

The Tangential Traveler

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China 1

China's maddening, vexing, fascinating. It's been 11 years since I was last here, and it's totally different, and totally the same. The streets are jammed, as are subways. People drive like homicidal idiots. They push into subway cars far more aggressively than New Yorkers, causing you to act like a roid-raged middle linebacker when you need to get out at your stop.

What is most odd is that this anarchic, dirty, often fetid place, where mother's dress their toddlers in 'split pants' (pants open at the bottom) so that they can squat in the street to freely urinate or defecate when the need arises (sometime this entails dangling them over an open trash bin in a subway station while they spew fecal matter), is so authoritarian. Singapore, with its prohibitions on everything from porno to chewing gum, makes 'sense' to me; it conforms to my concept of an authoritarian regime. China, on the other hand, has this schizophrenic duality: the crushing hand of Big Brother is everywhere, yet the Chinese resolutely refuse to behave. They won't stand in lines. They won't be polite. They won't give ground. They seem, for the most part, bossy and pushy. I cannot count the number of times I was not only pushed and jostled yesterday, but even body-checked by oncoming hordes. On the long line to see Chairman Mao's plaster-like embalmed corpse, people constantly shouldered past us in hyper-aggressive line cutting. It was almost humorous. Almost.

Every subway station has a security team and an airport-style baggage-screening machine. Most every person is totally unwilling to criticize the communist party. History is totally re-written, and decades like the 60's, when the Cultural Revolution ravaged China, simply disappear, in the Orwellian exhibit of China's modern history since its revolution at the recently re-opened National Museum.

Here in America, we spin our history. George Washington is a hero, not, as the Native American's called him the 'Burner of Villages'. Every war we've ever entered into was for freedom, liberty, democracy, not, heaven forbid, to install friendly dictators and cow rebellious peoples to insure our supply of cheap labor, foodstuffs, and raw materials. We spin and spin, but we don't erase decades! And though hard to find sometimes, the interested student can discover that White people invented scalping and colonial American's murdered native men, women and children for bounty money. You can learn that thousands of people flocked to festive picnics to watch lynchings. And about Salvador Allende, the United Fruit Company, the origin of the term 'Banana Republic', the sins of Joseph McCarthy general Curtis Lemay, the crimes of Oliver North and Richard Nixon.

Not so in China. At the national museum, whole decades are missing. There is no Great Leap Forward, no Cultural Revolution. Sure, the old-timers remember, but the little kids from all over China who are lucky enough to come to Beijing and visit the museum? They are never going to know about Mao's failures, or the millions who died and the priceless cultural artifacts that were destroyed because of his policies. Their China is perfect. More amusing/dismaying, their China is ostensibly a glorious Socialist country where class has been destroyed.

The truth, of course, is that China is now an authoritarian capitalist country with a centrally-managed economy, busy privatizing everything in sight, and has been for quite awhile. Old folks are losing their pensions to theft, mismanagement and inflation, and the income distribution inequality in China is close to that of the US. Far from a class-less society, China, like America, is dominated by a small cadre of the very wealthy, and inundated with a huge, poor working class, with a small middle-class in-between. There is, as far as I can see, nothing Socialist or Communist about China. Instead, you have the worst trappings of that world: NewSpeak history, an overbearing, sometimes remarkably brutal authoritarian regime, and rampant corruption, coupled with the venal sins of late-stage capitalism: laissez faire policies that turn the state's back on real privation, undue corporate influence, privatized everything, and a withering away of the welfare state. And by welfare state I don't mean 'Welfare' with a capital 'W'. I mean the social safety net: free medical care, pensions, a guarantee of some acceptable standard of living. That is all withering away in China, if it were ever present, and more and more the country resembles a bubbling cauldron of capitalist greed, excess, and unsustainable consumerism.

One walks the dirty streets, jostled by the rude crowds, watching the absurd traffic jams caused by the most selfish driving behavior imaginable, behavior that makes New York's own aggressive drivers seem sedate and

polite by comparison, and... you get pissed off. You watch the kids encouraged to defecate where they stand, or the teeming crowds smearing every display case in the museums with their hands, and, yes, you can start to think these people, who invented the compass, the printing press, movable type, gunpowder, the seismograph and so many other things, who created, 3000 years and more years ago, the most beautiful bronze work, the most amazing technology, are now merely devolved barbarians. Stupid, pushy, incurious, drone-like. It's not a pretty thought, and it's not fair. It is only part of the picture, but it's the first part you may see.

The National Museum, newly reopened after 10 years, is a prime example. Unlike our museums like the Met or MOMA or the Museum of Natural History, the National Gallery, The Getty, The Smithsonian etc., this museum is almost aggressively user-unfriendly. Not only can you bring no liquids (even a bottle of water) into the museum, not only are you subjected to aggressive security checks, but there's nary a bench or chair in sight anywhere. You walk corridor after corridor, looking at ancient artwork and modern propaganda, and there's nowhere to sit. I think I saw maybe 8 benches in a museum that dwarfs the Met, a museum overrun with hordes of people, jammed in a way the Met never is. You aren't allowed to take photos anywhere, even without flash, though I did sneak some (and got some irate scolding). You are chastised for squatting against a wall in the corner to rest your tired legs, or sitting on the floor to rest feet battered by thousands of square feet of hard concrete floors. You're followed by guards who will aggressively yell at you if you want to take a photo of some gorgeous artifact, but who say not a word to the thousands leaning on the vitrines, smearing the glass with an almost messianic fervor, or at least a stolid, almost bovine disregard. There is a 'snack area' with packaged cookies and soda and (I kid you not) TWO tables. Imagine the Whitney, or MOMA, during a blockbuster exhibit, the kind that packs 'em in, then square it in size, and cube the crowd, and give them TWO tables and some junk food. Is there a nice cafeteria, where one could sit and have an actual meal? A civilized, quiet place to refresh one's self, rest one's feet, and gird one's self for yet more exhibits? Nope. There is an incredibly overpriced 'tea shop', where a cup of Liptons is about 3\$ US (in a city where the subway costs about thirty cents US and a cheap hostel room is less than \$20.00), and a cup of a decent tea will set you back anywhere from \$12.00 on up to.. \$30? \$60? more?

Do I sound grumpy? It's probably the cold, flu, whatever it is that's dogging me. But if one more Chinese guy tries to shoulder me aside and cut in front... Hey, it's funny, here I am, the Ugly American, and I'm a picture of politeness and consideration compared to these people. Except... Except that these same people will chase after you to return your money if you want to give them a tip. Or the folks at our hostel, Peking Downtown Backpacker's, who, when I asked for some salt to gargle with, gave me a half a kilo of salt, worth about a dollar fifty, and absolutely refused payment for it. These people don't follow rules, but easily accede to having their bags checked on virtually every subway ride. They can't carry a knife for protection that way I do all the time in New York (more on that later), but they are free to let their children piss and crap where they stand. They are creatures of contradiction, but so are we. A Chinese person thinks nothing of a kid taking a crap in the street, but the idea of actually sitting on a toilet for 5 or more minutes, reading a book or a magazine while going to the bathroom strikes them as both absurd and abhorrent... and I guess it is! I mean, in nature, you get that business over with as soon as possible, you don't 'sit on the throne' and hang. Then again, in nature, you usually get the business of sex over with as quickly as possible too, and that is just perverse, in my book. Some things are meant to be lingered over...

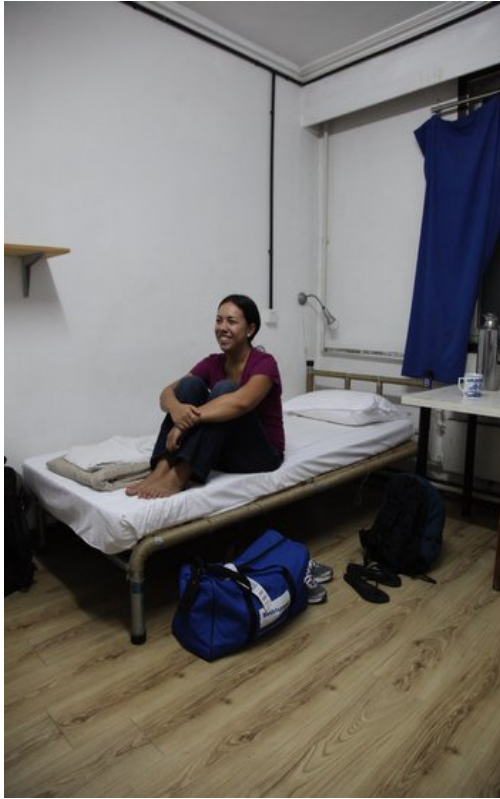
My kids are half Chinese, and my son Daniel has been teaching English on a fellowship for 2 years, and is returning to the US, so I thought I'd take my daughter, Hannah, who has never been to China, here to visit some of her roots (my kids also have roots all over the UK, and in Lithuania, which means that they are paradoxically more and less 'mixed' than I am. More so, because they're Chinese, less so because they're *half* Chinese; I'm not half anything. I'm an eighth this, and a sixteenth that, apparently).

So. we are to travel for three weeks around China, and then all fly back together. The logical starting place was the Capital, Beijing, which I'd visited once in 2000, and Daniel has visited several times.

I was opining to Daniel that I didn't know if I could afford all the hotels at our various destinations, and he suggested hostels. Doh! I guess I thought they were all youth hostels or something, but the vast majority in China aren't. So I reserved rooms in our first to destinations, Beijing and Chengdu. A room for four (including Daniel's girlfriend, who would be with us for the first two days) ran about \$73.00 dollars a day – for four people! That's the kind of price I can deal with!

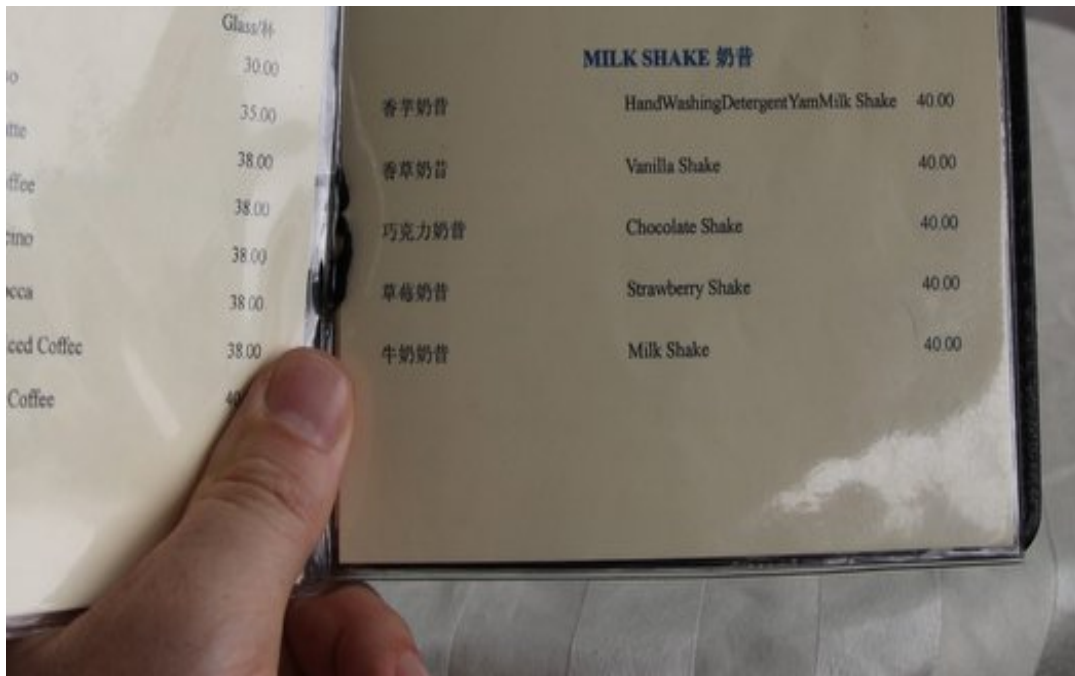
Once Hannah and I finally landed in Beijing, we met up with Daniel and his sweetheart, Alexandra, and headed to our hostel and an evening's meal. The hostel. Peking Downtown Backpacker's, is in a hutong (alley-street) that, though quite touristy, is also so charming, and has so many cool stores, that quite a few Beijing locals frequent it as well. I reminds me a little like a street in the West Village in NYC.

Here's my daughter Hannah, enjoying our Spartan but entirely comfortable digs:



Like all of China, but especially urban centers, the shops and restaurants (and people's tee-shirts) are festooned with mostly non-sensical, English non-sequiturs and 'Chinglish' (chinese-mutilated English). There's the 'Waiting for Godot Cafe'. And a bar called 'Michael Jackson'. And there are storefront signs and tee shirts that say... oh any random collection of English words, I mean RANDOM, like 'Kitty Tune Siesta' random, usually with a cartoon character or a photograph that is equally unrelated and non-sensical.

And then there's World Class Chinglish, like this menu item:



But I digress...

Mao's body, Inviolable.

The next morning, our first full day in Beijing started with a trip to Tiananmen Square to visit Chairman Mao's Mausoleum and view his mortal remains. It's interesting to note that although Mao's been dead for over 30 years, the cult of personality surrounding his is still very strong. When Alexandra asked the cab driver in her Excellent Mandarin to take us to 'Mao Zedong's Mausoleum', he reflexively corrected her: 'Chairman Mao's Mausoleum'. Yes sir! When we got to Tiananmen, at an already broiling 9 am or so, there was a massive line of people snaking around the massive square. I am literally, not figuratively, talking thousands and thousands of people in a long complex zig-zagging line replete with bossy matrons and pugnacious young men all bellowing into bullhorns for us to keep the line straight, not cut the line etc.



Tiananmen, seen from the national museum after the crowds were gone. Those are giant TV Walls down there, projecting everything from patriotic imagery to floral motifs.

Daniel left us there to put my camera and his, and my camera bag into security lockers because no cameras or large bags are allowed into the tomb. Pretty funny, of course, since almost every cell phone in the world is now a camera.

After he left I realized that my trusty Benchmade spring-aided folding knife was still in my pants pocket. Oh shit. Well, I had a tiny little man-purse thing I travel with that goes over my shoulder and holds my wallet and passport and stuff, so I stuffed it in there and hoped for the best.

As we waited, people pushed in front of us from behind. They cut across from the adjacent line too (the line snaked back and forth, so we were cheek by jowl with folks who were much farther in back of us). Parents held their toddlers as they squatted to pee, and perhaps even to shit, though I admit I didn't see that, through their 'Split Pants'. But the line moved, and pretty rapidly. Considering that there were many thousands before us, we only spent I think 2 hours on the line.

Finally we made it to the entrance, where a phalanx of metal detector wand-wielding men and a bank of X-Ray machines awaited. Oh shit! Would I be arrested for smuggling a weapon into Mao's tomb??? Luckily not. The immense press of people apparently precluded a thorough enough search, and we were swiftly herded into the building, past an immense bower of flowers (people sold them outside by the truckload to people on line), and then into the softly-lit tomb itself, where the pickled remains of Mao, like Lenin, sit in a glass vitrine for all to see. What I saw was a hard-looking, strikingly orange face that might as well have been made out of plaster. It

could have been a manikin, for all I new. But, Alexandra's dream of seeing Mao's body achieved, we headed back out into the crowded square, not sure why we'd really spent all that time to get about a 10 second look at an orange.. corpse-like dummy or dummy-like corpse, before being shoo-ed out by the bossy guards and the press of the massive column of people streaming in behind us.

As we left, Alexandra related a tale she swears is true: after Mao died, the preservationists got a little too enthusiastic with the formaldehyde and other embalming chemicals and pumped him up too much. The result was a bulbous mess, more akin to a Macy's Thanksgiving day float than the body of the founder of their country (Imagine George Washington crossed with the Michelin man and you get some idea). I'm sure heads rolled, probably quite literally, and a desperate call echoed throughout the land for... Masseuses! Yes, the bulbous picked remains of Chairman Mao had to be arduously massaged back into shape, the excess juices lovingly squeezed out by those lucky individuals who got to... It beggars the imagination...

Unfortunately, no picture was to be had of the Chairman's remains, either under repair, or as they now lie in state, so you'll just have to imagine them, or not, as your spirit moves you.

And now, the adventure of the National Museum...

So, after recovering from near-sunstroke, massive crowds, and an orange, glass-encased apparition, we headed to the recently re-opened National Museum, which was closed for 10 years while a huge fancy new building (in neo-crypt communist formalist style) was constructed.

Another long line, small in comparison, but quite large compared to what you'd get at a museum at home, and then, the security detail, and this time I wasn't so lucky. Not only was my knife discovered, but it caused a brouhaha. The zealous guard pulled it out, opened it up, brandished it, and kept sort of blithely swinging it around while lecturing us all on its illegality. It was in fact, illegal anywhere in the area of the square! In fact, possibly in all of Beijing, possibly in all of China to carry such a lethal weapon! He was quite clearly enjoying playing with my knife, and I was getting a sinking feeling as Alexandra and Daniel both pleaded in their excellent Chinese to hold it for me and we'd collect it upon leaving. No dice. This knife was now property of the People's Republic of China (or perhaps that of an overzealous guard). My brand new (lost the old one) \$120.00 Benchmade, spring assisted, half plain, half-serrated folder was gone! And the biggest irony of all? I'd not planned to bring my knife to China at all until I downloaded a city guide to Guangdong for my Kindle. It said that more and more tourists had been accosted by knife wielding thugs, and I'd wanted to be prepared. To paraphrase the NRA (for whom I mostly only feel antipathy) "when knives are outlawed, only outlaws will have knives".

Another funny note: My son is constantly being applauded for his good Chinese by the locals, a not uncommon event for even a semi-fluent Westerner (or even someone like me who knows perhaps 30 or 40 words and can string them together semi-coherently). Once I'd said goodbye to my folding friend and we'd entered the museum, Daniel related to us that in the midst of the heated discussion, the guard had turned to him and related his approval of Daniel's Chinese. Oh how nice, you're confiscating my dad's costly knife and you wanna compliment my Chinese... Still, looking at this zealot piously lecture us while he waved my open knife around utterly irresponsibly, I took a perverse pleasure in knowing I'd gotten my knife into Mao's tomb, albeit quite innocently.

Alexandra pointed out that I was probably lucky that it was a museum guard who confiscated it, and not a cop at some subway station, and she's right – I might have gotten arrested. Still, I feel naked without it. Unlike Daniel, I'm paranoid, and consequently, I like to be prepared, perhaps over-prepared. But now my sharp, incredibly useful and handy little friend is gone, and the emboldened thugs of Guangdong remain. No justice, no peace.

Where was I? Oh yeah, the museum.

So, we had to scarf down our water (no liquids allowed), Hannah had to hide her lip gloss and nail polish (no liquids allowed), and finally, we were inside the vast museum. We went to the ancient history section first, and I managed to snag a few shots by sort of tilting my camera from waist height and hitting the shutter. They utterly fail to convey the rich treasure trove of amazing artifacts there. I've only seen one other museum in China with such amazing things, and that's the history museum in Xian, but even they don't have an alien-spacesuit-looking suit of jade plates tied with gold wire, an entire, head-to-toe 360 degree funerary covering. It was thought that by plugging all orifices with jade plugs (yes, all, so use your imagination, then grimace), and then putting the body in this suit, the personage being buried (who I'm loathe to admit, I forget the name and title of) would be

guaranteed immortality. I believe this suit held an emperor, since the threads were gold.

From Wikipedia: For many years, many archaeologists believed that jade burial suits did not really exist and were only [myths](#) or [legends](#). The discovery in 1968 of two complete jade suits in the tombs of [Liu Sheng](#) and [Dou Wan](#) in [Mancheng, Hebei](#), finally proved their existence. The jade suits of Liu Sheng and Dou Wan consisted of 2,498 plates of solid jade connected with two and a half pounds of gold wires.

Of the jade suits that have been found, the pieces of jade are mostly [square](#) or rectangular in shape, though triangular, trapezoid and rhomboid plaques have also been found. Plaques are often joined by means of wire, threaded through small holes drilled near the corners of each piece. The composition of the wire varies, and several suits have been found joined with either [gold](#) or [silver](#). Other suits, such as that of King [Zhao Mo](#) of [Nam Viet](#), were joined using [silk](#) thread, or silk ribbon that overlapped the edges of the plaques. In some instances, additional pieces of jade have been found beneath the head covering, including shaped plaques to cover the eyes, and plugs to fit the ears and nose.



According to the [Book of Later Han](#), the type of wire used was dependent on the station of the person buried. The jade burial suits of emperors used gold thread; princes, princesses, dukes, and marquises, [silver](#) thread; sons or daughters of those given silver thread, [copper](#) thread; and lesser aristocrats, silk thread, with all others being forbidden to be buried in jade burial suits. Examination of the known suits, such as the two found in [Mancheng](#), has revealed that these rules were not always followed. Considering the vast size of the country, and the relatively slow means of disseminating information, it is not surprising that the materials and techniques used in a jade burial suit occasionally differed from the official guidelines.

A jade burial suit was extremely expensive to create, and only [wealthy](#) aristocrats could afford to be buried in them. Additionally, the process of manufacturing a suit was labor intensive and is estimated to have required several years to complete a single suit.

Some other goodies:



A ceramic eagle-shaped urn



A bronze urn with climbing leopard handles, and an entire village scene of highly detailed houses and people on the lid.



I love this statue with the elongated arms. It reminds me of Matisse's dancers, somehow



A grisly spear (sorry it's blurred) with two dead bodies dangling from it by chains.

Then it was on to the huge display of Chinese history, from the colonization of the Chinese by various powers, boxer rebellion, opium wars, the fall of the last empire in the early 20th century, through the struggle against the Japanese during WWII, the fight against Chiang Kai-Shek's nationalists after the war, the glorious founding of

the Socialist Republic, on through the rest of the 20th century to the present.

It's quite a piece of rampant propaganda. From the disastrous Great Leap Forward, which prohibited private farming and caused huge economic damage and famine, to the harrowing Cultural Revolution, which was a self-immolation of the Chinese intellectual and cultural heritage – I remember a temple in Gaoping I saw, where literally thousands of Buddha stone sculptures had had their heads cut off by revolutionary zealots during this period – where intellectuals and artists and writers were pilloried, tortured, re-educated, millions were killed and forcibly relocated: all of these mis-steps and self-induced catastrophes were utterly missing from the exhibit. A young person seeing this would never know of the mistakes of Mao and others. China appears infallible, as do its leaders.



Battle Diorama



A headlong Revolutionary charge under fire across a bridge.

Then on to another display, almost entirely of paintings like the one above, that is, images from the Revolution. Some of them were really quite good. There's one of citizen peasant-soldiers struggling across a raging river, under fire, with a woman gasping as the person she's been trying to save is slipping under the waves in front of

her, that was really very emotionally affecting, and painted with great style Another of men struggling across a chain bridge was also very well executed stylistically and emotionally gripping. But it seemed to me that whomever had curated this exhibit had really bad taste: all of my favorite paintings way up high in the second tier near the ceiling.

A long first day, and frustrating for me, because I have very little in terms of imagery to show you. But we'll finish on a mouth watering note.

My son took us all out for Peking Duck and other goodies at truly, awe-inspiringly excellent restaurant. We had the most delicately seasoned, lovingly prepared 'kale' (not what we call kale, but what we call Chinese Broccoli, a favorite of mine), braised in a delicate sauce with a hint of garlic, soy, and Chinese cooking sherry:



We also had Peking Duck of course, which I neglected to take a picture of. It was more delicate and leaner than the Peking Duck I have in Chinatown in New York City (I actually think I like both varieties about equally). And an amazing, wondrous, soft bean curd in saffron sauce that I also forgot to snap a picture of (too busy oohing and ahing)

We finished the night off with Lichees and melon over dry ice and smoky mung bean ice cream.



More soon...