

我们两个美国人去中国



by Curtis Mobley (copyright © 2005)

Ann has a colleague, Nora, who is working in Chengdu, Sichuan Province, Peoples Republic of China helping Intel start up a huge new plant there. She invited us to use her apartment as a base camp from which to explore China. That's the opportunity of a lifetime, so we dropped everything and headed for the airport. Here is a brief summary of our adventures from March 5-31, 2005; see the photo gallery for a few of the 1,000 photos I took. BTW, if you can't translate the title, read on...

Introduction

It's hard to set the stage for China...it's just *so* different. It may help to consider that when Americans go to France or Brazil, they are going to a different country; but when they go to China, they are going to a different planet. Another way to think about China is to imagine that the Roman Empire survived the last 2000 years and that everyone in Europe still speaks Latin and is able to read the inscriptions on pre-Christian statues. China has a similar continuity of culture and language, which can't really be comprehended in the west, where empires last a few hundred years at most, and most modern European languages have arisen since the middle ages. And speaking of language, what can you say about Chinese, which gets by just fine without an alphabet, has only about 400 basic sounds (syllables, as opposed to tens of thousands in English), has no explicit words for "yes" or "no," doesn't conjugate verbs to express tense or change nouns to distinguish number, case, or gender, and translates the sounds of "Coca Cola" with characters that mean "allow the mouth to be able to rejoice." You just have to go there and *experience* China for yourself; neither my feeble words nor drab pictures can even hint at what it is like.

Beijing

We started with a few days in Beijing, the Nucleus of the Middle Kingdom and Receptacle of the Mandate of Heaven. The city, which is larger in area than Belgium, is like an enormous version of Los Angeles. We hit the standard tourist spots: Forbidden City, Ming Tombs, Great Wall, Summer Palace, and Temple of Heaven. Those Emperor guys definitely knew how to live. Everything was fantastic beyond all expectations, but I won't bore you with the details. Incidentally, I even saw the nephew of Pu Yi, the last emperor, who now works in the gift shop at the Forbidden City.

I have an oceanography colleague, Keping, at Beijing Normal University, and one evening he took us to eat Peking Duck (just called "roast duck" in Beijing) in a *hutong*—an old, original

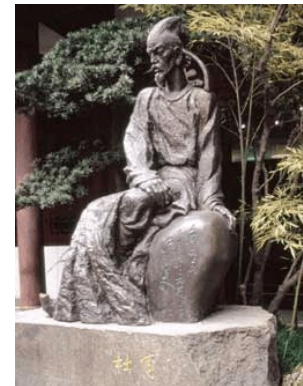
neighborhood of single-story buildings without indoor plumbing and streets 5-10 feet wide. I had told him to take us someplace where tourists don't go and, as they say, "be careful what you ask for because you may get it." The chaos and atmosphere of the restaurant—not to mention its kitchen—can't be described in any way that would be believable in the U.S., where restaurants are oppressed by Health Department inspections, fire safety codes, and OSHA workplace regulations. The duck was outstanding, and this evening gave us our first glimpse of the "real" China not seen by tour groups.

Chengdu

We then flew to Chengdu in Sichuan province. Nora has a car and a driver, who goes by Frank, and we borrowed both to take us to various places around Chengdu. The highlights were three UNESCO World Heritage Sites: the Giant Buddha (230 feet high) carved into a mountain side at Leshan between 713 and 803 A.D.; Emei mountain (one of the four sacred mountains of Buddhism) and its monasteries; and Qingcheng mountain, which once had 108 monasteries and temples on its slopes. Chengdu is also the center of Chinese panda research and preservation.

Prices are very cheap in China. Our first night in Chengdu we got two-hour massages, from toes to ears, for US \$6 (not a typo, that's six dollars) at the Big Foot Pleasure Place. A taxi costs about 20 cents a mile. A big lunch with 6 or 8 dishes costs two to three dollars. A full dinner at the best place in town is less than \$10 per person, including drinks. (These prices are for "real" restaurants, not the westernized ones in 4-star tourist hotels.) Sichuan food is fantastic and famous for its hot peppers. One kind of pepper actually makes your mouth go numb, just like at the dentist's office. Dog is a favorite dish, but Curt wasn't allowed to try any.

In 759 A.D. this dude named Du Fu was like "I think I'll move to Chengdu and write some poems" and everybody goes "Yo, Du Fu, your poems rock! You da man!" and he got like famous and everything. So now Chengdu has a large city park devoted to Du Fu and classical poetry. A sign at the entrance says "Respect the Poetry. No Photography." After buying and reading a book of Du Fu's poetry (Chinese on the left page and English on the right), I can well understand why he is considered to be the greatest Chinese poet; he's certainly the greatest poet I've ever read.



Du Fu

The best unexpected discovery in Chengdu, indeed in all of China, was the "Face Changers." This is a combination of classical dance, opera, and magic, done with the perfection of Cirque du Soleil. The dancers have elaborate face masks, which they change in a fraction of a second. My theory is that the different masks are painted silk, and that one mask is jerked away (via hidden strings inside their costumes) to reveal the next, and so on through as many as 20 different faces during the performance. It was so amazing that we had to go twice.

Three Gorges

After Beijing, a boat trip down the Yangtze River through the Three Gorges is probably the best known Chinese tourist attraction for Americans. We did a five-day cruise from Chongqing to Wuhan on a 600-foot luxury ship filled mostly with American tour groups. The scenery was nice, but the experience was very inauthentic—western food, imported wines, no chopsticks, souvenirs priced in US dollars, etc. On such a cruise you see China only through a window. Ann and I hung out with a Canadian couple who were traveling alone, like us, and who wanted to learn some Chinese, eat Chinese food, and mix with the locals. The best part for me was helping one of the staff with her English pronunciation in exchange for a good deal (negotiated under the table in Chinese) on one of her painted snuff bottles. BTW, only Americans call it the Yangtze (a holdover from the days of the Euro-American occupation of China in the late 1800s); to the Chinese it's the Chang Jiang, or Long River.

After the Three Gorges we spent an afternoon in Wuhan at a new museum full of 15,000 artifacts recovered from the nearby tomb of the Marquis Yi of Zeng, a local bigshot who died in 433 B.C. Finding his tomb in 1977 was the Chinese equivalent of finding King Tut's tomb (or of finding the "terracotta warriors" in Xi'an). The museum is a fabulous place to learn about China's ancient history and culture, and well worth a side trip to Wuhan the next time you're in the neighborhood.

Lhasa

Tibet is, not surprisingly, an extremely touchy subject in China. Get caught with a photo of the Dali Lama (classified as pornography) or wear your "Free Tibet" tee shirt and you'll get to see the inside of the nearest Peoples' Security Bureau office. You have to have a special permit to go there, which requires an invitation (typically obtained from a tour company).

We got the paperwork to go to the "Tibet Autonomous Region" by joining a Chinese tour group, which was rather different from the American tour groups on the Three Gorges trip. Our hotel had no hot water (so no shower for 4 days) or heat in the rooms (so we slept in our pile clothes), and the front desk staff sleeps (and maybe also lives) in the lobby. No one spoke a word of English, and there were no English menus in the nearby restaurants. The only thing that saved us was a Japanese student on the trip, Keiko, who is studying Chinese in China. At dinner, we would go from our good English to her bad English, then to her pocket translator to get Japanese and back to English to double check the English, then from Keiko's adequate Chinese to the good Chinese of the waitresses, who converted everything into Tibetan for the cook. It all worked flawlessly. In the process, we taught the English for all of the foods to the Tibetan waitresses, who study Chinese in school but have no opportunity to learn English. The evenings were absolutely wonderful multicultural experiences, and we became almost celebrities by the second night because of our willingness to



Curt, Ann, Keiko and Tibetan waitresses

teach English. On the second night, they even gave us a private dining room and the waitresses cycled through to serve us and get an English lesson. Our money-is-no-object, you're-only-going-to-be-in-Lhasa-once multicourse farewell dinner for the three of us came to US \$8 (that's eight total, not \$8 per person, and we even had the most expensive item on the menu: shrimp). BTW, yak meat is really tough.

The Potala is without qualification the most magnificent building I've ever seen. It is a 3D maze of over 900 rooms filled with priceless art, golden Buddhas, and tombs of many previous Dali Lamas. For example, the casket of the fifth Dali Lama is 13,000 pounds of gold encrusted with countless diamonds and other jewels. Photography is not allowed inside the Potala, so you'll have to go there to see it for yourself. I even received (in exchange for a small donation, of course) a specially blessed prayer flag from a monk in the Potala. My hope was that it would protect me from the taxi drivers.

Tibet is still devoutly Buddhist in spite of the overlay of Chinese communism, and it's the industrial-strength Yellow Hat and Red Hat varieties, not the Zen Buddhism that we have in the US. The monasteries are right out of the middle ages, with chanting monks, yak butter lamps, and floors that haven't seen a mop since the year 700. However, while one monk is chanting a 1000 year old sutra from a 500 year old scroll, the monk next to him may be yakking on his cell phone and wearing a North Face pile jacket over his saffron robe.

The streets are an equally amazing mix of street vendors, pilgrims spinning prayer wheels while circling stupas (I spun prayer wheels with the requisite "om mani padme hum" at every opportunity), beggars, SUVs, yuppies in high-fashion clothes, and nomads in from the high desert for their annual visit to town. Sheep are herded down streets filled with BMWs and trishaws (three-wheeled rikshaw bicycles—the poor person's taxi).

I bought a very nice hand-woven Tibetan wool rug directly from the weaver for \$216. I got pretty good at haggling with street vendors in Chinese, if I do say so myself. Other successes include a small bowl for 50 RMB, down from the 180 RMB asking price, and a filagree box for 40 RMB, down from 120 RMB. Only the most clueless tourist would ever pay more than half of the initial asking price.

You get the idea. Lhasa is the most incredible place I've ever been. It is a sensory overload of sights, smells, sounds, and discordant juxtapositions beyond comprehension by a westerner. Lhasa is indeed the ninth century with cell phones.

When we got back to Chengdu, we celebrated by going to "Peter's Tex-Mex Grill" for a burger and the only iced tea and salad I had in China. I even had chocolate walnut pie for dessert. I'm big on total cultural immersion, but I also wanted to see the local expatriate hangout. The place was full of Intel employees.

Guilin

For our last major side trip, we went to Guilin in south China and did a day boat trip down the Li River. This area is the center of the famed and fabulously beautiful “limestone mountains” seen in many classic Chinese paintings. The surreal landscape around Guilin is some of the most spectacular I’ve ever seen, even though pouring rain prevented good views. This area is also home to several ethnic (non-Han) minorities, which have their own languages, culture, dress, architecture, art, and music. The south-China restaurant menus were much different than in the other places we visited, and there are as many snake dishes in Guilin as there are beef dishes in Texas. My advice: skip the Three Gorges and spend a week here.

Economics and Politics

China is one of the most dynamic, capitalist, free-enterprise nations on earth, if measured in terms of its unrestrained growth. It would be the dream of any 19th century American robber baron. Deng Xiaoping really turned China around after Mao’s disastrous Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution of the late 1960s and early 1970s. As Deng said, “To get rich is good” and “Some will get rich before others.” China has created in the last decade the infrastructure that took over 50 years in the U.S. They have built 12 international airports in the last 10 years, and they’re now building an “interstate” highway system. Over 40 bridges now cross the Yangtze, vs. not one when Mao was alive. Sky scrapers are going up by the dozens in every city. Eighty percent of all the concrete used in the world is being poured in China. Bookstores are filled with translations of every business book imaginable. The reason Intel is building a plant (which will employ thousands of engineers and technical workers) in Chengdu is not for cheap labor, but because they can get the needed engineering talent that isn’t being turned out by U.S. universities. My advice to U.S. students: turn off your brain-dead reality TV show and start learning Mandarin so you’ll have some chance of getting a job after you graduate.

Although business is a free-for-all, China is politically still very much a heavy-handed Communist dictatorship. I’ve read that there are over 50,000 people whose job is to read emails (but who knows how many people are employed by Homeland Security, FBI, NSA, CIA, etc. reading Americans’ email after 9/11). Hotel rooms catering to western businessmen are sometimes bugged. (I have this first-hand from a person who sweeps the rooms for bugs.) When I Googled “Falun Gong” in the US, I got 777,000 hits. When I Googled “Falun Gong” at a hotel in Beijing, I got the message ‘This page cannot be displayed.’ Putting a bumper sticker on your car saying “Hu Jintao is too dumb to know he’s dumb” would not be a good idea, although many cars in Seattle have some variant of the same sticker with Bush’s name instead of Hu’s. Economically, the U.S. is probably lucky that the old-guard Communist Party still dampens Chinese society. If the full creativity and energy of the hardworking and disciplined Chinese were unleashed, they would eat America for economic lunch within five years.

Likes and Dislikes

There were many things I absolutely loved about China:

- Fascinating history, culture, architecture, music, and language. Ann and I are continuing our Mandarin studies, but it's clear that we will never achieve any real competence; tonal, character-based, non-Indo-European Mandarin is just too different from inflected, alphabetic English for real-time processing by our aging brains.
- Nothing is wasted, especially electricity and land. Even office buildings and stores are often unheated; you just wear more clothes. Every available acre is used to grow crops. (China feeds 1.3 billion people on less arable land than the US has for 300 million.)
- Friendly people (don't confuse different customs, such as pushing ahead in lines, for rudeness). I saw no anti-Americanism at all in spite of decades of US hostility to the PRC (Chongqing, for example, has a Joseph Stillwell museum commemorating him and the assistance the US gave to China during the "War Against Japanese Aggression," as WWII is called.) There is however a lot of (officially encouraged) anti-Japanese sentiment, as surfaced publicly in the anti-Japan riots of April 2005.
- Great food, especially in Sichuan. Very little sugar is used in Chinese cooking, so I lost 8 pounds even though I ate like a pig. Surprisingly, rice is not a major component of most meals. It is usually served as a filler at the end of a meal, in case you haven't yet filled up on the good stuff. I saw not one, I swear not one, fat person in the entire country.
- China recognizes the need to control population growth. Their one-child (with many exceptions) policy has been far from perfect and is occasionally amended, but it's at least a serious and concrete attempt to solve the world's most serious problem—overpopulation.
- Air China is the best airline I've ever flown (we did 12 flights within China). I hope they take over United and the other bankrupt U.S. airlines after they go completely out of business. Also, Air China stewardesses are total foxes.
- Crime rates are very low. We never felt the slightest bit unsafe, anywhere or any time. Maybe this has something to do with the fact that drug dealers and other hard-core criminals are promptly executed, as are corrupt politicians and crooked businessmen. (Ken Lay and his buddies would already be dead if Enron had been a Chinese company. Political prisoners, of which there are many, get "re-educated.")

There were things I didn't like:

- There is a huge gap between the urban rich and the rural poor. The streets of any big city are much like in the US: lots of young, well educated, well dressed people talking on cell phones in Starbucks (which plans to have more coffee shops in China than in the US). Farmers, who constitute

50% of the population (vs. 1% in the US), are often wretchedly poor. You still see lots of manual labor, horse-drawn wagons, and shabby housing in the countryside. My guess is that the growing urban-rural inequity will sooner or later lead to upheaval of some sort.

- Air pollution and traffic are bad beyond anything I've ever seen in Los Angeles or Houston. In the cities you often can't see more than a mile or two because of the air pollution, whose primary source appears to be coal-burning power plants.
- Rivers are often used for garbage, raw sewage, and industrial waste; you wouldn't want to go kayaking. From what I've read, environmentalism appears to be growing at the peasant level, because peasants are the ones to have to use the polluted water. The government, however, doesn't invest nearly enough in environmental protection, probably because that might cut into profits (sound familiar?).
- Many people smoke, and the idea of a non-smoking area in a restaurant is unknown.
- Safety is an almost unknown concept. Taxis rarely have seatbelts; bicycles never have lights or even reflectors, and their riders never wear helmets; narrow mountain roads often lack guardrails. The right of way when driving goes to the bravest driver with the loudest horn. China has one-tenth as many cars as the US (25 million vs. 250 million), but four times as many auto accident fatalities (over 150,000 vs 43,000). The Intel plant now nearing completion in Chengdu, which has several hundred thousand square feet, has yet to have a single building inspection.
- Every surface in China is continually being swept, mopped, dusted or polished, except in public bathrooms, which are often filthy. Public toilets have "squat slots" about 6 by 18 inches in size. If your aim is bad, your creation just goes on the floor. (You also learn very quickly that public toilets don't provide toilet paper; everyone carries a small roll of their own. Another tip: make sure your heels are rotated outwards.).
- Censorship and lack of political freedom. At least I get to vote against Bush. There are still an estimated 250 people in prison for the Tiananmen Square pro-democracy demonstrations in 1989.
- Oppression of Tibet. Taiwan has been a part of China forever, and its people are ethnic Han Chinese, just like on the mainland. Chiang Kai-shek was a corrupt warlord whose only competence was in robbing China blind and bilking the U.S. taxpayers out of billions of dollars (read *Stillwell and the American Experience in China*). It's a shame Mao (who, of course, was no angel himself) wasn't able to finish him off after WWII. Tibet is a much different situation. Tibetans are ethnically, linguistically, and culturally distinct from the Chinese and clearly want to be free and independent (witness the anti-Chinese riots of 1959 and the early 1990s and the number of Tibetans who have fled the country). There is a heavy Chinese military and police presence in and around Lhasa, which you don't see elsewhere in China. You're stopped at highway checkpoints when driving between the airport and Lhasa, and bridges are guarded by Chinese soldiers. When we asked our Tibetan tour guide if we could "go for a drive in the country," we were told "that isn't allowed and would cause problems with the Peoples' Security Bureau." But regardless of what the Tibetans and I might prefer, Tibet is definitely now a part of China and is going to stay that way for the foreseeable future (Lhasa, for example, now has more Han Chinese living there than ethnic Tibetans). The Chinese are clearly there to stay (as are various American companies who don't mind making a dollar off of the Tibetans...Amway, for example, has a huge new building in Lhasa).

Another reason I'd like to see Tibet free is that it's a lot easier to say "Tibet" than "Xizang Zizhiqu" (Chinese for "Tibet Autonomous Region").

Well, enough for now. When all is said and done, the positive things I can say about China far outweigh the negative (just as with the US). Ann and I loved China and can't wait to go back. We'll keep you posted. Once more, thanks to Nora and Frank and Keping who made our visit both possible and extraordinary. And one final thing—here is my trip report title and its character-by-character translation (with humble apologies to my honorable Chinese teacher, Mr. Yao, for all errors):

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