



**Lanzhou
Shanghai
Xining**



MONDAY - DEPARTURE:

I think we can usefully skip over the horror of sitting for 13 hours in a cramped plane seat with sickly blood struggling to force its way through tired old veins and wondering whether we might hit a flock of high-flying geese migrating back to Siberia and start at the point when I arrived in Lanzhou. Having said that China Eastern Airlines is very good.

On arrival I could tell it was modern China from the Tibetan monk on his cellphone and again from another cellphone user bellowing into his instrument. Either his co-locutor was 98% deaf or this was just how they do it here.

I finally got out of the airport red zone after completing three forms, all of which had 75% the same data: name, passport number and so on. Apart from anything else I had to attest on one form that I wasn't suffering any horrible diseases. On this form it said: "Any false information will be treated with the utmost severity!" so I was a bit worried at claiming not to suffer from any "psychosis". Still, let's hope the form gets lost in some office somewhere.

I was met by a mini-delegation of people from the host university who had driven 40 miles from the city to meet me

I was very touched and told them I wasn't important enough for such treatment whereupon they insisted I was naive and trusting as I am I took them at their word and spent the rest of today playing the role of someone important. I can see how this can grow on you

The airport is the second furthest from its host city in China (Lhasa is the first) and this is because Lanzhou is surrounded by mountains and so landing a plane is tricky. The fact that the city sits in the bottom of a hole surrounded by mountains also helps to explain its pollution levels. Usually tolerable, the pollution is on occasions so bad that they have a project to completely remove one of the four mountains to let a bit of wind in. (This is China, after all) The landscape on the way from the airport is like nothing I have ever seen before: endless low, barren, earthen, fantastically-shaped hills. The place is clearly crying out for rain.

This area is considered by the locals to be part of the "west" - even though the city is "only" 2.5 hours' flight west from Shanghai - and one sees numerous signs on the road indicating Xinziang and other exotic places. I was wondering how a city came to be here in this rather barren spot, but apparently it was a major staging post for armies either going to or



coming from Mongolia. And of course it was part of the legendary "Silk Road". The Great Wall starts somewhere near here and I'm hoping to get a look at it sometime. I asked my hosts about visiting Lhasa on the new railway, which in places reaches 5,000m high. However, I was told it took 24 hours by train, which wouldn't leave much time out of my weekend and I do not want to see the inside of another plane in a hurry.

2,000 km west of Shanghai? Does one expect to see the road signs in English as well as Chinese characters? Not really, but you do. One of my hosts said: "China is really switched on to globalization." On arrival in the city they took me to what they called their "presidential suite" which sounds a lot grander than it actually is but I was quite touched nevertheless. By the time I'd worked out how to open and shut the double front door (about 10 minutes) and solved the mysteries of the plumbing (15 minutes) I was feeling much more relaxed and - despite having hardly slept for two consecutive nights - I managed to shower and dress for dinner, and off we went to the restaurant. They asked me what sort of food I liked. I was tempted to try a joke and reply "Have you got fish and chips here?" but I wasn't sure if they would find this funny or rude, so I avoided the temptation!





The restaurant was a very large place with beautiful girls waiting at the door a large space inside full of people and lots of children (Okay, Okay - I know kids are people, too!) but we went upstairs to a private room full of Ming vases and dragons - well, the dragons might not have been Mings for all I know.) We sat down at a very large round table, with glass turntable in the middle where the dishes rotate and you help yourself as they go round. Being me, I was trying to work out how you could motorize this thing so that everyone didn't have to play their part pushing it. But of course a motor would mean the same amount of time to attack each dish whereas I was actually quite happy to ensure that the rotation got stuck from time to time with the king prawns opposite me ...

Well, describing food is a bit like describing music; plenty of verbiage but it doesn't really do it.



Suffice to say nonetheless that the taste, colour and variety was out of this world and as far removed from your local takeaway as Katharine Jenkins is from Elizabeth Schwarzkopf. And you have four glasses, tea, corn juice, warm water and wine. In my case, being parched and asked what I wanted I actually told the truth for once instead of just trying to make it easy for everyone and said: "Well if it's not too much trouble a cold beer would do very nicely." This did seem to throw them a bit; they do seem to like their liquids warm.

Well, it eventually appeared but of course I also had to try the local Pinot red wine, which was surprisingly good. "This is great; why don't you export it?" I asked. "It's too good to waste on foreigners," someone said. And we all had a jolly good laugh. If you've never been to China you may not know that a waiter hovers constantly filling up all your glasses as soon as their level dips by more than a centimetre. And apart from that, it is considered very rude to sit there with a full glass.



Luckily, they don't seem to go in for major speeches but every three minutes someone leaps to his or her feet and proposes a toast to their esteemed guest, in this case me My turn came more than once (three minutes passes quite fast when you are both zonked and smashed simultaneously) and I had to propose a toast to the esteemed President for all her kindness and her team and everyone else. I think I was tactful and remembered everyone but to be honest things were a bit of a blur by then ...

Yes, the President is a lady and she has a personal chauffeur AND he was invited to the dinner. Now that's what I call democracy These people are just totally and amazingly friendly and sociable.

TUESDAY EARLY MORNING

This is brief as it's 5.00 in the morning and I've been typing since 3, having woken up for some reason. Could be jet lag or perhaps just the dry throat. Or of course it could be the whiff of sulphur in my nostrils. Yes, sad to say, the Chinese pollution thing is not a myth. I feel it inside me. It was a bright, cool day today and the sky seemed pretty clear, but you need very few parts per million in the air to feel it.

Well, the people are just great. They smile a lot more than many in the west, specially the kids. There is some poverty here of course, though I haven't been out and about much. But everyone looks fit and well-fed and dressed. There are loads of cars, including the occasional Audi and even Porsche ...

I hadn't been to mainland China before, only to HK. If you've never been there, that is an unforgettable place. I really loved HK. I've also been to Taiwan, but I don't spread that news about much

The BBC website is definitely jammed, BTW. Apart from the fact that I can't get it the students confirmed it to me. I said in class: "To practise your reading you should look at the BBC website!". They replied: "We would, but the government blocks it!" At least they KNOW what's going on! It is a very funny feeling for those who live in "freedom" to have a real experience of having the news concealed from them. However, this could be a commercial problem rather than a political one. I believe that Rupert Murdoch has done some sort of deal with the Chinese government regarding his SKY business. All a bit mysterious. I had no trouble accessing CNN for example.

WEDNESDAY EVENING

I survived the day and managed to put on a brave and cheerful face despite the raging headache I woke up with this morning. Self-diagnosis is not always easy and so I don't know if this headache was due to:

- A) the height above sea-level
- B) the pollution
- C) jetlag
- D) old age and general decrepitude or
- E) the vat of beer downed with some students last night.

Suggestions on a postcard

I managed to get food at the uni canteen today with no help - my sign language is coming on leaps and bounds, as is my mastery of chopsticks. The motivation of acute hunger and fear of starvation come into play here. There's not a fork to be seen this side of Shanghai. I did wonder how I would manage the soup but there are in fact little spoons for this which can - if nobody is looking (we westerners like to save face, too!) be used with furtive guilt to scoop up those last tasty morsels which chopsticks would take weeks for





There was this bloke wandering about the canteen with two metal balls he was twirling in his hand and he came up to me and chatted me up"I often see foreigners around the campus," he said, "and I like to talk to them Do you mind me sitting here?" Well, we exchanged language lessons and I learned my word for the day, 'bian' = noodles (I think, but I forget easily - this was four hours ago!) Anyway, 'bian' comes in very handy here.

WEDNESDAY EVENING



It's 18.30 here and I've just had dinner in the students' canteen. One of them met me and said he'd never seen foreigners eating there. I said I like to go native when abroad and besides I couldn't afford to eat anywhere else He seemed both impressed and sympathetic, exactly the reaction I was trying to create

The man with the silver balls was there again. He can twirl them in both directions and in either hand and with his feet while watching telly though he didn't give a demo there and then. (fortunately there was no telly to hand!) I had a go, but by heck they're heavy. He said he learned when he had a bad arm and had to exercise it. It was difficult to do at first but he strove to succeed. I don't think I have ever heard an Anglo-Saxon say that he "strove" to do anything, so I was impressed.



This evening walking back across the campus there was English on the PA; something about some trip somewhere. I could hardly understand it so goodness knows who else did. However, I am astonished to find these people so internationally-minded so far in the hinterland. I'd like to get about more but am mostly so zonked that I sleep when not on an official engagement. At the weekend an outing is planned to Qinghai refreshing.



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"This is China." said one of my students when I asked how to cross the road. There is apparently no official way to do it There seems to be some sort of crossing painted on the road outside the uni but it has been mostly obliterated and no traffic stops under any circumstances. You have to sally between vehicles passing in both directions who hoot if you get in their way Little old men pedal furiously with overladen bikes in the middle of the road and get hooted at incessantly by all the motorized vehicles, causing them to swerve violently towards the kerb.

After class this evening I went out to buy a bottle of beer the street is humming with life with all kinds of exotic foods being prepared on the pavement. The E.U. would close it all down as impossibly unhygienic, but do I see people dying of food-poising everywhere? No, I don't! Do I see them enjoying their food at every opportunity? Yes, I do!







Well, Lanzhou is a fascinating place. The road entering the city isn't too brilliant though. They don't need any traffic policemen to deter speeding; they just don't repair the roads, thus economizing two ways. Anyone "speeding" on the bits I saw would shake both themselves and car to bits in seconds. And you need a loud horn here; every few seconds my driver had a blast at some cyclist veering to the left. The best way to describe the driving style in the city centre is "Dodgems for adults".

I forgot to mention that the city lies astride the Yellow River, cradle of Chinese civilisation. Despite all my weary cynicism, this very fact sort of brings a lump to the throat. One feels both a very long way from home and in a country and region steeped in momentous history.













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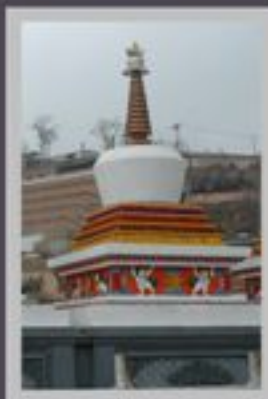




















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