demolished; however, new rooms had not yet been found. In my mind, I felt that the school was not going to set me up in an apartment until my visa situation was cleared up. I was living in a condition of limbo – not alive or dead, not able to move on forward or be returned home.

At this time, I had no interest in turning the apartment into a home. It remained a tomb of dust, and I wanted to keep it that way. The sheets remained unwashed, occasionally shaken out to remove the extra dust. The toilet and shower were one -- a tiny room, without tiles and a squat-hole on the floor, and a dubious shower-head coming out of the wall. Even though the days were beginning to chill, and with them the pipe-- water, I did not bother to ask anyone how to turn on the electric water-heater: I took cold showers, and only when I had to. In time, I cleared off a large desk in another room and started to write there. However, I would not write any creative text; I copied curriculum cards, for language study. I closed the windows as best as I could (for the steel frames were distorted, and the hinges almost frozen in their rust), and carefully closed up the faded gold-yellow curtains for the last time clasping them together so that no light would go in or out. The cupboards remained resolutely empty, retaining the last curious tokens of their previous owner -- things he had left behind in the last minutes before he closed the door on that chapter of life. I refused to use any cupboards, or to clean them out, for that implied "settling in", putting down roots, making a home. I did not want to cook anything, or even to boil water. Of course, I did not want to invite anyone over, except a few "necessaries".

Thus, I returned to my usual customs my former personality, of “teaching machine - or, as one friend once stated it, “old machine”.

The book's setting. As you know all too well, Lychee, I have a well -- established reputation for withdrawing into myself. You have seen it often enough! However, I do wish to say that the conditions of the time also contributed to how I felt and acted. This is why I have chosen to call this part of the book “The Poison Quilt”, as conditions caused by the July riots, as well as the long-latent resentments in the social fabric up to that time, both spread their deep and toxic influence over everything and everyone. (Why, as I write, do I think of Bophal?) At the time, and for most of the year thereafter, I felt debilitated by a sense of futility, of transience, of the fragility, of the lack of stability. Being sent home for some stupid bureaucratic reason-- not for a mistake, or for bad behavior-- was always on my mind. I was not afraid of violence, I didn't much care about the Han-Uighur paradigm, now shattered; life otherwise was, on the surface, pretty much the same. I just had no confidence in tomorrow, as it seemed to have no root to it; as for today, I walked through it in a daze. As for yesterday, I had trampled on it, and consigned it to my own outer darkness. The futility, and the existential meaninglessness of past, present, and future came together in that room, and abided there, under a thick layer of ancient dust.

This, Lychee, is the introduction to this part of the book, which will now begin, and go forward by topics. I hope it was not too shocking to you.

1) On the lack of the Internet.

One of the consequences of the July riots was the lack of the Internet in Xin Jiang. It was cut off for a total of ten months. This was done by the government to assure security in Xin Jiang. Whether for right or wrong, it wrought havoc with business, for how could companies deal with the outside world? If I was a foreign company, I would worry about having a business presence in Xin Jiang. However, for the “Mandarins”, local security was vastly more important than easy and open communication, so the Internet was closed.

In actual fact, I liked it this way as I wanted to be cut off from the rest of the world. I detest the strong prevailing “zeitgeist” which insists that most people be “connected” or “wired-in”. I want to be alone, on the outside (or on the fringes), only coming inside when it pleases me, or when something is necessary. The frantic and demanding world, with its panoply of colporteurs, family, contracts, and others ceased to exist. From the inside of Zhi Da and the immediate local neighborhood I was more than happy to see the rest of the world recede to the outer edges of consciousness, and almost into oblivion. Whereas most people were desperate for some connection with the outside via the Internet, I was happy to withdraw, or “go local”. At times, I needed to check my e-mail, so I found a way to do that, so as to keep my e-mail account from expiring. I also told certain friends not to expect to hear from me while I was away in Xin Jiang.

For most people, these times were very hard. Therefore, they tried many ways to break the internet blockade. In times of hardship, some people can be very creative and resourceful. They went on long weekend journeys to the next province, where there was no Internet blockade. Some went to great lengths to “hack out” (not into) the system, using programming ability. Others asked friends to carry “hot letters” out of the country. There were a few people who, once able to establish Internet communication, became very popular with their friends, who would come to their homes to send e-mails. There were many whose e-mail accounts just expired, but these people did not care as they had already made the sacrifice.

For a while, international phone calls were also not possible. Here too, people tried to out-fox the blockade. Some people used their computers to enter certain sites, from which they could telephone overseas. It was said once that certain shady types in the Russian import/export market were selling “special” phone cards with access to the outside. Here too, I had my own way of passing word out. For a long time, I did not have a working phone in my apartment, and I was all too glad to be left alone.

The “Internet bars” were hard hit by these circumstances, even though they continued to serve the many local people who liked to play the usual computer games. Some “Internet bars” near Zhi Da closed down or went to another place, although I suspect the school leaders arranged for that to happen, as they were sick and tired of the students going out to play computer games.

Perhaps the biggest consequence of the ten-month Internet blockade was the rise of the “cell-phone Internet”. It was possible to look for information on the Internet, using a cell phone, and my students did this all the time. Whether this source of information was part of the old Internet, or something new and very separate, I do not know. However, many people turned to it in time of need, and it seemed to fill their expectations. Now that the Internet has been returned to Xin Jiang, I suspect that the “cell-phone Internet” will remain, and become better and better. It is the tool of the new generation. So much is happening through this channel.

However, there is a dark side to all this. It is said that a person’s actions and whereabouts can be monitored by the police much more easily, since so much of daily life passes through cell phones, and almost everyone has one. As for the Internet, communication there is also monitored. There are many people among the foreigners who believe that with their special “fire-walls”, encryption, and other forms of technical hocus-pocus, they can avoid being monitored by the police. I do not trust that for one moment. In fact, I believe that most foreigners are living in a “fool’s paradise”, and the police are happily listening in to all they say or do, for the walls, and codes in which they put their trust were long ago “compromised”.

As for me, I reluctantly return to the Internet bar, to communicate tersely with those who e-mail me. During the “Internet blockade”, I rather enjoyed the information twilight, the splendid isolation of Xin Jiang dipping back briefly into the ice age. Like the SARS epidemic in Beijing in 2003, I enjoyed the experience from within. The “information age” is all very well and good, but when it intrudes upon my privacy and desire to be left alone, it is most troublesome.

2) On my new teaching situation.

Upon return to Zhi Da, I began teaching English classes. Over the years, I have taught English conversation, reading text analysis and comprehension, listening, writing, Survey of British and American Culture, and maybe others. Now, I was only teaching oral English, to eight classes, with a total of about 300 students. I was the only foreign, English –language teacher in the English Department. In earlier years, there were four people (from Britain, the U.S. and Canada) who taught a variety of courses, and took part in a minor, departmental renaissance. Now, it was a fraction of its former self. In the second term, a part-time teacher was added, to make up for extra classes needing a foreign teacher; however, I remained the only teacher with a formal contract. Why did the school do that? There was obviously a need for more foreign, English-speaking teachers. One foreign person somewhat tactlessly told me that the school was shamelessly extracting all they could from me, since I was such a fool for doing all the “above and beyond” work that I was known for. Zhi Da was my turf, but not my life, in this sense. At times, I wondered if Zhi Da wanted to save on administrative cost by only having

one teacher actually in the classrooms. All this translated into shortfalls for the English-major students, and frequent exhaustion for me.

Students. The students were different from those I had known ten years earlier, who still remain my best- 9801, 9561, 9652, 9601, and others. The new students like their cell-phones very much; they care about fashion, and their appearance; so many have boyfriends; they want the world, and they want it on their terms. If they go about fornicating like bunnies, they appear to hide it well, better than the second group of students (I put the first group above reproach.) This is the new generation, which will ride on the coat-tails of China's 21st century glory, and in some cases participate in it.

As usual, the school left me alone to do my own thing– within bounds. This state of affairs pleased me, as I liked to be left alone. However, due to the recent rioting, there was a tension throughout society. I had to be careful about everything I said. Although it was not often stated overtly (sometimes it was, when my tongue slipped, and a classroom spy reported it), the means of control were subtle, indirect, and pervasive. Once again, “the poison quilt” of fear regulated everyone's behavior. I was not afraid of anyone openly firing me for some wrong word or action (although that was a possibility); rather, it was the abiding, unspoken, unseen landscape of uncertainty and existential instability that exerted control over me – and everyone else. In this form of control, the Chinese are the world's masters. Moreover, this form of control has worked – for the moment, at least.

Classes. This year, I had eight oral English classes: two were training to become English – language teachers in primary or middle schools (0801 and 0803); two were “generalist-English” students, with the students preparing to be secretaries or hotel workers (0805 and 0807); one was a business – English class (0809); two were tourism- English classes (0811 and 0911); finally, there were two classes of “ethnic minority” students, who would take a variety of jobs after graduation (0602 and 0702).

I liked my students, although for different reasons. Some drove me a bit crazy with their naughty behavior, some gave me much satisfaction.

0801. 0801, I considered as my most able and excellent students. They thought well, and some of them were quite strong in their ambitions. However, in this class, there was a minority of students who appeared to have no grasp of English; they should have been allowed to change their major, and do something they liked, and were good at. However, the educational system of “student assignment” at Zhi Da (and probably at many other schools in China) was very unfair; I met quite a few students over the years who were locked into majors they detested, but could not change. I had a few “free-talks” with 0801 over the year, but not that many; often, when I asked them, “Do you want to have “free-talk” this evening?” most of them would answer, “Sorry, we are busy tonight.” So, I would leave their classroom, and go somewhere else. At times a few would come out for “free- talk” in the corridors.

There were some students who chose to go beyond the norm, and seek extra English experiences outside of the prescribed classes. 0801 I had quite a few such students. The most prominent was Hope. She often accepted the invitations to come outside for “free-talk”. In the past, she was very shy, but in a sustained bout of self-determination, she chose and chose again to take social risks and step out into opportunity. She became the “study-monitor” of her class; this job involved supervising the class homework activities, and involved much public speaking. We met for many private or semi-private “free-talks”, to discuss a wide range of topics, or to help her prepare for an English proficiency exam (C.E.T. -6). Her English fluency and her confidence improved, but these really improved as a result of her determination. I introduced her

to another foreigner, and they became good “English friends”. When I went out to teach basic reading to a child, Hope came out with me. It was good teaching practice for her, and it gave her extra outside social experience. I hope she becomes a good teacher, and has a satisfying life.

Next came Heidi and Lily. They came with me to tutor a 14-year old girl, Zhou Di. We all worked as a team: they would explain the grammar points from Zhou Di’s middle-school textbook, using Chinese; I would do some reading practice, and then have Heidi and Lily follow my model; we all had “free-talk” with Zhou Di in the last part of the tutorial. Heidi and Lily were good friends; they also had very strong and independent personalities.

Pearl and Rita also helped out with interpretation activities. Since both were actively involved in real-life experiences outside the school, the texture of their “free-talks” was very rich. When I wanted to talk to an old man about his life, these four students helped me, for, although I had known that man for over ten years, I needed help in communicating complex, new concepts with him.

Angela tutored one of my high-school tutorial students in English, polishing his English grammar in a way I could never do, for she is Chinese, and knows the system.

Melinda wanted to become a trained psychologist. I only found this out at the end of our year together.

There were many others in that class. I told them they were the most excellent of the students that year, and I wanted them, and me, to believe it. Many times, they disappointed me and I let them down, but I liked to be with them. Theirs was the position of the eldest daughter. This autumn, most of the class will be sent to southern Xin Jiang, to various villages around Kashgar, for their student-teaching practicums. It would be good to be able to visit them in October.

0803. Next, is the class of 0803. This was my favorite class, and I always told them so. I do not know why they were my favorite class; they just were, and that was it. Unlike any other class they were all female. They were intensely fun loving and sought life’s enjoyment at any time. They could also be very mischievous, and frequently were. They too were preparing to become English teachers after graduation. With this class I had less concept of individuals, and more concept of a collective whole class 0803. I did not have many “free-talks” with this class, as they were frequently “busy” when I came to ask them-- busy doing homework, busy preparing for some exam, busy watching television (for their classroom had a working T.V.)

Smile was called “Smile”, because she had a smile that could turn a day of depression into a day of hope.

Elaine and Vicky were good friends, although they portrayed themselves to the world as rivals. They both worked very hard. I remember them especially, because they helped me to tutor Yang Li Li in English, along with other classmates. Since Elaine and Vicky were always “bouncing off” each other, life around them was rarely dull.

There were many others, but they rose and fell out of the class’ own collective consciousness like day-- lilies. This was the unique character of Class 0803.

Liza was their “monitor”, and she ran a good class. One afternoon towards the end of the year I had a “Huo guo” party with the class, and Liza helped to organize it. We walked to the restaurant, took our table, then went to the supply shelves to choose our food. “Huo guo” (hot pot) is like a fondue, except that there is no hot oil, or cheese, or chocolate kettle. Instead, the round kettle has two halves in the “yin-and-yang” shape. The soup is either salty, or very spicy. Each of the ingredients from the supply-shelves came on bamboo skewers. Each person chose what they wanted, and boiled it in one of the soups. I normally do not like to have “huo guo”, as

people usually eat too much, but this time I liked the experience, as I was with my favorite class, and I could sit back and enjoy the experience, and the company.

Star. The most memorable person from 0803 was Star. For a long time I did not know her; I certainly did not recognize her. One evening, I was having “free-talk” with 0803, when I noticed that one student was not joining in with the conversation; instead, she often asked her friend, “What did he say?”, or, “Tell him about...” In short, she was not speaking to me. I asked her name, and then made a separate appointment to talk with her. She was very shy, but over the ensuing weeks, she improved – more in confidence, but also, slowly, in ability. It could have been any student, but fortune chose Star, and we enjoyed these “free-talks”. After a while, her classmates knew that on Sunday afternoons, she would be with me. Typically, we would go to a Sichuan restaurant, during their off-hours, and talk. Five yuan kept the restaurant boss happy. It was an uncertainty with the English language that kept Star silent in the classroom, for when using Chinese with her friends she was animated, an independent spirit, a woman with a voice of her own-- as were almost all of the members of that class. Speaking with Star each Sunday was not a matter of “teaching her English”, for most of the language was already inside her, the product of eight years of grammar lessons in middle school. The secret lay in letting her become a communicating person, with a voice of one’s own, in a new language. Star was therefore a prototype of what every language student can become – themselves, in another tongue. (As for me, I like to take this concept one step further-- another personality, in another tongue, or at least, another more authentic expression of the “me” that is denied a voice or an identity freely chosen in English, my own starting point.)

So, over time, Star began to speak better English. Her other teachers noticed this, and commented on it. Her classmates said, “Oh, she spends time with her foreign teacher.” I will always be grateful to the rest of 0803, because there was no envy in their assessment, and because they tacitly allowed me to run my “pilot-project” with Star. They knew they were my favorite class; they also knew all about where I was, and what I was doing, and with whom, because they constantly talked to each other on their cell-phones.

I was determined to give Star as many opportunities to speak English, and use it practically, as possible (although not in 0803’s formal English class, where I left her alone, and she wandered in a world of her own, occasionally sending text-messages on her cell-phone). In time, some real opportunities came. A newspaper reporter for the Urumqi Evening Newspaper came to the school, to interview me about my life as a foreign teacher in China. It was part of a series on “the lives of foreigners in China”. Of course, it was all carefully planned beforehand by the local leaders, the newspaper, and our school. Therefore, I asked Star to be my interpreter for the interview. She was very shy and said her English wasn’t good enough. However, in rare assertiveness, I said that I needed her, and her only, so she agreed. In time, the reporter came, and we met him in one of the Zhi Da gardens. He asked me various questions about my life in China, what I did in my spare time, my views about teaching and local issues, and so on. During this time Star translated for me. She did a good job. Yes, she made mistakes, but that was not the point: above all else, I wanted to give her real-life, professional experience in using English; I also wanted to make 0803 locally famous! The interview went well, and the reporter said the story would come out later, after it had been “vetted” by his leaders. (In time, the story was printed, but I was out of the country at the time.)

The story goes on. Sometime later, the English- language channel of China Central Television--C.C.T.V. -- came to Urumqi, to do T.V. interviews; again, the topic was on “foreigners working in China”. Before the interviews, I was asked by my school’s leaders to

attend a banquet with the visiting T.V. crew. I was expecting a dinner-table interview, but actually, it was just a “face-giving” social event. Some officials from the Urumqi city government were there, to welcome the T.V. crew. We went to a well – know banqueting restaurant (one I consider an infamous house of gluttony), and had our banquet. Actually, the eaters were strangely subdued and restrained at the table, as various unseen Chinese social dynamics played themselves out. We left the table groaning under piles of luxurious, but uneaten food. (What a waste.....). For this banquet, I brought Star, so she might gain more interpreting experience, and also be introduced to society, in a way she might not normally have. As for me, I played the linguistically-insufficient foreigner, and let her do the speaking for me. During the banquet, one of the leaders toasted Star, and publicly recognized her.

I have written at length about Star, because I wish to make various points. It could have been anyone else, but that night at an ordinary “free-talk”, I met a silent person, and became determined to work with her. The results were good. This is one reason why I like working in the back-water part of China. Although there are obvious restrictions and local tensions, I do not care about them. As for the things I am interested in and wish to pursue-- well, here the field is wide open, with almost no one to forbid me, or put me down. Those people seem to come mostly from my own culture. I am able to enjoy an operational liberty here that I cannot have back home. If people at home criticize me for doing things “they wouldn’t do”, that is their own problem!

0805. Next comes Class 0805, which were “general English/applied English”, and were preparing to become secretaries or hotel workers. In reality, they were two classes: one part was composed of hard working, along with struggling students; the other part had many students whose mind was elsewhere and acted accordingly, or who had almost no English ability or interest. Sometimes, this class drove me crazy. However, there were some very diligent students, who put down their heads and studied, in spite of the noise and fun making around them. Although they could play and be frivolous as well as anyone else, they sometimes held anger against all the time-wasting they saw each day; their expected, overt loyalty towards their classmates was compounded with frustration at not moving forward. April had doggedly resolved to study and improve herself. It is a pity that I only found out about her towards the end of the school year. Fay had her own laptop computer, and she would creep into the classroom during lunch hours or on sultry afternoons to watch English- language films, when her classmates were not about to disturb her. She was very clever. Wendy worked for the student government, and so came to class rarely. I thought she was deviant, but actually she was not – she really wanted to learn. Julie came from Sichuan Province and “had an accent”. In Zhi Da, those students with problems in pronunciation were subtly (and sometimes no so subtly) discriminated against. Julie tried, tried, and kept on trying. She also had the most endearing personality, and it was a pleasure, a necessity, a duty, a source of inner satisfaction to me to work with her – that is, to follow every opportunity to practice English with her, in a normal, everyday context. She absolutely refused to give up her dream of speaking English more perfectly, although at times, she was dismayed by the magnitude of the task, or by being excluded from some opportunities, on account of her accent. (It should be noted that some in Zhi Da had a fetish for “American English”, or believed in “functional, conversational competency”.) Julie was very charming and she knew it, but she was able at times, to temper her idealism and inquiring innocence with realism. On more than one occasion, she asked to speak with me outside the classroom in the corridor, and there she would tell me what I needed to improve. Linda was also from Sichuan. She had dark, soulful eyes that were impossible to fathom, a thoughtful mind

constantly turning over the questions of life and how she should relate to them, and a fiercely independent spirit. I only discovered these things – indeed, tripped over them – while I was giving one of my “two-minute, sheep dipping” oral exams. I asked her if she wanted any special tutorials, and she said yes; towards the end of the second term, we met once a week, usually during the lunch-break, to discuss any issues or questions of importance to her. I was especially pleased with her own preparations for the talks we had; whereas many students were casual about what topics we would talk about, Linda wrote down her discussion agenda in her notebook beforehand, and was earnest and ready to go.

These Sichuan girls had their own “hometown friends” (lao xiang), and on one occasion, we went out to a notable Sichuan restaurant not too far from the school. I bought, and they chose some representative dishes. I liked such dinner parties, as they showed me the “hidden dishes” of the Sichuan cuisine; also, I could enjoy the company of these people. It was new; it was different. Far too often, I spun a cocoon of “same old, same old” in my life, and this was a welcome change.

There were also several students who I think belonged in another class, as they were so different. They cared so very much about their appearance – face, hair, nails, clothes, accessories, and so on. They propped up their fake-designer handbags on their desks, so as to hide behind them, and did all sorts of “other things” behind them – paint their nails, send text-messages on their cell-phones, read other books, or sleep. They also liked to talk to each other in Chinese, thus disturbing the class. I did not reach them : partly as I was not teaching them properly, partly as the class should have been divided, partly as they had fallen so far behind the class norm, partly as they had their interests elsewhere, and partly as they were just plain naughty. Yet, I suspect that in the “real world” of jobs and making a living in this hard-knock society, they will prove themselves to be survivors and for some of them, managers able to perform.

Even though Class 0805 caused me frequent bouts of frustration, I liked this class, and some of the individuals within it. Were I to present my “true love” to my students, who are a core part of my life, I would start with 0805.

0807. Next came class 0807, which was also a “generalist-English” class. I do not feel I succeeded with this class, although some of them might not be so harsh. There were times when I taught this class and everyone was so “tuned out”, they appeared to pay no attention to me, and did something else. It was a scene to make one weep. There was a time when spirits were riding high, when we went out for a class dinner in one of the local “big-plate chicken” (da pan ji) restaurants and had a good time. Then, over time, things got worse and worse; and perceived gains dwindled away like a city’s population under cholera; by the end of the year, the class was all but dead in terms of motivation to learn English.

The monitor was May, and she was the best of the nine monitors that year. For her part-time job, she worked at Pizza Hut as a waitress. (Yes, certain western restaurants have arrived in Urumqi. I think they are expensive and since I went to China to avoid western culture, and not to propagate it, I typically avoid such places.) I had few “free-talks” with May, but not so much as I should have. She was often very busy with student government and student union affairs. Helena was like an assistant monitor; she often seemed to be arranging and organizing class events (although there is no question the May ran the shop). Julie wanted to be an English-language teacher in Tibet or Qinghai Province (somewhere rugged and undeveloped-sounds like me, here?) She worked hard, and tended to her own studies during the evening “self-study” periods. At times, I wonder if she held me in smiling, silent disdain. Alice also studied hard,

and tended to leave the classroom and go to the corridor for evening “free-talk”, as did Sophia Yang; however, sometimes they too said they were “busy” (with other home works), and couldn’t join that night’s “free-talk”. Jessica was hard-working and clever, but also aloof. Daphne was thoughtful, but also playful and narcissistic. Ben was shy, but he often tried to engage me in some conversation; his classmates told me that behind that shyness was a very clever man. One other student was into punk-hair and body-piercings; his class mate (girlfriend, disciple, “lost soul”?) followed his spirit, if not his body-piercings, and as the year rolled on, and as they came to class less and less, she took on the demeanor of one on drugs, or bewitched into some soporific, cult-induced mindlessness. I do not know what will happen to Andrew Li, and to Iris. He was clever, to be sure; who knows if she really was grounded, but out of the public eye?

Apart from a few students, I do not know what to do with Class 0807. I would like to continue to do something with them next year.

0809. 0809 was the Business English class; it was also the largest, with 51 students. The size of this class always affected how I could teach them. It was a mistake for me to inherently assume that they would always form up into willing, pliable small groups of four, and then discuss small-group topics in an unsupervised, effective manner. I did not do well with this class; they were much smarter and more capable than I gave them credit for. I think by the end of the year, many of them did not like me, because of my teaching. Yet out of this class came some interesting facts and statistics. From my log of “free-talks”, I see that quite a few of them came from 0809. Although most of the class did not want to have “free-talk”, there was a very persistent minority that did, and they came back again and again. (Needless to say these were the students I referred to prospective employers, when possible job-opportunities appeared on the horizon.) Since 0809 was a business-English class, and since I had many “crazy ideas” about developing this or that in my restless mind, there were ideas to discuss, and projects to plan out. In fact, most of these ideas never took off; however, they provided grist for our conversations. It is this dynamic that I especially liked about 0809.

One group was Abigail, Helen, Lucy and sometimes Nicole. Abigail was earnest to learn, and very, very endearing; you could not help but admire her. Helen forged ahead quietly; a silent realist, who had her own mind, she ratcheted her way up the mountain of competency. She was a bit shy, but I knew she had the heart to see out a project. Lucy almost always volunteered for the “free-talks”, she was the essence of willingness to learn something new, and her inner cosmos, demeanor and clothing were plainly, carefully and regularly laid out. Her designer duffel coat became her winter trademark, so that I could recognize her in any crowd, anywhere in Urumqi. Nicole was a quiet, country girl, whose family lived razor-close to the margin. Sometimes, I could tell how affairs stood on her farm, by observing her emotions. She was utterly distraught one day, as the autumn moved inexorably into winter, many migrant workers had left the fields and gone elsewhere, the air was finger-nip cold, and her parents toiled on alone in enormous cotton fields, picking the cotton by hand, and stuffing it into bags-- and she was far away in the big city, unable to help. Her hair was long, and cascaded over her green- top desk; she cried into her hands, the tears running down her cheeks. Nor was she alone: many of her classmates were the intellectual vanguard of their own families, the first child sent off to college, the hope of many a parent. In one hand, Nicole grasped farm-tools, in the other, a cell-phone; her face was polished and sculpted by the wind and the earth of Xin Jiang, but like almost everyone else, she experimented with Amway and Mary Kay; her mind was simple (in the good

sense), and these all met the prevailing student culture, the spirit of the age, and were altered, adapted, transformed. Watching Nicole was like watching high-speed geology.

Another group was formed of Vicky, and three others (I do not remember their names, although I should). Vicky as the squirrel, active, a born small-group leader, ready for anything, and like Squirrel Nutkin, active and merry-making. Watching those four was a teacher's delight, as they performed their small-group discussion in class, obviously transcending the duty of the assignment, and weaving their natures, their very personalities into the dialog. They made the English language their life, and put it to the service of their daily round, their unique aspirations (and not just the exams). With this group, I had a "business project", to find a steel security door for my small apartment. The plan was to visit Hua Ling, a huge shopping complex that covered several blocks in area, find a suitable dealer, have the door taken to my apartment and then installed. The plan did not work out, as I did not have enough money, and besides, I was concerned that my leaders would not let me go forward with this idea. However, I would like to try this again next year.

Eileen was the class monitor, and occasionally we would have intense "free-talks", usually about financial survival, meaning in life, the future, how to get good jobs, or any job these days, or how to learn English better. She, along with most of the students in Zhi Da, knew that life was hard outside, and that somehow, they were not receiving the quality of education they needed. Like the vast majority of students in Zhi Da, Eileen had a part-time job, and parents at home who were struggling to survive, let alone send their daughter to college.

Merry organized a special Thursday night "English corner" for me to assist at. All I had to do was show up, sample what topics those students present wanted to discuss that night, and oversee a chain of semi-structured, small-group discussions. I think Merry was also frequently involved in all sorts of student government activities.

Lee Mary wanted to work as a Mary Kay salesgirl. She liked to make money to work and be independent, and be a part of the real world. I wanted her to see you, Lychee, to hear about your own experience working for Mary Kay, but I think she never called you. At one point, Lee Mary was "volunteered" for a speech competition by her head teacher, so she came to me for some pre-competition practice. I think she had a good time on the day, and liked it.

There were many others in that class, including some who barely concealed their disdain for me. This year, I "lost" more students than I should have.

0811. Next, was Class 0811. This was an English-language tourism/tour guide class. Since the July riots had greatly affected Xin Jiang's popularity as a tourist destination, these students knew they would have a doubly hard time in finding a job after graduation. I liked this class, as I did all my tourism-English classes--0305, 0811, 0911-- since I like to travel so much; we had much in common to talk about. I did not have too many "free-talks" with this class as they frequently said, "We are busy tonight. We have homework to do now." However, I came to know some of them.

First were the "Nanjing girls", who were chosen to attend a "tour-guide competition" in Nanjing. Tourism majors from all over China converged on that city to give a recited presentation of some famous tourism site, and then do some performance (such as do one of the local ethnic minority dances). I liked working with Claire and Angel, as well as Rose, for they were extremely diligent, and tried hard in everything. So, when the class in general was very listless, I looked for the "Nanjing girls". This point above is important. I treated all of my various classes like stock portfolios; if a class was performing well, I kept on working with it, but if it was listless, lazy, or indifferent, I left them quickly and looked for other, hopefully

willing students. I sought out students as classes, and welcomed them as individuals. Otherwise, I think I would have gone insane from burn-out and frustration.

Jordan was the monitor. At first glance, he appeared surly and resentful, but in reality he was thoughtful and tried hard. His job as class monitor weighed heavily on him; the endless round of committee meetings, notices to his class, and various crises all wore away at his freedom to study. It is for this reason that I do not like student government, student union, part-time jobs, excessively demanding boy-friends/girlfriends, and especially competency exams, such as the CET-4 and CET-6 English exams.

0811 had to study a whole series of passages, which introduced various tourism sites in Xin Jiang. The problem was, these passages had been translated from Chinese into really bad English- full of mistakes, stilted and meaningless in places to most foreign tourists. It was shameful that they had to learn such things, and those students coming after them. So, next year, I would like to have 0811 and 0911 choose twenty famous tourism sites, and together with twenty small-groups, we will re-write them, and then release it onto the Internet, for everyone to read and use.

One day, I found out that these students are studying and reciting famous tourism sites from northern Xin Jiang, and barely studying those from southern Xin Jiang. Now it is true that the province is far-flung (three times the size of France), and that southern Xin Jiang is “far away”, but I do not think that is a good reason to neglect them. Slowly that area will slip out of the public’s consciousness, and it will slip into the limbo of the 1930’s, as it once was in Soviet Central Asia. I think this slow transformation from “famous Silk Road heritage site” to “the attic where our mad aunt is locked up, and out of sight forever”, is slow, insidious, and completely planned and also premeditated. Nobody announces this, but it happens by fiat, slowly and imperceptibly. If one discovers it by accident, one is lucky indeed.

0911: The next class was 0911, also a tourism-English class. However, they were first-year students (unlike 0811, who were second-year students), and that made all the difference. They were very energetic, and full of enthusiasm for learning. In Zhi Da, many of the second-year students have lost their zest for striving as students, and have fallen into langour, despair, or alternative pursuits. This is only partly the fault of this current, “post 1990” generation- for all its faults. The real blame, I think, lies in the way Zhi Da treats the students, wastes their time, defrauds them at various points, and bleeds their will to participate and to strive. I have heard variations of this from students (and a few past teachers, too), for as long as I have worked at Zhi Da.

The department leaders gave me 0911 halfway through the year. Very quickly, I realized they were a dream class, a joy to any teacher. From the very start, I told 0911 that they were special, and clever, and that I was not “assigned” to them, but wanted them as a class. Since their learning experience with a previous English teacher had not been very successful, the results were very striking indeed. Here was a supercharged class, ready to go forth and be famous and competent, so I decided to put concentrated effort and time into them, to make them into an experimental class, and see what the results were. This was one reason why I liked to live and teach in China, it was socially acceptable to practice proactive education as an amateur, almost as an alchemist (as long as one moved within the “comfort-zones” prescribed by the Chinese). By the end of the second semester, I had logged more “free-talk” time with 0911 than all the other classes combined. After so many years of throwing my favors indiscriminately to all and sundry, I now want to put one class into orbit.

Orange. My dealings with 0911 began during the first semester, when I was moving my baggage and the old apartment's furniture to the new apartment. The school had assigned laborers to help cart the heavier objects for me, but some of the smaller items I did by myself. It was a lonely--some would say, humiliating-- experience, going from one place to another, some boxes on a chair, and making slow progress. At that time, I imagined many eyes on me, as I walked back and forth. On the third or fourth journey, three students came up to me, and offered to help carry the baggage. They were first-year students. Soon the work was done, and we rested in my apartment. Then, one of the students gave me two oranges, and they left. I later found out where their classroom was, and I met the students. I called their leader Orange, in memory of the first two oranges, and thus was born another good friendship – both her, and the class.

Like many “out-of-state” students, Orange came from Sichuan Province. Like many of her classmates, she was very motivated to learn, to “go out and get it” to use her English wherever life took her, to walk around with me in the parks (with her friends) to show me the sights, to study, recite, edit, and then recite again her tour-site texts, to organize English department speech competitions, and then give her own speech, to ask all sorts of questions, to be an energetic tour-guide in embryo, to be the class 0911 monitor, and more, much more. At times she was “busy with homework”, but when she was available for English conversation, she would try anything. If I had not met Orange that day, I would never have known class 0911. Mei-la was energetic, but in different ways; she was very good at giving “non-memorized, synthesized speeches” about local tourism sites, such as Lin Zi Xu’s memorial statue, in Hong Shan Park. She carried a trademark hair-tie, with the hair leaping out to one side, an outrageous blue-dyed rabbit fur handbag; she gave rousing performances as an “em-cee” at the speech competition and other first-year student gatherings. At times moody and self-conscious, she tried hard. I always liked talking with her.

One day, I went to Hong Shan Park with Orange and Mei-la. I listened to their declamations about Lin Zi Xu (who I have always liked, as a Chinese historical figure). We walked in the park, stuffing low-grade popcorn into our mouths (I tried to smile, ignoring the “partially hydrogenated oil” spreading over every corner of my mouth). We climbed the tower overlooking the city, the same tower that you, Lychee, and Chen Ping showed me. The day was mundane, and the weather nondescript, but we had a happy time. We rode the mechanical rope-roundabout like middle school children. I was glad to be out of the school, if only for an afternoon.

Celia was endearing and worked very hard; she was also very self-conscious, and took her setbacks hard. I always liked to have “free-talks” with Celia and her small-group. When I thought of her, I often thought of Ben Jonson’s poetry and plays.

Emily had spent some time studying at a high-school in Beijing, before returning to Xin Jiang, where she came to Zi Da. She too was clever, but she was very modest about it. She kept her feelings to herself, and studied hard, out of the public light. She had her own world.

Matty was head and shoulders the most intelligent person in the class. When I had some special English tutorials with her (she was the “gifted-and talented” student of her class, and I was determined not to let this opportunity pass me by), she wrote down the agenda for that class in her notebook; very few students did that. Her rough notes for her oral book reports generated the best spoken book reports I have ever heard in China (she did Dr. Jekle and Mr. Hyde). She was meticulous in all she did; indeed, she looked every inch a student. However, for reasons I do not quite understand, she was “passed over” by the English Department, when certain speech

competitions passed through the college like seasonal weather systems. This was very much the school's loss although it obviously hurt Matty.

There were others of note in 0911; in fact, most of the class wanted to go somewhere with English. Mark had difficulty with pronunciation, but he never gave up trying. If he must flog up the "mountain of English" in first gear, he will do it, come what may. Snoopy was a brilliant artist, and drew some linguistic articulation profiles of the mouth for me, on poster-sized paper.

I really liked 0911, so when the year was ending, I specifically asked the English Department secretary for the chance to teach them again. I hope this happens, so we can continue to work together in English.

0602/0702. The last two classes were made up of ethnic minority students--mostly Uighurs, with Kazakh, and a few of the other Xin Jiang ethnic groups included. Maybe they were "general-English" classes but to this day, I am unsure. 0602 was a third-year class. I was surprised that Zhi Da gave me these students, for I had long assumed that the school did not want me teaching the minorities.

First, I must say something about their character--such as I perceived it, not necessarily as it was, at times-- and about how well or badly I was able to deal with them. The Uighurs are culturally Muslim, although many are becoming more serious about their faith. The Kazakhs are also Muslim, but they have an under stratum of traditional folk beliefs-- a sort of shamanism. Both groups are extremely social; they are always networking among themselves, going to social functions and parties, or talking with their friends. In fact, being with friends is so important to most of the Uighurs, they will give newly-arrived friends priority over established engagements! Being thus "stood up" has happened to me so many times. I always carry a back-up book with me. The Uighurs always like to talk and socialize; they are some of the world's great salesmen. However, this brought me a lot of trouble in all of my classes-- and especially in the minority classes. The Uighur students talked to each other in class, directly, or by cell-phone. The concept of whispering, or writing a secret note, or leaving the room to use their cell-phone was quite foreign to them. (In like manner, all of my students could not walk in Indian-file, but had to walk abreast.) Nothing was truly secret in class, all was known, and all was talked about. To me, they were an "enmeshed" society.

They held onto their culture extremely tenaciously, refusing to deviate from their cultural norm in many aspects-- and for good reason. They perceived the majority culture as diluting in its influence. One let-up and they would be instantly "diluted", and thus culturally ruined. Life was a constant gauntlet of trying to remain culturally viable; it was like being a small boat of carved rock-sugar, afloat in a sea of hot tea. So much for now about their character.

Second, they were usually able to learn their English well. I think this was because they already lived in two very different linguistic worlds, and had to function in a variety of settings. Thus, making adjustments for English was conceptually understood. By contrast, it was hard for Han people to "step out" of their long-established identities. Having just said all that, I recognize that the Uighurs, although linguistically flexible, were culturally inflexible--especially when it came to issues of diet, origin, religion, and certain other domains. Even though they could speak English fairly well, their strong ethno-centrism kept them speaking Uighur to each other. It seems that everything outside the pale of their proscribed cultural repertory was not a natural part of their life. Of course, there were some who were able to transcend these obstacles to linguistic progress but even these were influenced by their cultural habits.

It was difficult for me to effectively teach these students, as they were so active, distracted, and socially networked. To be honest, I did not do very well with these two classes. Many students did not even bother to bring their textbooks to the class--or even buy them. They came to class to talk to each other. The frustrating trait of passiveness in the Han was compounded by the passive-aggressiveness, and other behaviors and attitudes often associated with minority peoples worldwide, and it made teaching more than frustrating. There were times when I taught a class, and not one student was paying attention. I closed my inner eyes, and forged ahead.

However, I am still glad I had these experiences with 0602 and 0702, as they brought me into a very different world from the one I was used to. Some people back home used to question why I went all the way out to Xin Jiang, and then spend all my time with Han people. Well, I am used to Han people-- to a point. For a long time, the Uighurs were mere stage-scenery, a pinch of spice, a whiff of danger when life on campus got boring. Anything more was very aversive to me. In short, I shared the mundane prejudices of the majority. Teaching these two classes, getting to know some of them better, and becoming friends with a few changed many parts of my thinking, and my life. Now, my life has more than just Uighur or Kazakh flavoring in it, and I owe this to these two classes.

0602. Class 0602 were third year students. Taken together, their lives could easily make up a novel. There was richness to the texture of life they portrayed. They were Zorba the Greek; they were Everyman; if they knew how to, they would have become Jim Dean (?). No doubt, if they had read Victor Hugo, they would have seen themselves in center stage in 1832, or 1848. Certainly, the times they lived in would have enabled such re-personifications. However, that was not the case, especially in this city, under the “poison quilt”; in our school, under the present dispensation. Like so many students I have taught over the years at Zhi Da, they felt their college life was being wasted and stifled by a seemingly never-ending succession of time-consuming and time-wasting tasks, passively designed to keep them busy and “under wraps”. However, in fairness to the school, there was a distinct streak of restlessness and mischievousness in 0602, a decided case of “third-year burnout”, or “senior-itis”, a sympathy for the restless forces within the whole city and over the province, north and south. Perhaps, had 0602 heard about “Danny the Red” and the other colorful characters from Paris in 1968, perhaps they would have recognized something. However, in the same breath, they could become just as orthodox as any 16th Century Spanish Jew, posing as any other Catholic. They knew which way the wind blew, and frankly, I would have done likewise. However, all this mélange of feelings, cultural consciousness, latent student restlessness, as well as uncertainty over their future life after graduation all made this class very hard to manage in the classroom. Uighurs love socializing with each other, face-to-face, or through their cell-phones. 0602 did this constantly, often with no attempt at caution, or going outside to talk, or subterfuge, or even whispering or passing notes under the desks. It seemed to me there were no boundaries regulating where to talk, and where to be silent; everywhere was their salon. The concept of “the English bubble-oasis”, where a language-learner could be hermetically separated from the outside prevailing culture, and have a secure place to learn language, was not at all recognized by them. Whether they were irreparably enculturated to be unable to know this, or whether they tacitly or overtly rejected my own cultural values in this matter is open for discussion, but one thing is sure: the classroom was very hard to manage, and there were days when none of the students followed my discourse. Maybe they should have had another teacher.... Finally, there were several students--mostly men--who came to class without their textbook, as they never had one. They would talk to each other, or

read other things, or sit there, wasting their time. It should be said here that most (or all) of the students in 0602 did not study English in their middle-school years, as students in most of China do now. When I received them, they had only studied English for two years! Seen in this light, their progress was remarkable. The Uighurs, as with most minority people-groups who must live two (or three) cultures under one prevailing “system”, have a remarkable ability to jump into and out of different cultural and linguistic settings. This is very helpful for language learning. By contrast, “majority-culture” people, like Han- Chinese people, or many Americans, have a problem, as their natural “ethno-centrism” makes them culturally and linguistically inflexible. So, most of the students in 0602 had made good progress over their two years of English study. However there was a remainder who were never able to gather inertia, or motivation, to move forward. They were left behind, and became a kind of “linguistic under-class” (to use the sociological expression).

I like Zhi Da, as it suits me in many ways, but I am unhappy that it does not easily allow those students who have entered “the wrong major” to transfer into a more suitable major, so as not to waste their college experience. This problem is quite common, and it is very pernicious. At times, I wonder if the school really cares about this problem, or if it cares only for “student-to-institution” cash flow.

In any case, I decided very early on that as a whole, 0602 was troublesome, and would be very hard to direct somewhere (i.e., they were going nowhere). Therefore, I sought out those students I perceived to be “keen” students, we made our own little out-of-class group, and I gave them “the special treatment”. Lest anyone think I was being unfair, or cultivating a climate of favoritism, I answer thus. For ten years I have thrown my favors to many classes and many students, and the results have been mixed. Some classes prospered, some were unresponsive, and most were so “matter of fact” I saw little payback for my effort. It should be said that in this “post-1990” generation, there is much less authentic interest in learning language than before; what matters is wealth, easily gained and maintained; this has many behavioral implications. However, there are some students who do want to learn. In China, it is much easier to work with the “keen minority” than in America, as Chinese society has thus far not experienced the poisonous effects of “political correctness”, and the other forms of post-justice, self righteousness. (However, these may come in, one day.) There were five “keen” students that I worked with in Class 0602, and we had many good talks.

Tursungul came from the south of Xin Jinag. Tall, somewhat thin, with soulful eyes that would move the hearts of boulders, she also had a mischievous sense of humor-- and she used both to full effect. Yet she also had a sharp, ready wit, and she often said what I should or shouldn't do. At times she would disappear-- as did quite a few of her classmates, although they too did not know where she went. Having her in a conversation group was like walking among the olive trees on a hot summer's day, and seeing, feeling the refreshing breezes manifest their life among the stirring leaves. Stories from the Greek myths, about country girls who drove the goddess to jealousy, for no other reason than Attic beauty, were written of women like Tursungul.

Emily was the imp, with an almost elfin dealing with the world about her. Yet, along with her merry jokes and uncorked personality, there lay a sad melancholy, especially when she was facing setbacks in her quest for a good man. All I can say is, silly men! You won't find one better. Emily danced to perfection. Of course, almost all of the Uighur girls dance well, but Emily danced her charm, whereas Tursungul manifested it through her eyes.

There is a Uighur custom, somewhat reminiscent of “kissing under the Yuletide mistletoe”, or of Sadie Hawkins’s Day, in which social restrictions are relaxed. On the day of first snowfall, a girl can write a poem (not a love-poem, but vaguely reminiscent of one) to a boy and ask him for something. Emily wrote me such a note, and asked me for a pair of gloves. After consulting the classmates who knew her, I went ahead with the project. We visited one of the underground-level markets (since Xin Jiang has such cold winters), and bought the gloves. By the end of the week, many people knew we had gone out shopping together. In Uighur culture, which is extremely “enmeshed”, almost nothing escapes the public eye. As in Africa, the informal “bush telegraph” is very effective.

Nurbiya was the aristocrat of the group. Her features were delicate, her views and resolution strong and her application to life diligent. Her dress and social comportment were flawless. Uighurs do not have “blue blood preppies”, but she would make a good one. She was hard-working and very smart. However, she also had the aristocracy’s disdain for outsiders on occasion. Once, when I was having a “free-talk” with the group, and we were discussing the rights of a man in a cross-cultural relationship, she assumed implicitly that the foreigner, being a foreigner (in their culture) would have fewer rights. This was automatically taken for granted. I cringe to think how this people-group would ever practice governance. This was a small incident, early on in my encounter with this group, but I never forgot it.

In her free time, Nurbiya tutored a girl in English. This girl was truly brilliant, and I was impressed how Nurbiya was able to find her; teach her, and improve her. Nurbiya also did her “third year, social practicum” in one of the best restaurants in Urumqi. I was impressed with her ability to find, catch, and participate in excellence.

Aygul came to the group later on, by consensual agreement. As a hard-working student, it was obvious she should be able to have access to the extra “free-talks”. Aygul was very clever, and modest; in the right school, she would make a good graduate student. However, in this society, being clever, sweet, full of potential is not enough. The whole world became Byzantine at the end of the school year, when the limited “slots” for further education in other schools came up for distribution. Thus in education, thus in society....Perhaps my readers will scold my views my laments for “intelligent underdogs of potential”, strewn on the margins of life’s highway, but when one works with such people, one begins to care for them somewhat.

Then there was Rabigul. She was a student par excellence, and I heard about her long before I notice her wandering about the campus gardens. She spent a great deal of time in the school’s library; indeed, the image which comes to mind is that of Phaniel’s daughter in the temple. I was told of her by someone, so I sought her out and we began having English tutorials together. The effort was not wasted, as in other “cultivated relationships”. She grew and grew, her mind like Jack’s bean-stalk on steroids, and still she wanted more learning. I tell you this Lychee, because Rabigul became your replacement (since you have graduated). Of course, Lychee, no one could replace you as you are paramount among the earthly muses. In Rabigul, I found the “race-horse” I had long sought, someone who really wanted to learn, so I made some plans, and got down to business.

I like the concept of “hiding in plain view” especially in this culture of limited opportunities, where social envy is an occupational hazard. Therefore while the weather was warm enough, we met in the campus garden, sitting on intricately carved and re-fashioned concrete tree -- stumps, next to some over-spreading concrete mushrooms (they were sun-shades), next to smaller concrete mushrooms with the campus P/A loudspeakers inside them and not far from the swirl of star-struck student couples walking here and there. This was the part of

the campus where many amoureux liked to walk by day, and it had the serenity and security of a benignly-supervised insane asylum. Each time we met, we participated in the uniquely Chinese ritual of dusting off the concrete stumps with a piece of tissue paper, laying down a sheet of newspaper or writing paper, and then sitting down, ever so gently. Thereafter, we did not wiggle the paper.

It was late-summer, and late-summer moved inexorably into a gently chill autumn. We returned to the concrete stumps until the cold, and the “cover” of other people outside, drove us elsewhere. The dry and curled leaves from the garden trees fell down, onto the stumps and the ground around the stumps; they cracked and broke when we stepped on them. Love and learning and poetry often flourish in the wasteland, where lives are as leaves, the air is cold and brittle, the sky an unreasoning grey, and the passing walkers of less importance than shadows. The only life came and went in the form of sparrows rummaging in the dry leaf-shells, searching for the last of summer insects with a mounting urgency. It was in this setting that we studied our English.

How then should I describe Rabigul, the arch-student? She was very, very, modest in all she did. She had none of the external assets of the four other students I have just described--not eyes, not wit, not nobility, not dance. Her clothes were plain, her cell-phone battered, her hair unremarkable, her manner quiet and unprepossessing, her eyes riveted to the task at hand, and her home the school library, the bookshops and of necessity, her dormitory. However, of women born of women, I have not yet seen a more dedicated student than her. I can only assume that, like many of my students at Zhi Da, she came from a humble family in the south of Xin Jiang. Perhaps she would make a good school teacher, but I do not know what she would like to do with her life.

Late-autumn drove us inside. Here we met in full view, again, in some of the lesser-travelled corridors, or else in empty classrooms; sometimes, we walked the campus or the open streets around the school. We went to the bookstores and procured books of interest. At first, she was shy to do this, but after a while, she reluctantly agreed. By this time I was determined to take part in this “super-charged education.” However, it should be said that throughout the year, Rabigul kept her intellectual and emotional independence. There was never any doubt that she would study hard, and in fields of her choosing.

This then is a brief description of the five women from Class 0602 that I spent extra time with. Usually, I met them in pairs, or one at a time, since it was easier for me; moreover, they were individuals, with different temperaments and foibles. Still, we met together as a group sometimes, usually for dinner. In Urumqi, there is a Uighur restaurant call “Mirage”, and it is sumptuously decorated with all the usual Uighur home-artifacts--carpets, carved wooden dining platforms, copperware, and tablecloth-- as well as some farmhouse courtyard artifacts of an almost bygone era--butter moulds, wooden rice-threshers, donkey-cart equipment, heavy nail-studded doors, and weaving looms. Uighur hash-house, it is not! Someone obviously took the time and effort to create a visual and experiential example of authentic Uighur culture, and let people eat there. In the “Mirage”, there was also an area for live music and dancing. The food was good, although the dishes were small, and the prices outrageous. We had some interesting talks in the “Mirage”, which helped to bring this small group together.

There were some men from Class 0602 that I also went out with on occasion. We would go to one part of the “Uighur Casbah” area, which had many businessmen from Pakistan, more severe veiling of the women, and the perceived feel of a “no-go area”-- most certainly, after dark. We went there to eat certain lamb-stew dishes, and “become strong” from drinking

mutton-broth. It was a time away from the women, where we could have English “free-talk” without feeling self-conscious about it. On one very rare occasion, we even boiled goat meat in my kitchen. (This is rare, because I do not like to cook at all.) Sometimes, I went out to see some pulp action film in the Nan Men cinema, with one of the 0602 men. They also helped me to buy certain items, like walnuts, from the Uighur market.

These then are some of my impressions of Class 0602. As I wrote earlier, there was enough life-experience in this class to write a novel. As a class, they often drove me crazy; taken one by one, they were active and inquiring, interesting people to be with. When they graduated, they deserted to the outlying settlements of Xin Jiang. Most of them I will most probably never see again.

0702. After 0602 came Class 0702. This was also a Uighur and Kazakh class, but there were some marked differences between the two groups. For the most part, 0602 was already marked by the listless “anomie” that Zhi Da bequeathed to many of its students, and the prevailing times to its still restless people. They were third-year students, fed up with school, and not at all certain about where they would go in life (or could go). With 0702, the picture was a little different. They were second-year students, and had a little more life and zest in them. However, many of the problems of 0602 also existed in embryo in 0702. The Uighurs just love to socialize, to talk, and to have fun in life. While there is nothing wrong this, I wish they would do it outside my English class, or do it using English inside class! At times, the Uighurs are very ethno-centric, very set in their ways, and crushed under multiple burdens of internal and external social/cultural/religious norms. They remind me of the stereo-typical dyslexic, who always orders hamburger and fries, because he is unable, and therefore perhaps unwilling, to order any other dish from the menu. However, these are the folks I have been given, so I need to find out ways to deal with them.

It was hard to teach 0702 as a whole, so I started to deal with them in small groups. There were many distinct subdivisions in this class. Some were very shy, and had to be taught on their own, or with a classmate or friend sitting next to them, figuratively holding their hand. That worked, although that group often “stood me up”. One group was very shy in class, and said little, because they appeared to lack basic English oral competence. However, when I took them out into the corridor for evening “free-talk”, away from the eyes and ears of their classmates, and free to deal with any incoming cell-phone calls, they actually started to speak--not just memorized speech, but synthesized and confident dialog. One student appeared to be very keen on learning English, and wished to emigrate; of course, the spouse would have to be Uighur also. They thus wished to leave the system here, yet take most of their cultural baggage with them, even some of the erstwhile values of their oppressors. Some men in one group were often mischievous in class, but their hearts were good: they wanted to develop their English. Some disdained me; they just couldn’t stand me, or they were so entrenched in their cultural values, that it was all but impossible for me to enter their corner of the cosmos. Some knew no English, and they knew they were irreparably behind the average ability of the class; thus, they gave up trying, by not coming to class, or by sitting in the back doing nothing, or by talking to each other in a “back of the cinema voice”, and disturbing everyone. This class needed to be broken up into at least eight groups, and each group then remediated according to specific needs and conditions. However, having said all the above, they were “a good group of kids”, who had only been learning their third language for only one or two years. That in itself was astonishing.

The group I liked best was a splinter-group of four women- three Kazakh, and one Kirghiz. They often stayed together, as they were three times minorities: ethnic-minority in

China; Kazakh/Kirghiz in a predominately Uighur class; women among men. Since I am interested in learning basic Kazakh, I gravitated towards them-- to the chagrin of the Uighur students. One was very keen to learn English, and genuinely so; one was either shy, or sometimes disdainful; one was in-between; the last, I am not sure of. Towards the end of the school year, we went out shopping, or went to my favorite park, to walk about. I enjoyed being with these four students, but I felt it was like trying to make friends with the wolves of the mountains around Altai, or Ili; there was an unbridgeable gap between us. Nonetheless, I have decided to continue with them. I hope they allow it.

Conclusion, of students. So, Lychee, these are some sketches of the students I was working with at Zhi Da, during the 2009-2010 year. Are they really that much different from the students you knew during your own time at Zhi Da? I wonder what future readers will think of these character sketches. Maybe the lives of western teachers of English in P.R. China is no longer of interest to western readers. However, it is my life, and I like it.!

Some more comments on the state of the city infra-structure, in Urumqi.

About the infra-structure in Urumqi. As you know Lychee, I like to look at “infra-structure” when I go to another country. By infrastructure, I mean roads, bridges, buildings, tunnels, railways, the pavements, parking facilities, schools, hospitals, airports, and the like. To look at them is to better understand what the society which made them is like. (To look at advertizing is to better understand the people’s aspirations and goals.) I have always been impressed with the infrastructure development of the Chinese; in the 60 years of P.R. China, so much has been built. The land is typically harsh, barren, mountainous, wet, inhospitable, and prone to natural forces of disaster. Perhaps it is somewhat necessary for the Chinese to have such resilient, persistent, stubborn, even a downright arrogant character, for anything less would be utterly crushed by the engineering demands of the Chinese landscape. So, when people ask me what most impresses me about China, I have always said, “ the civil engineering works!” The “min gong” (the internal migrants, the “floating” population) from Sichuan, Henan, and other provinces are the ones who have actually built this country. Fuelled by rice, hard liquor: and salted vegetables, and equipped with shovels, picks and now, machines, they hew the trails of development everywhere. Roads cross over mountain passes, or through the mountains; what long appeared to be semi-desert becomes dry-arable land, and it is irrigated from distant mountains; constructions sites appear by the tens of thousands all over the country, and especially in the cities and towns. Yes, construction is booming.

However, here I wish to discuss the state of “infra-structure development” here in Urumqi, as there are some emerging trends that worry me. I will state it up front: a variety of factors, such as poor construction, too many people coming in too fast, and the over-loading of the existing infrastructure’s “carrying capacity”, as well as what I perceive to be the authorities lack of real concern for these factors, are all combining to make a sort of “perfect storm of failed infrastructure”. In this discussion, I pointedly exclude most of the “ethnic tension” variable, as I wish to center on infrastructure, as one of the dominant variables in the rise and decline of societies. I believe it is by infrastructure that a nation rises, and it is by aging and broken-down infrastructure that a nation declines. Doesn’t this sound like the current fortunes of P.R.C. and the U.S.A.? One has only to travel on the trains and buses in each country, to walk the streets of the cities, to see these factors at work.

Urumqi (and Kunming, too) have now become very important cities in this chapter of Asia’s age-old “great game”. They are like the “secondary brain” (in the hips) of the stegosaurus; they serve as “coaling-stations” on the way to British India (as with Aden, after the

1830's); out of them will come much "development" in both Central Asia, S.E. Asia, and beyond (you "extrapolate"). Therefore, as a "way-station", Urumqi will become very important in the 21st Century. Therefore, it is no surprise that it is developing so quickly and that so much "arranged capital" is coming in to finance so many building projects. Fundamentally, I have no big problem with this: it seems to be part of a nation's natural, progressive path of "development". Urumqi will go on to eclipse Tashkent, or at least, to be a healthy compliment. If there are good rail- links, free of "red-tape", the future could be economically very promising for all.

My problem lies in how all this infrastructure is being developed, as well as how fast. Although I have never been to Karachi (so I should tread very carefully, here), why is it that the specter of Karachi often comes into my mind, as I contemplate what is unfolding in Urumqi? In this part of my letter, I will outline some of what I see around me. Perhaps no one will read this-- it will be "archived", or lost, or "confiscated", or fall on deaf ears-- but since I have always been interested in "infrastructure", I will write down some thoughts. This issue will make or break Urumqi, a viable city, and as a 21st Century "way-station".

First, I wish to discuss the movement of populations into Urumqi. Once again, I will intentionally avoid the "ethnic" issue, as I see it as a distraction from a far more important issue-- that is, the over-burdening of a city's infrastructure "carrying capacity", by a half-managed, half-permitted "wildcat-influx" of new population. I hope that you, the reader will bear with me.

There are about 2-3 million people in Urumqi. It is a rail-hub, and an air-hub, and a bus-hub. Cargo-trucks pass through, going everywhere; in this sense, Urumqi is an "inland port". The machinery is modern, the roads are being built, as a part of China's "inter-state highway" network, and the rail system is also expanding. In about ten or twenty years, the transportation network promises to be very impressive. I hope that future maintenance work will be able to keep up with this network, as China's natural forces (especially unruly groundwater and surface-water movement) are ferocious, the enemy of every civil engineer. This transportation network means that is easy to move raw materials, finished goods, and many people, from far away, too far away. Even now, the volume is very high, and will become even higher.

All of this passes through Urumqi. Goods come and go, but many people come and stay. After all, there is work to do here; buildings rise out of bulldozed ghettos, and out of foundation-pits everywhere, like Jason's crop from sown dragon's teeth. Every day more and more train-loads of migrant workers arrive, and go to their assigned building sites-- or else come on a personal or relative's invitation, or on their own, looking for an opportunity. They build their temporary lodgings-- a sort of urban logging camp--around their building's new site, live there for two or three years, work very hard, eat mountains of good Sichuan food in the local "Mom --and--Pop" restaurants (also run by internal-migrants), drink hard, and bequeath to the nation a new generation of housing-stock. I have nothing but respect for these men and women, small, tough and wiry, who do this. Their hours are very long, the conditions are very hard, and every dime they send home to Sichuan is soaked in rancid sweat. Since I have been tutoring a few of their children English, I have been able to see a very small part of their life. Also, a large series of buildings has gone up opposite Zhi Da, and I have been observing as best I could, from the outside, passing up and down the street, for about a year now. (I will talk more about these people, and their children, elsewhere in this letter.)

I never felt ill-at-ease about the dire-poor migrant workers who came to Urumqi to live -- although there are many of them, they have a definite presence on the ground, and they keep on coming (and going, when economic times become hard), and although their children overburden

the local school systems. No, rather, I am worried a lot more about those who will come after the migrant-workers, those who will live in the brave new, middle-class world the migrant-workers have built, those who are striving for the life they have seen on T.V. for so long, and who have the ego and some cash to grasp for it. It is such that the infrastructure of Urumqi cannot carry. For those who are sociologically inclined, this city will become a case-study in infrastructure overload, and its attendant consequences.

I wish to examine, item by item, what “those who follow”, the “arriviste” middle-class and their accompanying factors, are doing in Urumqi, and how this affects the city’s present infrastructure, and maybe its future.

At present, there is a rampant and speculative rise in the price of real-estate, with perhaps the highest growth rate in the country. Even people from far-away provinces in the hinterland are concerned about Urumqi’s speculative growth-rate; or, they participate in it; or, they say, “This sort of thing is going on all over the nation!” The first observation goes as follows. Some real-estate speculators from Wenzhou, in Zhejiang Province, bought up some housing estates, containing many buildings, each with dozens of apartments inside. Rather than re-sell, they sat on the properties, and made the prices go up. Those who could now buy came from the eastern provinces. In this way, the price of “per-square-meter” went up a lot, the outside people came in, and many local people were in effect, shut out of their own housing market. This makes me think of the “carpet-baggers” in the South of the 1860’s and 1870’s.

Second, those who bought their houses (or acquired their new wealth) did so in the all-important years before the current speculative boom. However, when I hear these people, now in their early 30’s, talk about their gains, I think that some of them used “inside connections”, and other questionable methods, to become rich. Now they succeeded; many have one or two houses (with a third on the way), a car, and a profitable business, money to spend on the usual pleasures and status symbols, and more. Their parents are well-connected too, and their dreams are unfolding steadily.

Yet, behind the growth, the speculation, the great ambition, I see something else. The “not-at-all blind hand” overseeing this marketplace appears to be guided by those who want Urumqi, and many other communities here to have the appearance of growth and prosperity. This point is very, very important! Rather than actually having a solid, well-founded economy and civil society, it seems that having good-looking growth-statistics, that paints such an image, are now very desirable. Why not be able to say “The 2009-2010 growth-rate of ____ city is 5.9%, and the standard of living has gone up 27 or 28 points”? What needs to be done, on the ground, to make such statistics appear? I am not talking about “forged, false statistics”. Rather, some input is factored into the economic equation, but this is done with favorable future statistics in mind! This reminds me very much of the “mild-powder/baby formula” scandal a few years ago, in which melamine was deliberately added to compromised mild-powder, so as to deceive those food-quality analysts, and make them believe the milk-powder’s protein- content was high (which it wasn’t)! “Watering down” the milk, and to make more profit, I can conceive of; deceiving those food-quality inspectors, for the sake of favorable statistics, is really bad. It shows the motives of those who are trying to make this “brave new world”, at all levels, today.

The same motives are at work, I feel in generating the current favorable and impressive economic statistics. What needs to be done, to get such observable statistics? I therefore call this phenomenon “melamine economics”. Such is the huge desire to become rich-- to be seen and applauded as rich--that people are willing to create a society that yields the necessary statistics, with (it would seem), no concern for stable underlying fundamentals. This is like

putting up a tall building, without a foundation. The phenomenon can be seen all over this society. The superficial signs of “having arrived” have become more important than carefully building the necessary structures and institutions which are the hallmark of most well-thought out and executed societies. The old psychoses never left...

At the same time, this society has become infested with advertisements. Of course, I have seen ads everywhere, for a long time in the West-- and here too. However, over the past year or so, almost as if someone opened the sluice-gates on cue, ads have appeared everywhere. They now pervade all areas of public life. Frankly, I think the ruling powers--aware of the impending forces of change--made an alliance with the ad-companies. “The Party--now brought to you by Qingdao Beer!” It is an idea, copied from the Soviet “sliv-ki”, re-engineered to suit the local conditions. There is no better entity to “morph” into, than the ad-companies. The pervasiveness of the ads has now become much too in-compassing, I think! The party bosses have moved from the traditional balconies of power, those grey reviewing stands on Tian An Men Square (or Red Square), and vaporized into thin air... or so it seems. They married the advertising companies, or took a hidden, back-seat control of them. From there, they see us, and have full observation or control over us. What better place than an advertizing agency, or empire of millions of consumers, all controlled by a hidden elite. Well, I think it was a very clever move, by astute leaders insuring their future, and keeping themselves in power.

On the ground, the results of this new power-morph are plain to see. All over the street, ads are everywhere; the “eye-sore” pollution is oppressive, and messages are very intrusive. Every busy street is a “fashion cat-walk”, for the Chinese take their public and social appearance very seriously. They are especially vulnerable to the “bandwagon phenomenon” (“Everyone else is doing it, so why not you, too?”), and to fears of being left behind (“We will never be second.”) This gives advertising, with its cult of happiness, success and the superficial, all the advantages. There is a lot of consumer money out there, and the apparatus of propaganda, now morphed into the apparatus of the advertising companies, is keeping power, and getting rich doing it.

Here, I should mention one good side-effect. That is, creativity is now in fashion. This variable is an essential component of a successful nation. In large part, this comes from the example of advertising and the influence of the Internet on the younger generation. I hope that creativity continues--both from above, and from below.

The rise of the new advertisement dynasty makes me think of the new (or not-so- new) structure of society. The leaders hold the nation, interacting with it through the advertising agencies. The “masses” are the consumers--both rich and poor. They live in the “glitzy” freedom of conspicuous consumption, but in reality, they are unable to fight their way out of a plastic bag. (Somehow, so many people are very “contained”-- in the city, but not going out into the country; in their jobs; in their consumption, but not beyond it; ignorant of geography, directions, and their location; fashionable in clothing and strong in appearance, but not much more.) Under the surface of a new wealth, I sense constraint and unseen, unfelt imprisonment. Is this really any different from the condition of the oppressed, under feudalism, and the manor system?

This begs the question, where are the elite (i.e., the new nobility)? Where is Sagres? Where is Eton; and Harrow? Where are the “gymnasium” of Prussia?” Where are the schools for the Jannisaries? Where is the “new Yan An”, the seat of incubation? I have no doubt that these people are out there, under the most impervious of cloaks. I believe that the elite are “out there”, in formation, because I have no sense of them “here”, in the general visible population. They all

disappear, and are taken away. Make no mistake: you cannot run the 21st century, and pull off history's ultimate heist, without an elite-- and where is it?

Enough. I digress. I really wanted to say that advertising has become so prevalent in Urumqi, and that it is affecting the structure and the identity of the city, and its people.

Another change has affected this city. In the spring of 2010- or around that time – the number of cars on the roads increased significantly. This quickly affected many aspects of life. Of course, the roads became more crowded, and there were traffic jams; this also happened in many other Chinese cities, whose roads were built in the 1950's. Life and traffic were very different then. Overnight, it seemed, simple movement around the city took a long time, or no longer became feasible. I either gave up and stayed home, or went out very early, or late. Xing Fu Road, which I had known for several years, now became crowded, and dangerous to cross. Many drivers became selfish and dangerous. "Road-rage", of a distinctively Chinese flavor, became more common. Not content with one counter-snob, offended driver's would follow their enemy down the road, striking back again and again. Once the Chinese become offended, their malice is unquenchable, and their intent pernicious. On the roads, and on the sidewalks too, the character of the people changed. The quality of life itself changed. Urumqi now became less pleasant to live in. I think a significant factor in this change was the increase in car traffic.

Everywhere, people want to become rich, be seen as successful, and also garner "respect" in the eyes of other people. While the foreigners living in China crave visas, so as to stay in place, the Chinese want "respect", with a strong implacable desire. This word, "respect", has a wide range of connotation to – all the way from "giving consideration to", and up to "servility, under the guise of mutually beneficial relationship". How strange is the cosmos, to pair such opposites together.

Obviously, I am only one insignificant bystander and observer, with opinions that some would call marginal or polemic, but I will say this. After living in Urumqi for some years now, I am planning to leave, for a quieter and slower-paced lifestyle. The sudden proliferation of cars on an unprepared city, and the resulting effects on how one can get around the city, and increasing rise in pressure, have driven me out.

Perhaps Lychee, you are surprised or a little angry that I write these things. Maybe my opinions are too strong, or wrong. However, I need to share them somewhere, and to someone. If I feel that the "feel" of Urumqi is like that of "Horatio Alger, on steroids", or a society running on "melamine-based economics", then I will say so. I have lived in China for so long now that I care about this place. It has become my home, as it were; thus I comment on China, as I would comment on my own home. It is a strange irony that I comment on my expat home, but have lost the ability to say anything of substance or credibility concerning home affairs (i.e., US affairs). My own family prepares to scold me, when I open my mouth, here!

(Re-group.) So, Lychee, thus far I have discussed students at Zhi Da, the "big picture", as I see it, concerning Urumqi's new direction, and my response to it. Now, I wish to begin a series of observations and character-sketches, of a variety of people--people I see every day, or on occasion. There will only be some, for Urumqi, like many big cities, has attracted so many different people, that it would require writers like Walt Whitman, or James Joyce, to clearly and effectively portray life as it appears here. However, since I have read "Leaves of Grass" (the inspiration for this book), and "Dubliners" and "Portrait of the artist as a young man", I would like to write down some of what I have seen here. For all its problems, "dear, dirty Urumqi" is full of life, of interesting people, and peeks into the future. There is no need to set any of these characters into the oft-expected contexts of "ethnic tensions", or "race-relations", or the like:

those are distractions to me. My subject is the forgotten, passed-by individual, the internal migrant worker, and the children of these migrant workers. There is little façade about them!

YLL (Lily) People come and people go, but of all the people I knew “on the street”, I hope I will always remember Lily. Her mother was the boss of a very small Chinese dumpling restaurant, not far away from Zhi Da. The #17 bus ended there, so there was always the background sound of the buses coming and going. (One had to be constantly on the watch as the buses swung wide during their turn-around. In spite of this known hazard, many people would blithely jay-walk here and there, with no expressed concern.) Around the edge, on one side, there were several not-quiet shanty shops, tenanted by migrant workers from Sichuan and other poor provinces. Lily’s mother was Hui, and came from Ning Xia (where many Hui people came from). For a long time, the father never showed up; for a few months I saw him occasionally. The mother lived a hard-scrabble life, had a “heart condition”, and effectively raised Lily alone. Nonetheless, she could be manipulative, and something of a flirt on occasion. As I write this, I think of “the woman at the well” in Sychar. As with many Chinese mothers, she would depreciate Lily--privately, and in public. “Oh, she’s stupid and lazy!” she once said to me, in the hearing of one or two others in the restaurant. This brought Lily to tears. However, the mother did give me my “soupy dumplings” without the salt and toxic MSG, and she left me alone--save on those days when the spirit of despair and flirtation was upon her. I always like the Chinese best when they leave me alone...

I knew Lily for about one and a half years. The relationship began with English tutoring. At that time (autumn, 2009), I was fed up with the indifference and lack of spark in my own students at Zhi Da and sought fulfillment in tutoring migrant children nearby. (At one point, I had up to six or seven children, but that was too much: I became burnt-out, and sick.) Lily was the first such “outside student”, and the best. In her fifth or sixth year of primary school, she was quite some way behind her peers in English. Her innate intelligence was fairly good, so I suspect there was some learning disability at play, here. Of course, there were other variables: Textbook (materials), which are average; her home life (emotional), which was not easy, to say the least; the corner table in the restaurant (study environment), where she did her homework, with the noise of the restaurant around her, and very poor lighting. Often, her mother would leave Lily alone in the restaurant, and to a nearby shop to play cards with some of the other shop owners. Of Lily’s teachers, I knew nothing.

Lily was a little “pudgy”, and when I first met her, lacking in some self-confidence. However, once we got down to tutoring in earnest, she was very dedicated. On some occasions, she held her interest and concentration for one and a half hours! For a primary school student, that was exceptional. For a long time, she wore the same blue-and-white sports uniform that most students wore, but she also liked to dress up when someone gave her red boots, she was very happy.

We went over the textbook material a lot, at her speed. I know she was clever, and so did she, but the actual belief in it had to be encouraged out of her. It seems that like many students, she did not know how to read (by “decoding” the letters into bigger units). Rather, she relied on auditory memory, of what the teacher had told the class, as a group. (Could it be, that “decoding”, on one’s own, is an act of personal independence, and therefore subversive to group norms and the teacher’s control?) As a result, she could not read--not as I define reading! In time, this did change for the better. However, with some words, it was necessary to point her gaze away from the textbook, away from me, away from everything, and into the outer space beyond the restaurant window. Then I would whisper the word into her ear--pure, “auditory

input”, with all other variables removed-- and she would reproduce it with the clarity of a tape-recorder. This worked well.

We reviewed, and reviewed again, the textbook. Lily liked the predictable, the familiar, with the leaven of humor. Sometimes, we went a little off the beaten track, but not far, and within sight of the familiar. Over time, this “little” became “a little more”, but still within her realm of experience. A picture dictionary was a great help. All Lily needed was some affirmation, regularity, “structure”, and a few sparks of what lay outside her immediate life-experience, for her to take off...and take off she did. In one school term, she went from the mid- 70’s to the mid-90’s of her class. I blame...(J’accuse...) her mother’s “put-downs”, and the neglect enforced on Lily by the circumstances of poverty. I blame... the poor study environment, especially for homework. I blame...the factors at school that did not teach Lily how to “decode” most words for herself. (Yes, for the record, some “whole-language” is all right.) I blame... “group-think”, for stifling the individual, when it comes to learning and every child’s creativity. I blame...her father, for not being there! I blame...in absentia, her cultural group, for its latent (and sometimes not-so-latent) culture of abuse, often inflicted on the women and children. However, Lily’s inner character was good (if sometimes a wee bit lazy...), and I was happy with her native disposition. She stuck very firmly in my memory, and remains to this day the model “min gong” student (i.e., the child of a migrant worker, who is my English tutorial student).

On the surface, it would seem, we exchanged the same sentences. (“Hello how are you. I am fine. I am happy to see you. I am happy to see you, too...” All in dead-pan voices.) However, under the surface, in the “affective domain” of the emotions, the desert was blooming. I can still see her now as I write this account far away. She is seated in the corner, behind her table with textbooks piled around her, plugging away through her homeworks. Steam from the kitchen--and dumpling restaurants generate lots of steam -- condenses on the window. The hanging 40-watt bulbs hanging over her head, designed to attract customers in from the dark outside, weakly lights up her table-top. Perhaps it is fitting that the only song I taught Lily was “This little light of mine.” I hope this is borne out in her future. If I come back to Urumqi on future visits, I will make a point of coming to see her, and see how she is doing.

The #17 bus terminus was a very good place for me to find “min gong” tutorial students. Many of their parents had their “Mom -- and -- Pop” business there. It was also close to Zhi Da, and easy to get to, in almost all weathers. Just outside the #17 bus terminus compound was a solitary building, and it was here that the Liu sisters lived.

L.W. and L.J., and their parents. Their parents worked very hard. The mother ran the grocery store, and the father did work outside. In order to better understand the Liu sisters, it is important to know something about their parents, and the surroundings they grew up in. The mother had lived in hardship or near hardship for a long time; she had the ruggedness of a long-ago forgotten but still active icebreakers in faraway Arctic waters. She was somewhat short, with medium-length hair tied back. Her clothes were old but brushed. The skin was weathered, and her eyes looked out over the landscape of hardship; her appearance betrayed every sign of understanding through experience. She had the dignity of the eagles, and it was this trait which stood out in her, transcending everything else in her life-- and how harsh a life it was! Dignity was all she had to hold her domains together. I never disputed with her, for under the quiet resolve of the shopkeeper, there was a rod of iron, and courage to match it.

The shop could be divided into three parts. The left part (about 25%) was the kitchen, family storeroom, and space for the Liu sisters’ bunk bed. It was extremely impoverished, run

down, dirty from coal dust, dust blown in from the outside, and grime. There was some improvised counter-space for kneading out the dough, pulling noodles, and chopping Vegetables -- and yes, out of that cave of a kitchen came some of China's very best folk-cuisine. There was an old tin stove-pipe running from the coal stove to the outside; nonetheless, in winter, it was desperately cold in this room. I can close my eyes, and see the forever-grimed quilts of the Liu sisters, on their fragile bunk.

The right part (about 25%) was the parents' bedroom with two enormous old wardrobes, now in their sixth life. In these wardrobes were clothes, work-items for the father, various shop inventories, and who knows what else. All of it was old and run down. Everything was flung here or there; the quilts were greasy and grimy; it had the air of a bunk-house in an underground WWI trench bunker. In one corner, by the window, was the table where I gave tutorial classes to the Liu sisters. It too, was old and over-burdened with more inventory, old tools, cardboard boxes of obscure items, and the clutter of a household of four. Sometimes, it was quite a task to get into the cockpit, figuratively speaking, and begin class! On top of all this, the lighting was really, really bad. In this room, there was also a small coal-burning stove.

The middle part (about 50%) was the shop. The iron-and-glass double doors always let in the draughts, and besides, so many of the customers did not even bother to close the doors after them--even in mid-winter! However, there was also a heavy green "door-quilt" hanging outside the door. There was a table for the mother to manage accounts, with two or three public-use telephones nearby. Nearby was the ice-cream freezer; many school-kids came here to buy an ice-cream. On the shelves were basic dried food stuffs, candy, snacks, instant noodles, cheap liquor, cookies, crackers, soup, washing powder, and soft drinks. Most "Mom -- and-- Pop" stores nearby schools and colleges do a good trade in these materials. Surprisingly, it was hard to find a place to sit down in this central part; when I tried, I had to lower myself gingerly onto a case of water, or dried goods. Of course, if there was a chair, I was offered a seat at once.

My recollections of the Liu sisters' home are overwhelmingly associated with too much noise, and too little lighting-- in short, the worst sort of home environment for doing one's homework...or having a quiet and peaceful home life. Almost every time I came to the Liu sisters' home, there was noise: the noise of the sisters themselves, playing, whining, or play-arguing; the sound of the customers, either buying something, or shout-talking into the phone, as so many working people do; the suppressing force of the television, bolted to the upper wall, and watched avidly by both of the Liu sisters; the late night games of cards. It was this latter that galled me. The father would be home from work; the home's few chairs would be requisitioned for the card-guests; sometimes there would be liquor; both father and mother played, or else the father played, and the mother would stand behind him, observing his "hand"; there were shouts, hands-of-cards flung down on the chair, mock quarrels, and constant, running disturbance. It was this environment that the Liu sisters lived in and had to stay in. Indeed, the sisters sometimes shouted over the dinner table at their parents, asking for some quiet to study in. They were ignored, rebuffed, or else told off. I cannot conceive of having to grow up in such a place, and be able to receive an education!

L.W. The younger sister's name was Liu Wen. She was in upper-elementary school. In a word: she liked to play. Life for her was a playground, what-ever the time and wherever the place. This drove her mother to distraction, but I think the mother knew that Liu Wen would never change. Maybe that is the essence of parenting -- realizing the mould in which one's child was cast, and then working within certain, basic parameters. Liu Wen could study, and did; she often applied herself in our English textbook tutorials together, but behind all this was a free

spirit. Maybe she was better than all the rest of us... When she was studying at the hyper-cluttered, ill-lit desk, with her parents and the house-guests playing raucous card games in the middle room (i.e. only several feet away), she would sometimes burst out with “Be quiet!!! I am trying to study!” Her father would ignore her, or else cuff her off handedly, and resume his card game. Liquor, cards, poor lighting, an inverted peer-pressure system, dirty housing, dirty clothing, and somewhat grimy bedding, all take their toll on a young person’s mind and ambitions. In the case of Liu Wen, she still liked to play. This is how I shall remember her: running around the back of the shop to climb up a pole resting against a wall; skipping with friends; trying roller-skating; climbing onto the back of a truck, and hiding behind the driver’s rear window, then shrieking in fright when he started up his engine. I suppose youth is resilient, and is the buoyancy that keeps a soul above the dark waters.

L.J. The elder sister was different. Liu Jie was in middle-school, so she lived in a world of early-adolescence, bereft of hormones. Liu Jie was quieter by far than her younger sister; she could play, but is was more restrained. Her friends were quieter, more reserved, and more “apart, unto themselves”. One friend in particular was aloof, with the barest veneer of shy demureness about her; she often consorted t with Liu Jie, and refused all overtures of basic English dialog. Acquisition of English seemed to come slowly for Liu Jie; I do not know about her other academic subjects. Whereas Liu Wen grasped, or tried to grasp new knowledge with her characteristic enthusiasm for life’s activities, Liu Jie was perhaps restrained, or withheld, as by a hidden hand. I do not know why. It would be wrong to call her lazy, or indifferent. However, her mother seemed to treat her in a different way. One event will forever stay with me: I saw the mother beat Liu Jie. Her grades were bad and the mother hit her, again and again. These were not spanking slaps, but real slugging punches-- and the mother was a strong working-class shopkeeper. Maybe the mother considered Liu Wen too young for such treatment. As for Liu Jie, she lived under a weight of existence I could neither perceive, nor understand.

The other kids. Lest the reader wonder at these life conditions, and their harshness, let me say that these were the better-off ones. There were other children in the area around the #17 bus terminus, whose life-conditions were much, much worse. Of course, such things happen everywhere in the world, and not just here. There is no exempt country. The main thing I learned from all this was the huge effect of home-environment on school performance. I will end this section with three more sketches-- and I will not give names.

Some children were just small, frail, wispy-light enough to be picked up and blown away by the wind. “This girl was like this, and had grimy clothes and a few soot-marks on her face” she was straight out of Oliver Twist. She was raised by her grandmother, who ran a “cold-noodle” mini-restaurant. I never saw her parents. I tutored her a few times; she disappeared off the planet for a long time, and re-appeared later for a while, then left for good. She seemed to be bright, and had a spark in her. The grandmother did all she could, with what resources she had. This child showed me there was a huge, almost bottomless sea of children who needed some sort of mentoring, or tutoring help. Maybe some older students could help them, one-to-one.

The next two were also sisters. Their parents ran a very busy noodle restaurant. There were two floors. The upper had most of the customers, and the kitchen. Orders were hurled through the trap-hole in the wall, and the heat and confusion of food-preparation came out. Gas burners, turned on beyond maximum output, “pulled noodles” flung down onto the grease-patina wooden boards, the “whoosh” of vaporized cooking oil igniting inside the woks could all be heard, but not seen. No problem: the violence of the sound behind the partition-wall made visual imagination easy. The customers were migrant-workers in passage or working nearby, and Zhi

Da students. Cheap tea was slopped on the floor; the light was below average; tables were crowded; there was no peace and quiet in this place whatsoever. Large tin cans, which used to hold tomato pulp and were now used as waste-paper bins, were placed under each table; they now held spent tea, sodden tissue paper, cigarette butts, and spittle. It was in this environment that the elder daughter, in her fourth or fifth year of primary school resided, and tried to do her homework. She had an emaciated soul, and shell-shocked eyes. She got up in the morning, got dressed, went to school, did her homework as best she could, helped out with the restaurant work by shouting orders into the kitchen and carrying out large plates of noodles in her small hands... yes, she did all of these, but there was also something missing. There was an indefinable emptiness in her being-- not everywhere ...just somewhere, in one part. Her soul was intelligent, and it looked out over the denuded landscape of the childhood assigned to her. I never, never saw her smile in the public spaces, upstairs. She was assigned many burdens.

We did our English tutorials in the downstairs part of the restaurant. It served to absorb the overflow of lunch or dinner customers, when the upstairs part became too crowded. It too was ill-lit, filthy with grime and greasy residue from weeks of customers and weeks of mopping, and full of heavy air. There were tables with unequal legs, and a cold, rusty, incomplete stove in the corner. On cold winter days, she would gather old chopsticks and used tissue paper, and start up a fire.

However, this room below street-level had one advantage: it was a refuge from the chaos above. Only occasionally, did I see the overflow customers come down for their meal; at the sight of me, many left the room and returned upstairs.

It appeared that she could not read, and was relying on a “fusion” of whole-language and auditory short-term memory to survive in her English class at school. Whatever happened to basic “decoding” instruction? She was very diligent in our tutorial classes. We got on quite well, in the short time we were together.

Her sister had a form of mild mental retardation, or something similar. She was in late-kindergarten, or early primary school. She was constantly grabbing hold of something from the older sister’s study materials, while we were having English tutorials, and it drove the elder sister crazy with frustration. In the evening, the mother or an aunt would help her with her homework. I don’t know how the younger sister got by, with a busy street outside, and all sorts of accident-related hazards in the kitchen. Somehow, she got by.

One time, the family bought a small kitten for the basement room, to control the mice. The younger sister was really hard on that kitten--not out of malice, but unawareness as how to treat an animal. While the older sister and I were having English tutorial class, the kitten would come out of its hiding- place, behind the radiator. However, when the younger sister came down the stairs, the kitten would flee. One day, the cat “ran away” (as the elder sister said), and was not seen again. China is a horrible place to be an animal.

Their mother I saw in fragments: in the table area of the restaurant, hauling out plates of noodles, her hands forever weathered by steam and oil; shouting the customers’ orders to her husband and his brother, over the din of cooking, through the ill-lit air of the kitchen; cleaning up the carnage of customer satisfaction after lunch, mopping the foot printed floor in a silent room with the stools upended on the tables; going downstairs to the lower room, in search of more napkins for folding or garlic for peeling, preparing her careers’ ammunition for the next assault; sitting beside her two daughters at meal-time or homework time, giving stability and admonition amid the day’s chaos, resolutely manning her assigned bilge-pump. Her strength, her devotion to her children--even as she scolded and sometimes cuffed them--for day after day, took their toll

on her. Her eyes showed a daily, walking familiarity with the horror most people try to avoid, through the many contrivances of wealth. She was hunted by circumstance, she knew it, and she stayed on deck. Outside, the traffic of Xing Fu Road flowed in full spate, the people eager about their business.

Xing Fu Road, again. Over the “on-again, off-again” years since 1999, when I first came to Xing Fu Road, much has changed. Back then, the road was the end of the line: the paving was poor (and you knew it if you sat over the rear axle of the #17 bus!); the housing was a little bit ramshackle, as the concrete of the 1980’s aged; with the exception of a row of “spicy fish-pot” restaurants (patronized by those with power and mistresses), nobody of visible prominence lived here. Then the effects of development, suffused into Xin Jiang from the: “inner Provinces”, like slow-release capsules of steroids, took their effect. The unexplained “spike” in the city’s car population really made an impact on Xing Fu Road, with traffic jams the norm, especially at certain junctions. The Chinese love of their “face”, their refusal to “back down” in any form of argument, and the insidious arrival of insurance companies, as well as the concept of liability and legal recompense “coming of age” -- all of these variables came together into a malignant spectacle: two cars in an accident, with nothing moved since the collision, awaiting the insurance evaluator...and a huge tail of backed-up traffic behind them, with barely any “trickle-space” to pass them by. In this simple, common occurrence lies a thousand indicators of character, how people behave, and how all this will manifest itself in the global forum, far from the streets of Urumqi-- or anywhere else in China. I, for one find the future revealed by such “tea-leaves” to be thoroughly distasteful: I am glad to have no children or grandchildren to worry about, late at night. Perhaps, in the final analysis, the mother in the noodle restaurant is better off by far than me...

In time, the traffic problems eased, with the introduction of bus lanes, one-way streets, and a special “BRT” (Bus, Rapid Transit) system. However, the final solution to Urumqi’s traffic problems is a long way off. People just need to leave!

Transition to conclusion. There is so much more one could write about Urumqi during these times, but I will not: it is not my right to do this. I am only an observant English teacher, with my eyes looking around me. I am not fit to play the elder statesman”-- although I do flirt with it. In my dreams at night, I do it all the time... Suffice to say, Urumqi is going through “growing pains”: some of these are normal, and will be passed through in time; however, some could have been avoided by better attention to city-planning and to population management. This is obviously the domain of the government here and they will have a lot of work to do.

As for me, these changes in the city of Urumqi, my home for a total now of seven years, as well as in different changes in Zhi Da itself, all had a significant effect on me. In short, I decided to leave Urumqi, and take my life somewhere else.

For a long time, I had considered Urumqi as my abiding “home” overseas. A long time before, I cut the emotional ties with many (but not quite all) of my roots. I wanted to go out--for a while. With my father’s death, all pretenses vanished. Yes, I have land in Maine State, but it is a “global crash-pad”, a travel-base to work out of, but not truly live in. I send “baggage parcels” home, and I collect artifacts from everywhere, but I will probably never use and enjoy them. I see my family less and less. There is no family of my own, and my blood-relatives and I have less and less to do with each other. I think it is good for humanity that I have no children. I only read obscure classics from other ages; I almost never read modern, current, in-style books. As for the expats, I have as little to do with them as possible; I have almost nothing in common with them now, but I occasionally “check-in” with a few of them. I want to go to a place where there

are no other foreigners, few people I know, and where the tentacles of “socialization” are absent. (I want to rid myself of what the sociologists call the “enmeshed” society. So, I chose to leave Urumqi. Naturally, my old students were not happy. Yet, I couldn’t help wondering, “Hey! We barely see each other. What about me and not you?” (Naturally, Lychee, you are above such affairs. I will always keep contact with you, and a few others in Urumqi.) The others... For a year or so, I had been flirting with basic, functional usage of the Kazakh language, as I hoped to transfer my career as an English teacher to somewhere in Kazakhstan. Why there? Well, that country is very big, and I want to travel more-- a lot more. In a safe and ideal world, Kazakhstan would be the perfect work/travel base for the next ten years. Of course, the reality is not that way, but I wanted to start from somewhere; I will always be an idealist. In this province, there are only two good “Kazakh areas- Ili, and Altai. I rejected Ili, because there are too many people there who have social connections with people I know in Urumqi-- I wanted a fresh start, and the whole fishpond to myself. So, I chose Altai. An old friend told me which schools in Altai might have hiring-rights for foreign English teachers, and gave me the contact information. One day, I got a bus ticket to Altai, so as to have a look. At the Urumqi bus station (Nian Zi Gou), I called a number, out of the blue, and asked someone if I could come up for an interview. She said yes, and the next day, we met. By now, my defection from Urumqi was an established process. There was another meeting that year (2010), and another few meetings the next year (2011), as details were arranged, and the Byzantine reams of paperwork processed. I told the new boss I had three conditions: (a) she do the visa-application work; (b) I get 45 or 40 days free in the winter holidays, for travel; (c) she exempt me from the booze-soaked banquets the Chinese insist on subjecting their foreign teachers to. She agreed. Every so often, she came to Urumqi, on her business, and I sent up my baggage, bit by bit. (I have way too much baggage, by now.) I slowly said goodbye to my Urumqi students at Zhi Da. I left one class (10-03) with many, many books and learning materials, so they could continue on “auto pilot” and gave a few other students some of my special, literature books. I phased out of my usual social and teaching life. Some friends were put into the special chamber for long-term preservation; most were buried in salt, mummified, buried, and the key thrown into the back of the drawer. This is how I deal with my “past, life chapters”. As for you, Lychee, you will “live in these lines”, never growing old-- as long as this book survives, and is read. As for Urumqi it was one of the “fragments of China”. I am glad I spent time here!