

The Tangential Traveler

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China 2 – The Great Wall Kicks My Ass...

So, before we get to the wall, we'll talk slack day. I arrived in China a bit under the weather. Added to that, Daniel had just seen his sweetheart off on her voyage, not to be reunited for a year, and wasn't exactly in ebullient spirits either, so it seemed that it might be a nice idea to scale back the 2nd day's activities. Instead of the Forbidden city or the Summer Palace, both of which I'd wanted to show to Hannah, we took a meandering walk to the old Imperial Lake area, which is less manically crowded than most of Beijing. It's quite lovely, lined with trees and, yes, gauche bars for foreign tourists, little hole-in-the wall noodle shops for locals, and some pleasant, less gauche restaurants, for domestic tourists, at the bottom of the lake, away from the 'party' district.



A rare sight: A government guard acting human. They're usually ramrod straight and utterly immobile, for hours!



Tourist Debris: Chairman Mao and Loyal Socialist Obama
All those right winger's conspiracy wet dreams confirmed!



Mr. Li - the king of "California Style Beef Noodle Bowl" – inventor and chief monger of an apocryphal American dish that has made him the very rich 'Colonel Sanders' of China.



Handsome bridge over the canal at the head of the old Imperial Lake, shot from a hideous steel monstrosity of a bridge right next to it.



Wedding Day on the lakeside



A pleasant respite from the madness of crowds (more on this later).

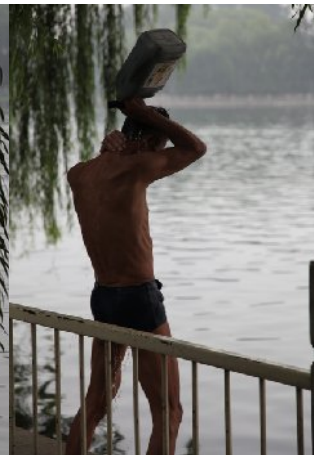
Another example of Chinese contempt for the rules, and the look-the-other-way-for-minor-stuff attitude of the authorities:



Detail of a warning sign that says no swimming.



And... lots of people were swimming, actually, though I only caught one.



Washing off the very toxic lake nastiness post-swim. Yuck!

The next day, it was time to tackle the 'roughest part of the Great Wall near Beijing'. I'd hiked part of the Great wall eleven years ago, Near Badaling, the most touristy, densely visited section. On the day I went, in November, it had been wonderfully empty, and cold, and hiking hadn't been much of a problem, though we hadn't gone that far. This time we were supposed to do 32 or so watchtowers, something like 6 or 7 kilometers, which still really didn't sound like much. True, I'd been sick for over a month with a cold and then the flu, and I was still a little ill, and true it was not November, but a very hot and humid July, but I wasn't too concerned.

We had a long drive, several hours, out of the grim, rusty, dusty concrete block apartments, endless billboards, power pylons, and dense smog of Beijing into the equally beat-up, concrete-crumbly, dirty, and almost as hazy countryside. On and on we plunged, up and up into the mountains in our completely-jammed van.

Up into the mountains where seemingly every little wrinkled furrow and arroyo held corn or bean or melon crops. People have truck gardens *everywhere* in China: Behind the Wal-Mart store, in the no-man's land of a highway cloverleaf, and every fold and pocket valley in the mountains. Which got me thinking about corn, and potatoes, and tomatoes – three staples of China, thoroughly integrated into the Chinese diet, but originally natives of the New world. When did they arrive, and what, if any effect did they have on China's population?

It was generally accepted that corn and the rest arrived in China some 45 years after Columbus' voyage to the New World. And it is still believed that tomatoes and potatoes did arrive that way (along with Syphilis, which arrived in China in 1505, an astounding 13 years after Columbus' voyage – one of two theories posits that his crew brought the disease back from the New World). However, an herbal book completed in China in that same year, 1505, shows

clear illustrations of a plant closely resembling corn already being cultivated in remote areas of China. It seems unlikely that a plant would spread nearly that far, that fast, so some believe that the Chinese navy of old (which had ships reputedly nearly as large as modern aircraft carriers) visited the New World and brought Corn (Maize) back, or some other unknown traders with New World, quite possibly from the West coast of Africa, passed it along the Silk Road to China. For more info see: http://yakushi.pharm.or.jp/FULL_TEXT/125_7/pdf/583.pdf

Whatever the source, the introduction of corn to Northern China meant the addition of a very quick-growing, calorie-dense staple to the already-existing Northern Chinese staples of wheat and winter wheat, which resulted in a stunning population explosion in Northern China (the potato also had a similar, though less explosive affect as a new staple). Columbus, or some other trader(s) lost in the mists of antiquity bequeathed a boon to China. However, there is an ironic twist: Columbus also brought back tobacco, and nearly *every* adult man in China (and a growing number of women) smokes with the same careless disregard for mortality that they display when driving their cars and motorbikes (almost always sans helmets, often with multiple toddlers casually hanging on), and even walking across their anarchic, traffic-strewn streets. In fact it is estimated that very soon China will have more people suffering from lung cancer than the rest of the world put together. Columbus giveth, and Columbus taketh away...



Our van to the Great Wall. Pull-down jumper seats fill the aisle, utilizing every square inch of space.

We finally arrived and walked from the parking area to the wall, where things went awry very quickly. Within 20 or 30 stairs, my daughter Hannah, a robust 22 year-old who exercises regularly, was out of breath and dizzy. Another 20 more and so was I, stumbling on instantly rubberized legs, gasping for air, and bathed in sweat. What the hell was wrong here? Daniel was fine; Fit as a fiddle, and probably annoyed that he had to wait (forever) for us.

It is hard to conclude what exactly the issue is but I suspect it's one of constitution. The humidity was near 100%, and although I exercise a lot, I tend to avoid it completely in high heat and humidity, not consciously, but because I seem incapable of either generating energy or keeping cool enough in that type of weather. Hannah apparently has a similar constitution, while Daniel does not (interestingly Daniel appears more 'Asian' to most people than Hannah does as well) The Chinese say I have a lot of 'Damp' in my body. I think that means, among other things, that I cannot efficiently extract oxygen from humid air, hence dizziness, weakness, and nausea.

Now, don't get me wrong, it's a hard up and down climb, but I hike all the time at home, often up steep trails, and I never recall feeling ill like this in minutes. I don't know what the altitude was up there, but perhaps we were also up high enough for the air to be slightly thinner. Add in a serious chest cold and I had the perfect storm. I was amazed, appalled, embarrassed, humiliated, and disgusted. I was pretty sure that since I'd just stumbled up and across only one of the 22 towers (thankfully, the route had been reduced due to reconstruction work), and was barely erect, that there was no way I could complete the trek. However, going slowly, with very frequent pauses for breath, and to cool off from the oppressive heat (thankfully, a breeze often wafted across the parapets), I did make it... barely.

The backdrop to all of this unexpected drama was the Great Wall itself. Just as with the first time I saw it in 2000, my visceral reaction to the Wall was mouth-agape, dropped-jaw awe. Photos just cannot connote the achievement of it;

One must stand there, on the steep wall, with its vastness rippling away into the distance, up and down the incredibly steep and rugged mountain range, to really experience it. No photo or video can suffice, but we'll try...



We climbed all of the wall you see here, up and down and up and down from the bottom center foreground all the way to the last tower you see on the upper right, and beyond.

There were level parts, but precious few of them. Some of the slopes were quite steep, and often the walkway was broken or completely missing. Due to an old spinal cord accident, I am pretty clumsy, so along with the unexplainable exhaustion, I felt absurdly challenged trying to finish a hike I'd expected to be a moderate bit of exercise. Having lost a dear friend and also a close relative in the last month, I felt preoccupied by my mortality. Only poor Hannah's shared distress ameliorated my neurotic worries. She is young, and in pretty good shape; Whatever was crippling us was more a matter of climate, maybe altitude, and perhaps germs, than decrepitude...



All along the watchtower...



Steep climbs up broken battlements.



Finally, last of the entire tour group, I struggled up the last slope and then undertook the long rubber-legged descent off of the wall down to the parking area, about another half hour of slogging through the heat, but mostly thankfully downhill.

But my envy of my son and all of the other young, fit, unfazed folks blithely trotting over the uneven, steep slopes aside, it was still worth it, both for the wall itself, and the mountains, and for the... victory, after a fashion. I'd been presented with a totally unexpected obstacle, and exhausted to near puking, I'd pretty much been sure I'd have to turn back. But I (and Hannah) overcame it. A man's got to know his limits, something I learned the hard way when my spinal cord was crushed and my brain damaged at age 32, and I was suddenly transformed for a time into a feeble-minded 90 year old quadriplegic who couldn't even remember his own phone number, let alone wipe his own ass. It is a lesson we must all learn constantly as we get older, no matter what our level of fitness; If we become overtly attached to the present, the inevitable physical decline of the future will be a much more bitter pill to swallow than it has to be.

The spasticity and loss of tactile sensation, the clumsiness and occasional unsteadiness I've lived with for 19 years now is a part of me, and I've now lived with it long enough that I no longer know what is 'the accident' and what is merely getting older. I am only 51, and certainly a bit clumsier than a 'normal' 51 year old, but the body is so adaptable, and it so seamlessly substitutes different muscles, neural pathways and movements to accommodate debility, that I simply cannot know what I'd have been like physically if I hadn't experienced my injuries; I am as indivisible from them as I am from all of my experiences.

But I do know that I would never, ever have been as grateful for my life, my relative health, the miracle of my body and its mobility if I'd never fallen off that bike. All of the rest since then, all of it, from relearning to walk, feed and clothe myself to SCUBA diving, hiking and relearning how to play the guitar, has been an unexpected gift of the greatest magnitude imaginable, and I am grateful for every single day in a way I never was before my accident.

And I also know that although I certainly don't welcome getting older and weaker, I think I can accept it more easily than some, because I am decades younger than I was 19 years ago. I lost so much, that what I've gotten back feels like a gift of grace. I know what it's like to get old already, and I've been lucky enough to radically turn back the clock. But in the long run we will all experience the debilities of aging to some degree or another if we are lucky to live long enough. I will be experiencing them for a second time, so I am at least a little bit forewarned, and thus forearmed.

I can keep exercising, and get back to my Quipong (Chi Gung) practice to forestall and possibly even reverse some of it, but I will grow older, Gods and Goddesses willing, and all I can hope for is that earned wisdom, love for and of family and friends, the joys of creating, loving, sharing, learning, and cultivating the fine art of contentment will be adequate compensation for the loss of a certain amount of strength and vitality. It is manifestly obvious to me that I am much, much happier now than that ripped, strong 32 year old was before his accident, so the losses have already been more than offset.

And I have two fabulous kids to share this adventure with too, as well as a wonderful sweetheart waiting back home for me.

I am truly blessed.