CHINA PENNYWALK

by

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As a child I loved pennywalks, tossing a penny at every corner, heads go right, tails go left, unless a different direction seems better. Although I no longer use a coin, I haven't outgrown the game.

And I haven't outgrown the suspicion that there's reason behind chance, behind where I happen to step, what I happen to see, whom I happen to pass on the street, or sit next to on the plane. Like the man on my left at the moment. He's clasping his hands over his nose almost as if he were praying, then banging his fist rhythmically on the window ridge. He must be afraid of flying. He just dumped his peanuts out of the foil bag, making a neat little pile in the middle of his napkin. He probably wants to know exactly what to expect, doesn't want to be taken by surprise, to stick his finger in the bag and find there's nothing left.

If so, he's the opposite of me. It's the surprises that animate life. Too much salt, a bit of mold, a hint of honey, every package is loaded with unknowns, whether peanuts or people, strangers or friends. Including my husband.

Life with Adolph's a pennywalk, even when he's out of town. While he was in New York last week, I decided to change our bedding. Usually it's a joint project since we both hate to do it. I dropped the top sheet into the laundry basket, the bottom sheet, my outer pillowcase, thinking I should have checked the linen closet first. The pillowcases have been missing recently. Maybe the kids took them. Eli could have some in Taiwan, Joshua in Portchester, Sarah in Brooklyn, Rosenblatt pillowcases all over the world. I dropped my inner case into the laundry basket, musing on the patterns, roses, daisies, stripes, nothing in our house matches. I took off Adolph's outer case, his inner one, there was another. I removed that, Lilac watching and wagging her tail. There was a fourth. I chuckled. A fifth, a sixth, a seventh, our pillowcases aren't all over the world, they're all on Adolph's pillow. An eighth, I was laughing so hard the dog got upset and ran out of the room.

I already knew Adolph ignores details. It took me 27 years to notice that sometimes he doesn't change his dirty case, just puts a clean one over it.

So, is it merely chance? Today's coin toss sat me next to a man who wants to know exactly when his peanuts will run out, while I'm thinking about pennywalks, thinking my life is a grab bag of surprises.

And predictability.

Music of the fifties awakens Adolph and me at 5:30 every morning. Depending on tune and mood, I'll hobble or dance out of bed; Adolph usually sleeps a little longer. I might do yoga, he won't; I'll definitely swim, he might. Whatever the weather, I'll bike the half mile to the Shorewood Pool. Whatever the weather, he'll drive.

Biking makes each day an adventure; after all, this is Wisconsin, land of thirty below and ninety above, of rainstorms, of blizzards, of sleet. If the sunrise is spectacular, I'll detour past Lake Michigan. If the morning is dark and frigid, I'll wonder about that elusive line between discipline and madness. As I stand at the water's edge, cotton in ears, goggles over eyes, two caps on my head, I might wonder some more. I doubt Adolph does. If he's there, he's plowing back and forth in the diving well, no cotton, no cap, no goggles. He swims fifty widths, I swim forty lengths.

Then breakfast. Adolph has coffee with cream and sugar; I drink mine unsweetened and diluted. He has an apricot houmentaschen; I have a bran muffin. He reads the TIMES first,

then gives it to me. Actually he delivers it to me. For he has his breakfast at Benjy's Kosher Deli; I have mine at the Oakland Cafe. In fact, I spend the whole morning there, for that's where I write. He spends the morning sculpting.

Neither of us like ivory towers. He lugs fifty pounds of clay to the bleachers for Brewer games, to cow pastures, swimming pools, alleyways, restaurants; or he invites people to pose at his studio. I write in cafes, libraries, airplanes, anywhere but near my telephone. I paint and draw along the lakefront, in parks, department stores, in darkened theaters. Instead of working in peace and quiet, we immerse ourselves in the world around us.

That's how our art comes about, by combining discipline, chance, and the vagaries of our minds. We've got to be there every day, playing with clay, paint, or words when the wild image appears. In the arts, as in science, the clue to discovery is taking advantage of accidents. A slip of the tongue may improve a poem, a slip of the hand may add life to paint. The unconscious mind may form images that the controlled, conscious mind could never create. I count laps, I pedal, and my thoughts drift. The exercise before I write allows me to peek into the part of my mind that knows much more than I think I know, remembers everything I've forgotten, recognizes my feelings, and organizes my life into metaphors and symbols.

Dreams are similar peeks; they're proof that every human mind is creative. Right before my fortieth birthday, I had one that changed my life:

I was searching in the dark for the bus stop. I had to get the number eighty, it was the only way to get home. My feet led me, over concrete, gravel, clay, through a cornfield, over twigs and underbrush, and finally to a bed of pine needles where I fell asleep.

When I awoke, light was seeping through pines, and the world was transformed. I walked along roads totally new yet hauntingly familiar, and arrived at home exhausted and exhilarated. I didn't even notice that the number eighty had passed me by.

The dream was so vivid I wrote down every detail in the middle of a June night in l977. The following day I wrote a short story. Then another. Strange, I was a painter, not a writer. Then another. I wrote ten short shorts in a week. It was unsettling. After twenty years of trying to establish myself as an artist, why was I suddenly writing?

I guess it was another version of pennywalking. Not only had the dream told me to take another path, it was so intense it became the path. Popping into my mind a few days before I turned forty, it showed me a new route to eighty.

Adolph and I used to pennywalk with our children in unfamiliar parts of Milwaukee. Years later the five of us traveled in Mexico with a similar attitude, never sure where we were going until we got there. Maybe that's why Eli's job at a Chinese restaurant led us all to China.

He scrubbed soy sauce from plates, peeled shrimp, learned how to cut broccoli and bok choy on a bias and to sauté vegetables in a wok; he picked up a few words of Chinese from the cooks. Eventually he moved to Taipei.

Adolph, Sarah, Joshua, and I visited him for a week that July. From there the five of us went to China. Sarah's a poet, Eli and Joshua are painters, none of us live according to an itinerary. We extended our pennywalk half-way round the world.

THE FIRST TRIP
1985

I don't know why I'm doing this, why I chose to leave my secure routine and thrust us all into the unknown. Of course that's how we learn, stepping into the unknown, not that there's anything else.

So now we're at the Korean Airlines gate in Kennedy Airport, excitement palpable. We board in a half hour, then Anchorage, Seoul, Taipei.

The aerial view of Alaska is startling: bleak, snow-covered crags jutting above the cloud layers, difficult to tell where clouds leave off and snow begins in that wild, eerie landscape. It's 4:30 A.M. and light in the land of the midnight sun. Intriguing to think of the lives being lived in that vast wilderness below. And of the lives soaring above it. This is a monstrous 747, about 500 passengers jammed in. One man fled China during the Revolution in 1948 and is returning now to visit his brother and sister for the first time. How many other dramas are heading towards the Orient?

A young American buys silks in Shanghai and fur hats in Harbin, rabbit, muskrat, sheepskin; then he loads his old Mercedes and peddles bits of China in the States. The minister seated in front of me founded a Cantonese-Presbyterian church in Queens. Raised in America, he feels only half Chinese. He can step out and look at the Chinese character, at the passivity and the collective mentality. He says the word for individual was coined in Chinese only seventy years ago.

Now I'm in the plane from Seoul to Taipei. The woman sitting next to me speaks only Korean, so we converse in mime, discussing the ages of our children and of her grandchildren, looking at photos. I suspect she's never before flown, for she watches me carefully to see how to lower the tray. She squeezes salad dressing onto her lettuce only after she sees me squeeze mine, uses her toothpick after I use mine, takes off her shoes...

Trudging along Taipei's tiled sidewalks for the first time, heartburn gnawing under my rib-cage, ankles swollen from forty hours in planes and airports, I found myself counting the days we had to survive to make it home alive. The heat was oppressive, and I dreaded the end of each block, where we'd have to cross the street. Imagine taking two million people, throwing them into a pot with two million motorcycles, and turning up the heat. That's Taipei.

The main streets here are too wide and traffic-stricken to be picturesque; the side streets are fascinating, seething with lives I can't begin to imagine, nor can they imagine mine. Snake Alley is the epitome of things exotic, that's where Eli took us tonight. A chimpanzee tortures a turtle to entertain passers-by. Hawkers kill pythons and god-knows-what other snakes, and men drink the blood to increase potency. They drink snake blood, then visit the back streets, the narrow, winding back streets that stun the eyes with a burst of light and activity, wide doorways dazzling with red fluorescence, not really doorways but wide, doorless openings exposing small anterooms and lithe bodies in filmy dresses.

Sarah and I were the only females there besides the whores. Women, young and old but mostly very young, waited, smiled, grabbed at the throngs of unsavory men. A teenage girl slapped the back of my hand, angrily. Did she hate me for not having to sell myself? I rubbed the touched spot against my blue jeans.

Adolph and I walked the Taipei streets at dawn, intimidated at first since all signs are written with Chinese characters. We memorized every turn, picking out landmarks. We each had a card with the address of the "Y" where we're staying written in Chinese.

We found the perfect spot not too far away, a lovely park with trees and ponds and bandstands; an arched white footbridge spanned a lagoon filled with fish and turtles and rimmed by weeping willows. People of all ages, though mainly middle-aged and older, were stretching, twisting, bending, under every tree, behind every bush, out in the open and in every isolated cranny. A deep voice with no visible source boomed out instructions in Chinese, yi, er, san, ci, one, two, three, four. I lay my purse in the grass and joined in, rolled my head slowly from side to side, then my torso, down, around, and up. Plies, twists, every muscle did its share before we ended with some slow deep breaths and a universal grunt that resounded like the bark of a pack of dogs.

It's hard to figure out what to have for breakfast, a cold and greasy fried egg on a slice of white bread, doughy dumplings, oil-soaked vegetables, pastries with inlaid frankfurters and chives. On our first morning we bought soup from a street vendor who set up tables and stools on the sidewalk, a tasty soup with spaghetti noodles, pork-filled wantons, scallions and other greens. But what are we doing to ourselves, eating at delightful spots that common sense tells us to avoid?

Eli wishes he had learned more Chinese. Still, what he does know makes a difference. It's a dream, hearing my son speak in sounds and tones I can't even imitate. Everything here is a dream. In ASIA, that's where we are, in Taipei, a twentieth-century city gone haywire, inhabited by motorcycles with human appendages and by Japanese cars that move as if they were operated by remote-control buttons.

With its tumult of traffic and humans, with its foul air and sooty buildings, Taipei sometimes reminds me of Mexico City. The people though seem very different, gentler, perhaps more passive, we feel safer here. Mexico is a macho society. What is this one?

I'm not learning enough, walking the streets which are fascinating but only streets, talking mainly to my family and to those who approach me to practice their English.

Today we wandered through a more prosperous area; we could have been anywhere in the world. Modern shops selling dresses, shoes, luggage, cameras, affluence is the great homogenizer. So, I guess, is poverty.

Main streets, side streets, little shops, vendors, then we unexpectedly come upon crowded courtyards with ornate columns, carved dragons, and seated Buddhas under pagoda-style roofs. Worshippers wave bouquets of burning incense sticks; the smell permeates the air. Coils of incense spiral from the ceilings; believers kneel, bow, leave offerings of fruit. Robed monks watch, write, pray, perhaps wondering about my life as intensely as I wonder about theirs.

Wherever I happen to be, I'm always intrigued by the little vignettes that have no nationality. Like the tall slim woman in high heels and lipstick carrying a box which I'm sure contained a large birthday cake. She'd rush past me, propelled by the weight of the cake, the excited birthday boy trying hard to keep up. Then she'd stop and gasp and rest her burden, and I at my snail's pace would pass her by. Then she'd whisk past me, then I'd shuffle past her. She never let on that she noticed me.

What I enjoy most is the calisthenics. This morning Sarah, Adolph, and I arrived at 5:55. People were loitering, glancing at their watches. At exactly six a whistle blew, and we all faced east, hundreds of us, most standing exactly where we stood yesterday, hints of recognition in our smiles and glances.

Sarah and I are sitting in the park on a cast-iron bench near the lagoon this sultry Saturday afternoon. The heat subdues, or maybe Taiwanese children are quieter than American. The weeping willows extend over the water almost horizontally, making the reflections appear three-dimensional. I'm writing in my own personal shorthand, curves, straight lines, dots. A woman has been peering over my shoulder for a half hour, trying to figure it out, not Chinese, not French, she can't believe it's English. She calls others over to look, pushes back my hair, tells me my daughter is beautiful, and stares at my mysterious script, never suspecting that my script is describing her actions.

Adolph won an argument with me two days ago and turned the air-conditioner way up. Now he's sick. Yesterday he stayed in bed while the rest of us visited two of Eli's students. We left our shoes at their door, put on thongs, then sat on a couch facing a TV console, their young son watching shyly, their niece climbing on the backs of chairs and on the window-sill. We ate sweet, crisp Chinese pears and gleaned the outer facts of each other's lives. He works the night shift, she the day, they're at home together two hours of each twenty-four, except on Sundays. They're saving to visit America, studying English with Eli. The Taiwanese government may or may not let them out.

They brought us to a nearby restaurant, private room, food ordered ahead, fish, duck, beef, pork, shrimp, a feast for their guests, while they ate very little. Then we all went to a Chinese beauty parlor. Sarah, our hostess, and I stared into mirrors as strong fingers massaged our soapy scalps. The men waited in a separate parlor, eating pears and sipping tea.

Perhaps the insects that are making so much noise overhead are cicadas rubbing their wings together. At first I thought they were flocks of birds. I can't see them anywhere, yet wherever there are trees, there's an irritating racket.

The smells of this city are mainly exhaust fumes, overlaid with garbage, sewage, urine, and cooking oil. The street sounds are those cicadas scraping, motors, horns, and screeching brakes, voices shouting in Chinese, music blaring. Today I heard Cat Stevens in a clothing stall.

Fastened onto most buildings are brightly-colored vertical signs several stories high with large Chinese characters. Below these are small shops, bakeries, hole-in-the-wall restaurants, food cooked outside in woks, fancy coffeehouses featuring exotic grinds, vendors on walks and curbs selling shoes, glasses, hats, shirts, newspapers, dumplings, soups, fruits. Still, the sidewalks are predominantly parking lots for motorcycles. Motorcycles and scooters outnumber cars four to one in Taiwan. And in Taipei the cyclists drive, as well as park, on the walks, weaving through crowds of pedestrians. They ride the wrong way on one-way streets, sneak through red lights, and cut in front of buses and cars. Many wear white surgical masks to filter the air, a few wear helmets as they swarm along the thoroughfares and side streets. Eli has seen several accidents.

All the traffic's crazy. Drivers make left turns on red; there are through lanes that don't require a stop on red. Cars, cycles, scooters, bikes, everyone surges ahead about thirty seconds before the light turns green. People tell me in low voices that the Kuomintang controls every aspect of their lives, no freedom of press nor of speech. They do seem to have freedom to drive however they see fit. A driver who injures a pedestrian has to make payments to him till he dies; supposedly some drivers back up and run over their victims again to make sure they're dead.

I'm certainly a curiosity as I sit here in the park on a Sunday afternoon. Several women across the path whisper together, then all turn around and stare at me. A small boy with big eyes can't stop looking, hides behind his mother's legs and peeks again. Perhaps it's my blond hair, rare in Taipei, and today it's a massive mane, thanks to the Chinese beauty parlor.

I love my early morning routine. When I leave the hotel before 6 A.M., the streets are free of the usual chaos. The men who vend or deliver newspapers sit on the sidewalks and sort their wares, then pile the papers onto bikes or motor scooters, dozens of newspapermen, mainly old, some reading the news before they start out. Food peddlers pound dough for dumplings, heating oil in their woks. Men wash themselves, basins right out on the sidewalk.

Shen is Eli's closest Taiwanese friend. He's helped Eli in tight spots, and Eli helped him by cooking American breakfasts in a vain attempt to save Shen's failing restaurant. Now in his late 20's, he joined the army at 13. The restaurant was one of several businesses he's started and lost since then. He appears unfazed, but is he?

He's a tall, skinny, energetic man with mischievous eyes and a pixie smile. One minute he's animated, very quiet the next.

He met us this morning at a Buddhist temple in the mountains outside of Taipei, and from the moment we arrived for the rest of the day, he hosted us. Whatever we tried to buy, he hustled to pay for. Had we ever tasted passion-fruit juice? He bought us some. Hot chestnuts, sodas, guava juice, Eli kept whispering, "He's always this way."

At noon he led us down the temple's stone steps, dank and musty, I expected rest rooms, instead found the monks' dining hall, where a table was already set with a vegetarian meal for us, melon soup, tofu, overcooked vegetables, rice.

Then we squeezed into Shen's tiny car, and gas and gravity propelled us down the mountainside. I grasped the back of his seat and gasped as he sped around a blind curve. He smiled, "Ah, I know who I'm dealing with," slowed down, and drove us safely to his home.

His mother silently shook our hands, she couldn't speak English, and went into another room. His shaggy dog skittered over the waxed marble floor, sniffed us, and left. Shen filled the coffee table with plates of lichees, bananas, watermelon, and pears, and glasses of Coke. He smoked cigarettes as we ate. Then he took us out to dinner, duck, shrimp, pork, fish, he watched while we feasted. After that, disco-dancing at a Taiwanese nightclub, he watched while we danced. When Adolph and I were tired, he sent us to the "Y" in a prepaid cab. Could he afford it all, did he enjoy it all, I wish I knew.

Flying from Taipei to Hong Kong with a fever of 102 was not in my original plans. Josh and I were burning up, Eli wasn't much cooler, Adolph was in the recovery stage. This flu seems to have definite steps: first a slight sore throat and headache, then a nose that runs like it's peeing, then a high fever, then a cough.

From Hong Kong to Canton you can take a plane, hydrofoil, ferry, express train, or local train, the cheapest is local train. That's how we went.

Everyone relaxed on the ride to the Chinese border. When we arrived the crowd sitting calmly in the train became a mob, rushing, shoving, sprinting with bags and babies, climbing barriers, combining, like egg whites and yolks under a beater, with passengers from preceding then succeeding trains, thousands of people, mainly overseas Chinese, scrambling towards customs. The throngs would surge forward a few hundred feet, everyone jockeying for

position, then wait fifteen or twenty minutes, each person in a space not much larger than his feet, then surge, luggage becoming lethal, especially in the hands of old ladies, then wait, people sneezing, coughing, sweating.

After two hours of alternate surges, we came to the end of the line, to officials examining passports, checking visas, handing out immigration forms, health forms, declaration forms, and forms with no apparent purpose. Everything filled out, inspected, stamped, at last we were officially in China, hot and exhausted and anxious to catch the 12:30 train to Canton.

That was the next surprise, the throngs buying tickets, shoving, cutting in, arguing. I waited almost an hour, patiently, I'd been forewarned to be patient in China. I finally reached the clerk way too late for the 12:30.

"Five tickets on the 2:08 train, please."

She said it was full.

"So when is the next one?"

"5:30."

"What about the 3:50?"

"It's full."

"What about the 4:30?"

"It's full."

We were spending our first day in China in the train station.

"Are you sure there's nothing on the 2:08?" I listed all the trains again. Full. Then I listed them all once more. I finally agreed to take the 5:30, she pantomimed that we could stand on the 2:08.

Li, a Cantonese businessman whom we met in the station, guided us to car seven. It was air-conditioned, seats soft and comfortable, and occupied. We stood in the aisle, pressing ourselves against the armrests when people wished to pass. Finally we went to the dining car, hoping to spend the trip there. The waiter warned us that the dining car was reserved, and we had to leave in ten minutes.

The menu was written in Chinese, that's why we ordered three plates of shredded pig stomach and string beans and two plates of mushrooms and chicken bones. Li had left us; now he came back smiling and watched as we ate. Men in clean, pressed shirts and pants were filing in. Party officials? Union leaders? Who gets a whole dining car in China?

Li escorted us to the front of the train, set up five folding stools, and remained there with us. Someone gave us fresh lichees, someone else taught me to count to ten. When we arrived in Canton, Li brought us to our hotel. Our first day in China was a blend of chaos and kindness.

My first image of China outside of the train station was more of that crazy Asian traffic, dominated by bicycles instead of motorcycles, and the constant tinkling of bells. Being a cyclist myself, I love being in a city where the right-hand lane of most main streets is reserved for bicycles. The problem is everything else, buses, taxis, vans, trucks, streaming down the middle, usually unregulated by such amenities as traffic lights. I don't appreciate the technique for getting across: Pedestrians inch forward until so many are in the way that vehicles are forced to stop. One or two pedestrians won't suffice.

There are very few cars here. Privately-owned vehicles are rare. The price is prohibitive in a country where the usual wage is around 100 yuan per month. That's $36, which is deceptive, for prices are extremely low. Not car prices though. Private ownership of cars would probably destroy China.

There's no time to finish a thought writing about a trip like this. Each day practically erases the last, and yesterday was special because of Cui, a young physicist whom we looked up.

At 7 A.M. Cui was guiding us through Canton, unraveling such mysteries as how to take a bus, not so easy since there are far more people than spaces; showing us our first Chinese department store, stone, stark, none of the glitter of its American counterpart. And most consumer goods sold in China are made in China.

After a breakfast of dumplings, chicken, cakes, and tea, we strolled along the Pearl River, then through a park with a formal lagoon and wild, wooded areas; through thriving food markets where we could have bought snakes, live fish, buried eggs encrusted with mud, fresh fruits and vegetables; through narrow side streets, with slacks, skirts, bras, panties suspended overhead. Drying laundry and bikes were the dominant features of the cityscape. And people everywhere, vending, buying, toting, cycling, building.

Cui, tall, thin, features soft and kind, appeared rather shy at first, less shy as we got to know him. He's a college-educated man, yet he'd met foreigners only once before, an American couple who helped him with his English for a couple of months. We were a memorable event in his life, and he in ours. He's sharp, perceptive, someone who's curious about, who cares about, whatever goes on in the world around him. Apart from working with that American couple, his English is, amazingly, self-taught, by reading books and listening to Voice of America. His vocabulary was large, his pronunciation clear and noticeably improving as he spoke.

What did we think about Nixon, Reagan, Russia, Star Wars, abortion? How can the US. Congress pass a resolution condemning China's family planning? What about Kramer Vs. Kramer, are most Americans divorced? The Chinese couldn't understand the film at all.

Trained as a physicist, Cui had to teach physical education from a scientific point of view, muscle function and use in sports. He wasn't happy about that, yet wasn't bitter. In general he approved of Deng's policies, for the standard of living in China has risen considerably, an incredible accomplishment in a country of a billion people.

We spent today with Cui again, walking through the side streets in the older sections of Canton. In the heat of the day, all doors and windows were open, allowing us glimpses of dark, tiny rooms where women were cooking or families were eating; people washed dishes or clothes outside, using plastic tubs, a little boy sat on a potty chair. Vendors sold clothing, food, plastic products. At lunch time they'd squat next to their wares, holding chopsticks and bowls of noodles or rice with vegetables.

We walked, talked, huddled under an awning in the afternoon downpour, visited ancient temples, pagodas, academies. How do the people of today relate to their history? Does someone who works a 48-hour week have the time and energy to reflect on the lives that have existed here over thousands of years?

Yesterday at 8 A.M. Adolph and I went to buy tickets for Peking, a 36-hour train ride. The lines stretched out of the station, no one spoke English, we could easily stand all day in the wrong line, then buy the wrong tickets. We went to the China International Travel Service instead. All the tourists, clustered around the one clerk who spoke English, were fuming. I decided that in this country of waiting, I might as well watch, wait, and contemplate.

After three hours of contemplation, the only tickets available were three soft beds and one hard seat on the early train and one hard bed on a train leaving two hours later. "If you want to go, you'd better take them," the clerk warned. As I tried to figure out how, with no particular destination in mind, we'd ever find each other in Peking, a second hard seat mysteriously appeared.

So we're travelling to Beijing first class and last, three luxurious soft beds in a compartment for four, and two hard seats, narrow benches with vertical backs in a hot, crowded car.

The world seems filled with people who stick to the rules, and our porter must be their role model. He's tall and bony with big eyes and prominent teeth, and he first came into our compartment to charge us an additional 47 yuan 70 fen ($18) for the air-conditioning. Since neither he nor our Chinese roommate speak any English, getting this message across was complex, and we tried our best not to understand. Eli told him that we had paid full price for our tickets and no one had mentioned an air-conditioning supplement.

The porter left, and about a half hour later, our air-conditioning went off. We looked frantically for a switch, tried to open the unopenable windows, suspected he'd turned on the heat. Then as suddenly as it went off, it came back on. The porter returned, this time with an interpreter who said we'd better pay or they'd turn the air-conditioning off again. I counted out 47 yuan and 70 fen in the smallest bills I could find. The porter took the 47 yuan but returned the 70 fen (25 cents).

Later, just as I was pulling down my jeans in the water closet, the porter unlocked the door with his pass-key and walked in. I screamed, and he ran. Yet perhaps this was a stroke of good luck. He certainly was not a man who could cope with walking in on ladies about to pee. He was probably so embarrassed he wouldn't bother us again. We had a good laugh, delighted to be rid of him. For we all planned to spend the night together in our three soft berths.

The hard seat at this point looked like a scene from Dante's Inferno, slight Chinese men sleeping or slumping half-dressed in every available space, even in corners on the filthy floor, a few women and children sandwiched in on the hard green seats, men in their undershirts crowding at one end of the car to get water for tea and for washing, most of the water sloshing onto the ground. The heat was oppressive.

I know because I sat there awhile, squeezed between two peasant women. They were very concerned about my camera, wondering how I could tolerate that weight around my neck. They tried it on and told me not to wear it anymore. And they were fascinated by, in fact couldn't stop laughing at, the difference in skin color between themselves and me, putting their arms next to my arms, then comparing palms.

"Strange what people find amusing," said an American backpacker sitting across from us.

One of the women removed a hard red plum from a bag, wiped off some slime with her dirty hand, gave it to me, and they both waited, smiling, for me to eat it. I wouldn't. The women kept telling me to eat. I stared at the plum and indicated I'd had stomach problems.

"You're insulting them," said the backpacker, who speaks Chinese, "Anyway, I've been eating their plums all day."

Finally I brought the plum to the sink, scrubbed it, sat down with them again, and ate it, slowly chewing the sour, unripe fruit, very slowly, for I saw they had a second plum poised.

We went to sleep in our air-conditioned, soft-bed compartment. At midnight the porter pounded on our door, unlocked it himself when we wouldn't, and turned on our lights. He babbled, gesticulated, inspected our tickets. After fifteen minutes he left with the seventy fen he hadn't accepted five hours earlier. We laughed and went back to sleep.

At 1 A.M. he pounded again. This time he left no doubt, two of us had to go to hard seat. Sarah and Josh volunteered.

It's noon now, we boarded the train yesterday at 6 P.M. I've been sweating so much there's no reason to pee. I haven't eaten since lunch yesterday except for a banana, a lichee nut, and a hard-boiled egg. The food in this country has killed my appetite. Oil forms a visible layer on anything edible. Struggling hard, I managed to lose ten pounds over the past three years; I think I've lost another ten over the past three days.

The scenery outside our window has been like a fairyland. The fields are jig-saw puzzles of rice-paddies, ponds of purple or white lotus flowers, tiny patches of crops unrecognized by me, hills sometimes in the background, sometimes in the foreground, houses red where the earth is red, brown where the earth is brown, peasants in round straw hats working in the paddies, plows pulled by water-buffalo.

The peasants are sweating from dawn to dusk in the summer sun, I'm watching from my air-conditioned compartment. If I dig a hole deep enough I might hit Bogota, New Jersey, that's where I used to dig for China. Chinese kids do dig for us. So I'm here writing and cool and they're tying up little bundles of straw. Perhaps that's why I was so moved by getting to know Cui. He grew up working in those fields, we grew up relatively cool, yet I felt our minds were meeting, felt we could gladly spend a lot more time together. Now we're passing patches of sunflowers and of corn, small patches with curving boundaries. The land is very orange.

I didn't know what to make of our bunkmate at first. He's a Northern Chinese man of 28, large and lively, speaks Chinese in loud short spurts and with frequent smiles, eyes sparkling. He doesn't understand a word of English, I doubt he's ever before met a foreigner. When he realized he'd be rooming with us, he systematically inspected everything inour suitcases, with special interest in Sarah's camera and our plastic water flasks. He removed our books one by one from our book bag and leafed through them. Then he gave Adolph the comic section of his Chinese newspaper. When someone came around selling dinners, he bought three extra in Styrofoam containers to give to us. At the first stop this morning, he went out on the platform and bought us three ices and a bag of green apples. Adolph, Eli, and Josh immediately began eating, though nervous. Were the ices made from boiled water, did the apples have to be peeled, how could we know?

At the next stop he bought us Chinese candy: flour, sugar, and sesame seeds ground and pressed into paper-thin, paper-flavored wafers. After the 1 P.M. stop, he plunked a bottle of Chinese whiskey and a roast chicken, head and all, onto our table, took three Chinese sanitary pads from his suitcase and dissected them to use as napkins, then skillfully tore apart the leathery chicken for us all to feast on. And we did, chicken and strong whiskey. We let him eat the head.

The porter continued to pester us every hour or so. Eli nicknamed him the mosquito. Finally he indicated that he had another bed in a different compartment which we could have for 47 yuan. Later he changed the price to 50. After we paid, he came back for another 33 yuan, still later for another 5. We paid him, and Eli told him that was absolutely the end, not another fen. But we're still short one bed for tonight. Our bunkmate told us to lock the door and hold it shut whenever the porter comes around.

A girl from Hong Kong came to our compartment and gave us an opportunity to talk to our bunkmate. His first question: what were we reading? It was nice that he was so interested. We later noticed the cover of Sarah's book of D.H. Lawrence stories: a pencil drawing of a naked man and woman in bed.

He told us he supervises the goldfish pond and flower garden at a farm in the North. He's on a business trip, traveling first class, expenses paid by the government. He could have brought his wife along had he been willing to travel more cheaply. We thanked him for being so wonderful to us. We've been damned lucky in the people we've met. Even the girl from Hong Kong brought us crackers and chewing gum. That was our supper.

The porter is the exception. He came in to tell us that if our bunkmate moved to the bed we had just bought, Sarah and I could share his bed. We said we'd stay the way we were. Later on he told our bunkmate to go to the other compartment. The bunkmate screamed and fumed and refused to move.

The toilets in China tend to be holes in the ground, and people squat, which is treacherous for objects in pant pockets. Women seldom close the stall doors if there happen to be doors. The public ladies' room in the middle of Canton was reminiscent of a stable, stall walls a yard high, a drainage ditch down the middle. Feet go on either side of the ditch. The room appeared empty at first, then I realized there were squatters in many of the stalls.

This country is so overpopulated that everything is done on a mass scale. There are limited supplies, especially of space, space to walk on the sidewalks, space in buses, in hotels, in trains.

The importance of the one-child family policy becomes more and more apparent to me. There isn't room for any more people. And the irony becomes apparent: in a country with such masses of people, the importance of the individual shrinks, and the family is needed as the main emotional support.

Not that I understand this place at all. I'm an outsider at whom people blatantly stare.

We're in Peking now, staying on the outskirts. Finding a low-budget hotel in the center seems impossible. The clerks invariably say no room, then ignore us.

We're too far out, dislike taking buses, which make us feel like the bottom pennies in a loaded piggy-bank. The minister on the plane who told me the Chinese are passive had certainly never tried to board a Chinese bus.

Empty taxis are parked all over the city, and the drivers won't pick us up, perhaps because they're salaried and have no incentive to get fares. Cabs take only four people, we need two taxis, usually we can't get even one.

The telephones, too, are a problem. I always have to find someone Chinese to dial for me. Finding something to drink is a problem, sugar in everything except the tea, and I don't like the tea. I'm thankful I brought my own herb tea bags. The food's still a problem, oil floating on everything.

Of course all this is minor. What counts is the people, and they've been wonderful.

Like yesterday. Though we couldn't seem to pronounce the name, eventually the caretaker of the building realized we had come to visit Yuan Peng, artist, professor, and director of the Academy of Art. Yuan was a small man, round face broadened by a constant smile. Unfortunately he spoke English about as well as we spoke Chinese. Students scurried through the corridors, searching for an interpreter. Almost everyone was away for the summer holidays. An entourage of about ten students and teachers struggled to find out about art in America and tell us about art in China. The rapport was there when the words weren't.

Art schools may appear the same on the inside all over the world; the work certainly doesn't. Stylized figures, Buddhas, very little experimentation, little of the Western freedom of movement was apparent in the paint. The paintings were more like filled-in drawings. One woman called her drawings "dreams," of windows, of streets, they were angular and abstract. She tended to avoid the human figure in her "dreams" of this teeming land.

For almost three weeks we carried a package containing baking soda, Tang, Wylers Instant Grape Juice, and scouring pads that a Chinese woman in Milwaukee wanted to give to her family. Yesterday morning Zhang, a professor of botany, came to pick it up. He was anxious to show us around Peking.

Let's get started, he said, rushing us out of the hotel, How old do you think I am?

He was 72, charming, he spoke English with a slight lisp; lively, his energy seemed rooted in his legs as he led us along the hot dusty road, his feet turned slightly outward. He spent the day with us, sightseeing in the Forbidden City, finding restaurants, ordering, helping me buy train tickets for Xian, answering all our questions. Except about the Cultural Revolution, which was too painful for him to discuss.

Probably a hundred thousand people, including Zhang, his daughter, and the five of us, visited the Summer Palace on Sunday, many of them swimming or boating, everyone seeing how royalty once lived. Perhaps on Sundays the Chinese have time to reflect on their past. Actually every day they throng to historical sites, parks, museums. I wonder where they go to sit in silence and meditate.

While the others explored, Zhang and I talked, and suddenly we were making contact. I felt his excitement about China opening up to the outside world, about its improving standard of living. Mao had believed that there's strength in numbers, that's why the population jumped disastrously, from over three hundred million to over a billion in less than forty years. The Chinese government is somehow managing to feed, house, and employ one quarter of the world.

I asked about the monetary system. There are two sets of currency, renminbi, or people's money, and F.E.C., foreign exchange currency. Theoretically we tourists spend only

F.E.C., though the currencies are interchangeable for many purchases. They supposedly both have the same value, yet there's an extensive black market. The Chinese pay 150, 160, even 170 yuan in renminbi for 100 yuan in F.E.C. We've never exchanged money; almost every other tourist we've met has.

This double system is somewhat confusing, one fen notes, two fen, five fen, one jiao, five jiao, one yuan, two yuan, and up, in both F.E.C. and renminbi. The people's money is very worn; sometimes I feel as if I'm paying with a handful of dirty tissues.

Zhang said the tourist money is necessary for international trade. Otherwise the foreign exchange rate would be so low that it would be impossible for China to buy any foreign goods.

After visiting the Summer Palace, Zhang brought us to his home. The university houses its employees and students in large blocks of apartments. As a full professor, Zhang has five rooms, small ones, still that's luxurious by Chinese standards, running water in the bathroom, kitchen long and narrow, and filled with food. His son-in-law had prepared an elaborate meal, stuffed eggplant, chicken, dumplings, tomatoes, several more vegetable dishes, and seedless watermelon for dessert.

If they want to get where they're going, people can fight to board the bus, or those lucky enough to have a bike can pedal. Peking is a city of bikes, which outnumber motorized vehicles probably a thousand to one. Many of the bikes have two rear wheels with flatbeds, loaded with cartons, fruit, vegetables, anything that fits. At this time of year the main cargo is small round watermelons.

This city is designed with vast spaces, streets very wide. There's a 20-lane boulevard near the central square with very little traffic except for buses and bicycles. It was built not for cars but for mass demonstrations in the early days of the Revolution.

Yesterday we went to the Great Wall. We weren't expecting much, just one of those tourist things to do. Certainly I've never in my life seen more tourist buses in one spot, hundreds if not thousands, certainly hundreds of thousands of people swarming all over the wall. And it was impressive, this massive construction weaving up and down over mountains, a fortress, a highway wide enough for three armed warriors on their steeds.

Thinking about its magnitude, about all the lives lost building it, perhaps I understand a little more why life is hard here. Extravagant structures, extravagant history, extravagant population, everything in China is on a grand scale.

At the moment I'm sitting in the hard bed section of the train from Peking to Xian. The hard beds are triple berths with straw mats instead of mattresses. The top bunk is about eight feet above the floor and two feet below the ceiling. As I sit at the table between the beds, a breeze created by the train's movement blows in, carrying with it chunks of soot. The compartments for six are not enclosed, not as isolated as the soft beds. Extra seats fold out into the aisle and people socialize there. The men in the next compartment have been giving Joshua a lesson in Chinese dialects for the past few hours.

8 A.M., and we're in the Bell Tower Hotel in Xian, which of course has no rooms. Sarah's sleeping on a couch at one end of this vast and dreary lobby. What else is new? My sandaled foot collided with a concrete slab in Peking and I think I broke my toe, my camera battery went dead in the train last night, and my glasses seem to be the wrong prescription.

These are not complaints, I'm still nurturing the Chinese virtue of patience. So I'm relaxing as we wait indefinitely for a room.

The clerk ignored us for an hour and a half, and my question is why, why do clerks treat us as if we're enemies instead of customers? And do the Chinese treat each other this way?

A couple from Hong Kong noticed us, tired and grubby from 19 hours on the train, and drove Adolph and Josh to the Renmin Dacha, the People's Hotel. Built by the Russians, it has gardens and fountains and arched white footbridges, everything illuminated in changing colors at night; and the rooms are reasonable.

Zhong guo bin, that's the word for Chinese cakes. I want to remember it just in case I get waited on. There are twenty waiters and waitresses for forty tables. They stand around and talk to each other. I'm about to have breakfast by myself for the first time on this trip.

Someone just sat down at my table. I said hello and continued to write, feeling guilty for not being friendly. It has taken exactly a half hour for me to get my zhong guo bin and my glass of tea with so many leaves floating on the top that I don't know how to drink it. Maybe the Chinese eat their tea leaves. Ah, I figured out a method. I sip dribs of the tea keeping my upper lip in the way so the leaves stick to the top of the glass, then remove them with my fingers.

With the exception of the waitresses, the staff at the Renmin Dacha seems to have been coached in friendliness. "Welcome to our country." "I hope you enjoy your visit." In fact almost everyone in Xian is friendly.

We liked this town immediately. Its relaxed pace is reminiscent of Milwaukee. The people are curious about us, and many of them initiate conversations to practice their English. We're meeting one particular stratum of society: those who studied English in the middle school. As usual the traffic is predominantly bikes with some buses, trucks, taxis, few private cars, and the right-hand lanes on the main streets are reserved for cyclists.

Life is lived right out in the open, in part because it's hot and humid, though bearable, not over 100 degrees yet. Living quarters are small, many opening onto the street. So the sidewalks or the dirt alleys are also people's yards.

The scene last night was wild, people sitting in the dark on wooden chairs, straight-backed or folding or sling- type, set up on the sidewalk. Some were eating dinner, some cooking, many watching TV, their sets in the doorway or window. Children slept on mats on the ground or even on roll-away beds; the adults chatted, and we threaded our way past, feeling as if we were walking through their homes.

Two young men barbecuing bits of meat on skewers grabbed some wooden horses for us, made us sit down, and shoved skewers and bottles of beer into our hands as crowds gathered around to find out whatever they could about us, the limits dictated by Eli's Chinese. None of us wanted the mysterious meat bits though we forced them down, nor the beer though I was the only one who wouldn't even sip. And I really saw no reason for Adolph and the boys to smoke the cigarettes placed in their hands and lighted for them. It was a dream, sitting there in the dark, joking with the friendly crowds, children staring with amazement, street filled with barbecues, vendors, eaters, passers-by.

When we were ready to leave, the men at first refused our offer to pay. Then they changed their minds and charged us five times the usual price.

This city of two and a half million feels like a small town. The pace is relaxed, people are friendly, and many of the buildings are single story, though there also are large housing projects.

Xian is ancient, structures going back hundreds, even thousands, of years. The original city wall still stands, as do towers, pagodas, several ornate Moslem temples, some now used as warehouses, schools, or homes. Many homes have no running water; women fill buckets from public faucets, wash dishes or clothes or bathe babies outside. I keep seeing wonderful photos that I don't take. It feels intrusive. I'd love to do a series on people's relationship with their children.

I think that's what I like most about China: mothers, fathers, grandparents, all handle children in a very matter-of- fact manner yet with lots of warmth. I haven't heard frustrated parents screaming; I haven't seen harried mothers dragging bawling brats. The children are well-behaved and content, only very small ones crying.

Of course being an outsider, I don't know how people here feel about their lives. I don't sense misery, people seem accepting. They appear well-fed, no bellies bloated from malnutrition. I've encountered no beggars and few people in rags. I've noticed no fear of talking to foreigners, have had many conversations, none whispered. Zhang said people aren't afraid to criticize the government, but I haven't probed.

We keep expanding our stay in Xian, each day bringing experiences we'll remember. There are the tourist activities like visiting Banpo, the world's best-preserved Neolithic village, and visiting the famous life-sized clay warriors discovered only ten years ago not far from the tomb of the Emperor Qin. I'd hate to have come here and not seen these, especially those warriors, hundreds standing in battle formation, some with their horses, in a monstrous hole in the ground, thousands more still covered or half-covered with earth.

But mostly this is a place of people. Whatever we do, if we ask directions, browse in a shop, we are surrounded by twenty or thirty people, staring, smiling. Often one will speak English. Everyone's curious about our ages and our relationship to each other, fascinated that we're one family. Since we left home, we've met only one other traveling family, though we've met hundreds of other travelers, American, European, Australian, overseas Chinese, usually alone or in couples.

3:15 A.M., things are happening fast. I barely have time to write, so when I awakened now, I decided to get up. The hotel is spooky at this hour, empty, lights out in the lobby. I'm sitting on a red-carpeted staircase, the only lighted area. The air-conditioning is off outside the rooms. It's hot.

We keep meeting people, through contacts or on the streets, artists, musicians, students, and I'm left to contemplate what a society like this does and does not offer the creative person. China is both traditional and Communist, neither encourages individuality. One artist, I'll call him A, hesitated to show us his work until he was convinced that we too were serious artists. Our conversation with him marked the first time I felt we should keep our voices low.

A was caught between the traditional Chinese concept of art, which demands specific techniques, subjects, and styles, and the Western concept of art, which usually expresses an individual's personal view of the world. He says he can't find a style that's not derivative, yet also in keeping with the tradition which has formed his idea of what art should be. And the

state does not, according to him, approve art with no propaganda value, art that's purely personal. There's no way for a non-traditional artist to show his work in China.

Do you know what happens to our artists once they graduate from art school? he asked with bitterness. Either they teach or they go to the factories or to businesses to do commercial work.

That's what we've been noticing since we got here, that the best contemporary artwork in China seems to be the hand-painted billboards all over the cities. The paint is loose and expressive; serious paintings masquerade as advertisements on the sides of buildings and fences. .

People often approach us on the street, wondering where we're from and how we feel about China. That's how we met M, a well-known singer. He was proud of his accomplishments as an outstanding student and successful musician, proud of his father who began his own factory a few months ago, and already has ten employees. Working with his father, M says he earns in one month what he earns in a year singing in an opera company. I wanted to visit the factory, and M is taking us there in about four hours.

M's eyes twinkled like those of a man in love when he told us about his girlfriend. So I was shocked when he mentioned that that night they would have their first date, a walk around the square. They've never spoken to each other, only nodded as they passed. An introducer arranged the date. Introducers are crucial, M said. They're the go-betweens to get parental permission for marriage.

Sarah and I rented bikes yesterday. It's not as easy as you'd think, pedaling around in a city of bikes, cyclists cutting in front of one another, pedestrians stepping into the street without looking, expecting us to tinkle our bells to warn them of our presence. But my bell was broken, in fact my bike was lousy. The seat was hard and springless and wiggled all over the place. I had to keep stopping to rest my butt. I'm accustomed to coaster brakes, and though I had no trouble remembering the hand brakes under normal circumstances, for my two emergency stops I used my feet and nearly clobbered some cyclists who'd assumed I knew what I was doing.

A Dutch couple we met rented bikes to visit a mountain in the countryside about fifteen kilometers outside of Xian. It was the first time they felt as if they were out of the tourist corridor. We'll again extend our stay here and do the same thing. I hope we get ridable bikes.

Yesterday I went out early in the morning. The sidewalks, parks, and vacant lots, were crowded with people practicing tai chi, everyone with his own routine, some using wooden swords. I found a group and joined in.

Later. M's father said we need government permission to visit the factory and that would take three days. Instead M brought us to the quarter where musicians, actors, and dancers live and rehearse. We watched a rehearsal in a concrete room large enough to comfortably fit about 25 musicians. The composer was there to criticize; we were there mesmerized. The sounds were lyrical and sweet, though overpowering in such a small space, the lilting voice of the soprano haunting. It couldn't have been more magical had we gone to the actual performance.

M introduced us to several people, always making sure we knew this was a famous dancer, a famous composer, other famous musicians, listing their honors, everyone friendly,

anxious to talk though we couldn't always discover what to say. Then he led us past workers picnicking on the grass to a housing project where we visited a flutist. He and M had been forced to work in the countryside during the Cultural Revolution.

Did you learn anything from the experience? I asked.

No, nothing. There was nothing positive they could say about the Cultural Revolution.

So this is how musicians live, a concrete room in a housing project, no heat though winters are cold, sporadic running water on the first floor, none on the upper floors, a problem all over China. At least the rents are negligible.

How can a country provide housing for a billion people? There's construction everywhere, a building boom. There's also a population balloon, expanding, expanding.

This is a country of receipts, receipts for almost every cent spent, in taxis, in restaurants, even on the bus, five people, five little slips of paper, my pockets are always full of these thin bits. When I glance into the waste baskets in the public rest rooms, I think I know how they're used.

This is a country of tea, especially here in Xian, where thousands of peddlers sit on sidewalks or at curbs, glasses of tea on their low tables. Sometimes they also have bowls of hard-boiled eggs. Hotels and trains provide giant thermoses of hot water. Of course the water here isn't drinkable unless boiled. Perhaps that's the reason for all the tea in China.

This is a country of art, with its 6000 year tradition, enough to overwhelm any aspiring artist, and of cheap art supplies, Chinese brushes, rice paper, intense watercolors, irresistible for a family of painters. And this is a country of tiny eating spots. Though we try to be careful, we've eaten in some dubious places, feeling uneasy but hungry, always resolving never to do it again. Like yesterday. We ate with M in a hole-in-the-wall eatery. At one table a group of peasants played a drinking game, counting loudly, laughing, then slurping their beer out of bowls, one of the few times I've seen any sign of drunkenness in China. M kept apologizing for them, telling us they're low-class people, which surprised us in this classless society. At our own table we stared at our food. The string beans and green peppers looked, then tasted, uncooked, dangerous fare in a land that uses night soil as fertilizer. M assured us they'd been submerged a few minutes in boiling water. Did that suffice?

At the dumpling house the night before last, dumplings stuffed with scallions and pork, we paid less than $2 for a meal for seven people, 28 cents each. What is the relationship between price and safety?

The day before that, wandering around at the wrong time of day, the only open restaurant we could find was crowded, dirty, alive with people. The tables, dishes, floor, stools, and chopsticks were all greasy, the prices incredibly low. The string beans were mixed with shredded pig stomach, and the beer was ladled from a tub under the counter into green plastic mugs. A woman sat at the door with a wheel-barrow full of rice which she scooped into bowls.

This is a country with a famine diet, everything that's edible is eaten, including chicken heads. If we don't order a whole chicken, and we're usually not sure exactly what we've ordered, the chicken comes cut up in half-inch pieces, including bone. The pieces all look the same, yet we know the head is there with its eyeballs, beak, and brain.

Sometimes it's hard to know what to think. Perhaps I should retrace our relationship with M. When he first approached Sarah and me, he showed us letters he was about to mail to several friends in the United States. Clearly he had had experience dealing with Americans. When he canceled our visit to his father's factory, I was amazed he hadn't realized ahead of time that we needed government permission. We invited him to our room to show him photos of our artwork, and he didn't hesitate to say yes. But when the doorman told him he had to sign in if he wanted to go up, he refused, and we brought everything down and sat on the steps.

Suddenly he got up to leave, claiming that the doorman was staring at him. The doorman came over and told him to sign in although he hadn't gone to our room. He was visibly upset. Afterwards I asked him what it was all about.

"They keep track of everyone who goes into the building in case something happens."

"They do that in many American buildings."

"I just don't like to have to sign."

"Will you have any problems because of it?"

"No, no, it's nothing." He didn't sound convinced.

When I mentioned to M that we wanted to go to a village in the countryside, he said he'd bring us to one the following day, that we could spend the night with his friends. But when we met him to make the final arrangements, he said we couldn't go. There was a missile base there and foreigners weren't allowed.

He said we'd visit his parents' apartment instead. When we met him to go there, he said he'd bought us concert tickets, the show was about to begin, he'd bike there and we should take a taxi and meet him. He shoved five tickets into my hand.

The taxi-driver grabbed the tickets, saw that the performance began in three minutes, whisked all five of us into his cab, and took off, plowing through streets filled with cyclists. We tried to slow him down, fearing some poor bike- rider would be sacrificed for our concert. Once there, he ushered us to our seats.

After the concert, M got us a cab, told the driver where to leave us, and said he'd meet us there to visit some friends of his. We waited, and waited. Eventually he arrived.

"I've been forced to change our plans," he said. After we left, the police had wanted to know why he was accompanying us to a concert for foreigners without the necessary permit and had fined him 80 yuan.

"Did you know you needed a permit?" I asked. He didn't answer. He said he had lied to the police, told them we had been in China before, that he had met us when he was a music student.

"Hundreds of people talk to us on the streets and no one seems afraid, why didn't you just tell them the truth?" I asked.

"Because I had made an appointment to see you again." I still didn't understand. People haven't been afraid to make appointments with us.

We all walked back slowly, everyone upset. 80 yuan is a lot of money, a month's salary. Adolph offered to pay the fine for him. M refused. He said he had friends in the government, he'd call them tomorrow morning. We stopped a few blocks from the hotel, sat on a ledge in

the dark, trying to understand, wondering what it meant in his life. M said, “I just now realized that the most important thing is freedom.”

I have a feeling there’s something more that we don’t know. I could put it like this: We met a stranger in the street who went out of his way to spend time with us and to take us places we would not otherwise have seen. Several times he made plans, then suddenly canceled them, and we had only his word about the reasons why. He may or may not be in trouble because of us. I hope no poor biker was sacrificed for our concert.

Yesterday was our most wonderful day in China. Beiwushan was the name of the mountain our Dutch friends had visited. They’d bathed in a mountain stream and stopped at Buddhist temples as they climbed. We decided to rent bikes, spend a night in the temple at the foot of Beiwushan, climb the mountain, return to Xian, then take the train to Chengdu as soon as possible.

But the weather forecast was hot, 104 degrees. We thought it would be wiser to take a bus, get off at the last stop, and walk the rest of the way, perhaps 7 or 8 kilometers. Our friends had said to keep going straight. We had our destination written in Chinese on a slip of paper, just in case.

We left everything in the People’s Hotel and carried only our cameras and two straw baskets containing toothbrushes, bathing suits for the mountain stream, five flasks of water, and toilet paper. When we got off the bus at the end of the line, we figured we were half-way to Beiwushan, and, judging from the stares, that we were off the tourist track.

Within a half mile of the bus stop we came to a fork, so much for going straight. I showed our slip of paper to a man sitting on a fence, and he directed us to the right. The poplars lining the road offered a little shade as we passed tiny rice paddies and cornfields. It seemed crazy to be walking all those kilometers when it was over 100 degrees. It’s hard to breathe in such heat. Still we loved it.

Whenever we saw a peddler, we’d buy the little banana ices that have become our main beverage in China. We’ve been consuming them for almost three weeks now. They cost less that two cents and are available on almost every city block.

After a kilometer or so, we showed our slip of paper to a passing cyclist, just to make sure we had taken the right fork. She indicated we hadn’t, then found someone else to discuss it with. They decided we could reach Beiwushan on the route we were taking.

Adolph’s feet were already killing him, and my broken toe ached. There was bicycle traffic, an occasional truck, at one point a bus sped past.

“Ni hao,” we’d greet the villagers, How are you? They’d look at us as if we were aliens. “Duo shao?” we asked the boys selling watermelon, How much? They stared blankly back. A man carrying a child on his shoulders stopped, mouth agape, and watched till we were out of sight.

Another fork ahead, we bought a watermelon to forestall any decision, sat in the dirt in our sweat-soaked clothes and ate in front of a friendly crowd, spitting our seeds into our hands, getting stickier and grubbier by the minute.

One of my children placed a straw hat on my head, warning me that I was already badly burned. Actually I felt flushed, not burned. The hat made my scalp sweat, still it was better

than nothing. Once, long ago, our dog Happy rolled over on his back, stiff legs pointed skyward, suffering from heat prostration on a day far cooler than this one.

Where do we go from here? we asked with our slip of paper. A man drew us a diagram in the dust. Take the road to the left, his finger made a long line, then a circle to indicate Beiwushan. By now we had walked several kilometers. We couldn't be too far, though we still didn't see a mountain.

After a while we showed some women selling watermelons our precious slip of paper. "Beiwushan zai nar?" Where is Beiwushan?

They assumed we spoke Chinese, and their words and gestures rushed like a mountain stream quickly past. They frequently pointed in the opposite direction. Had we taken the wrong road after all? We still had forty something to go, that much Eli understood. It couldn't be forty minutes, nor forty kilometers. We knew from their reaction we were further than we ever imagined. Well, we could sleep out in the open, surrounded by fields and poplars and haystacks.

We trudged along. The road curved, then sloped shadelessly, steadily upward. Half-way up the hill, Adolph stopped and said, "I've had it, I'm hitching." None of us objected. Unfortunately the only traffic was bicycles.

Eventually a van approached, full of well-dressed, official-looking men. We showed them our slip, they pointed straight ahead, we refused to move. Finally they invited us in, clearly amused that we were walking all the way to Beiwushan. When we reached the top of the hill, we saw before us a road with no shade whatsoever curving through brilliant green rice paddies. And off in the distance was a range of dark, jagged mountains.

That was not our vision of Beiwushan. We expected a single small mountain rising like an aberration in the fields. Instead here was spectacular countryside overshadowed by a mountain range, and a van was bearing us across what would have been the most impossible, sunniest, part of our walk.

The men in the van let us out in the next village, telling us to continue going straight. There was little shade, the mountains appeared to be miles away, the temperature was still over 100 degrees, we were all beet red.

We came to a general store. The women behind the counter, excited to see us, turned on an electric fan and ran into the back room to bring out stools. We would gladly have stayed there till the following morning. Instead we stayed five minutes, bought a cake of soap and jars of pears and mandarin oranges, then reluctantly left, drawn by visions of monasteries and mountain streams.

I'm never sure of what to do when a pig is blocking my path, whether to calmly continue, ignoring him, or to wait till he goes somewhere else. I ignored several pigs that day; Sarah, I noticed, kept a spare rock in her hand. Pigs were everywhere, peering up at us from walled-in back yards, crossing the roads, wagging their tails and nuzzling each other.

The dirt road wound upwards. Peeking into the courtyards, we could see that people lived in caves in the hillside. The facades were mud walls, each with a doorway and a window cut out. In one of those doorways an old woman and a little boy sat on a wooden bench. We walked across their yard and showed her our slip of paper, though we knew which way to go.

She was slight, no more than five feet tall. Her grey pants were rolled above her knees, blue cotton blouse untucked, grey hair pushed behind her ears, face expressive. She was glad to see us, understood we were hot, exhausted, and thirsty, and offered us something to drink. We hesitated, then nodded.

As she went in, I glimpsed the twilit interior of her cave, a pile of eggs, a wooden table, a stone oven, earth forming the walls. She dumped the contents of a large bucket into a tub, brought the empty bucket outside, and lowered it into a well a few yards from the cave door, down, down, so deep it had to be safe. Then she lugged the heavy bucket, probably two cubic feet of water, back to the door and handed us bowls which we dipped into the bucket, clear, sweet, the best water we'd ever tasted, a drink we'll always remember and we hope never regret. We doused ourselves, filled a flask, and, elated, continued our trek. This was not an easy walk, yet it seemed like the most beautiful one we'd ever taken.

Cyclists passed us, horse-drawn and donkey-drawn carts, small tractor engines with loaded flatbeds. An old lady approached me, one hand over her heart, the other indicating that I should put my hair up. I tied it in a knot behind my head, and she left smiling.

It would be a shame to have come to China and not to have done this, I kept exclaiming as we passed more rice paddies, haystacks, grapevines, cornfields, always the mountains in the distance. Adolph and I hobbled behind the others, my toe, his feet, the heat. A woman was bathing her daughter in a spring. We took off our shoes and submerged our listless feet. The water was cool, clearly coming from the mountains, though God knew where it had stopped along the way.

Cows, horses, goats, errant pigs, sun still beating down, we walked several more kilometers, every now and then showing our slip of paper, more for conversation, more out of disbelief at the distance.

Finally a thriving village, we'd been walking four hours. The townspeople followed us and stared as we made our way down the main street. The local English teacher introduced himself. Beiwushan? We had five kilometers to go, it would be dark, we should spend the night in his village. I would have, but the others were still lured by images of bathing in a mountain stream and sleeping in a monastery. Five more kilometers, we'd already walked about ten, and even in late afternoon it was damned hot. We bought another hat and banana ices, sipped from our flasks, and said we'd be back tomorrow. There was no shade as we trod the dirt road, avoiding pigs, nodding to the peasants walking or biking home from work carrying shovels, axes, mysterious packets. I tried not to notice the dead rat.

After another five kilometers, the mountain seemed at least a kilometer away. Adolph and I lagged way behind on the dusty road. A donkey was pulling a cartload of straw and manure, and I asked the young man perched on top if I could join him. He smiled and motioned me to hop on. But how could I do that to the poor donkey?

A truck rattled towards us in a cloud of dust, wheels waffling from side to side. We waved it down, showed the driver our slip of paper, and asked if we could climb into the back. He told us to get in; I couldn't figure out how. There were no projections for my feet. Adolph made a stirrup with his hands, and, scraping and bruising myself, I scrambled over the top. Adolph struggled in on his own; the man who had been riding back there boosted himself in with ease. Further ahead the driver stopped for Sarah, Eli, and Joshua.

In the cab of the truck were two men and a little boy; in the back, another man, the five of us, and a hundred watermelons.

When we reached the bottom of the mountain, they didn't stop, kept right on driving up the narrow dirt road, round hair-pin curves, the air becoming cool and fresh. Eli and Adolph were standing, gripping the wooden sides, Eli exclaiming, "I don't believe this, I don't believe that drop," as the old truck struggled up the narrow snaking road. I stood up, precarious, wondering if the side of the truck could tolerate my weight, and gazed down on a mountain range spotted with clouds.

The man in back with us stood calmly in a corner, enjoying the breeze and watching us with amusement. He offered us cigarettes, lit one up for himself.

The trip to the top would probably have taken us two days on foot. It was dusk when we finally stopped. The floor was sticky with watermelon juice; our cameras, sandals, hats, bathing suits, and toilet paper roll were mixed in amongst the melons. We gathered our possessions and clambered out, ready to lie down on the floor of any monastery.

We tried to hand the driver 20 yuan. He shook his head no, climbed into the back of the truck, selected a melon, sliced it with our jack-knife, and we sat on the ground with several construction workers who were repairing the road. Our hosts passed around the melon, using our newspaper as plates, refusing any for themselves.

The monastery was at the top of some rough stone steps curving up the mountainside. We said good-bye, but the watermelon men climbed with us. About half-way up we came to a small cave, and they motioned us to come in with them and sit on the rocks. I pointed upwards, towards the monastery and mimed that I wanted to go there and sleep. They continued to beckon; I continued to stand. The truck-driver gestured with his hands, imitating a balloon popping. At that moment there was an explosion, and debris rained down around me. Workers were dynamiting the mountain above.

A monk came down from the temple; apparently they didn't take guests. Adolph and the boys wanted to sleep in the cave, Sarah and I wouldn't, the watermelon men were adamant that we couldn't. We made our way down the steep uneven steps, already becoming treacherous as the sun set.

There were sand piles near the truck, probably used for road construction, and we considered sleeping there until Joshua mentioned that they might start blasting again in the morning. Climbing in and out of the truck wasn't easy, and Adolph thinks he broke a rib. Still we were euphoric. We drove down in darkness, stars intense, mountains outlined by their light, air by far the purest we'd breathed in China.

Half-way down the mountain was another monastery, silent in the dark, candlelight glowing through the upstairs windows. Our driver went in, and we could hear shouted conversations, see shadowy figures converging. The man in the back remained with us. "Chinese and Americans the same," he said several times in Chinese, delighted with the idea.

After fifteen or twenty minutes our driver returned, and we continued downwards into heat and humidity till we came to a tiny hotel. The men led us through a general store on the first floor, into the back yard, and up concrete steps to the sleeping quarters. The hotel had three small guest rooms lit by naked light bulbs. The beds were made by placing a straw mat

on a board supported by two chairs at each end. Filmy white mosquito netting hung from the ceiling. 18 yuan, $6.50 for the five of us.

The manager was a gentle old man. He filled a basin with hot water, and he and the watermelon men watched intently as we squatted on the floor to wash. I doubt I've ever looked grubbier in my life; my white slacks and tee-shirt were layered with grime. Even my teeth were gritty.

The watermelon men led us back downstairs into the street and around a dark corner, crowds gathering as if we were Martians. We came to a mud house, radio blasting a Chinese play or soap opera. Someone brought low stools outside for us, then a pan of cold fritters. The curious crowd watched us eat. Where were we from? What were our names? What was our relationship to each other? How old were we? Why weren't we wearing watches? And I noticed that almost everyone had a watch on his wrist. I searched through my purse and found a small plastic digital clock which I handed to the truck driver, indicating he should keep it. No one would take it. Next they brought us five bowls of soup; it tasted like hot vinegar.

When we finished eating, the watermelon men escorted us back to the hotel.

The excited manager showed us the outhouse, walking through the dark yard to a tiny shelter in the back, unlit, no way to tell where the hole was, very possible to end up in it. Next trip to China I'll bring a flashlight.

He brought us back upstairs and filled two basins, one for soapy water, one for rinsing, watched till we finished, then emptied the water by sprinkling it onto the floor, perhaps to cool the place down. If so, it didn't work.

Sarah and I shared a room, both of us exhausted, over-heated, and wide awake. I poured the hot water from the thermos into a cup and sipped it, let it cool a few minutes, doused myself. I still couldn't sleep. We felt a breeze when we stuck our heads out the window, full moon shining over haystacks in the back courtyard. We couldn't spend the night in that position. We pushed Sarah's "bed" in front of the door to hold it closed and lay naked and sleepless on our mats. I sipped more water, again doused my body, then reached out in the dark to put the cup on the night table. I missed.

We could hear the breeze and the rush of an unseen mountain stream. Finally we dressed and felt our way past men sleeping on the hallway floor and down the cement steps in search of a breeze and a stream. The hotel door was padlocked. We went back up and lay down on the concrete balcony, which at least was cooler than our room.

The manager discovered us there at five and awakened us to give us mats and pillows. People were sleeping on mats right next to us and on the dusty road below. I now understand with a different kind of knowing why so much of life in the summer is lived outside.

We weren't looking forward to walking back to the bus stop, at least fifteen kilometers under the hot sun. In fact we were delighted to see grey skies when we awoke.

We started out early. The thunder we heard in the distance was only workers blasting near the cave where we hadn't slept. Women washed their clothes and their children in the stream that rushed alongside the road in a man-made canal. I stubbed my broken toe on a rock. It was so swollen it led all my other toes and was always the first to hit any obstruction in my path. I limped to the stream and submerged my feet, watermelon rinds speeding past

my ankles. Perhaps we could hitchhike later, for now there were only donkey carts, bicycles, tractor engines, and pedestrians.

After five or six kilometers, we were in the thriving village again. We ate a late breakfast of noodles flavored with horse radish, then continued to walk until we saw a mirage, a bus. Feeling like five grimy wrecks, we stood in the middle of the road and waved our arms. The peasants welcomed us in and even gave us their seats.

Right now I'm in the hard-seat coach of the train from Xian to Chengdu, a fourteen hour trip, 7 A.M. to 9 P.M. We're just beginning to move, and I can see already that hard means harder than I thought. I could see it when we first walked on. The train was crowded, and everyone wanted as much space as possible. Josh and I found seats in this car, Adolph, Eli, and Sarah in the next.

Benches for three face each other on my side of the aisle with a small table-top near the window. Two people are sitting opposite me, a man and a woman, with a six-inch gap separating them. The gap is small because a thick black purse is squeezed between the woman and the window. Several times I asked these two if there was room for Sarah. They nodded yes, put one finger up to indicate room for one more, but they didn't move. Nor did they move their bags, carelessly thrown on the overhead racks, to make room for ours. And now they are staring at me as I sit here and write. In fact everyone within sight of me is staring.

Almost everyone also is smoking. The floor is covered with ashes, butts, apple cores, certainly with spit, for this is a country of spitters, despite a national anti-spitting campaign. Even the soprano at the rehearsal, the famous singer, gargled and spit as the orchestra played. Perhaps they spit because of the excessive dust, in the city and in the countryside. Women with straw brooms, sometimes wearing masks, constantly sweep the sidewalks and streets, and sprinkle the walks with watering cans. The dust is out of control. Perhaps it's the type of soil, the lack of grass, or insufficient rain.

I'm sitting in the aisle seat, and my seat mates keep getting up, returning with cups of boiling water for tea or with food, just missing my broken toe as they squeeze past. The man sitting next to me wants to talk though we have no common language; the man and woman facing me are a different story. Sarah came in for awhile and sat on the edge of the seat. The woman still wouldn't move her purse.

I just took a look at the toilet; I hope I won't have to use it. If I dropped something on the floor in there, I wouldn't pick it up. Well, this is how the average person has to travel, if he can travel at all. If I want to begin to know what life is like here, I should travel in the jammed buses and trains the way everyone else does, though I'm damned if I'd spit on the floors. In fact it makes me gag. Ah, now a woman is coming along with a straw broom and sweeping up the garbage. No litter baskets that I can see; when Sarah asked where to throw away her pear peels, she was told to toss them out the window.

The old man across the aisle keeps spitting onto the floor. Otherwise I'd enjoy watching him. His face reflects about eighty years of living, sad and sensitive with high cheek-bones, big ears, baggy eyes, almost no brows, and about two days growth of grey beard. He's wearing a loose white nightcap on his head, a large blue cotton jacket over his untucked grey shirt, an undershirt, and brown plastic sandals. His pants are ripped instead of hemmed; he's smoking a small cigar.

Now a woman came along and mopped, gruffly ordering everyone but me to lift his feet. China also seems to be a country of very clean people, despite the dust and spitting, and despite a shortage of indoor plumbing. She just came back up the aisle with the mop, even mopped the old man's feet.

People have their heads down on the tables. I'd do the same if our table was within reach of my head.

We're stopped at a station. Nobody got off, except to buy roast chickens, or beer, but a lot of people boarded here. The aisles are crowded with peasants carrying packs that knock into the seated passengers as they pass us by. The people facing me thought no one would sit down if they made the space small enough, but somebody did. Sarah gave up on that seat about two hours ago. Uh oh, my stomach's a bit crampy, I'd better not eat anything today.

Straw bags, cloth bags, one just fell on my feet, leather bags, quilts tied up with cord, fans, umbrellas. The man who squeezed in across from me is fat and has a watermelon. There's been a bumper crop of small ones, thank goodness, they've been our staple for eating and drinking.

A woman is lying across two seats, a straw fan over her face, a small bag under her head. She has no intention of getting up although people are sitting in the aisles if they have luggage to sit on, standing if they don't.

A young man is devouring a whole chicken. Chinese chickens are tough and scrawny, and tastier than our fatty hormone-grown birds.

Music and words are a constant on the train's loudspeaker, sometimes Oriental music, at the moment an instrumental version of LA CUCARACHA. The landscape is spectacular. After miles of cornfields and haystacks, we're in the mountains. The fat man with the watermelon is chatting with the people facing me as if they're all old friends.

The woman taking up two seats and a man with no seat have been screaming at each other. After about twenty minutes, he suddenly pulled the bag from under her head, grabbed her arm, and forced her to sit up. She fought back, tried to lie down again. Everyone crowded into the aisles to watch. And laugh.

We're high in the mountains; intense green mountains, then long dark tunnels, then mountains, then tunnels. Josh said we just passed the August 1st train from Xian to Chengdu; the derailed cars are still here where they fell into a ditch.

It's 11:15 A.M., and everyone's eating, apples, pears, hard-boiled eggs. I paid 1 yuan for a lunch of unknown content. It should arrive soon.

My lunch is here, chicken and peanuts on rice, sounds good. But the chicken is chicken bones, tiny ones at that, and skin, no meat at all; the peanuts are so overcooked they taste like beans. I don't dare eat for fear of choking. It's very hot in here, I wish they'd turn on the fans.

The old man took off his blue jacket. In this heat our damp clothes feel like strait jackets. Now at last the fans are on. The floors have been swept then mopped three or four times. An attendant rearranged the baggage on the racks and made sure all the little hand towels hanging over the seats were folded properly. Though my back aches, I love traveling this way.

I changed seats with Josh, his view is better, and my head can reach the table. He was sitting with three peasants, all wearing loose pants, bright undershirts, and sandals. Their feet are filthy; so are mine.

My new seat mate is slopped over the bench as if someone had dropped him there, jaw hanging loose, forehead and chin receding. When I first got here, he ignored me and left his feet on my side as if he didn't know I wanted to sit down, and he sporadically shouted, seemingly to no one. The man opposite me kept his legs stretched under my seat, forcing me to keep my legs in the aisle.

The Chinese bury raw eggs, I don't know for how long, then dig them up and eat them. The man facing me peeled one, I could tell by the layer of dirt on the outside. On the inside the white had turned into a bright yellow gel and the yolk was moldy green. He treated it gently, a delicacy.

I get a little nervous each time the attendant makes the rounds of the seats with his kettle of boiling water for tea drinkers. I shove my feet back under my seat and he fills cups right over the spot my feet had been.

One of the peasants opened a bag of sunflower seeds and they all ate. That's when I realized they were traveling together. They spit out the shells with no thought to where they landed, even on me. They gargled and spit out gobs, one blew his nose onto the floor, another into the curtains. This is a country with no tissues.

I just left Josh's seat. One of the peasants lit a cigarette and the head of the match flew off and burned my foot.

I'm back in my own seat, and the man next to me really wants to communicate. I took out my Berlitz book, he looked through it, then pointed to a line which read, "Do you learn Chinese?"

Another stop, lots of people boarding, very few seats. The fat man with the watermelon left, and the woman next to the window immediately put her black bag in his place to make sure no one else would sit there. This woman is a character, selfish, amusing all the same. She's around 40, short and very pudgy, belly unusually round, face round too, nostrils flared, hair in two thin black braids hanging over her ears, grey pants rolled way above her knees, very swollen ankles, and high-heeled sandals.

A scrawny peddler of about 50 boarded with a large basket and a burlap bag. He stuffed the bag under the seat across from me; his basket would fit only in the aisle. Then he asked if there was space on the seat. They indicated no one was sitting there, but the woman refused to move her purse.

We're in the train twelve and a half hours now, three to go. They gave me the wrong arrival time when I bought the tickets.

The peddler picked up the woman's purse and sat on the edge where it had been. He couldn't lean back. The little peddler said something to the pudgy woman, she answered with a smile, soon they were chattering like old friends. He's a slight man, and full of life. After awhile he carefully removed his burlap bag from under the seat, untied it as if it contained gold, felt around inside, then pulled out a plastic bag containing a live turtle and handed it to the woman. She was delighted, animated, they looked like two children about to play a practical joke. Then he put the turtle back. A while later, he opened his bag again; it was filled

with turtles ranging in size from six inches to a foot. He stuck his hand in, pulled it back quickly, stuck it in again. Finally he found the one he was looking for, carefully retied his bag, then put the turtle into another burlap bag.

From a tiny pocket at the waist of her trousers, the woman removed a cloth pouch, took out a wad of bills, and the two of them chatted, argued, smiled. Finally she gave him twelve yuan, a lot of money for a Chinese peasant. The man stuffed a second wriggling turtle into her bag, quickly, so she couldn't see it was much smaller than the first, and tied it closed.

Now she emptied the black purse onto the table. It contained about a dozen green apples. As she shoved the bag of turtles into the purse, the peddler snatched an apple and ate it. Then the woman and the turtle-peddler sat there silently, both grinning.

Still later the peddler took a bag from his basket in the aisle, pulled out a dead turtle, head hanging limply, and passed it around for everyone to inspect. She bought that one, too, for six yuan, adding it to the collection in her purse. Then the scrawny man and pudgy woman sat quietly once again, still grinning.

The man next to me is incredibly sweet. He asked for my Berlitz book and looked through it till he found, Where do you come from? On a map of China he showed me that he lived not far from Hangzhou. He pointed to Japan and looked at me. I pointed to America. He asked what the plane fare was. Expensive, I replied. I didn't tell him it would take the average Chinese worker two and a half years to pay for the ticket if he used every cent he earned. He asked if I'm a writer. I asked him what he does. From the list of professions, he pointed to salesman. From What's it made of? he pointed to platinum and gold. From What is it? he pointed to necklace and bracelet and ring. All this took time and patience, but he was thrilled at being able to communicate that way. So was I.

Thirteen and a half hours. It's exciting to write on the spot like this. I'm soaked with sweat, I haven't eaten. The one-yuan dinner was more chopped chicken-bones, this time with chunks of ginger on rice. I tossed the whole thing out the window, afraid it might be an insult to offer it to the peddler, who had gobbled the one green apple and eaten nothing else. I probably would have tossed an edible dinner, there's too much spit. The peddler keeps spitting near my feet, then flattening it with the sole of his shoe.

Fifteen and a half hours in hard seat, I'm glad we traveled that way; I'd do it again. It showed me a crude side and a gentle side of China, the crude side most apparent, the gentle most meaningful. The crude: the spitting, the nose-blowing onto floor and curtains, someone wiping his snot onto Sarah's shoes, a child peeing on the floor near Adolph's feet, garbage flying out the window or landing on the floor.

The gentle side: the man sitting next to me. I'm sure he'd never before met a foreigner. When we weren't using Berlitz, he'd smile at me, wanting to say something, not knowing how. He was young, attractive, warm, when he smiled he glowed. In the end he looked through my book and pointed to "goodnight." I suddenly felt sad that I'd never know more of his thoughts.

The gentle side: the relationship between the old man sitting across the aisle and the man sitting opposite me. When I noticed the younger man picking the shells off hard-boiled eggs, then handing them to the old man, I realized they were father and son. Breakfast, lunch, dinner, two or three eggs per meal, pears and apples lovingly peeled. After fifteen

hours the old man looked so exhausted I wondered if he'd survive the trip. His son helped him put his jacket back on and buttoned it up. Then he placed a bag on the seat, covered it with a towel, and had the old man lie down, using the bag as a pillow. He hovered over him, closed the curtains to block the cool evening air. I watched the old man's hands, long-fingered, knobby-knuckled. They reminded me of my own hands. No, not mine, my father's, they looked just like my father's hands.

Our crutch has been the CHINA SURVIVAL KIT, a backpackers' guide covering everything from hotels to history. People who take tours see the China the government wants them to see and come back with glowing reports. Though our reports may not glow, I've loved being here because of the way we've traveled. Thinking of hard seat, I'll remember the sweet man next to me and the old man and his son. I'll also think of the crudeness and wonder how the Chinese themselves feel about traveling that way for hours on end. Is it a holiday, an ordeal, or merely another fact of life to accept because it's there?

After fifteen and a half hours in hard seat, we arrived in Chengdu at 10:40 P.M. with no reservations. We were besieged by young rickshaw drivers anxious to pedal us and our luggage, which had doubled in Xian, to a hotel. We piled into three rickshaws and drove through the dark but active city, filled with bikes even at that hour. At last we straggled into the city's only hotel for foreigners, a thousand-room complex, the clerk of course said, "Sorry, no vacancies," and we of course refused to leave. Eventually a very expensive suite showed up, though no one had left, and later on two double rooms, only enough for four people, too bad there were five of us, too bad these were doubles, not triples, too bad a double room is not for three people. More discussions, until the clerk finally agreed to let us pay extra for the extra person. Is this a game of power, is that it, a game of power for the powerless? Perhaps I should have compassion for these powerless clerks whose only power is over us.

Eli wears size twelve shoes, not an Oriental size, so he has to have them custom-made. We took bicycle rickshaws to a shoe factory on the outskirts of town to order a pair. Sitting on the left side, I could see oncoming buses, trucks, and bicycles swerve to avoid us, and I suddenly realized just how much our lives depended on young strangers who wove in and out and made crazy left turns.

It took an hour of conferences for us to catch onto what no one had bothered to tell us: the factory made only women's shoes.

Back in the rickshaws, we wove through a crowded marketplace, everyone staring at the foreigners, hostile stares, the foreigners staring back. Let's get out of here, I was thinking, just as the pedal fell off our driver's bike. Poor guy, earning his livelihood with that flimsy, rusted-out vehicle. He worked at a repair shop for an hour and a half on a makeshift pedal that lasted, when finished, for less than a block.

Friday was a lost day. We spent the morning arguing. Sarah and Joshua wanted to climb Emei Shan, a sacred mountain about five hours from Chengdu. I wanted to fly right to Yangshuo, a small town near Guilin, and stay there. We spent the afternoon buy plane tickets.. The government settled our argument, there are no seats for Guilin until next Thursday.

Saturday morning Sarah, Josh, and I left for Emei Shan. Since Adolph had the runs, he and Eli left a day later.

We weren't surprised that the hotel clerk tried to charge us a higher rate when we checked out, that the watermelon peddlers raised their prices for us, that the woman selling

bus tickets to Emei pretended we weren't there. Chengdu was the most unfriendly city we'd visited.

The bus ride in the countryside had a nightmarish quality. The landscape was beautiful, lush green paddies, clumps of graceful bamboo, farm houses with thatched or tile roofs, stacks of drying rice plants, water buffalo wallowing in canals, mountains rising in the distance, ducks and cows and people. People farming, peddling, lugging loads, building roads, biking, bikers all over the place, that's why I couldn't enjoy the ride. The bus barreled down the narrow road that was bustling with activity, pedestrians, cyclists, cars, bus driver banging on his horn to tell everyone to get the hell out of his way because he wasn't getting out of theirs. The horn was loud, constant, grating on the ears and nerves, the seats were hard, the road bumpy, the air was rife with fumes. .

Suddenly the bus stopped, I heard a gasp from outside and saw a cart rolling onto a human body, then people running, converging. I sat there, hand over open mouth. I could see one unmoving leg on either side of the cart's wheel and red behind. The crowd had closed in and was trying to lift the cart off the body. I don't think I've ever been more horrified.

Then for a moment I saw the victim standing, supporting herself against the cart, dazed, surely in shock. The red I'd seen was her blouse. As soon as she stood up, the bus driver took off. I had no idea whether or not she was still standing two seconds later.

For the rest of the endless bus trip, all I wanted to do was cry, though I didn't; all I wanted to do was take a plane home, though I couldn't. Josh, sitting right in front of the bus with a full view of the road, saw the accident happen. The bus driver had forced a man with a cartload of rice-bags off the road. The cart began to roll backwards down a hill; the man had to let go of it; it knocked a woman off her bicycle and rolled on top of her. The bus driver never even got out of the bus.

That's the reality of overpopulation, of the fight for space in China. Buses, trucks, cyclists, and pedestrians battle for every inch of road traveled. I couldn't stand being a part of it, I didn't want to climb a mountain, I just wanted to get out.

Josh said that every blast of the bus's horn meant death ahead, that we had no idea how many people were almost killed on that trip.

At a seedy hotel in Emei, I spent the night trying to figure out how soon I could leave the country. I never again wanted to walk in the streets there nor ride in a bus.

There was of course no way to avoid buses. The next morning we rode through a grey drizzle to nearby Jingshui. Then, leaning on bamboo walking sticks and wearing plastic rain capes, we began our uphill climb.

I wonder if many people made the pilgrimage for religious reasons in this country where temples seem to exist mainly as relics of the past. Some went to see sunrise from the summit, to look down on a rainbow of clouds below. Some went for the festive atmosphere. Whole families climbed, the elderly, the very young, all taking it in stride.

Last month Adolph suggested that we visit Tai Shan, a sacred mountain with 6000 stone steps. I'd replied that that would be like walking to the top of the Empire State Building four times. I'd somehow imagined that Emei Shan would have sloping dirt paths instead of steps. And I'd thought I'd be able to stop at any point along the way, find the road, and hail a bus.

However the road was on the other side of the mountain. And the path was mainly stone steps, more than 6000 I'm sure, uneven, treacherous, some narrow, some wide, some appearing unusable at first glance, many covered with mud. In fact much of the path turned into a waterfall in the rain. Whenever the narrow trail lead downward for a while, I knew what was coming next. For the general direction was up, steep steps endlessly upward. And even here there was the struggle for space. People passed on steps wide enough for one, knocking me in the head with their opened umbrellas.

We saw no other foreigners, except for overseas Chinese. Men, lithe but strong, carried the weak, infirm, or lazy in wooden frames mounted on their backs. Four yuan, they indicated to me. I probably looked as if I needed help. I wasn't accustomed to paths three or four feet wide with steep drops on one or both sides, and I can't conceive of traveling them on someone else's back.

Thousands were climbing upwards or rushing downwards, encouraging each other, trying to communicate when they saw us, motioning me to continue whenever I stopped to rest. And when I did stop and stand and look into the faces of those passing me by, I saw some of the most beautiful smiles I've ever seen.

One man repeatedly tried to talk to me. He wouldn't leave until a man from Hong Kong came along and translated.

"Where are you from?" he asked.

"America."

"Oh, America! Did you come by plane or train?"

We walked 28 kilometers the first day. At one point I saw that everyone up ahead had stopped. I peered into the forest. Wild monkeys were swinging through the trees, chattering loudly, moving closer and closer to the crowd. One sat in the branches overhead and hissed when he realized we hadn't brought him food. Someone did feed them peanuts. They sat at his feet until his nut supply ran out, then grabbed at his pancho trying to find more.

The last few kilometers of the day were the most unbelievable, upwards, practically vertical, always upwards, around each bend more steps straight up, more curves, more steps, always expecting the top, always finding more steps. Finally we came to the monastery and the usual disorderly line, the usual mob scene, everyone waiting for rooms, drenched, shivering, exhausted. And elated.

Our room was spartan, three beds with three heavy quilts, stone floor magnifying the chill in the air.

My first project was finding a toilet. "Ce suo zai nar?" Usually people understand; this time they didn't. Eventually someone pointed towards a building at the foot of more steep stone steps.

Others had rushed there ahead of me and hadn't quite made it; the place was literally a shit hole. The mud floor had piles right in the doorway and flies buzzing in such swarms that the air appeared misty. I had to balance on ledges, almost as intimidating as the ledges I'd faced earlier in the day, to maneuver myself to a usable stall. Under no circumstances could I return after dark, though I guess a fall here wouldn't be fatal.

Sarah crawled under her quilt. Too hungry to sleep, Josh and I were forced once again to fight for space in the ticket line, to squeeze past packed tables and join the crowds at the

windows, everyone waving tickets, this window for food, this one for rice, that one for greasy chopsticks, to find room at a table, to find stools to sit on.

Our most memorable moment came later on when Sarah and I realized the significance of being unable to use the ladies room in the dark. The only safe spot we could find to pee turned out to be the ash trays.

Cool dawn. I pulled stiff wet blue jeans over leaden legs, forced damp socks and soggy sneakers onto swollen feet, and started out again, gasping for breath in the thin air. Pink clouds clung to the adjacent peak. The view was so spectacular, I was actually glad to be there, in fact euphoric.

The sunshine dried us as we climbed through nine more kilometers. Then I heard a car horn in the wilderness. A road. So we didn't climb all the way to the top. Thirty-seven kilometers sufficed for me; I had no qualms about taking the first van down.

What do the Chinese do when they get the runs on a five-hour non-stop bus trip? I'm not anxious to find out. On the ride back to Chengdu, my stomach felt queasy. I took some Pepto Bismo, and it worked.

Little things have made a big difference for us: Pepto Bismo, water flasks, tennis shoes, bamboo walking sticks, Eli's alarm watch that awakened us when the hotel clerks didn't, the Berlitz book, herb tea bags, THE CHINA SURVIVAL KIT, toilet paper. We should have brought multi-vitamin pills.

By the time we got to Chengdu, all we wanted to do for the next two days was to sit in an air-conditioned hotel room, with private toilet and shower, and wait for our plane to Guilin.

Right now we're in a four-engine propeller plane. "I hope we don't die," Josh is saying as we cruise low over the mountains. Before take-off, there was no air-conditioning. Instead the attendants distributed fans. Next they served kiwi juice, then gave us key chains with tiny thermometers, after that bags of candy. What I'd like is breakfast.

We expected Guilin to be a tourist trap, and that's what it is, the usual hotel run-around, the usual host of people viewing us merely as potential sources of income. We came to see the karsts, incredible limestone formations jutting up from the ground like mountain peaks with their bases missing.

Today's boat ride along the Li River near Yangshuo was idyllic, the water crystal clear, reflecting the karsts and the bamboo trees which curved like feather dusters. Water buffalo wallowed and crapped near the shore, naked children yelled to us as they swam, young men dove for clusters of green sea plants which they piled on rafts. Instead of using nets, fishermen used captive cormorants, throats tied so they couldn't swallow the catch. People living on junks were cooking their meals or hanging their clothes to dry. We floated through a dream on our last day in China.

We had planned to leave China next Tuesday; there's no plane that day. The ticket agent never mentioned there's a Monday plane, that's why we're on the Saturday plane, no more Chinese trains or hotel clerks or ticket offices. We're saturated with experiences, and with masses of people.

My last two mornings in China I did what I had planned to do every day, got up early to do tai chi, this time on a platform in the middle of the Li River. The routine in Guilin was very different from Taipei and even from Xian, was more like dance. People took turns leading, an

old man, a younger man, a middle-aged woman. If I ever return to China, I'll ask someone to teach me the routines. I love the movements. Also it's a way of making contact, of fitting into the rhythm of a land in which I'm clearly alien.

Now that I know which key opens the ladies' room door at the Hong Kong "Y," it's time to go home. Returning after being out of touch for seven weeks is scary. When I'm away I try to deal with whatever confronts me where I am and forget about the other side of the world and all the potential disasters.

My toe has been swollen for four weeks now. I should have seen a Chinese doctor. For the experience. Our Dutch friend, a doctor himself, did, only because he had no choice. His fever was so high and his throat so sore that he required a house-call. He asked the doctor for antibiotics.

"Oh, you don't want those," the doctor replied and gave him a mysterious injection and pills. He was better within hours.

A German doctor studying traditional medicine was fascinated that the Chinese use the eyeball for diagnosing diseases anywhere in the body; but she hadn't had enough experience

SECOND TRIP
1987

I'm somewhere between Chicago and Tokyo, somewhere between May 18 and 19, somewhat hungry, somewhat groggy, somehow reading a book I wouldn't normally have chosen to read on the way to Taipei.

People, incidents, books, chance chooses me. By chance last week a stranger handed me an article about sleeping in small chunks, and that's what I'm doing, two hours last night, another hour on the bus to O'Hare, half hour naps on the plane as I fly through a 37-hour day.

And by chance last night I noticed a book lying unread on my night table. A friend gave it to me two years ago, MAN'S SEARCH FOR MEANING by Viktor Frankl, an appropriate title to bring to a culture so different from mine. After all, that's what always interests me, what gives meaning to others' lives.

I didn't realize that the book dealt with the psychological impact of being in a concentration camp. Sitting here on a wide-bodied jet, ten people per row relaxing in cushioned seats with pillows, blankets, and trays for food, free to fly halfway round the world, I'm reading about men sleeping in tiers, nine on a slab of wood, nine sharing two blankets, sometimes sneaking their battered shoes under their heads to use as pillows, sneaking, for the Nazis controlled everything but their minds, men surviving on a bit of watery soup and some bread. And we're complaining that the fish is too salty.

What kept anyone going? The beauty of nature, memories of loved ones, hope. Most of my fellow flyers are now watching OUTRAGEOUS FORTUNE.

"Don't kiss me, I'm sick," were Eli's first words. He'd stopped at a hospital on his way to meet Adolph and me at the Taipei airport last night. He has a fever, rash, sore throat, swollen glands, and he's lost about fifteen pounds. He's been working sixteen hours a day.

He opened a bar a week ago with two Chinese partners and one Canadian. The partners are arguing, Eli playing mediator. One hasn't yet paid his share. They've been hassled for payoffs by gangs and police. The bar itself is warm, intimate, wooden tables and benches, a loft with pillows for those who want to take a rest, life-sized drawings of patrons on the walls, a small dance floor.

At the moment I'm sitting on a bench on the sidewalk, traffic surging past, fumes traveling into my lungs. I awoke at 5:30, eyes junky, nose running, a normal reaction to the air in Taipei. The streets were active, people walking and stretching, sweepers cleaning. I found some middle-aged women practicing tai chi on the campus of Taiwan University. Dressed in slacks, hair short, faces strong, they smiled when I joined them.

They were limber, a limberness most people in our society lose as quickly as they lose their childhood. I wonder what other aspects of childhood these women have retained.

Less than nine hours after landing, I've seen Eli's bar, spent the night in his apartment, acquired a head full of worries, and, sleeping in chunks, established my tai chi and writing routine with no jet lag.

Reading a good book is like traveling through a foreign land. Thanks to circumstance, it was as an outsider that I passed through a concentration camp, passed through it on my way to Asia

The last of human freedoms when all else is gone, wrote Frankl, is the choice of attitude, of how to deal with whatever confronts us. The choice of attitude, it applied in the

concentration camp; it applies perhaps more often than we realize, the choice of whether to close our eyes or open them, step or stand still, smile or snarl.

Yet it's a freedom only if we realize it is; and even then endless other factors may temper that freedom. Frankl managed in the worst possible circumstances. His turning-point was the moment he imagined himself giving a lecture on the psychology of the concentration camp.

Frankl considered man's search for meaning to be a primary force in life. If so, I suspect it often veers, replaced by the search for pleasure or power.

I think I'm reading this book for a reason which will become clearer to me as I travel.

I wonder if this breakfast will make me sick. Lettuce, cucumber, green tomato, relish, and greasy fried egg on a gushy white roll. Actually it tastes delicious. Diluted coffee, was the water boiled?

Anyway I'm worried about Eli, not me. Yesterday he was very feverish, his rash was worse, swallowing painful; he slept all day. In the evening Adolph and I taught his English class at a teahouse while someone took Eli, who by this time was burning up, to a doctor.

I never expected to be teaching English in Taiwan. We conversed for two hours, till the waitress came in to report that Eli was in the hospital and drew a picture indicating he was hooked up to an IV.

Jay Ci, one of the students, took the taxi with us, interminable ride, the doctor's daughter waiting outside under a street light. My God, she looked serious as she ushered us into a dreary building and through a narrow waiting room.

Less than 24 hours after arriving in Taipei, we were seated next to Eli, flat on his back on a green leather bed, a tube carrying yellow liquid into his arm. The purpose was to lower his temperature, which was 104. The doctor's daughter and Jay Ci massaged his arm, stiff, painful, bloated from all the sodium, calcium, and potassium chloride dribbling in.

Apparently "hospital" in Chinese also means doctor's office, though it took me a while to realize it. Well, I didn't realize until this morning that I bought two different sandals yesterday. I thought the salesgirls were laughing because I'd chosen men's sandals, the largest women's size in Asia being too small for me. I was so busy examining the bottoms, looking for size 40, that I apparently never glanced at the tops.

By 11 P.M., after two IV's, Eli's temperature was down to 101, and he, Adolph, and I took a cab back to his apartment.

"Taiwan cold." Is the doctor simply unable to translate? Or is that a catch-all term for unknowns? The rash is worse this morning.

I got up before 5:30, fastened to the idea of chunk sleeping. Five hours is acceptable so long as I can squeeze in an hour or two later in the day. And if there's one aspect of life I can participate in here, it's early-morning exercise. I went to the same spot as yesterday. The women weren't there yet. I walked briskly through the campus complex looking for tai chi. It was a beehive of exercisers, tennis courts full, people running, jogging, playing basketball. About thirty women in the dumpy stage of life were learning a dance, tai chi cha cha cha, a cha cha beat, extra wiggles in the hips, the movements themselves derived from tai chi. The music sounded like a Chinese version of an aerobics record.

I've never been good at following dance directions, coordinating arms and legs to do someone else's steps, and I felt like a clod, was relieved when everyone stopped and stood at attention as the national anthem boomed across the entire campus at 6:30 on the dot. Were any of those hundreds who stood motionless on tennis courts, on running tracks, or in the dewy grass, thinking of the Kuomintang, of authoritarian rule, of the throngs protesting martial law here two days ago?

After the anthem, the cha cha turned to ballroom dancing, and a poor old lady got stuck with me. If she'd been willing to lead, we might have managed. Instead she grimaced when our feet collided, laughed when they coincided, and the first chance she got, she found out how to say, Go home and come tomorrow.

I instead returned to yesterday's spot. Three ladies were chatting, smiled to see me again, and led me through a 15- minute tai chi routine, easier to follow than cha cha, more in tune with nature, more in tune with me. The movements slow, subtle, suspended, all parts of the body coordinated, I suddenly felt that this had to do with the meaning of life, balanced, in tune, always aware of the center of gravity.

"Come every day, we're here at six," said a woman who knew some English.

I'm in the restaurant I ate at yesterday. I solved the gushy white roll problem by bringing some whole wheat bread I bought at a small grocery store.

This place is outside on a quiet side street, a tin roof overhead, seven tables. Young people, mainly in their 20's, come, read the newspaper, and eat their white-bread breakfast. I can hear the singing of caged birds, the honking of car horns, the hum of motorcycles. I'm trying to transliterate the words of a distant street vendor shouting in a nasal male voice. Louder, louder, now I hear, Who are we? coming closer, Who are we? soaring above all other sounds. Dogs are yelping. Now another man's voice soars over the vendor's, over the bird tweets, a sweet deep voice practicing an operatic aria, an incredibly beautiful voice. Perhaps it's a recording. The newspapers pass from table to table as people come and go, everyone reading intently, six of them at this moment, reading the government-controlled press.

The vendor is passing closer, wawa wu ee.

We spent yesterday afternoon in Outpatient at the Taiwan Adventist Hospital, sick people and pregnant women using the same waiting area. What if Eli's rash was German measles? Some baby could be born blind.

It's a virus, could be nasty, the doctor told Eli, suggesting he check into the hospital. Eli refused. We took a cab back, Eli sweaty, clammy, blotchy, glands so swollen he could barely swallow.

Adolph was convinced that he made a big mistake in refusing to check in. I, however, don't trust a strange doctor, nor a strange hospital. Nor familiar ones.

Hospitals here don't provide round-the-clock nursing, according to Eli's roommate Skip. Instead they assume that the patient's family will take care of him. One of Skip's friends, with no family in town, fell asleep hooked up to an IV and awakened to find it had run out, leaving a vacuum, thus reversing the flow and sucking his blood back up the tube.

Being in Asia feels like a dream; Eli being sick feels like a nightmare. After dinner Adolph and I walked through this thriving unreality, through heat and humidity. What were we doing here? What was our son doing here? In a dark alley was an open-air Buddhist

temple, ornate carvings, incense not burning, no worshippers, a tranquil contrast to the bright main streets of clothing stalls, each with a different American album to assault the ears of passers-by.

We ended up at Eli's bar.

Why does Taipei draw young foreigners? I asked the young foreigners there.

It's so completely different from the suburbs, from the small town in the Midwest, from Canada. You can do things, like open up a bar, that you could never afford to do at home.

Here, you're someone special, one of them replied.

Adolph, Skip, and I slept in the living room on tatami mats. Not for long though. A little before one, Eli got up. His throat was so clogged and swollen he couldn't breathe. He didn't dare go back to sleep, was afraid he wouldn't wake up. He decided to check into the hospital.

At 2 A.M. we were sitting in Emergency. The doctor, a warm, English-speaking man, said Eli's temperature was 100.4, prescribed pills, syrup, and lozenges, gave him an injection, and sent him back home.

His voice sounded better in the cab as we cruised through the almost-dark, not-sleeping city, past the rotating green lights of barber poles. Most barber shops are massage parlors. They stay open well into the night for those who don't want haircuts.

If I weren't sleeping in chunks, I probably couldn't have told my mind to wake me up at 5:30 this morning for tai chi.

The women were smiling, friendly, You got here on time today, What is your name? Suzanne? That's a good name. So I did tai chi with Judy Chao, Mrs. Wong, and several unnamed ladies. Then they left to go home, and I was left to wonder what they do once they get there.

Afterwards I joined an old man teaching two other old men the dynamics of tai chi. I sensed they welcomed me, though they didn't look in my direction. They did the movements very slowly, with careful attention to the relationship of knees to feet, to the shifting of weight, to the position of the fingers.

Eli doesn't seem as feverish, glands not quite so swollen, rash somewhat lighter. He's pretty sick though, has slept for four days. As I lay in bed last night trying to figure out when to leave for Hong Kong, certainly not on Tuesday as planned, I realized that once we go, we won't see Eli till December. I couldn't stand the thought of leaving, still can't, can't but will. Grown children don't need hovering mothers. And mothers, too, must live their own lives. Not that I have any trouble doing that.

Tai chi again, first with the women, then with the three old men. People here, as in China, take turns teaching each other, discussing the subtleties. The old man gave his two students long lectures on the philosophy behind tai chi, telling them to imagine themselves suspended, like puppets, by a string connected at the top of the head. He described the path of the life force as we inhale and exhale, the importance of lips, teeth, throat, abdomen, of air, of water. I could tell by gesture alone. Though our eyes never met, I knew by the hint of a smile when I joined them that he was glad I was there.

As we moved, the master was discussing the exact position of feet, hands, arms, fingers, the location of gravity's center, the smallness of the steps. We had to be aware of and looking

at our own bodies, almost as outside observers, much in the way Frankl saw himself giving a lecture on concentration camp psychology.

In order to have control over our lives, we have to step back and look at them, think about our direction, purpose, balance. Does tai chi do this in the mental as well as the physical realm?

Five days now I've managed to awaken at 5:30 without an alarm and without my usual dose of sleep. These tai chi women are my age; their children are the same age as mine. Judy Chao brought her 25-year-old son this morning to practice English.

When I'm dancing, I love reaching the point when the music is directing me, telling me to do steps that wouldn't occur to my conscious mind. At times I feel a similar sensation doing tai chi, the communion of the body and outside forces.

Shen invited Eli, Adolph, and me out to dinner. He got only two of us; Eli stayed in bed. We took a taxi to one end of town to the other and back, looking for a restaurant acceptable to Shen. Finally we took another cab across the city to a mountain top, then halfway down again to a restaurant with a stream rushing past, sulfur springs filling the air with the aroma of rotten eggs. We sat outside at a round table for twelve. Shen ordered according the number of seats, fish, shrimp, chicken, baby bamboo shoots, full-grown bamboo shoots, Chinese cabbage, fried noodles, mussel soup, and a bottle of wine. For dessert we had jamoca almond fudge ice cream cones at 31 Flavors.

Shen is a handsome, charming, voluble man of 36. He's slight of build, and his face is dominated by a multitude of wrinkles around the eyes and an ever-present smile, which lapses every now and then into sadness. He opened a new business five months ago, gets up at midnight, works till nine P.M. six days a week. He says he wants to make money make money.

For what? I asked him.

In order to travel, he told me.

Well, people travel and people travel, and then what? It's not merely an end but a way of getting somewhere, and the question is where.

Shen said he just wants to do, not think, to keep on doing, not too much thinking. I said I like to think, that's how I know where I'm going. Adolph kept agreeing with Shen, not too much thinking, "I think through my work," said Adolph.

That may or may not be okay for Adolph, who affects others' lives with his art and his teaching. Is it okay for Shen, who wants to make money make money?

"Did Shen mention that he wants to commit suicide at age fifty?" Eli asked me when we got back. He said that social pressure to make money and be successful is even stronger here than in the States. I guess in a collective society the impact of social pressure is magnified. On the other hand, isn't competition a perversion of collectivism?

I once tried writing my own eulogy. This line sticks in my mind: Imagine yourself at your destination, where do you want to say you've been? Similarly Frankl told patients to imagine themselves at age eighty and on their deathbeds looking back at their lives. When they project themselves like that, they begin to see more clearly what makes life worth living.

I doubt we'll see Shen again this visit. I told Eli to suggest to him that he think about what he wants from his life.

Judy's son Peter is an attractive young man, tall, small-boned, delicate. He stared intently and didn't say anything when she brought him to tai chi to meet me. Maybe he didn't really speak English. Sometimes, in answer to a question, he'd say yes or no very distinctly. Judy indicated that he doesn't open his mouth; I wondered what was wrong. He'd had to leave military service because he was sick. Perhaps the illness and his silence were connected.

Adolph and I visited them in the afternoon. The four of us sat in their sparsely-furnished living room. The floor was a black and white checkerboard of marble tiles; cane chairs lined the wall. I wonder if there's a relationship between the Chinese seating arrangements, side-by-side instead of face-to-face, and the lack of eye contact between men and women. I told Peter to move a chair to the other side of the coffee table, surprising him. I couldn't imagine conversing if the four of us sat in a row. In fact I couldn't imagine us conversing at all, with Judy's poor English and Peter's closed mouth.

So, what do you do with your day? I asked Judy.

Keep house, cleaning cooking shopping seeing friends, very very busy. She smiled shyly and shrugged.

Two little dogs yelped wildly as they ran back and forth on a narrow balcony off the living room.

Do they stay out there all day? I asked.

Yes.

Aren't they allowed in the house?

No. Too dirty.

Do you love your dogs?

They were shocked at that question. Adolph looked at me as if I were crazy, though he kept asking them if the balcony wasn't too confined.

Judy said her other son loves the dogs very much.

And do you?

Yes. She said it as if she hadn't thought about it before.

And do you? I asked Peter.

Yes. We all love them.

Do you take them for walks?

Yes. Two times a day for a half hour.

Do they eat breakfast?

Yes.

What?

Milk and bread and eggs.

Lunch?

Yes.

What?

Rice and milk.

Dinner?

Yes.

Their dogs ate four times a day, ate whatever the family ate, and two pieces of bread before going to sleep at night.

Our dog eats only dog food, I told them, but she runs all over the house and there's dog hair on everything.

Their expressions indicated they would never tolerate dog hair on everything.

Do you eat dogs? I asked.

No, but some people here do, said Peter.

Would you like to see one of the dogs? asked Judy. She opened the sliding door and after a struggle managed to squeeze Hopper through while leaving Lai Lai outside. Hopper was a foot long miniature daschund, an electrified knockwurst, jumping, wriggling like a fish caught in a net. We couldn't stop laughing.

As time passed it became more apparent that Peter's silence was shyness. He was bright and educated, with a master's degree in engineering. Although he knew English well, he'd almost never spoken it. He had had to leave the army because of a severe case of asthma.

Do you read books? I asked Judy.

No, no, no time.

Do you read books? I asked Peter.

Yes.

What do you read?

He showed us an advanced physics book, ANALYSIS, in English. He spends his days sleeping and reading textbooks and newspapers, according to Judy. She wishes he'd go out and meet people.

Frankl wrote that life, if meaningless, "can't be rendered meaningful merely by its perpetuation." It's not the perpetuating, the parenting, that's meaningful, it's the love. And Judy's love is evident in every gesture. But is that all, and if so, does that suffice?

Tai chi is different from other exercise, Peter was saying, It requires total relaxation, emptying the mind, feeling the flow through the body. It takes years to master.

Perhaps forty years of doing hatha yoga has helped me. This morning I could feel very clearly how the movement of the arms flowed to the legs, could feel the smoothness, the coordination.

Taipei is polluted, noisy, drowning in traffic, I hate having Eli sick, hate being out of touch with Sarah, Josh, and my parents, yet I'm enjoying this city more this time. I feel more at home than before.

Yesterday I was needled by worries: about Eli, who's feeling weak and sleeping all day; about writing this journal from the viewpoint of the meaning in people's lives when I can't even speak the language; about surviving in the Orient when it's so easy to become diseased, fall down stone stairs, step into holes, get hit by motorcycles; about wandering the streets too much. We'd planned to fly to Hong Kong tonight. Now that I've canceled the reservation, it's painful to make another, since once we leave we won't see Eli for seven months. Tears are running down my cheeks in McDonald's. McDonald's, empty calories for breakfast once again. It's hard to find a good place to write.

Before reading Frankl's book, I'd intended to focus my journal on being a part of wherever I happen to be. That hasn't changed, for that's part of my personal definition of meaning, being a part of and caring about wherever I am.

At sunrise here as at home I am part of the exercising population. Actually, here I'm part of the world community of post-menopausal women, complaining of farsightedness, memory-loss, and, if I understand the gestures, hot flashes, each identified by age and number of children. And Judy and I share something else at the moment: concern for our sick sons.

I'm sitting at a little outdoor restaurant with a can of "apple sidra." I expected juice but received carbonated water, citric acid, sugar, and concentrated apple essence. So here's to gas, inside and out, as vehicles buzz past.

Tai chi, then breakfast and writing for three hours, my own personal routine roots me, takes away the aimlessness of travel. Routine and root, or routine and rut, the potential for either is always there.

I did relinquish some of my writing time this morning. Judy took me to meet her husband, Leo, before he left for work. He didn't appear embarrassed, wearing only his undershorts when we walked in. He quickly dressed and, slim and smiling, chatted with me, then invited us all out to dinner.

For lunch Adolph and I have been going to a dumpling house. Usually by that time it's pouring. Then, rain or shine, we've been taking buses to unknown destinations, getting off whenever we agree an area looks appealing, then wandering until we're exhausted. The first day we wanted to buy a sheet for Eli. Another time we tried for several hours to retrace our steps to find the store where I'd bought my two odd sandals.

We suspect we were walking certain blocks again and again, yet aren't sure. If we can't recognize the places we've already been, what's the point of having been there? When we have no objective, no sheets nor sandals, I feel more than ever like an outside observer, looking, looking, talking only to my husband.

Then we'll come upon one of those temples with Buddhas and dragons, snakes and warriors, incense, monks, offerings of fruit, and I'll know I want to be here.

This city is built very low, maybe because it's earthquake-prone and floating on mud, one, two, three, four-story buildings, once in a while a fifteen or twenty, the very tallest thirty. The first story is usually indented, so the stories above extend to the street, covering sidewalks. Many side streets have no walks at all. Cars, motorcycles, bicycles, pedestrians, and dogs all fight for the same space.

The city is a pastiche of tiny shops, eating nooks on every block, most without plate glass, woodcarvers, sign painters, stylish dress shops, jewelry shops, tea shops, pharmacies. Yesterday I watched two druggists carefully weigh and sort organic bits and pieces into intriguing packets, frequently referring to their customer's prescription. Inside the glass counter were dried lizards and turtles and snakes and herbs.

Pots and woks, cutting boards and choppers, the city's divided into a million minuscule kitchens. Three men are making dumplings, one trimming the dough, then putting it through a small press for further flattening, the other two placing wads of pork and green onions into the skins, then squeezing the edges.

There's this center of awareness traveling about five feet above the ground through Taipei streets, through tunnels under the busier thoroughfares; a center of awareness that could be wiped out at any time, leaving behind a pile of shorthand notes; an awareness that could sit for weeks in this city and describe every hole in the wall with its unique pulsation.

Part of travel is the imagining of what each observed life must be: Five men squeezed into a kitchen that could fit only five, chopping, washing, boiling, sweltering, preparing the midday meal for anyone willing to pay. A lady scrubbing other ladies' hair in a two-chair salon, a man trimming other men's hair, another ironing, hour after hour, other people's sheets. A woman standing midst suspended blouses, skirts, and slacks, telephone receiver pressed against her ear. A fruit vendor slicing chunks of pineapple and watermelon.

Every one of us is inhaling air that shouldn't be inhaled, eating pesticide-laden produce, coping with anarchic traffic. The twentieth century is here without the pesky rules and regulations that save people's lives.

What did you do this morning? I asked Judy at tea.

She'd shopped, twenty minutes each way, then prepared potato leaves, rice, and pork for Peter's lunch.

What did you do? I asked Peter.

Sleep.

Do you ever go to the movies?

No.

Do you ever go to bars?

No.

Do you ever go out dancing?

He thought that was amusing. No, he spends time talking to his mother. I don't know whether he has friends, I suspect our visits are as special to him as they are to us.

Now I'm in a cab squeezing through side streets. The driver is calm, relaxed, competent. I haven't spoken to him, have only seen his back, yet I like him.

This city is filled with construction sites, wooden structures coming down, concrete going up. Character and charm makes way for homogenization. Yet the old wooden houses are squalid, decaying, and one match could create a forest fire.

At the entrance to an alley a middle-aged man is leaning against his motorcycle, a display case filled with doughy cookies over the rear wheel. How many hours days weeks months does he stand there, lean there, what does he think there? How many people in this world are permanently connected to their pushcarts or scooters or enclosed in little booths, waiting for the eaters of doughy cookies to pass by with kwai or lire or pesos or rupees?

And now we're back in the Adventist Hospital Outpatient Department, Eli's final check-up, I hope. The pricing structure is strange, $30 for a two-day supply of medicine, the next time $24 for a four-day supply. Maybe they want to keep us off balance. Eli's still lethargic, sleeping full time, though better. Adolph and I are leaving on Saturday.

It upsets me that once we're in China, we can't contact him in Taiwan. Then I think of all the families separated since l949. Brothers, sisters, parents, children, those who fled to Taipei are prohibited by their own government from any contact whatsoever with the main-

land. No letters nor phone calls, and nothing from the mainland can be brought into Taiwan, except perhaps a few million anti-Communists.

After seeing a total of six different doctors over eight days, Eli finally has a diagnosis: mononucleosis. The doctor who figured it out was an American.

Eli asked us to stay until Sunday so he can show us Taipei night life. I was delighted to have an excuse. In the meantime, I could easily sit here in McDonald's till nightfall and write as I watch life file past the plate glass. Motorcycles are parked in rows on the tile sidewalk; cyclists weave through pedestrians. Across Hsin Sheng Nan Lu is Taiwan University, whew, a cyclist zipped along the sidewalk, now another. The first question Taiwanese ask me is, What do you think of our traffic? Are you scared? Do they mean in the streets or on the sidewalks?

There are three activities I've particularly enjoyed here: Doing tai chi with the same women every morning. It's nine days now that I've managed to awaken, my alarm is my bladder. Teaching Eli's English classes. Each time we have two or three hours of intensive conversation. Drawing on the walls of the long, narrow hallway leading to Eli's bar. I hope to have created a crowd by the time I leave.

When people model, I'm intensely looking at the physical, and they're intensely aware that's what I'm doing. Then they realize that I should know a little about the inside if I'm going to do justice to the out. A man of 35, a dragon on his sleeveless tee shirt, a ring of keys hanging half out of his blue-jean pocket, hair down to shoulders, mustache curving upward with his smile, a beer mug in his hand, it wasn't my best drawing, but I was glad I did it. There's no other way I would happen to have talked to him. He exports sunglasses to America, also has a travel agency. "I want to keep making money," said this man who wandered in off the street.

Is that what you want to do with your life, just keep on making money?

No, not at all. I look at each day as a challenge. I just want to keep on learning.

Yes, me too, I said, and to overlap with the outside world. If I had to pick what's most important to me, it's my children.

No, he didn't feel that way. He wants his son to be independent, to make his own decisions. The most important thing is being independent.

Love and independence aren't mutually exclusive. I want my children to make their own decisions. I often refuse to give them my opinions, even if I disagree with theirs. Here I was, drawing on the walls of my son's bar, and I don't like bars. I've observed the effects of alcohol all over the world, seen how it can destroy not only individual lives, but whole cultures. Still, if the meaning of life is learning, this is one hell of a meaningful bar for Eli. Designing and building the interior, dealing with partners, customers, wholesalers, and balance sheets in an alien culture and in a foreign language, even getting sick from overwork, has been an incredible education.

I had breakfast with Eli's Chinese waitress. Raised in the States, she came here to find her roots. She's shocked and confused, doesn't like what she's seen among people her age, early 20's. They're not brought up to be independent. They let their parents make all their decisions, don't even know how to go out and earn their own living.

Nerida and Jay Ci, Eli's students last night, complained about parents not respecting their children's opinions, not listening, not communicating.

Skip mentioned that, too, that children are brought up to obey, to listen to their teachers' lectures, and not to question. I guess that's one way a culture can perpetuate itself for thousands of years.

I asked Skip if he thought the complexity of the language might stimulate brain usage. In mathematics and science, he replied, not in creativity. And they know it's a problem they have to break out of.

Yesterday about a hundred high school students were painting near a giant pond of pink lotus flowers, all wearing their school uniforms and using identical art supplies. Actually I wouldn't mind having one of those kits: portable easels, flat boxes for watercolor paper, inflatable yellow dishes for water. But the point I'm coming to is the similarity of their paintings, first drawn in pencil, then filled in, some better than others, all static.

When we do tai chi, I enjoy the oneness with others and with nature. On the other hand, the unexpected is what always fascinates me, the way each person, painting, dog, tree, moment, is different from any other.

I'm contemplating uniformity. The Chinese have a cultural uniqueness, a distinct character. Do we? We're represented here by McDonald's, Kentucky Fried Chicken, and Wendy's, located in clusters throughout the city, a characterless, profit-motivated uniformity, the carbon-monoxide of culture. I write this sitting once again in McDonald's, listening to a Muszak-type version of "A Bridge Over Troubled Water."

For Eli's 23rd birthday on Wednesday, four lovely young students bought him a wallet and an elegant birthday cake topped by whipped cream, peaches, pears, and cherries. His friends at the bar, foreign and Chinese, bought him another. Shen stopped by with still another, all these sweets accompanied by the incredible sweetness that seems to pervade the Chinese character, sweetness, kindness, modesty.

Uniformity. The children obey; perhaps that explains the lack of a drug problem. Of course drugs are easier to control in authoritarian societies, and authoritarianism is easier to establish where the children obey.

Chunk sleeping is petering out. I've been getting only one chunk, five hours more or less, which isn't enough. I've no time for another, too much to do, think, write about. Like two-inch cockroaches that fly and bite and hide on the toilet seat.

Like little old ladies in straw hats who sweep the streets at daybreak, sweep banana peels and dog shit into their dustpans and empty them into the large straw baskets that they pull around on plastic carts. A dangerous job, said Peter. A lot of them get hit by cars.

Like those cute little dogs that provide the shit. I've never before seen so many gentle strays.

My first gesture after opening my eyes each morning is trying to make out the numbers on my watch. If I can see them, either it's time to get up or Skip has kept the light on all night. This morning, however, it was past time, bioclock running slow. Then I realized it was raining. Do the ladies do tai chi in a drizzle?

Wearing my orange plastic poncho, I rushed to the campus. People were playing tennis, the tai chi crowd wasn't there. I went back home to wash my hair. As I stood under the shower, I could hear Adolph laughing in the living room. Whom was he talking to at 6:45?

Judy and Peter. They'd stopped by to invite us for tea and to give us a book, THE PAINTINGS OF CHAO SHAO-AN, a beautiful book, paintings alive and loose, yet within Chinese tradition. Peter had made a special trip to the History Museum to buy it for us.

Teaching English can include anything under the sun, as long as the language is right. When Eli's student Whelan used the expression "rich and famous," I asked him if he thought being rich and famous makes people happy.

I'm not them, so I don't know.

I asked the students what they thought would make them happy. Whelan's first response was a beautiful wife. Doris paused then said a husband, two children, and her own business selling plants. Bright wanted enough money to do whatever he wants to do, enough to make life easy. I commented that we learn most and feel most satisfied when we accomplish things that are difficult.

Whelan wanted a house with a yard, just one story, in the mountains outside of Taipei. In Taipei there are no yards, few places for children to dig to America without first drilling through concrete.

I didn't mention all the unhappy people I've known with houses, yards, enough money for life to be easy, handsome husbands, beautiful wives, children, even fame.

They asked what makes me happy. Well, all of us want something different, I told them. For me, relationships, learning, trying to make the world better in some way are all important.

"So are you happy?" asked Doris.

"Yes," I replied, and we all laughed.

I asked if they'll be different from their own parents when they have children. Yes, they'd communicate better. They'd all been spanked, and Doris was sure she'd never spank her own children. Whelan and Bright would.

What do you think? they asked.

Spanking shows children that big people have the right to hit little people, I replied.

Excuse me, I want to change the subject, said Whelan. We might never get to talk to you again, what do you do, what are your prospects? What is your address so we can send you Christmas cards?

I haven't described their appearance and personalities. I hope at least their warmth, charm, and liveliness radiates through these conversational scraps.

After an extended class the students said that if it's convenient, maybe we could all go see Eli's bar. This was a decision, whether or not I should do what I wouldn't want my children to do. Shouldn't I do it once, to understand a little more about life here? So clutching Whelan's waist, I was soon cruising through Taipei streets on the back of a motorcycle. Now I know firsthand how vulnerable one feels weaving in and out of traffic, unshielded legs just inches from moving taxis and buses. I had faith in chance, and in Whelan, but I wouldn't do it again.

Doesn't it worry you? I asked.

We have no choice. None of us can afford cars, these things are the only way to get around.

I asked Leo at dinner the other night why the government doesn't regulate motorcycle parking and riding on sidewalks. He said they're afraid that if they do anything that discourages the use of motorcycles, the car population and the pollution would grow out of control.

The students left, and I stayed at the bar to continue my mural, drawing whomever was willing to pose, including Eli's Chinese partner, Jean, who has her degree in philosophy. She's more interested in Western thinkers than in Chinese.

Why is that? I asked.

The Chinese tell you what to do, the Western try to get you to think for yourself.

But hasn't Chinese thought evolved over thousands of years?

If you keep doing things the same way for thousands of years, you stay the same.

Have you ever found yourself locked in, in a stall in the ladies' room of the McDonald's on Hsin Sheng Nan Lu in Taipei? Have you noticed that when the lock on the door jams and you start banging, if no other women are in there, then nobody answers? And if someone did answer, it probably would be in Chinese. Have you ever noticed how your thoughts jump ahead in such circumstances to everyone else wondering what happened to you when you don't show up for lunch? They go to McDonald's, and your reading glasses and felt-tipped pen and Berlitz book and bright orange poncho are still on the table, along with MAN'S SEARCH FOR MEANING, while you're sitting on the freshly-mopped, still-damp tile floor.

The space underneath the door is about six inches, and the space on top is about seven inches, I'm at least eight inches thick, not that I tried squeezing. Luckily with about five minutes of banging, pulling, pushing, and manipulating, the door opened, and I managed to escape from what Sartre called "the little room where one is tranquil." This sea of tranquillity didn't even have toilet paper, but I learned long ago that in Asia I carry my own.

We did spend time with Shen again, a full day, and I never gave him my message. Adolph sculpted him in Eli's apartment, Judy's family watching. We all ate dinner afterwards, Shen and Leo shoving each other to get the check, and then we went to Eli's bar. The Chao's were fascinated by everything, the sculpting, the bar, my mural. I wonder if they'll return to show their friends their life-sized portraits on the wall. I've drawn twenty figures in the narrow corridor.

In a few hours we take off for Hong Kong, though we're tempted just to stay here. Adolph now knows where to get clay, we're comfortable, have our routines, our friends, and most important, our son. I keep thinking we should divide this trip in half, three weeks here, three weeks in China.

Taipei may in a sense be China, the rest of Taiwan isn't. Away from this city, especially in the south, the people and the language are mainly Taiwanese. In Taipei we've met a self-selected group, those who speak English and who are interested in the West. Most came here, or their parents came here, from China in l949. Actually they're the minority, the conquerors. .

It hurts every time I leave one of my children behind, or they leave me. On the way to the airport, I wanted the bus to move slowly, or even not at all, so we'd miss the plane. The flip side of caring is always pain.

Perhaps we're separated from other species by the kind of awareness we have of our emotions.

After Taipei, Hong Kong feels modern, sterile, stylish, too comfortable for some, too uncomfortable for others, like the beggars with missing limbs on the sidewalks of Kowloon, reminding us all of how easy it is to misstep. Especially with vehicles driven on the left-hand side of the street.

Up before five again, slow at getting organized, I figured at 6:15 that I'd missed my exercise. Still I followed the old people streaming in the general direction of a park, then strolling along park paths. Maybe here they walk instead of doing tai chi. But all paths led to a soccer court where about three hundred people were gathered, male, female, my age or older, all Asian except for me, bags and purses lying on the ground next to their owners' feet.

I selected a spot near the front, an old lady made me move. I wasn't too close nor in anyone's way, but I wasn't part of an even row. At 6:30 the whistle blew, calisthenics began, everyone moving one part of the body at a time instead of doing the smooth, subtle, dance-like tai chi of Taipei.

I slept later today, a conscious decision. It can't hurt to rest a tired body before going to China, where it will become totally exhausted if experience is an indicator, which it is and isn't.

Last night I kept wanting to call my parents and Sarah, wondering about their trip to Mexico, worried about Father, and Mother. Adolph wants to call his mother. Then there's Josh and Eli. If we make one call, it's Pandora's box. Maybe we should go to China and forget the rest of the world. In Milwaukee it's 9:30 P.M. yesterday; here I've just finished a sickening breakfast. The English exported white bread to the rest of the world. I can't understand the attraction.

We're literally on a slow boat to China. We left Hong Kong at 8:30 P.M. and will arrive in Canton very early tomorrow morning. I'd expected the boat to be hard traveling, with wooden shelves for beds, more or less like Frankl's description of the concentration camps. Instead we're in a dormitory for sixteen, eight double-decker bunk beds, sheets, pillows, blankets, mattress, rather luxurious for $12. Everyone's Chinese but Adolph and me, all talking loudly. They sound like close friends though I'm sure they've never before met.

5 A.M., I'm on deck, watching us float through the fog into Canton. At about midnight some officials entered the room and escorted several occupants out with their baggage. Funny hour for customs inspection, I groggily thought. I just realized that the people leaving had been squatters.

So now we're back in China. Strange that it's a familiar place to be. Our taxi-driver pretended not to understand us, tried to deliver us to a hotel on the outskirts, long ride ending up a few blocks from where we started out.

Uh oh, I thought, as we walked into the hotel, now comes the no-room routine. I asked for a double and got one immediately.

We're right in the center of this incredible. seething city. Many side streets are too narrow for vehicles. Bicycles swarm down main streets and whiz the wrong way on one-way streets. Bike bells bells bells bells bellsbellsbells, we have to figure out how to get from one side to the other, pedallers passing like drops in a rainstorm. Streets thick with bikes, walks thick with humans, what happens to sense of self when each self is one in a billion?

Back alleys are tunneled by hanging laundry as elm trees once tunneled the streets of Milwaukee. A girl seated on a stool picks at a sore on her leg, a man scrubs his feet in a basin, another sands wood for a table top, a woman dices meat.

I went wild with my camera, walking at a steady pace, a picture framed in my viewfinder, click, damn, I forgot to reset the light meter, click, was the focus off, just keep going, snapping, I've never seen a more fascinating marketplace, whoops, got that baby really close, walking as if I weren't sneaking pictures, the man with the half-dead raccoons in cages, I wouldn't dare, the woman petting the puppies, looks normal, but this is a food market food market, Adolph suddenly wants to become vegetarian, the ducks the geese the chickens the rabbits the litter of dying kittens, the white cat, the snakes frogs fish, all awaiting execution, the monkey, I'm clicking away, live animals, dead ones, skinned ones, pelts suspended overhead, best roll of film I ever took, isn't it 36 shots yet, yes, then why is it still clicking, my God, the film must have come off when I got to the end, I think I've lost the whole roll, can't rewind, probably punishment for taking all those people who didn't want their picture taken. If they had the right to sell animals for slaughter, then I had the right to photograph them doing it. Damn, I wouldn't dare take my camera through there again.

We wanted tickets to go to Xian tomorrow. The clerk at the station sold only same-day tickets. We bought them anyway, packed, checked out, and managed to catch the 1:15 train. Hours and hours of hard seat coming up. We're pulling out now, lively Chinese music blaring over the loudspeakers. We don't know when we arrive nor whether or not we have to change trains at Wuhan. The mopper's already working her way through.

We're sitting opposite two young men. Bags are piled precariously on the overhead racks. I hope this is a very smooth ride.

Vendors hawk along the platform selling bread, pineapple, bananas, we bought thirty, ice cream drumsticks, we bought two, cartons of chrysanthemum tea, we tried it and threw it away. It's not as hot in June as it was in July, and the fans are functioning. A man in a white uniform is advancing slowly with his kettle, pouring boiling water for tea. We brought cinnamon tea bags but forgot to bring cups.

A man takes a puff now and then from a bamboo water pipe about two feet long and two inches wide, the lower half in a plastic bag, sweet-smelling tobacco. Damn, he closed the window. It's raining, that's why. I'd rather get wet than not breathe. Through the drop-streaked glass, I can see peasants in rice paddies, tea bushes growing round hillsides. The clouds are low, silhouetting the trees.

This car seats 120; 95 percent are male. Something's happening at one end, men standing, arguing. Ah, they're playing Chinese chess.

I got him to reopen the window. He's still smoking the water pipe, ashes blowing in my face. China exhausts me. Heat, humanity, it's harder now than it was two years ago. I've been having hot flashes accompanied by sudden thirst and weakness.

I showed the men across from us our dictionary. They've been poring through it for over a half hour now. We've been riding an hour, I've no idea how many more to go. I'll keep my elbow in the window so he can't close it again. He's too engrossed in the dictionary to notice it's raining harder now. People here are damned curious about the outside world. And it's impossible for most of them to go anywhere.

Two hours now, and Adolph suggested we upgrade to hard bed. He doesn't see the point in this. For me, the point is to know what it's like for the average Chinese to travel. In the meantime we've had a running Berlitz conversation, learned their names, Dion and Chao, their professions, and where they're going. They're commercial travelers; I guess that's traveling salesmen.

I just slept awhile, head numbing arms, three and a half hours now, Adolph seems serious about hard bed.

I was thinking about finding a toilet, looked down the aisle, people standing, leaning, sitting on sacks. I can't even tell if I really have to use it; maybe I've sweat enough.

A slight man in blue has been standing in the aisle opposite us for several hours, eyes bloodshot. Occasionally he sits down on the floor. Right now he's up, elbow on seatback, looking miserable. A young woman has been sitting, tranquil, legs uncrossed, barely moving for about four and a half hours. A trainload of pigs in slatted box cars is passing. The man in blue bought a Styrofoam box of dinner, thrust his face forward, chopsticks zinging rice into mouth. Now he's fanning himself with a folded newspaper as the loudspeaker blares GREENSLEEVES. He didn't try to find a seat when people got out at the last stop. Now he's sitting on the floor reading the newspaper.

Our seat mates haven't spit nor thrown garbage on the floor, Actually this car is much cleaner than most. We ate in the diner. Since we couldn't read the menu, the waitress drew pictures. We understood her rendition of duck, so that's what we had for supper.

Adolph's trying to get us into hard bed. Maybe I'll stay here. The men across from us are very friendly, still fascinated by our dictionary and Berlitz book. I took a walk through three more hard-seat cars, hundreds of men, mostly in their 20's and 30's, slumping sleeping sweating on the green benches, in undershirts or short-sleeved white shirts. The awake ones stare blatantly at me.

The train stopped in a mountain village. Adolph suggested we get off and forget about Xian. Then the conductor came by. After almost seven and a half hours in hard seat, it looks like we're getting hard beds. That takes care of the mountain village, probably with no hotels, just as I was getting used to the idea.

So the conductor whisked us through car after car of hard bed. I felt sad leaving our seat mates, felt we'd connected in some way.

And now I'm flat on my back on the lower berth, looking up. A thick arm wrist fist extends over the edge of a bed; that's all I can see of the man in the middle. The smell of urine is overwhelming.

I lay on my back, tears streaming. Life seems so unfair for so many people. There we'd been, in hard seat. Then the conductor came along and ushered us out, we the privileged who can play the game of traveling third class while the people we leave behind have no choice. We were born by chance into lives with choices. How is that determined? And why is it that so many who have choices don't take advantage of them, when there's a whole world longing? And would those who are longing make better choices or be happier if they had the chance?

Is it easier to lead a caring life when there are fewer choices available?

The man in the bed across from me is tall, young, handsome, he has an angelic face. Last night he spit on the floor, and I immediately stuck my sandals under the bed. He's spit out the window ever since.

An old man noticed that I'm carrying a plastic shopping bag from the Taipei National Museum, and he got pretty excited. He showed it to everyone, moving his index finger to indicate we should never go to Taiwan.

Less than 22 hours left till we get to Xian, if that's where we're going. I think we change trains in Wuhan at eleven.

I'd thought that with so many tourists traipsing through China, we wouldn't be a novelty. I haven't seen those tourists, however, especially in this train. I've looked through a dozen cars; there doesn't seem to be anyone else who speaks English. Time's passing, and we have no idea whether or not we have to change trains. I've tried using Berlitz, pointing to Does this train stop at...? filling in Xian myself. People search through the book then hand it back to me frustrated. I don't want to end up in Peking.

We finally found a conductor sitting in a little room. He pointed to, It's a direct train, then pointed to 6:01 on his schedule. We weren't convinced. THE CHINA SURVIVAL KIT said there was no direct train.

We found another conductor in another car. He pointed to Terminus. Wow, and we had been ready to get off at Wuhan.

"Come in, sit down," said a young man as we passed his compartment. We were delighted to finally have the opportunity to talk to someone. Once we were seated, we found that was all the English he knew.

Twenty-one and a half hours gone, there's a farmer plowing with his water buffalo. Nineteen and a half to go, my joints are achy. The countryside's a fantasy world, tiered bright-green paddies. Small ponds of lotus flowers reflect billowing clouds.

Since I've become somewhat familiar with them, I think I'll mention that the squat toilets require forethought, like rolling pant legs up to knees, safety-pinning pockets closed, and keeping an ample supply of toilet paper handy. I've learned the red sign in the slot means occupied; the green one means go in. At the moment we're in a station, women shouting under the windows, selling hard-boiled eggs, roasted chickens, looking anxiously upward for a handful of money to poke out.

There is, it seems, someone on board who speaks English. He hadn't spoken to us yesterday because he was afraid we were German. The old man who had been upset about our Taiwan bag asked why we had it. He'd assumed we lived in Taiwan. Our translator told the man we'd never been there, then warned us not to carry the bag, adding that Taiwan is an enemy of China.

Now the translator's gone. Adolph and the old man are sitting at the small table in the aisle. The old man points to Adolph's chin, indicating that he has five o'clock shadow. He places his hand on his own bald head, then points to Adolph's unruly mop; he rubs his own smooth arm, then points to Adolph's hairy one; he places his thumb and forefinger around his own thin wrists, then tries to stretch them around Adolph's thick ones.

Earlier today the old man was trying to open a can of fish with a knife, and Adolph handed him our can-opener. He stared, fascinated; he couldn't figure out how to use it.

Twenty-nine hours gone, twelve to go, not too hot, hard all the same. If I hadn't filled my plastic bottle with water at the hotel, I'd be in trouble; I'm apportioning my squirts. The old man just gave Adolph a cucumber, which Adolph ate skin and all. Today we've eaten bananas, cookies, raisins, and a piece of bread.

Outside, I can see piles of hay, reapers working in the cool of the late afternoon. Inside, I look into the eyes of some of the people and am drawn in, a special warmth, a smile that startles as the white goats we're passing at the moment startle the green and tan landscape.

Last night the conductor asked to see our tickets, then indicated we had to move to another car. We were used to our beds and liked the people; we pretended not to understand. He came back later with our interpreter who explained that we were in the conductors' beds. They had done us a special favor letting us sleep there.

We left the old man and the man with the angelic face and moved to the next car. Some young men said, "Okay," and sat down on our new beds, but after Okay, all they could do was count to five.

The man across from me smoked steadily, strong, stale cigarettes. I moved towards the window to get some fresh air. He immediately closed it so I wouldn't be cold. I wanted to tell him that smoking kills. I've never seen more smoking anywhere. Nor more spitting. Nor nose-blowing without tissues, well, there are none. And if there were, there'd probably be no trees left. Adolph said he always hopes it won't land on him, and I began to gag, which seemed intolerant. They simply have a different attitude towards snot.

Sleeping in transit skews days and dates, a night on the ferry, a night in Canton, two nights on the train. Thanks to our switch to hard bed, we were rested enough to cope with the next step, arriving in Xian without a hotel reservation.

Two years ago we loved staying at the Renmin Dacha, a monstrous old hotel with character. Now it's just a monster, the main building deserted, several others under construction. When the taxi delivered us, we thought we'd arrived at a ghost hotel.

We finally found the office, ran the usual run-around, and ended up where we wanted to be.

"China is exhausting," said an American woman to me, "We're getting towards the end of our trip, thank goodness, and there's more and more to do. Tomorrow we do Peking."

Does "doing" a place change anything more than slide collections?

Maybe we went to the other extreme, total immersion, forty- one hours on the train without knowing the language. That's an experience in itself, sensitizing us still more to people's responses, the ways they tried or didn't try, the smiles and eyes drawing us in. I know we missed a lot. Perhaps, though, we got something we might have missed if we communicated with words.

I always try to understand and accept myself, to take advantage of my own potentials, and to live as free as possible from preconceived ways to do things. I wonder what happens to people like me who are born in a place like China. In this country of a billion, how many people are there who as artists, as writers, as human beings, have the opportunity to lead the kind of life I lead? Well, I don't know, it's just something that occurs to me. And then there's the question of whether or not it's always important to develop the uniqueness of individual talents.

I believe each person has his unique comment on life that might be meaningful to someone else, and often it remains locked in a renegade chamber of his brain. Part of the meaning is finding the key.

Perhaps the importance of the individual is what we have to offer China, and the importance of the whole is what they have to offer us.

I awoke looking up at a green ceiling, green walls, mahogany-stained woodwork. Where the hell was I, what city what country, I couldn't figure it out, mind must be slipping, nothing familiar, Taipei Hong Kong China, what am I doing here?

Now I'm looking around the room. It's not green at all. That must have been a dream yesterday afternoon, and I didn't realize it till now. I'm still at the Renmin Dacha, feeling as if I'd prefer to be home. China does that to me.

And Xian has changed. It's one of the biggest tourist cities in China. Two years ago it was only getting there. Now everything's being renovated, torn down, rebuilt. Entering the hotel grounds is like walking through a construction site. The main building with its hundreds of rooms is completely gutted, windows like eye sockets in a skull, fountains turned off.

The Belltower Hotel is in similar condition. The city itself is in similar condition. Trees chopped, the food market has turned into a trail of tree tops. What's going up, what's coming down? Everyone wants what the tourist has to offer, "Hello, where, do, you, come, from?" "Good, evening," "Want to change money?" "Change money?" "Change money?"

Yesterday's project was delivering a package to Loren at the Foreign Language Institute. A student we met in the bus guided us right to the gate. Two girls led us through the campus and right to Loren's door. And there we saw the contents of the shoe box we'd been lugging, sent by a Chinese girl living in Milwaukee to a Milwaukeean living in China: two tubes of mayonnaise, two boxes of jello, and mixes for pizza and hot chocolate.

Loren has been teaching English in China for three years now. Though we'd never before met her, we did write to see if she could help us with Adolph's project. He wants to do a series of sculptures of everyday life here, and of course he'd do a great job. But the process of trying to buy clay, getting the sculptures fired, then somehow getting them home could easily turn this trip into an expensive, bureaucratic nightmare. Adolph's talking about shipping fifteen large crates. Loren said it would be a pain even to ship a plastic bottle of mayonnaise. We'll spend the next few days, it seems, trying to find out what is and isn't possible. I just want to get out of Xian and into the countryside.

"Excuse me, can I ask you a question?" The female voice came from somewhere in the crammed-in crowd.

"Sure," I replied, finally connecting it to an attractive young woman standing not far from me.

"Yesterday I did nothing but repair my bike. Why isn't repair past tense too? It seems to me it should be, Yesterday I did nothing but repaired my bike."

"No, that doesn't sound right. I guess it's because the did already places repair in the past." You never know what kind of conversation you'll have on a crowded bus.

Nor with your husband, nor with the waitress, nor with a man who says, "Good evening," as you pass him on the hotel steps, about to take a walk which you don't end up taking. Instead you spend several hours sharing thoughts about China, mainly his thoughts.

That was okay, he was a bright man, a Canadian who'd spent five weeks setting up a computer center, five weeks spent exclusively with the Chinese. He was teaching them complicated computer systems. I mentioned my ideas about the complexity of the language affecting the thinking process. He said the Chinese have terrific memories, but they want to learn rules and follow them, to memorize instead of trying to figure things out for themselves. They're taught that the teacher is always right.

I asked about the lack of emphasis on individual uniqueness. He said that in a sense the Chinese emphasize the individual, everyone tries to get the highest grades. A university education, a good job afterwards, the direction of people's lives hinges on major examinations that ignore qualities such as creativity or the ability to communicate with and get along with others.

He'd spent a day in a small boat on the South China Sea, sun beating down. The Chinese with him were regularly sipping tea. He followed their example, and that saved him, he was sure, from sun-stroke. Interesting. I had assumed the Chinese drink so much tea because the water needs boiling. Maybe the tea itself functions in a way my herb teas don't. From now on I'll drink theirs.

6:30 A.M., damn, I hoped I wouldn't be late. At least I knew from last trip where everyone does tai chi. People were still stretching, next to construction rubble, on the sidewalks, in every open area. I joined one group for a while. When some took swords, others brooms, to practice the next level of martial arts, I wandered around till I found another group. Though people here practice tai chi at a faster pace than in Taipei, what I learned there made it possible for me to more or less keep up.

Maybe it wasn't nice of me, I told the maid who just walked in that she should knock first. I know that in Chinese hotels the staff unlocks the doors as if no one ever uses his room to undress, make love, or sit on the can.

Since Adolph is anxious to sculpt, Loren arranged for Andy, a university student, to take us to a ceramic factory. An attractive young woman led us on a tour of the premises, her spiel sounding more like a tape-recorded message. This was a commercial establishment, and the work consisted of reproductions from the past, pottery, statuary, thousands of pieces made from the same mold, a hundred years old, a thousand years old, two thousand, a floor full of fresh-baked warriors from the time of the Emperor Qin. Adolph and I have been wondering whether there are any sculptors in China simply portray the life being lived around them.

We sipped tea in a conference room, waited, the manager came, we sipped some more, showed him photos of Adolph's work, gradually coming to the point. Eventually the manager agreed to sell Adolph clay and fire his pieces. After further negotiation, he said he'd pack them. More discussion, the shipping would cost $350 per cubic meter. That eliminated the project, till we realized we can carry the pieces ourselves if we take a train instead of a plane back to Hong Kong.

Then the manager said he was too busy to do the firing, but he'd give Adolph the clay as a gesture of good will. Adolph will pick it up tomorrow. And the following day, bringing only necessities and two hundred pounds of clay, we'll take a taxi to Beiwushan.

Two of Andy's friends, Sarah and Gladys, visited us today. They wrote a note in Chinese for Adolph to bring to the countryside. "Could I please make a sculpture of you? It will take two or three hours."

Walking the streets of Xian this afternoon, Adolph saw everything as a potential sculpture, the men squatting on the sidewalk playing Chinese chess, the vendor of brightly-colored toys, the man pedaling past with wife and child balanced on his bike. That's what happens when Adolph gets clay. Finally I suggested that instead of lugging the clay to Beiwushan, he could do the sculptures here, and we can go to the countryside while they're drying.

Five or six days for sculpting, nine days for drying and firing, two days for hard bed to Canton, two or three days in Hong Kong, one day flying home, a day here and there for red tape, it sounds like a long time between now and Milwaukee.

Whereas urban Chinese seem desperate for FEC so they can buy foreign goods, people in the countryside often don't even know what it is. We decided to change money on the black market to have renminbi for Beiwushan.

I asked some Americans about the process. We should get at least 155 renminbi for 100 FEC, they said, warning me to be very careful. Once I've counted the changer's money, which is invariably in small denominations, I'd better not let him touch it again or I might get less back. Only when I'm certain I have the right amount in hand should I give him the FEC. He might yell that the police are coming to rush the transaction. Sounds shady to me, though it's done out in the open.

We passed through the hotel's front gate, ready to sink into the underworld. A rather unsavory character, tall, thin, mouth athwart, eyes beady, approached us. "Change money, change money," he rasped. We actually asked how much he'd give us. Another money-changer, equally unappealing, rushed over, and the two of them began to scream at each other. What were we getting into? I wouldn't dare even take the money from my pocket in front of them. We told them to forget it. They wouldn't. They followed us, fighting with each other, two hornets ready to sting.

One said, "Don't deal with him, he's a criminal." I figured they both were and told them that we weren't dealing with either of them, then stalked away.

We decided to forget the black market and go to the art museum instead. We examined our map of Xian, looking for the best route. A well-dressed young man offered to help, then asked if we wanted to change money. Whoops, there was the first changer horning in, using his calculator to show us he'd give us 155 yuan. The new changer said, "I'll take you to the museum," and the three of us left, followed by the man with the calculator.

Eventually we shook him, and the man "helping us" handed me two packets of ten-yuan notes. I counted carefully, looked up, he was gone. Ah, there he was, on the corner up ahead. I took out two hundred-yuan notes in FEC, and as we passed, he joined us just long enough for me to slip him the money. This was not my usual style of doing business.

6 A.M., not quite light, streets misty, Xian waking up, people scattered over the broad sidewalks, swinging their arms, stretching, doing tai chi, sliding into their personal exercise routines. A man behind me walks fast and rhythmically, chanting ahhhhhhhh, joggers and walkers dominate the bicycle lanes. How many millions of people all over Asia are doing this now?

I join a group of men, and after a while the leader, a balding man in his 50's, chin hinting at a beard, ready smile, steps aside to give an old man and me a private lesson. At first

just the feet, the positioning, the distance between, the shifting of weight, soon we're expanding to the hands and arms, the movement of the hips. He's expecting me to remember a lot, as if I'd trained my mind by learning the Chinese language. I won't let on that I'm exhausted. Finally he indicates that I should watch, and he performs a slow and graceful tai chi routine, glances at his watch, and rushes away.

That was yesterday. This morning I wondered how he'd feel if I reappeared. As soon as I arrived he broke away from the group to teach the old man and me, several women in their 60's joining in. Afterwards they all wanted to know my age, were fascinated that I'm fifty, were frustrated that I couldn't talk to them. Somehow I didn't mind. I felt calm and relaxed, enjoyed their spirit, their friendliness untarnished by words.

After Sarah and Gladys left yesterday, I was trying to figure out why our hotel room is an awkward place to have a conversation. It was that Chinese custom of chairs side-by-side chairs, only two of them, both pointed in the same direction. Adolph immediately placed them face-to-face.

We hit a sensitive spot when we mentioned this to a European businessman at breakfast. For conferences, he said, the chairs are lined up around the room, and everyone shouts across fifteen or twenty feet. Maybe the Chinese are used to that, he isn't. And company chairmen interrupt speeches to spit into spittoons, or to push up a trouser leg to scratch. He couldn't understand this simultaneous formality and informality.

Perhaps he's looking with Western definitions.

I asked Gladys how she got her name. Her English teacher assigned it on the first day of class. A stranger takes a list, You're Judy, You're Leo, Whelan, Doris, Bright, Sarah, Peter, and that's it. If Gladys goes to America, everyone will call her by the name her teacher impersonally chose.

"Is Gladys a strange name? Everyone asks me about it when I tell them?"

"No, it's just that people don't use it too much anymore."

Now I know why the names seem unrelated to the people who carry them.

Yesterday evening Adolph and I took a shortcut through a back alley where last trip families cooked dinner, ate, sat, and on very hot nights even slept outside. We heard someone shouting and turned our heads. There was a man sitting on a nearby roof holding a rifle and hurling words in our direction. We kept on walking and talking as if there were nothing unusual about someone with a rifle screaming at us in Chinese, Adolph saying to me in a cheery tone, "Is this the first time someone ever pointed a gun at you?"

I replying, "Is he pointing it at us, or is he pointing it in the air?" not turning around to find out. There was something familiar about the sensation of vulnerability. "Remember that little boy in Mexico playing with the rifle?"

"Oh yes, when we went for our laundry." At that moment we came to a corner and quickly veered out of sight.

It's very possible we may never again take that shortcut.

In fact I awoke in the middle of the night ready to take a shortcut home, not rifles but China. The air is so dusty I can hardly breathe. I've lost about four pounds this past week, grease again, and I can't think of a single source of calcium in my diet. Every morning my eyes are swollen and my nose is running. Every evening I'm ready to fall into bed. How will I

survive another 41-hour train trip? I was convinced I, too, had mono, was ready to fly home and let Adolph deal with his sculpture. This morning I got up feeling fine.

At 6:30 A.M. the sweepers are out in force, billowing dust as they drag their straw brooms over streets and broad sidewalks. Trucks wet down the roads each day; the dust is still out of control. In my English class, said Andy, we each gave a reason for China's dust, eighteen reasons, I don't think any of them were right. Some thought it's because gardens were considered capitalistic during the Cultural Revolution. Everyone was afraid to have them, so the city was covered with cement. Others blamed the government for cutting down the trees. Others said grass can't grow in this soil.

Keeping my eyes half-closed, I strode through the dust to my usual tai chi spot. Again my teacher stepped out of the group, four others joining in. I really like that man, like his glow when he smiles, can see how much he cares about the people around him, how much they care about him. He exaggerates his gestures and uses mime, hoping I'll understand his explanations. Part of me wishes we could communicate; part says maybe it's lucky we can't. With no words, I know that his interest is only to teach me without asking for anything more, and that seems rare in Xian, where tourists are fair game.

I got into the elevator, but it wasn't working properly, was suspended by a thin string similar to the broken clothesline in our bathroom at the Renmin Dacha. I ended up on the top floor of Josh's dormitory. I wanted to unpack for him but his suitcase contained only plastic bags. I noticed a slight fire in his mattress which I quickly put out. I guess it was still smoldering, for a few minutes later the mattress burst into flames. I yelled for help, a useless thing to do in China. Someone did come, but the mattress had disappeared. I forgot it had been thrown down the stairwell, as Primo Levi, survivor of Aushwitz, threw himself down a stairwell this week. The woman who'd been sleeping on the mattress was Chinese. Though she looked normal, I knew she had to be smoldering inside, had to be, after lying on a burning mattress. She danced around lithely, back straight, knees bent, like a Chinese dancer in the NUTCRACKER SUITE, claiming over and over that if she kept on dancing, the air currents would put the fire out.

Then Adolph sneezed.

I remember that dream because of a sneeze at 6 A.M. We're both allergic to this room. I dressed, went downstairs, hotel still dark. I almost tripped on two employees sleeping on the floor.

Grey day, warm, dusty, the first sound I hear is straw sweeping dry pavement in the distance. Joggers walkers runners bikers, limber men and women do little dances with their swords or sticks or brooms on a sidewalk as broad as the Shorewood Pool is long, everyone dressed in loose clothing, relaxed, each perfecting his own technique or helping to perfect someone else's. I cross the street, bicycle traffic heavy, no cars. My teacher sees me, says Ah in the special way the Chinese say Ah, long and abrupt. He steps out of the group, the women smile at me, then the instruction begins. This time there are twelve of us.

I try to internalize the movement, legs hips arms working together, try to make it automatic and flowing rather than merely rote. Whether or not I'm succeeding, it feels right. This hour each morning is my most moving experience in China...Damn, a cockroach is crawling on my pen. There's hardly anything in this room that doesn't have one crawling. I drink my water in the dark at night, knowing I'm taking a chance.

Words can cover up as much as they expose. I'm sensing the essence of the man teaching me tai chi, picking up signs from the tone of his voice, the look in his eyes, his laugh, his body language, his relationship with others. He's doing the same with me. Though we'd see the drastic differences in viewpoint, which clearly fascinate me, the things we do see now would fade under words. As a blind person uses his ears, I'm word-deaf and using my eyes. If I did tai chi with those people, then went back and spent the day in my room, which I might do today, that would suffice.

Well, I wouldn't give up our breakfasts with a couple of businessmen each morning. Here's how it went today: Adolph wanted one order of boiled eggs, four minute. His waitress instead brought four orders of fried eggs. Since most of the eaters here speak English, we wondered why the waitresses don't learn a few basic words. We also wondered why each of us had a different waitress. We all wanted toast and coffee, I asked for hot water to dilute my coffee, and milk to further dilute it. First we got toast, fifteen or twenty minutes later the coffee. I asked again for hot water and milk, eventually got hot water for cold coffee; I asked four more waitresses for milk, eventually got two milks. It's not a source of calcium, it's boiled so long it's drinkable only in coffee.

I was trying to organize all the thoughts about China thrown at us by foreigners living here, especially those two businessmen, and it struck me that I could create one fictional character to encompass them all. I decided to call him Matthew. Matthew is American, Canadian, French, Scandinavian, everything but Oriental. He's here five weeks or years, and he's always contradicting himself. In fact he told me that it's impossible to say anything about the Chinese, for the opposite is always true. They're prudes and they're not; they're monogamous and they're not; they're always heterosexual, and there are gay bars in Communist China.

Do you feel emotionally involved with any of the people, having spent so much time here? I asked.

With the people in general but not with anyone in particular, you can't get close to them, they're a mystery. A mystery, says Matthew.

Yesterday I stayed in our room, writing and thinking. I needed a rest from the streets of Xian. I regretted that I was missing an important experience: the sight of Adolph sculpting a peddler outside the hotel gate.

He came back high. The piece was great; she was sitting on a stool smoking her pipe, delightful woman, he loved her. Perhaps his nonverbal relationship with her is similar to mine with my tai chi teacher, intensity replacing words.

The crowds were so thick he couldn't step back; the hotel photographer and someone from the Office of Foreign Affairs took pictures. Another peddler will pose for him this morning.

This afternoon Adolph sculpted the owner of a tiny restaurant with a two-item menu. We've been eating his shobin ja sansa, a deep-fried wheat bread, for lunch. Each day the price gets higher. His soup, noodles in their cooking water, laced with vinegar, soy sauce, and spices does not tempt me.

The man, sixty years old, scalp shaved, face alive and mischievous, posed lying back in a sling chair, hands behind his head, elbows turning into ears. At first he was enthusiastic.

Time passed, and he became restless. He got upset when Adolph began to hollow out his head so it wouldn't explode in the kiln. That's when he asked Adolph to leave. Adolph had promised him fifteen yuan for posing; the man insisted on thirty.

I was trying get the clerks at the front desk to correct a mistake in our hotel bill. Three of them were arguing with each other in Chinese. A man said to me, "Don't worry, they're fixing it."

He noticed my pile of receipts. "Oh, you've been here quite a while, perhaps you can tell me what's interesting in Xian."

I told him what interests me, tai chi, the people we've met, watching life lived in the open.

Where're you from? he asked.

America.

I am too, he said, hesitating. Then he added, Well, I'm from Taiwan, I came by way of the States. This is my first visit to the mainland. Taipei is like another Hong Kong, I feel as if I've found my roots in China.

That's exciting, that's the way you begin to know yourself, I commented.

Yes, now I can understand why blacks want to go back to Africa. China is my home; I never knew it before. What I want most is to bring my father here.

Does he still live in Taiwan?

Yes, it's a big risk for him.

Isn't it a risk for you?

Yes. If the Kuomintang finds out that I've been here, they'll never let me out again. And I have such a big mouth.

We were unexpectedly connecting, so he kept on talking. His father, a wealthy man, had fled China in l949 with one wife, leaving another wife and children behind, and he hadn't seen them since. "I'm afraid he'll have a heart attack if I bring him back."

Split families, over and over, everyone dreaming, his father dreaming, his father obsessed. He'd raised a second family in Taiwan. His first marriage had been arranged by his parents, and the wife was much older than he was. Still, he'd left behind children, brothers, sisters, nieces, nephews.

I find it hard to put together. The backbone here is the family, yet millions of families are separated, and not just by the rift between Taiwan and the mainland. Couples all over China have jobs in separate locations, construction workers living on site, teachers and students leaving spouses behind in other cities. I've met dozens of married people living away from home. Sometimes they see each other only once a year. There's very little mobility in housing and employment.

It's not a simple problem. In a country of over a billion people, with over eight hundred million in the countryside, mass migration to the cities would mean chaos.

Norman, the tall and bulky Englishman we ate with tonight, has been traveling for twenty years, six months travel, six months studying, calling no place his home. He'd just arrived in Xian and had spent the day cleaning up after seven weeks of roughing it. I asked

him where he'd been, and he ticked off names of towns, a day here, a day on the bus, a day there, a day on the bus, tick off tick tock, life passing in town names.

Is he searching for life's meaning as he wanders through Asia Africa the Middle East? What keeps him going? I couldn't live so unrooted and unattached. I wanted to ask, people like that always make me want to ask, what he's looking for. The world has a vibrating layer of incessant travelers. Does curiosity suffice as an end, does it need a home for a frame of reference?

I had two small dogs, one was furry and responsive, the other resembled Judy's dog Hopper in Taipei but was lackluster, like the half-dead animals in the Canton market. I was sitting in a row of folding chairs and petting and petting my dogs. Being in China had taught me how important that is.

Over and over I read the words on the paper directing me to check the gas meters on my block. Strange, I wasn't supposed to read meters. A prim-looking old lady had the same notice; mine was probably a mistake. I let her do it. Then I began to worry. After all, the assignment was on my own block, not somewhere far away. If I didn't do it, I might lose my job and never get another. I read the meters too.

I was somewhere unfamiliar, sitting on benches with other mothers and watching our children. Except that mine weren't there.

This time I remembered my dream without the help of a sneeze. Even asleep, I don't seem to forget I'm in China.

Two coffee cups, two small bowls, one egg cup, and eleven plates and saucers, sixteen empty dishes in all after a breakfast for two of pineapple, toast, eggs, and coffee. Dishes are like people, filling every available spot. Is there a connection? If I understood this, would I understand something beyond this? Is it possible that the longer I stay in China, the more I don't understand? Is that what keeps all the Matthews here, the unsolved riddles?

I could have made Norman, the Englishman, a component of Matthew. But Norman's even more itinerant, looking on the outside for what can only be found on the in.

I made the mistake of mentioning to Matthew that I'm writing a book. "I guess it will be a series of funny incidents," he commented. And now he's more guarded, I doubt he wants to talk to me at all, for he'd already told me a lot that he didn't want repeated. It's not easy, living in a closed society where privacy is alien, where eyes have mouths, where rules exist to be never broken. Still, I haven't repeated his stories. And I consider it arrogant to write about China merely in terms of funny incidents. I suspect everything fits together into a way of thinking that I don't yet understand.

I explained to Matthew that basically I wanted to get some idea of the meaning of life through Chinese eyes.

Well, he replied, Do you have an answer?

No. Only a lot more questions.

It's a big mystery to me, he said. What keeps them going? They have nothing, have no hope of getting anything, yet they seem perfectly happy. I don't mean to sound materialistic, but really, they want material things, they want colored TV's and refrigerators. I'm here a year and I haven't been able to figure it out.

What about family?

With present regulations, the one-child family, people living apart, I don't know.

What about friendships?

They have none, not as we know it, they're too self- centered.

Maybe it's a more generic lifestyle. I've seen strangers meet on the train or ferry and soon they're talking like old friends.

I don't know. I've asked them if they believe in God, and they say, God? So I say, What do you believe in? And some of them actually say, Our leaders. And who are your leaders? I ask. Oh, they're in Peking. We don't know them.

He thought for a moment, then commented, Of course, why do any of us go on? I guess it's family.

If you had no family, wouldn't you still want to go on? I asked.

Yes. It's also feeling good about yourself, wanting to accomplish something.

And maybe going beyond that in a sense? Frankl called it transcending the self.

So tell me, what do you consider important? he asked.

Knowing yourself and your capabilities, accepting them, and trying to make the best possible use of them.

Very good.

But in China there's no emphasis on the individual, so what's their attitude?

I wish I knew.

Let me tell you a Chinese fable, said Matthew. I think it explains why it's so hard to do business here. There was a very clever chicken and a very fat pig, and the chicken said, We could have a joint venture. I'll lay an egg every day, you give me a slab of bacon, and we can sell bacon and eggs. They did this and made a lot of money. Finally the pig said, This isn't fair. Soon there'll be nothing left of me. And the chicken said, But this is a joint venture.

Guess who's the pig and who's the chicken, he added. I have to deal with this attitude every day.

He didn't mention that his joint venture is on chicken territory, Matthew using the chicken's cheap labor. Matthew has the choice, he can always fly the coop.

It's very important here not to lose face. That's another facet I don't yet understand. Matthew claims the Chinese can't really have friendships, that saving face precludes openness and honesty, that everything's "tainted by prevarication." I have no idea of Matthew's own personal taints. Certainly here again, he's looking through Western eyes. I guess not losing face goes with the social pressure inherent in group living.

According to Matthew, if someone commits suicide, his family, his work unit, everyone connected with him loses face for not preventing it. As soon as someone's depressed, everyone knows and tries to help. How many depressions are helped by, how many caused by, all this closeness? The suicide rate is low. Matthew says that's because no one is alone long enough.

Matthew complains that all the understanding has to be on his part. Why don't they try to understand why he does things the way he does? Why won't they learn English? They think they're superior and that he should do things their way.

Perhaps it's even more difficult for them to understand us than it is for us to understand them. For we're exposed all our lives to a variety of attitudes, whereas the Chinese have been extremely isolated and ingrown.

We've spent three days with Andy, yet I haven't described our discussions. I begin to write and don't know where to start. Maybe in the middle.

I asked him what the Chinese consider important in life. He thought awhile and said, Family. He thought awhile longer and said, For the student in the middle school, it's going to the university. For the student in the university, it's getting a job. For the person with a job, it's getting a house. For the person with a house, it's getting a family. For the old person, it's having grandchildren to take care of.

Today I said to him, People here have very little but seem happy, I wonder if they really are.

Well yes, he replied. One. If your neighbor has a poor house and you have a poor one, you can both be happy. But if your neighbor has a beautiful house and you have a poor one, then you're unhappy. Two. Things are much better than they were, and if things are getting better, people are happy. Three. Because of the communism, people here aren't selfish. But if you really want to understand the Chinese, you must read Confucius.

I read Confucius in college. Respect your elders, obey your parents, that's what I remember thirty years later. Filial is the word that remains with me.

Andy frequently referred to the damage caused by the Cultural Revolution. His father had resigned as head of an agricultural unit when the government doubled the quotas, for he knew the peasants would starve. There's a whole generation that was raised during the ten years of chaos from 1966 to 1976. Schools were closed, monuments, art, culture destroyed, intellectuals murdered, tradition ignored. Young people went wild, brutalizing society. In the long run, they were their own victims, for they grew up outside of tradition often with little education and a lot of guilt.

The importance of the "back door" was another recurring theme in our talks. The back door is the only entrance to anywhere; the need for contacts and bribes is embedded in the system.

Have you ever met anyone like me before? Adolph asked Andy.

Yes. We call them old boys. They're old men, but they don't feel sadness, and they're curious about everything like little boys.

"Thank you for making my mornings so special." I had only a minute to inscribe a copy of my book, MEMORANDANCE, for my tai chi teacher. He placed his hands in prayer position, bowing slightly, then disappeared like Cinderella as he does at 7:30 every morning.

I don't know his name nor have I tried to find out. And all we've said is Ah, and Ah hah. I don't know his profession nor if he's very wise. What I do know is the movements he teaches are in tune with the way I move, his smile in tune with mine. When I look back on China, it will be my relationship to him that I'll value most.

It's noon, I've been waiting for Adolph all morning. He brought the five sculptures he's done to the ceramic factory. The manager once again changed his mind, and now he's willing to fire them. While the clay is drying, then baking, we'll stay in the countryside. We're all packed and ready to go.

My wait has not been uneventful. My nose has been busy running, my throat insists on being sore, and I've had a number of visitors: several hotel employees who don't know what to do about cleaning the room and someone who befriended Adolph while he was sculpting and who has been unbelievably helpful ever since. I'll call him "H" for helpful.

H came to give us a book. As we looked through it, I sitting on the bed, H squatting on the floor, I noticed his leg pressing against mine, and I moved mine away. He leaned over to look at the book more closely, placing his hand on my thigh. I was so flabbergasted that I can't remember my reaction, probably a gasp. I do know he suddenly jumped up, ran to the door, and slammed it. I rushed over to see which side of the door he was on. He was on my side.

With a calm I didn't feel, I smiled and said, "We're going now," motioning to our packed bags. He grinned, shook my hand warmly, and left.

12:35. Adolph left at nine, I'm getting claustrophobic, I'm hungry, I'm looking forward to getting out of the city, if we go. I have a piece of paper, and in Chinese it says, "We would like to spend a night in this village. Is there somewhere we can stay?" We'd love to stay with a family. That's tricky, foreigners are a sensitive subject, and most families have no space, though all we need is a mat on the floor.

12:44. This is getting frustrating, sitting all day in a room I'm allergic to. I've read all our copies of the CHINA DAILY, learning that despite the low pay, millions of young people are registering to join the army. This is attributed to the tradition during the War Against Japanese Aggression and the Liberation War that a family with a person fighting on the front was highly honored and cared for. Vocational training also makes the army attractive. The article ended with this: the law obliges all citizens between 18 and 22 to register.

Adolph got back too tired to go to the countryside. His sculpture will be miraculously ready in four days. So now I have an unexpected option. If my nose and throat don't feel better I could be home in nine days.

Instead of the countryside, I walked to a park. Trees, benches, lagoon, boaters, lovers, men playing chess, school children playing games, to me it's the most comfortable place in Xian. The walk was long and hot, and I made it even longer. I took a curving road that wasn't on the map and got lost. I was so thirsty I drank five or six cartons of insipid orangeade.

I came back sick and exhausted, fell asleep, and dreamed about Chinese meatballs, not the tiny, tasty, sweet and sour ones we've been eating for dinner, but big, soft, spongy ones. I dreamed that you can get AIDS from Chinese meatballs.

We told two foreign businessmen about the Chinese hand on my thigh and the slamming door.

"That's encouraging," said the older one, "It gives me some indication they're normal. You should have let him, to see exactly what he wanted. It would have been very interesting."

"I don't believe it," said the younger one, "You must have been wishing. If something had happened, there'd be no way for you to prove it wasn't you that started it."

Adolph said he never in a million years would have expected that of H. I wouldn't have, either. Maybe there's some other way to interpret his behavior. He has hugged Adolph a couple of times. He could be physically affectionate in an asexual sense. He could have no concept of other people's space. After all, this is China.

Then why did he slam the door?

We're finally in Beiwushan. Yesterday we took the bus to the end of the line, asked about buses to Beiwushan, found the stop, and waited. Since the signs are written in Chinese, I wondered how we'd recognize the bus if it did come. I insisted that it's better to start walking than to spend the day standing at the bus stop. Adolph refused to budge. Finally we walked a few blocks, asked someone how to get to Beiwushan, he escorted us back to the stop.

We argued awhile, started walking again, asked directions again, were again directed towards the stop. We continued to walk till we came to a fork, asked some students which road to take, they said it was too far, thirty kilometers to Beiwushan, the next bus would come in an hour. Even Adolph didn't want to wait. A student meticulously drew us a map. The basic message was to turn left at a fork a few kilometers down the road. Another student accompanied us awhile, trying to convince us to take the bus. He wrote us a note in English, in case we couldn't understand his pronunciation.

We were hot, tired, thirsty, lugging all our art supplies, determined to get there by hook or by hitch, trying to get rides from every donkey bike truck motorcycle. For five yuan a young man pedaled us in his bicycle cart for one kilometer, probably 27 to go.

We walked until we came to a general store, bought a jar of pears, the clerk pried open the lid with a screw-driver, and we sat on the wooden floor to eat the slithery fruit, sticky juice mixing with dust on our hands and clothes.

We set out again, sipping our water, 26, 25. We could always find a place to sleep, actually that could be interesting, 24. We crossed a bridge overlooking a shallow river. Wasn't that where children were bathing two years ago? At that instant, a bus appeared, God knew where it was going. What difference did it make? We flagged it down and squeezed on.

From the bus we noticed all sorts of familiar details, the stone-cutting village, the homes in caves, the back yard where I'd photographed the pigs, the wall where three children had stood with their balloon.

The bus went as far as the village where we'd once eaten horse-radish-flavored noodles. We gleaned from the gaping crowd that we were still ten kilometers from Beiwushan. This time we knew which way to go. We ate at a dumpling house on the outskirts, then walked along the dirt road, recognizing a house, a path, a hillside, getting excited in our exhaustion.

The day was grey, occasional drops falling, countryside beautiful all the same. We dragged our paints and paper on my decrepit luggage carrier, wondering whether we or it would fall apart first, wondering when we'd ever get to the mountain stream.

Nothing passed by that could possibly carry us. Until some men came chugging along on a tractor engine, pulling a cart full of vegetables. We rode the last two kilometers as part of a load of cucumbers and tomatoes. It had taken us six hours to travel forty kilometers.

There's only a pile of suds on the ground now to mark the spot where the woman was scrubbing her clothes in the mountain stream that flows through the channel across from the hotel. A tall, balding man rolled up his pants to make them shorts and bathed his legs in the cool muddy water. A man walks past with two large empty straw baskets balanced on either end of a pole resting on his shoulders. People pass, pulling empty carts behind them. It's the end of the day for some, not for others, for this is the peak of the harvest season. A young man

whips his mule, cart speeding up, a stream of carts passes now, heavy with hay, drawn by human beings, mules, cows, tractor engines. Wheat is spread on pavement, on dirt.

A car is passing by, a cow walks in front, toot, the cow panics. A baby cries. A woman in a straw hat and blue pants and jacket carries a hatchet that isn't a hatchet, it must be for tilling. A boy hugs a baby. The mountain stream rushes past, sounding like endless rain.

This is a village of haystacks at harvest time, haystacks standing still, haystacks moving through in carts on their way to the machine that cuts the stalks to simplify threshing, miles of road piled high with stacks. Peasants use shovels to throw batches into the air, and the breeze separates the wheat from the chaff. We stroll through a grain rain a grain rain, a drizzle of wheat, the kernels spread on the pavement, driven over by bikes and occasional buses and trucks, lovingly raked, grain rearranged till free of straw, we walk down grain street. Then it's swept into piles, scooped into sacks, the process we haven't seen is the grinding. We've definitely taken part in the eating.

Today was our first full day here. We put our art supplies into a bag and set out to climb the mountain, day hotter than expected, road to the mountain longer than expected, Adolph's feet worse than expected. Most unexpected of all was the taxi parked at the first monastery. We rode up the mountain for five kilometers and took the path down. It wound alongside and occasionally crossed, a cold clear stream. We filled our bottles, bathed our feet, appreciated the luxury of walking down without having first to walk up. We marveled at the water rushing over rocks, the green of trees, the grandeur, and began to regret that we'd brought no lunch.

We came to another monastery, and I mimed that we wanted to eat. Apparently my message wasn't clear, for a monk immediately brought us two bowls of hot water. We paid two jiao each to see the altar and Buddhas inside and were about to leave when another monk indicated there was more, grabbed his walking stick, and hobbled behind the temple.

"Must be the pagoda," Adolph exclaimed. We'd seen it in the distance from the taxi. Then Adolph noticed the steep stone steps, like the steps of Emei Shan, leading up, top nowhere in sight. He balked, but the ancient little monk with his walking stick was already far ahead of us. We followed, Adolph stopping now and then to say he couldn't do it, finally deciding to leave his bag of paints behind. The monk came down far enough to grab the bag and continued to climb.

Carrying our art supplies, he plodded at a steady pace up the mountain, up to the pagoda. Trees branched out at each level of the ancient structure, even protruded from the top, and I wondered at their roots. The monk knew exactly where I should stand to photograph the pagoda and insisted that Adolph pose in front. He, too, posed, without my having to ask.

Climbing down was easy. When we said good-bye, the monk grabbed our portfolio and began to untie the string. We shrugged our shoulders and turned our palms upward to indicate we hadn't yet used the paper. He sat down, legs crossed like a Buddha, and posed in front of a towering tree.

Adolph painted and I drew, an ant and a fly vigorously fought over a dead worm, a puppy tried to eat green and red paint, passing students climbed the temple steps to watch the foreign artists and pick falling insects from my hair, still no lunch, not that it matters too much when I'm drawing a monk on a mountainside in China.

When we finally left, it was late afternoon, walk magnificent, rocks, stream, trees, mountains, our path sloping steadily downward. Around one bend, a young man was squatting on a flat rock and scrubbing his clothes in the stream, strange, a male doing wash in China. A little further on, a courtyard filled with laundry drying in the sun, "Come in and have some lunch," said another young man as he walked into the yard with a basin of wet clothes.

We were at a residence for forestry students doing fieldwork in the mountains. The language of the lunch invitation was deceptive, no one there spoke English, and as usual we communicated through dictionary and mime. We relaxed, drank tea, and ate noodles; it was a dream, coming upon this warm and lively group of students on a lonely mountain path.

Everywhere we've gone in China, the university students have been friendly, intelligent company, and always helpful, ready to drop whatever they're doing to spend time with us. By now we've met hundreds, for they're the people most likely to know at least a few words of English.

I'm sitting on a stone at the corner where the village's two paved roads cross, my back supported by a wall, at least twenty people surrounding me, trying to talk. I say, Wo bu dong, I don't understand, and they say Ta bu dong, she doesn't understand, bu dong, bu dong, ah, bu dong. The crowd is growing, looking through my notebook. An old man takes my pen and writes some Chinese characters on his palm. He can't believe I don't understand. God, is it a shame.

I'm a sore thumb. A woman with an albino baby got a kick out of my hair last night. Wow, are the children beautiful as they smile at me. These curious onlookers can have no idea I'm writing in a script I invented myself. A woman with long wavy hair is squatting a yard away, staring at me. A few yards further a man squats on a cloth piled with string beans, white melons, and cabbages. Cabbages are sold at three corners in fact, not that there are corners at all; the edge of the pavement unevenly becomes clay. Now he's tying cabbage leaves and green onions onto the back of a bike.

We've already spent two nights here. Even this smallest of villages is swarming with activity. Except I'm discovering it isn't so small. There are hundreds of connected brick houses with sloping tile roofs.

The hotel hasn't changed very much. The outhouse looks rebuilt. To get there, we have to pass a police dog who barks so suddenly and ferociously that neither of us dare pass him alone. Yesterday he broke his rope and dashed towards me. I screamed, he stopped inches from my leg, and everyone came running out. Now that I know my voice intimidates him, I yell at the dog whenever he barks at me. Sometimes he doesn't bother. Even so, if either of us awaken during the night, we choose to pee in a cup.

We love staying at this hotel; I don't even know its name. There's no running water, the beds are straw mats, the pillows filled with straw. The ceiling's made of mats, too, held in place by a bamboo grid, naked light bulb suspended from the center. The floor's concrete and possibly spit on by every occupant but us. We both sleep better here than anywhere else in China.

Adolph went to the mountains to paint; I wanted to stay in the village. Right now I'm sitting on the hotel balcony. A woman and a man are screaming at each other about a hundred feet away. She's ready to wallop him, no one's paying too much attention, everyone working, wow, still at it, at least twenty minutes now. She has a straw broom, she'd been sweeping the

wheat smooth. They're moving in and out of my range of vision, pretty hysterical, I wonder if they're man and wife. Someone is standing near them to make sure there's no violence. She gestures angrily with her straw hat. I'd think this is the fury of a lifetime. It's at least twenty minutes now. She walks away, then turns around and screams again. Now she hands her hat to a bystander and begins to sweep. Now they're screaming again. She swings her arms down and stiffens her body in anger.

She's still shouting, whoops, she hurled the broom to the ground, spun around, is walking in this direction, turning to the side and screaming, now stalking back again. I don't think I've ever seen anyone angrier.

I looked up from my notebook, and several people were approaching me, the hotel manager grinning as if he were bringing an old friend of mine over to say hello. He'd invited some teachers from the middle school to meet me, including Fu-mei, an attractive woman of 24 who teaches English.

That's how I learned that the couple fighting was not married. Their problem was space, who would use that spot on the road for spreading his wheat.

Fu-mei has been teaching English here five years, and we're the first foreigners she's seen in the village. That explains the gaping and gawking, that's why people don't know whether or not to respond when I say Ni hao. Many have never before seen a blond, and they can't stop looking at me.

The old man's still here, Mr. Ho's his name. The manager, a younger, energetic man with intense blue eyes, is Mr. Fan. When we first arrived, I was puzzled by Mr. Fan's reaction to us. We'd mime, and he'd answer with a barrage of Chinese, not understanding the significance of our blank faces. Now I realize he'd never before met anyone who couldn't speak his language. Fu-mei said he'd been upset that he was unable to help us, to tell us what to do and to solve any problems we might have. His first question for me through the interpreter was, Where had we eaten for the past two days?

Fu-mei studied English for three years in high school. Now she's teaching, English required for all six hundred middle-school students. Yet she'd never before spoken to a foreigner, never before heard anyone not Chinese pronounce the words.

That's what Matthew doesn't appreciate, that the West is superimposed. The Chinese learn our words and read them. But without hearing them from our lips, without knowing our ideas or tasting our lifestyles, English is merely a new group of symbols to express familiar patterns of thought.

In joint ventures, in hotels and restaurants for foreigners, they're mimicking our gestures. It's all external; they're coming from somewhere else.

This is a gentle, loving society in many ways. The people honor the past, respect age, adhere to tradition and to rules, are slow to change, slow to get things done. Speed is not necessarily considered a virtue. Andy said that his friends who have studied in the States don't want to live there; life is too hard. Everything has to be done on time.

I have my own room, said Fu-mei.

Oh, that's nice, I replied, Not many people in China have a room to themselves.

I'm married.

Oh.

But my husband lives in Nanjing.

That must be very hard, I was saying. At that moment I glanced up and saw someone was listening in.

How do you do, he said in perfect English. That was Mr. Mao, a forester doing research at the Forestry Experimental Station.

Mr. Mao mentioned that the brown-paper packages he was carrying contained traditional medicine. I asked him to show me exactly what he had: sticks, peels, stems, roots, pieces of wood, dried fruit, herbs, a pile big enough to fill a cereal bowl. He had to boil everything in water, then drink the soup before going to bed and first thing in the morning in order to cure his cold.

I have a cold, too, I said, though my sore throat was better, certainly my nose was still running, Maybe you can get some for me.

Soon I was sitting in a tiny office with Mr. Mao and several interested observers we'd picked up on the way. The old doctor, head shaved, was taking my pulse, no watch, just listening intently. First my left wrist, then my right, listening, maybe I wasn't sick enough to warrant this visit, maybe I was sicker than I thought, maybe he was aware of something unknown to me. He checked my blood pressure, discreetly stuck a stethoscope inside my shirt for a moment, glanced down my throat, then wrote me a prescription.

When he got up to prepare it in the next room, I followed, which meant that eight of us followed. This second room had a wall of wooden drawers, each drawer divided into four compartments, hundreds of ingredients stored there. How did he determine which were best for me?

Mr. Mao's comment, "the bitterer the medicine, the better it is," didn't penetrate to my conscious mind until Mr. Fan brewed my concoction this evening, and someone handed me a quarter cup of sugar to take afterwards. Adolph watched with infuriating glee, snapped picture after picture as I stared at the syrupy green-brown mixture, several onlookers waiting patiently, big cup, thick brew. I believe in facing the consequences of my actions. If I went to the doctor and had him go to the trouble of examining me and making up my prescription, I should follow through.

It was a rooty, barky, foresty drink, hard to swallow, not as hard as it looked, bitterness quickly erased by only a pinch of sugar.

I awakened at 6:30 this morning to find a second dose waiting, I drank only a third. My cold's almost gone.

Since today's the day Adolph's sculptures should be ready, we had to return to Xian. Mr. Ho and Mr. Fan made sure we were at the stop at 7 to catch the 7:30 bus. As we waited, Mr. Ho invented a game. He'd point to eyes ears nose mouth teeth watch chair hat bicycle, teach us the Chinese word, then we'd teach them the English.

When the bus pulled up, both men rushed on to make sure we got seats, which was lucky. For I had to chew Pepto Bismo in order to make it at all. I still haven't figured out what people do if they get the runs on a Chinese bus; I do know that I should always have diphenoxylate and Pepto in my pocket. And I should never drink traditional medicine before a long ride.

Two years ago we ate at the restaurant around the corner from the hotel in Beiwushan. Now it has expanded, it has two tables, one outside where the stove and counter are, one in the tiny back room. We prefer sitting outside, watching the oblong lumps of dough become noodles within seconds of our order. Flatten a lump, indent the center, pound it still flatter, stretch it, arms wide apart, stretch once more and the dough divides at the indentation. The long, thick noodles are thrown into the bubbling cauldron, then into a bowl with water, soy sauce, vinegar, garlic, green onions, tomato pieces, other odds and ends, eggs added for breakfast. But it wasn't the food preparation that moved me.

When we first arrived, the tractor cart had delivered us directly to the restaurant, where Adolph bought the men beer. A sad-looking man in his forties was carrying a baby about eight months old. Her eyes were open, yet she seemed unresponsive, didn't move and reach out the way normal babies do. I imagined that the man's sadness was sorrow that his grandchild wasn't normal.

We ate there the three days we stayed in Beiwushan, and I felt as if I were eating in the family's kitchen. The great-grandfather, an erect old man with wispy graying beard and a smile punctuated by several gaps, usually stood behind the tiny counter which contained glass jars of fruit, a pan of sugar cookies, candies, sometimes deep-fried breads or dumplings filled with bean-paste. The grandfather usually held the baby. The father stood most often at the stove, shoveling ashes and cooking. The mother did most of the kneading and chopping. A second baby, about eighteen-months old, was often on the premises, carried by neighborhood children, or playing. The family was there when we came for breakfast at seven in the morning, when we came for dinner at seven or eight at night, the adults cooking, selling orange soda, beer, or whatever a mixture of wheat and water might produce.

The great-grandfather sometimes would sit on a stool, older baby standing between his legs, child's head snuggled against old man's chest, and he'd spoon breakfast into his great grandchild's mouth. The grandfather cradled the youngest in his arms, the mother sometimes nursed, the adults tended the children with such gentleness and love that I didn't need language to know the meaning in their lives.

Our second night in Beiwushan, we took an after-dinner walk with Mr. Mao, ambling along the main road, avoiding the layers of wheat waiting to be scooped into sacks, skirting haystacks, cyclists, and carts, treading on chaff. Adolph kept telling Mr. Mao to practice English with Fu-mei. I asked if that were really possible.

The answer was no, not at all. He, a married man, and she, a married woman, could never get together in this village. In fact people don't walk along the street saying hello to strangers the way I do, especially strangers of the opposite sex. I guess that explains still further the varied responses to my Ni Hao's, some people lighting up and returning my greeting, others staring in disbelief, others answering with an unintelligible stream of words to which I had to reply, Wo bu dong.

Mr. Mao said my Ni hao had the wrong intonation; some of the people probably assumed I was speaking a foreign language. He taught me how to say Ni hao properly, taught me the correct tune. That's what it comes to, that's why I can't learn Chinese from a phrase book, I never know the tune.

Suddenly Mr. Ho pulled alongside of us on his bike and, Mr. Mao translating, invited us to his home. Soon we were walking along the narrow rutted dirt roads lined with houses of

brick or mud, and through one of those mysterious doors that lead to worlds so different from ours.

It opened onto a cheery courtyard. “Wait, wait till they tie the dog,” said Mr. Mao. We crossed the courtyard and entered a newly-built brick house, concrete walls painted white, woodwork on the doors and windows, three good-sized rooms, canopied beds. This was not the brick hut I expected.

We sat in a circle, and Mrs. Ho served tea.

Mr. Mao said, This is a very intelligent man. He was a schoolteacher for thirteen years. There’s a lot he could tell you.

Yes, I’d felt the first time we met him that he’s a special man, thoughtful, gentle, not someone who absently pours water into basins for the guests in a three-room hotel. He’s taller than most of his countrymen, his mouth and nose are larger, there’s a hint of a mustache on his lip, permanent stubble on his chin. He’s a handsome man of sixty-five. He could tell us a lot, but somehow we never got to it. For like all Chinese households, several generations live together, and the room was full of human beings and diversions.

I wondered how many people slept on the double bed piled with pillows and quilts, even asked that intrusive question, which got lost in a sea of other questions.

Mr. Ho’s wife was a dynamic woman, heavy though not fat, modest though not shy. Even before we finished our first cup of tea, she led us to her bedroom and opened up a large carton.

“This is what Mrs. Ho does,” said Mr. Mao.

She makes little dolls, seventy-eight different designs, a spider in a web, donkeys, turtles, reindeer. Buddhas. She proudly showed us the cabinet her son had built for her altar in the corner of the room. She burns incense and kowtows there twice a day. She became a Buddhist a few years ago, when she was dying. She’d gone to several hospitals, yet kept getting worse. It was Buddha who saved her.

Buddha did a great job, for she was exuberant.

You can’t leave a Chinese house without eating, Mr. Mao said, ushering us into the third room of the house. Someone turned on a colored TV for a few minutes. Someone else carried in a low, round table; then came noodles, cucumber salad, chopsticks. It was time to eat a second dinner with the first not yet digested.

It was 10:30 and dark when we left, very dark, for the street lights weren’t lit. They were used only on special occasions. It’s too expensive to light them every day. Mr. Ho lent Mr. Mao a flashlight to guide us through the village, most windows black, some glowing TV blue. Occasionally voices and footsteps would pass in the night. We gasped as a rat scurried through the flashlight’s beam.

I was surprised that the young man could write with such intensity while standing in a bus so crowded that the woman who collected the fares had to get out at each stop to rearrange passengers in order to close the door. More surprised when he handed this note to me: Well, forein friend. I am very graden see you at the bus in this morning. I very want speking in English to you and tell some intresting fect about Xian, China to you. But I know English a little. I feel very sad. So I unstand to study English well are very important. So I beg your parden. I can’t help you. A studen. Xian.

"Put that away and keep it, it's a precious note," said Adolph to me. I was already folding it to put it into my wallet.

Adolph just got back from the ceramic factory. Somehow I'm not surprised to learn we have to wait three more days. Tomorrow we'll return to Beiwushan. I'm glad. I was sorry to leave when we'd finally met people who spoke English.

Yet having to wait in China a few more days heightens my awareness of how much I want to go home, to know if everyone's okay. Norman, the Englishman, doesn't understand those people who can't wait to go home and see their families. He's happy wherever he is. Perhaps he doesn't realize that one thing doesn't eliminate the other.

Now I'm writing in a little pad as I walk behind two ladies in a corridor of the Renmin Dacha.

"If you have roots, if you have family, they support you," says one.

"Yes, the stronger the roots, the more they hold you up," says the other.

"Guess what," said Norman, "Someone took me to the Banpo Museum today, and once I got there, I found I'd already been there. And then I went to this beautiful pagoda, you really should see it."

"Was it the Big Goose Pagoda?" I asked.

"I have no idea."

"Then you might end up going there again," I observed.

"Do you have friends you miss?" I asked him.

"Oh no, I have friends wherever I go, all over the world. Why, I may even have a new friend here today," and he showed us a note from a Chinese man he'd never met, suggesting that they help each other with their languages.

"I like to travel hard seat so I can talk to the locals," said Norman, who's spent two years studying Chinese.

"That's wonderful," I replied, "Have you had some interesting discussions?"

"Oh, my Chinese isn't that good. But I find out where they're from and what they do, and we can talk about the weather."

On the outside he's cheerful, bubbling on about places and toothaches. Here he is in China, the rambling rose in a land of roots. If I put Norman and a Chinese man on a seesaw, I suspect the fulcrum would be smack in the middle. What does he want, what do they want, how much more do any of them want than they already have?

A toothless old man who speaks bits and pieces of English showed up at tai chi this morning and translated a little. "This man will teach you tai chi if you have the time," he said to me.

I'm sorry, but I'm going away today.

Will you be coming back?

Yes, on Wednesday morning.

If you will definitely be here, he will bring an interpreter.

I definitely will.

He would like to explain the positions and the reasons behind tai chi. It is very useful for old people and for everyone else. And he would like to tell you about the breathing.

I think that's a summary of a fifteen-minute struggle with language.

However we didn't go to Beiwushan today for it's raining. Instead we'll start out tomorrow, after tai chi.

Some days are not conducive to much of anything, so maybe it's just as well we're sitting here for over two hours waiting for a bus to Beiwushan. I guess we're both ready to leave China, and there's no way to do it if we want to take Adolph's sculptures with us. Xian is not good for our health. The dust level has turned my throat sore again, started Adolph's nose running, and even though this has been an easy-going trip, I've reached my saturation point. Tomorrow makes five weeks of being a foreigner.

Xian isn't nearly as hot in June as it was in August, but this is the rainy season all over Asia, and I'm getting sick of grey, outside and in. This bus station is dimly-lit concrete.

A blind man is begging, face filled with pain, going down the line of people seated on our bench. He gathers some jiao here and there as he holds out his hand and chants a sad refrain. Now he's going down the next row, guilt reaching into pockets for pennies. No one, it seems, dares refuse him, with his filthy clothes, hunched shoulders, straw hat hanging on his back.

I suspect every man in China smokes, strong cigarettes, smokes them right down to the lips, including the man sitting on my right, who's using his last to light his next, lots of lung cancer in this country, and cancer of the esophagus.

The CHINA DAILY described one area of the country that has had yellow dust raining down periodically, a hundred severe storms over the centuries. In the fifteenth century dust rained for a week, dust two meters deep, burying whole villages, yellow dust from the Yellow River loess.

Perhaps today's dust, though daily swept, is burying the people, destroying their lungs and throats. If I lived here, it would bury me.

Now we're on the bus, reserved seats. The man next to me is smoking; women rarely do. Maybe it's macho in a land where no one is. No, I'll bet macho is merely defined differently here. What do the men here do to prove they're superior to women? Maybe they don't have to bother to prove it. They're the valued gender. A daughter's a small happiness, a son the supreme happiness; a daughter's raised for her husband's family, the son will live with and take care of his parents. The son will perpetuate their name.

We are bumping towards Beiwushan, right on schedule, fare twenty cents for forty kilometers. Prices low, salaries low, it isn't cars that pollute the air. A mother pedals by with two children in her cart. Now a bikeload of watermelons passes, a hand-pedaled wheel-chair, a bike-propelled wardrobe closet, plenty of exercise in China. The roadside's lined with hay. The bus's horn must make the driver hard of hearing, but Chinese is a shouted language, shouted and gruff. People sometimes sound as if they're arguing when they're having a friendly conversation. I can't digest any more information, it really is time to go home.

The land's divided up. Each farmer fills his quota, and the rest of his crop is his own. How can they tell whose hay is whose? Cabbage patches, corn, most of the fields have rows of wheat stumps waiting to be hoed under.

Here's a village; my back's aching. Look, we all have our bad days, I happen to feel trapped in a country where I can't breathe the air. The feeling's been sneaking up on me, this morning it arrived.

to evaluate the accuracy. She'd spent most of her time observing acupuncture, which served well as an anesthetic and for rehabilitating muscles atrophied by polio.

When Sarah had a sore throat, I went to a drugstore, pointed to my throat, and the pharmacist gave me a package of tiny laryngitis pills, "ten pills thrice daily." The ingredients were "rhinoceros horn, pearl, bear gall, cow bezoar, musk, toad-cake, rhizoma coptidis, fined borax, etc." And I bought cold pills made of "antelope horn, fructus forsythiae, and semen sojae preparatum." Now I realize I should never have bought them. A rhino, an antelope, a bear, a cow, all had to die for those pills.

I can't imagine what it's like to be born in China, to be weighed down with thousands of years of tradition, to live with no privacy, with so much emphasis on family and community and so little on the individual. Relationships, especially family, are very important for the Chinese and certainly are for me. That's where our priorities meet. But developing my own potentials, lifestyle, and system of beliefs is an integral part of my life.

An engineering student I met in Xian was excited by the progress of the government. But it doesn't pay to be different in this society, he told me. You don't get anywhere, you can't succeed, people avoid you. Things have to be done as they've always been done.

I can only observe, and I don't even speak the language. I don't know how people in China feel about their lives. They seem to accept, but do they? They live hard lives, have few luxuries, yet they don't seem miserable. They walk down the streets talking to each other warmly, smiling. There's a sense of camaraderie. And then there's the way people treat their children, lots of affection and patience. On the other hand, parents do not foster independence.

What about sex in this society? I can only mention what I saw, and I didn't see much except occasional hand-holding. Instead of wearing diapers, young children wear pants with slits at the crotch and rear. Once they outgrow their slits, however, everyone covers up well. The women don't even expose their shoulders or wear scoop necks. Occasionally a man will go shirtless, though some think it's disgusting. Sex in China, nothing overt. The men didn't leer, and some had the sweetest smiles I've ever seen.

I'm home less than two days now, and everyone, even people I barely know, wants to hear about China. I keep saying that all my answers are guesswork. This visit told me what to ask next time, if there's a next time, and what to do. I'd go to a small town and stay there. I couldn't do that this time. I wanted to see the whole painting before concentrating on the details.

A MOMENT BETWEEN TRIPS

June 5, l989

Like the Chinese people, I'd hoped for sanitiy. Instead there's the useless loss, of lives, of opportunity. Once people have power they won't give it up.

So now we can sit in front of the TV and cry.

Will Eli be caught in the middle of a revolution?

June 6, l989

Looks like Civil War. Events in China intimately affect me, here on the other side of the world, certainly because of Eli, but also because China has become a part of me. Reading the TIMES this morning was an emotional drain.

June 7, in fact all of yesterday was. THE SENTINEL said all five bridges to Canton were blockaded, Lin said they might declare martial law in Canton, Adolph had left a message on the machine, "Call Eli and tell him to get the hell out of there, if you can't do it, I will."

There was also the sound on our answering machine, familiar to me now, of the phone lines between the United States and China, so I knew Eli had tried to get through.

I kept trying to call China, Lin also kept trying, people were calling us from all over to find out about Eli, Eli finally reached us at 1 AM. He said he'd leave if tensions increased. We strongly urged him to get out now. Once I hung up, I realized I wouldn't relax until he was out.

June 8,

The more we read, the more anxious we get. Adolph's mother called me, hysterical, demanding that I call Eli. When I finally got through, no one could speak English.

A reporter from the SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE interviewed Eli, and the story is featured on the front page today. It says he has a ticket to leave tomorrow but he doesn't know whether he'll use it. Use it, use it, damnit, Eli.

June 11,

Well, he didn't.

Canton is calm, back to normal in Canton, if he feels there's any danger, he'll leave. Adolph and Sarah are very upset. I don't know if I am. I'd probably do the same thing.

So would my mother. There's a streak of recklessness on the maternal side.

June 12

It looks like my China pennywalk is ended, looks like I'll never get back to tell the people in Beiwushan about the outside world. Even if I were allowed to go, even if it were safe for me to go, it wouldn't be safe for them to listen.

THE THIRD TRIP
1991

"You're brave to be traveling alone," said the woman sitting next to me in Detroit as I consumed my last taste of the United States, greasy potato skins loaded with cheese. Only fast food was available on Concourse F.

"It's a long way to go by yourself," said the stewardess as I boarded. Well really, so is life. We're all in this alone, taking on apparent companions here and there. But until we can hang around in each other's heads and see with each other's eyes, we're on our own.

Even my going away affects us all differently. Adolph won't have me to shop, cook, organize. Sarah won't have me to locate lost items. I did leave nine pizzas in the freezer for them. The poor dog won't have me to run her to Lake Michigan. I, on the other hand, am free for almost a month to draw and write.

It's four years since my last trip to China, the hardest four years of my life, so I feel more than four years older. That could affect my style.

As usual I'm traveling light, not a single dress, three pairs of jeans. My drawing pads, camera, and luggage carrier are the heaviest objects I've got. And as usual I set my watch ahead to Hong Kong time as soon as I boarded. I slept from Milwaukee to Detroit and for the first three hours of this Detroit-Tokyo flight. The plane doesn't have the empty space at the rear where I always exercise. I had to do my routine in full view, bringing on sympathetic stretches and a smile from a man several rows away. And a startled look from the stewardess who got my back-swinging arm in the belly.

As I finished packing this morning, I realized I didn't have a book along. I glanced at my night table, saw MAN'S SEARCH FOR MEANING was still there, perhaps to remind me that I have a choice of attitude, then grabbed HEART OF A DOG by Bulgakov.

The first few pages are written from the viewpoint of a dog named Sharik, who comments that when you look into the eyes, you can't mistake the man. Maybe that's true for dogs. I wish it were truer for me. Five and a half hours into this flight I hadn't spoken with the man next to me. I preferred to read, write, and stretch without distractions. I did observe him as he meticulously examined everything on his dinner tray; he even read the small print on the wrapper of his pat of butter. I noted that he used a fork awkwardly, probably was accustomed to chopsticks. The boniness of his face with its pronounced jaw and cheek-bones made him either interesting or sinister, I wasn't sure which. Sinister, I decided, when I caught him intently staring at me from behind his book as I exercised.

The stewardess just served a snack, and I broke the silence. "This is our breakfast," I told him, "It's already 7:30 AM in Hong Kong, though it's 6:30 PM in Detroit." He beamed at the sound of my voice, and sinister suddenly became innocent.

First person canine. That complements my latest series of drawings, for my theme is: If we looked at ourselves through the eyes of gulls, perhaps we'd understand. Sharik is in agony. A cook threw boiling water on him, and now he's wandering Moscow's winter streets trying to decide where to lie down to die. A doctor feeds him sausage and brings him to his apartment; those are the eyes Sharik looked into, the kind and generous eyes of Dr. P.

When he was a stray, Sharik had had his freedom but had lived on the edge of starvation. Now Dr. P is tending his wounds and feeding him whatever his dog's heart desires. The door to the outside world, however, is always closed, as it is in China. And Sharik is at the mercy of Dr. P, who transplants a human pituitary gland and testes into the dog to rejuvenate

him. The experiment has an unexpected outcome: the dog turns human. Instead of a sympathetic and loyal creature, he becomes a crude, aggressive lout.

I left fifteen hours ago, nine more coming up, I'm getting antsy. Can I still manage hard seat in a Chinese train?

I've finished the book. Dr. P. had used the pituitary gland of a rogue. It hadn't occurred to him that the pituitary might be the root of human character. In desperation, he reinserts Sharik's original gland, and Sharik becomes a gentle dog once again. That's the problem with technology, the unexpected always seems to happen. Technology whirls along, and the world crumbles with aftereffects. Unlike Sharik, we can't go back to doghood.

I do appreciate the technology that allows me to have coffee and bran muffin at the Oakland Cafe one morning, and do tai chi in a Hong Kong park the following morning after a 38-hour day.

I changed planes in Tokyo for the final five hours of this odyssey. I have a new seat mate, who is writing as intensely as I am and glancing in my direction as if he's describing me. His hand covers his blue lined paper. He doesn't have the advantage I have of writing in an indecipherable shorthand.

At some point the date changed to the 19th, though we've traveled through daylight the entire trip until now. The sun is setting over Japan.

That man next to me is a writer of letters, to his wife who isn't yet his wife. He mailed her a long letter from the Detroit airport; he'll have another ready when we arrive in Hong Kong. She's an American diplomat, he's an officer in the Portuguese army, they're stationed on opposite sides of the earth. This tall, handsome man with mischievous eyes and Latin charm captivates me. Though his appearance is macho, he talks on and on about his vulnerability, about being only partly alive when away from his "true love." They travel between continents to join for a few days here and there, longing to arrange their professions so they can live together and have a child. He opens his overnight bag to get out his reading glasses and Look! He shows me the love note she left on his pajamas.

I'm eating breakfast at the Hong Kong Y after awakening at 6:30 and doing tai chi. The park has been rebuilt into a maze of concrete paths winding around hillsides of tropical trees and flowers and vibrating with the chirps of exotic birds, most of them caged in an aviary. At every landing people socialize and go through their morning routines.

After three years, I've finally met Eli's Taiwanese girlfriend. Pauline is lovely and warm, and, though she wears bright, stylish clothes, she's shy. They're a striking couple, she under five feet and 86 pounds, Eli almost six feet and 186.

We have two rooms at a cheap hotel, very cheap, most customers don't stay the night. The entrance is a long, narrow staircase, up up up between peeling yellow walls till the aroma of incense indicates we're there. A woman comes from behind a small counter to unlock the glass door and lead guests past a double altar with lighted candles and offerings of fruit and down a dreary passageway to their rooms, tiny rooms, barely large enough for the bed. The walls and mirror in mine are spattered with paint, the nondescript bit of carpeting and the quilt have burn marks. The only window, which is in the bathroom, is barred. In case of fire, I can wave good-bye to the people down below.

The bed is firm, and I slept soundly. It was so dark I thought my watch had sped ahead when I checked the time this morning and saw 6:30. My toe was sore, I ached, my mood was as grey as the day, and I panicked at the thought of going back into China. Still, I've already decided to change my reservation and return home later than I'd planned. It's such a long trip, I should stay awhile.

I dressed and walked down the hallway to the glass door. It was locked, and no one was around. I banged on the counter until someone came to let me out.

Yesterday evening after a short nap, I was standing near Eli and Pauline's door, waiting to leave for dinner. I heard heavy footsteps and loud voices, mainly male, and I thought it strange that the management would allow parties in such a tiny hotel, seven small rooms with flimsy locks. I wondered if our bags would be safe. Five clean-cut men and one woman, all wearing jeans, filled the corridor to capacity. They entered the room next to mine. Then two approached me and said, "Police." Funny how I saw Eli, Pauline, and me in jail, though I couldn't think of anything we'd done wrong. They asked for passports, and Eli and I had left ours at a travel agency to get our Chinese visas. At least Pauline had hers. They riffled through all of Eli's identity papers, made sure no prostitutes nor illegal aliens were hiding in my room, said we were free to go, and lined up in the hallway, backs to the walls, so we could squeeze past.

The police followed us out, and I last saw them strolling down the middle of the street, brisk and confident, aiming towards the next little fly-by-night pension.

As if a police raid weren't enough, we soon discovered that we and the fire engines screeching down Nathan Road had the same destination, Chung King Mansion, a giant complex of grubby hotels, hostels, and restaurants. Though the place was swarming with yellow-hatted firemen, we saw no sign of smoke. We found the friends we were there to meet, pushed through a crowd of pamphleteers, ran up a filthy, non-functioning escalator, cut across a stone floor that doubled as a garbage dump, two-stepped up some more trash-filled flights past barred, broken windows, and finally came to a relatively clean Indian restaurant. An edible dinner, then a disco, and I'm wildly buzzing over the dance floor, then three and a half hours of sleep, and now once again the early-morning park. Even doing the surface motions of tai chi with little knowledge of the underlying rationale makes my body feel ready to dance through the day as if I lived in a perpetual disco. Today is cool and grey, as was yesterday, as China will be, and I'll wish I had waited for May. Still, I could easily spend my mornings wandering from group to group in the park. After an hour or so my joints and muscles are complaining a bit, yet I feel relaxed and limber. I think I prefer this to the Shorewood Pool, mainly because I don't have to get wet. The perfect exercise for me would be a dry swim.

After tai chi, I revisited the aviary of cockatoos, kookaburras, and toucans, mynas, macaws, magpies, pheasants, parrots, and pigeons. I passed a lagoon inhabited by flamingos and geese, found my way to the street, bought Chinese bean pastries, the INTERNATIONAL TRIBUNE, and the MORNING POST, and ended up at McDonald's.

A 44-year-old American policeman in Chicago wants to marry a Chinese lady in her 20's, reply with photo. A 27 year-old male in New Jersey is looking for someone disease-free, photo a must. A male in Miami Beach wants a Chinese lady with a good sense of humor and financial security. Is it the delicateness that attracts them? Are they assuming subservience? Are they unable to find anyone in the States? I wonder if these personals in a newspaper a

world away will end up in marriage. At least searching for a wife on the other side of the world seems saner to me than dropping bombs.

According to the TRIBUNE, there's a war fever sweeping China in support of the United States, a fever that has little to do with the Persian Gulf War. It's rooted in anger at their dictators' more or less neutral position, in respect for American freedoms and technology, and in a boredom so great that minor accidents or street quarrels quickly draw swarms of onlookers. "My feeling is bomb, bomb! It's a kind of emotional release for general depression," says one Chinese woman, and I wonder if she'd feel that way if she could witness the impact. Here I am in Asia, taking off from cooking and income taxes; I can't shake off the war.

I can feel the cold of the stone step as I sit on Kimberly Street amid the constant sputters and hums of motors, the hammering of construction-workers, and the shouts of hagglers. Someone somewhere is cooking with garlic. The other odors here are less definable and less pleasant. It's not the aromas, it's the life in the produce market that drew me here, the vegetables piled in bamboo baskets, the range of Oriental greens, the intense violet of the eggplants. The market opens right onto the narrow street of nudging cars and customers. An orange garbage truck works its way past shoppers, without picking up the piles of rubble to my left. Peddlers cut, chop, peel, and pile. A pudgy woman, filthy blue sales apron slung round her neck, places bok choy in a pink plastic bag, hands it to the purchaser, and slips the proceeds into a pouch. A man jams a dozen heads of cabbage into a transparent bag; another hoists a loaded basket onto his bike, ties it securely, and pedals away. This may be the world's most capitalist city, with a skyline of gleaming, ultramodern buildings; it still has its pockets of the past.

I'm sitting in my hotel room one last time. It's about seven by eight feet; the mirror doesn't deceive me into doubling the area. The tan wallpaper is stained and crumbling, the blue rug pockmarked, the wall next to the bed scarred by frequent close contact with humans, paper rubbed off, body oils clinging. Electrical wires are exposed on two nonfunctioning night lights. There's a dimmer for the naked forty-watt bulb that hangs overhead.

It's evening. Pauline's back in Taipei, Eli and I are on the ferry to Canton, cruising along on the South China Sea, passing shadowy freighters, harbor lights reflected on dark water like hundreds of suns. My visual perceptions are governed by my cataracts, which make the world seem even more mysterious than it already is, just when I'm searching for clarity.

This ferry is grubbier than the one we took four years ago. And the sleeping accommodations are not as nice, a narrow corridor with bunk beds on either side, seventeen to be exact, for thirty-four passengers. The rest rooms are one flight up, which might be lucky, unless stench travels downward. I can't complain; the trip costs only fifteen dollars American and gets us from Hong Kong to Canton while we dream.

I took a nap this afternoon and awakened with a general malaise that made me think I'm too old for this. What's worse, I'm here to finish CHINA PENNYWALK, and I don't have a publisher nor even an agent, like a tree falling with no one to hear the thud.

But now we're on our way, and I'm thinking that maybe I should change my reservation again and stay still longer. If I didn't have to do income taxes, I'd make it even later. I'm sitting at a table on deck, and I've discovered which way stench travels.

Ah hah, I was using the wrong rest room, was using the one for passengers sleeping in beds numbered 1 to 164, all in one giant dormitory. Ours is cleaner since we're traveling fourth class, and they're traveling fifth.

It's 10:37, and most of the people in our corridor are sound asleep, some rather noisily. The walls are pale blue, the metal framework of the beds is painted yellow, and the carpet is a dull turquoise, strewn with grey gobs of dust. On the floor near every bunk are two pairs of shoes and luggage. The lady opposite me has her bags in bed with her.

As soon as I drifted off, I was startled out of sleep by a grating female voice over the loudspeaker droning on and on in Chinese. It was after eleven, and in our room alone about thirty people had already soundly accepted night. Each time her inflection indicated she'd finished, she added a new section. Then she gave a short talk in English, ending with the statement that it was time to go to sleep and everyone should be as quiet as possible.

I awakened at two, nose running and throat sore from all the dust, and I couldn't get to sleep again. I lay on my back listening to sniffles (my own) and assorted snores and snorts and coughs. Finally I took an aspirin, built up my pillows so my head would be high, covered my eyes with tissues to block out the night light on the ceiling, and suddenly it was 5 A.M.

If I wish to see through the eyes of Chinese women, what should I ask? What is your day like, what time do you get up, is your husband still asleep, are you glad you married him, does he hit you? Eli has seen a lot of abuse in China, right out in the street. Well, that's where much of life is lived.

What would you most like to do if you could? I'd bet many would want to travel. That's what everyone seems to want, to know others' lives, to see the world through other eyes. And then they forget to try.

Many restaurants in Hong Kong have fish tanks in the window. As I looked at the fish yesterday, their mouth corners curving downward, it struck me that they may sense their destiny. For when they look good to one of us, they'll be scooped out, gutted, broiled, and eaten. Yet that doesn't stop me from eating fish.

I hear the coughing and gargling and spitting again. Now I know I'm in China, and I'm not even off the boat.

That same disembodied voice has now announced it's six ten and time to "prease" get up. People dress quickly, a simple matter of tucking in the untuckedness and putting on shoes. The woman sleeping with her luggage sat up suddenly, surprised to see everyone filling out immigration forms. Her black, raggedy hair almost hit the ceiling beam. She sat on the edge of the upper berth, gauging the distance down, unable to find the ladder. The man in the bed next to me put on a fresh pair of pants. And I can see a distant arm slipping into a blouse.

We're in Canton, enclosed in a taxi that's dodging through an ocean of bicycles. If drivers watched out for bikers, all motorized traffic would stand still. So each biker is responsible for his own safety.

This city could use some animal rights advocates. Canton is definitely not the place to look at the world through the eyes of a dog. We're in the food market, and I'm holding my new tape recorder an inch from my mouth. I see roasted dogs, suspended like beef or chickens or any other entree. Eli says they're blowtorched first to burn off their fur.

I'm getting jostled by old ladies with big bamboo baskets. Eli's way ahead. "Hey, Eli," I call, "People will think I'm pretty strange, walking alone and talking to myself." "No matter what you do, you'll look strange here, so you may as well continue," he calls back to me.

A goat's head is suspended next to more roasted dogs. More goat heads. Geese. The vegetables look so tempting I almost wish we had a stove, broccoli, Chinese cabbage, lettuce, mustard greens, cauliflower, pea pods, eggplant. The meat here should create a generation of vegetarians, a dead dog baring its teeth, live hens, fish cut in half with their guts exposed, live fish swimming in large metal drawers, listless kittens, eels, a dead deer, small cages squeezed full of live raccoons, rabbits barely breathing in a bamboo basket placed next to a rotting, moldy, indefinable carcass.

"They have no sense of display," says Eli.

A tub vibrates with live frogs, a cage is crammed full of ducks, flies harass a dying boar. A deer carcass is thrown on top of a cage of live deer. Since they're trapped in the wild, many of the deer have missing feet. A live raccoon is chewing on a footless leg. If they don't sell the deer, at least the raccoon had lunch. No price tags on the carnage. Turtles in all sizes. A woman sits behind her crabs, picking her nose. Baskets and baskets of crabs, vats of turtles, blood and guts all over the ground. I don't look down to see what I've stepped on. More deer, some dazed, some dead.

"Sounds like someone's killing a cat," says Eli.

Pigeons, dogs hanging over vegetables, tiny bananas, pigs' feet on the table, pigs' heads suspended above. More greens, more jostlers, dried fish, one about three feet long, mounds of ground fish, ducks, dead fish dropped into a bike basket, scallions, cilantro, and now we're out. We pass curbside vendors, some selling flowers, some selling tangerines.

I'm in the revolving restaurant atop the Ai Qin Hotel, sixteen stories up and slowly turning, a complete revolution every fifteen minutes, more or less, so I gaze down on a constantly changing panorama. Smoggy mists protect the city from the sun's rays. The colors of Canton range from streaked grey to dirty yellow, enlivened by green awnings, rooftop gardens, and a few lines of drying clothes. Many of the buildings are concrete blocks, with layers of balconies filled with flower pots. I'm by myself at a table for four. Now the waitress seats four people with me. Is that a hint that it's time to leave? I intend to stay. I thought for a second that a man was standing on a roof below, then realized it was only a pair of trousers hanging on a clothesline. The moving figure I saw on another roof was actually the arm of a woman at my table reflected in the window next to me. A running dog was actually the shadow of a distant street-sweeper's broom. A woman was seated at the head of this table, I looked up from my writing and saw a man in a grey suit seated there instead, then realized they'd merely switched seats.

Junks and small launches glide over the sun-drenched ripples of the Pearl River. A man on a nearby roof squats at a pile of clay, kneads it with sand, and shapes it into grey softball-sized lumps, thirty of them thus far, like giant dumplings for dim sum. Now he removes his gloves, rubs his hands, grabs an empty pail, and, oh no, I'm right over him now, looking down on his hair, and I'd swear that's a woman's hair.

It's kind of beautiful, grey gloves lying open-palmed, a pile of grey sand, balls neatly placed, almost in a triangle, a yellow broom, unknown white granules spread on pink cloth,

bamboo poles suspended on the railings, a basket of sponges, a dried orange peel, there's a still life right under my eyes.

We're directly over the river now, and a flat wooden junk cruises past towing a dugout, another junk, flat prow loaded and covered. I'll never know what's underneath, like all of China.

Surrounded by pots of green plants, a man and a woman are doing their wash together on a rooftop, squatting next to two red tubs, rubbing and scrubbing, perhaps discussing their stains. A pink tablecloth is doubled over the clothesline. At least I think it's a man and a woman and not two men. Yes, it is. She got up and walked away with those little footsteps I just realized are normal for a lot of older Chinese women, even if their feet were never bound.

A woman in white is sweeping. Or is it a man? Maybe this isn't my fault, maybe there's less definition in China. We're passing that lone pair of pants again, and now it's got company. Everyone's doing wash.

Along the river's edge at sunrise this morning people were stretching, each in his own world, touching toes, swinging arms, twisting, using the railing like a ballet bar, though certainly no dancers were visible to me, only men and women my age and older. And drabber, I tend to wear bright colors. I fast-walked till I found a group of eight women doing tai chi and surreptitiously joined them, as if anything I do could be surreptitious in China. After fifteen minutes, they began to socialize, and I continued my stroll, thinking that in mainland China none of the women I join for tai chi speaks English. They comprise a layer of society I can't communicate with. They've raised their children and dealt with their men. We have many experiences in common, and a yawning gap.

I walked awhile, then started back. The women were still there, one of them explaining a tai chi movement. I stopped to watch. She smiled, called the whole group together again, and we repeated our routine. They want to communicate, and all they can ask is my nationality, and my age and number of children.

We're passing the clay-molder's roof again, and now about ninety softballs, none round, are hardening in the sun. They could be briquettes for an oven. The person who shaped them is out of sight, no, I see her-him from the back, hair too long for a Chinese man, gestures masculine for a woman, which I suspect she is. She's hanging rags on bamboo poles.

A parade of junks floats down the river, one loaded with rocks, some empty, laundry hanging on decks, dugouts trailing behind.

Every time we make the circle, there are more clothes hanging on roofs and balconies. They're the only touches of red and blue. Instead of church or Sunday brunch, thousands of Cantonese scrub and wring.

I tried to call Adolph yesterday to wish him a happy birthday; instead I reached myself on the answering machine. Before I came up here for breakfast this morning, the desk clerk gave me the phone bill, 420 yuan, that's eighty dollars. I gasped. It turned out to be 42 yuan, followed by a zero-like character. This double-entendre day has continued from there.

My experience as I left the revolving restaurant indicates that the problem is, in part, China. When the elevator arrived at the sixteenth floor, it was full, no one got off, so I couldn't get on. I and several other people walked down to fifteen, took the next elevator going up, and stayed on at sixteen. When it stopped on fifteen going down, there was no room

for those waiting. On fourteen some people shoved their way on. On thirteen the passengers screamed at those about to get in, and the elevator left without them. On twelve someone on the elevator pressed close before anyone could enter. I got off on seven, definitely got off on seven, walked along the corridor to the older section of the building, was about to knock on our door, we're in room 709, the number on the door was 609.

We'd hoped to leave for Xian today; it doesn't appear we'll make it. The train station yesterday was more conducive to picking pockets than to buying tickets, and I was glad the pouch containing my valuables was diaper-pinned to my undershirt. Later someone told us that a half million unemployed came to Canton during the Chinese New Year to look for nonexistent jobs. They must all be camped out at the station.

The population there was ninety-nine percent male, and some shady characters eyed me as we shoved past. Shoved and were shoved, almost stepping on the people underfoot.

Long lines snaked around the station, men pressed front to butt. The line at the Xian ticket window was shorter, only about twenty-five or thirty, and we waited, until Eli discovered there was no one selling tickets.

Traveling with Eli is no way to lose weight, even in China, though yesterday's overconsumption wasn't his fault. Some friends of his invited us for lunch in their bright and airy apartment, balconies suspended over a courtyard, painted pots of flowering plants on the railings, and caged birds twirping to the beat of rock music played on a costly stereo. Five of us glutted ourselves on chicken, goose, sausage, pork, fish, shrimp, pea pods, and cabbage. The woman of the house spooned food into my bowl and beheaded shrimp for me. I obediently ate it all. Yet I came away thinking not about the meal, but about their daughter who lives in Milwaukee. They haven't seen her in four years, and they have no idea when they'll see her again.

On the way to their apartment it occurred to me that I'd finally be able to have an in-depth conversation with a woman my age. I was somehow under the impression that the woman of the house could speak English. She couldn't. After we left, I realized that she'd spent most of our visit in the kitchen. I should have insisted on helping her, even though she pushed me away every time I tried.

At night we had already arranged to take a young woman named Li Yi and her brother out for dim sum. Though our guests weren't feeling well and Eli and I were already satiated from lunch, custom required us to keep on ordering and eating. At least chewing seems to relax the tongue. I felt free to ask Li Yi, who speaks English, how her life differs from her mother's.

They are both educated women, she told me, yet there's a big generation gap. Yi Li loves someone four years younger than she is. Her mother insists that if she marries him, she'll look much older than her husband, and everyone will gossip. It's the mind that counts, I told her. Anyway it's better to marry someone younger, since men don't live as long.

Li Yi's mother works hard for low wages, is always worried about expenses, and never complains. Once Li Yi graduates from college and works for five years, it would cost her ten thousand yuan in bribes if she wants to quit her job and try to find a better one. Though she's determined to live her life differently from her mother, she feels locked in. As she spoke, I kept thinking of a man living in Chicago's public housing who remarked that he can't move

because there's nowhere to go and can't get a decent education nor job. "They've got us in a jar, and the lid's on tight."

Sometimes I think all of China is living in a similar jar.

We went to China International Travel Service for train tickets this morning and were sent back to that nightmare of a station, people and luggage all over the ground, everyone shoving, practically rioting, faces shadowed by desperation, lines at the ticket windows about two hundred deep. There were no lines at the Xian window because there were no tickets, except for hard seat. And forty hours in a moving version of that tortured station did not appeal to us. In fact, once I word it that way, I'm thankful that Eli adamantly refused to go hard seat. And disappointed.

As we were leaving, I noticed a dolly piled with animal cages, hens stuffed into some, dogs into others, squeezed too tightly to move. Doesn't anyone consider them living creatures? Perhaps the stuffed cages are too similar to the lines at the ticket windows, too similar to all of China, everyone squeezed in, almost too tightly to move.

After shuttling from office to office, building to building, we ended up with plane tickets for tomorrow. Small plane, Russian, an old one at that. Everyone who made air reservations to anywhere asked about the plane.

We've spent our evenings at an open-air bar with a group of Eli's Chinese friends, mainly English teachers. When we first arrive, we go inside to grab a table and stools, then we set them out in the street, sip beer or lychee juice, nibble pumpkin seeds or shuck the shells from peanuts, and move out of the way when a car tries to pass.

Maybe it's Canton, or my imagination, or the greyness of the day, or a carry-over from the train station, maybe I'm more observant than I was. In any event, people here seem sad. I didn't notice homelessness on our other trips. Now, late at night I see people sleeping in nooks and crannies. Of course I never before walked late at night, since I didn't sit in bars till two in the morning.

The palpable despair at the train station doesn't go away, the wretched people, the caged hens and dogs at the fringe. I said to Eli, "I'd hate to be Chinese and have to live in constant crowds." Then I thought, my own son chooses to do just that, when all the natives are trying to get out. Of course he can leave whenever he wants. Damn, I do understand; I'm the same way. Someone's about to take the boat to Wuzoo and Guilin, and I, too, am ready to board. I want to go to Kunming, Irumqi, Mongolia, Tibet. I also want to go back to Milwaukee and finish writing my novel.

The reality is, in the exotic places, I'll wonder why I'm there, and in Milwaukee I'll spend three solid weeks working on income taxes.

And what is reality? No matter whose eyes I'm peering through, it's never what it seems. There's an incredibly beautiful tree on my right as I sit at an outdoor cafe on Shamian Island, beautiful because it's half dead: the leaves are thick towards the center, and at the edges bare branches twist and reach in all directions.

And now I'll buy the INTERNATIONAL TRIBUNE and read about more reality. The ground war has begun.

I did tai chi with the same group of women, on a landing that juts out over the Pearl River. When I arrived at 6:30, they were already finished. They each said hello, then formed a

fresh group and started over. Their only other words were okay and good-bye. If we could speak, what would we say to each other at grey dawn on the Pearl?

Eli's hoping, with a very small investment, to open up a bar-restaurant on Hainan Island, a place on the beach, built with bamboo. And last night I met one of his potential partners, a Britisher, a nice man, I guess, but a drunk, a chain-smoker, and rather repetitive, not an ideal partner in my book.

We're in a cab on our way to the airport. We pass the usual masses of people and cars and bicycles and motorcycles and then something makes us gasp, a fight, a bus just missing a bike, two seamstresses seated in the middle of a major thoroughfare, sewing and inhaling fumes. China's not a boring place, for us.

We're now at the airport, another mob scene, though not desperate. The desperate can't afford airline tickets. There are long lines at all the check-in counters, except the one for Xian. Maybe we're the only ones on the flight. The departure board says one of the Beijing flights "will be delay due to plane turn around." Several flights are scheduled to depart, none are boarding. A fat boy wears a red tee shirt that says "Boys and Balls." The Great Wall is now being shown on the departure screen, the Forbidden City, ads for Sprite.

We had a smooth flight, landed, followed the crowd across the field in the dark to the airport parking lot, and claimed our baggage. A young woman hassled us, trying to get us to ride in her van to the Renmin Dacha. Eventually Eli bargained her down, and we got in with three other passengers. Not too far from the airport, she pulled up to a shiny new hotel and wouldn't budge. She insisted we'd get a better deal there. We had no intention of staying on the outskirts, and she finally gave up. As we drove along the busy road leading into Xian, a passenger seated all the way in back screamed, and our driver stopped dead in the middle of streaming traffic. I thought a suitcase had fallen out, or a rat had gotten in. Thanks to Eli's Chinese, we learned that the cap was off the tank, and gas was sloshing.

By 10 P.M., we were at the Renmin, playing the usual game of no cheap rooms.

I got up dark and early to search for Mr. Ma, my tai chi teacher four years ago. Now that I have Eli as interpreter, I wonder if I'll be disappointed.

I walked onto the still-gloomy street, already filled with work-bound bikers. No one was doing tai chi. Maybe they don't in winter, though it was in the upper thirties, warmer than Milwaukee. Some solitary men were stretching in a strip of park. Hundreds of people filled the main square. I did tai chi with about fifty men and women near the spot where I used to follow Mr. Ma. No sign of him, though. Afterwards I wandered around, looking for his gentle face, his balding head, his lithe body moving with grace and assurance and joy.

At least a hundred couples were ballroom dancing, another large group had taken up swords. I joined some people who moved in tandem to a rock beat, just the kind of music that inspires me to make up my own steps. Several glances told me improvisation isn't big in Xian, so I left and continued to look for Mr. Ma.

I circled the square twice, then came back here to the hotel restaurant. The waitresses immediately served me a complete Chinese breakfast: tea, rice gruel, omelet, cold tofu with garlic and scallions, a turnip-like vegetable strongly flavored with ginger, and Chinese rolls, twisted blobs of dumpling dough. I haven't had coffee since Hong Kong.

The restaurant is empty except for me and about twenty employees. I know foreigners laugh at this feather-bedding; I figure that it saves a lot of people from starvation.

After Westerners have been in China awhile, they develop a slight, or not so slight, arrogance. They sneer at the illogical aspects of life, and there are many, at the group mentality, at the rigidity, at a people brought up not to question authority.

Yet I didn't hear many Americans question as we bombed the cradle of our civilization.

Mr. Ma had written his business address on the letter he gave me four years ago. So Eli and I went to his office this morning, handed someone the letter, and indicated that we wanted to locate Mr. Ma. His colleagues took turns reading his offer to teach me tai chi, and I hoped it wasn't subversive. Or embarrassing. Finally someone phoned to notify him we were there. Then everyone gathered around to talk with us as we waited. There was none of the fear of being seen with foreigners that I expected in post-Tiananmen China. No one mentioned politics, though they did express disapproval of the Gulf War. It's better to talk than fight was the consensus.

Then in came Mr. Ma. I was startled to see how much he'd aged. He was still energetic, and now that he had the chance to talk to me, he couldn't stop. He launched into a speech about teaching me tai chi, an ancient version, not written down, different routines for every age and every illness, he's studied it since 1970. I was fascinated by the expressiveness of his face. Even when I more or less know what he's talking about, something about him moves me.

We're going to Beiwushan tomorrow, but Mr. Ma got time off from his employer to come over at 8 A.M. to begin my lessons. For me, meeting people like him is what travel's all about.

Mr. Ma no longer does his tai chi near the Renmin. His work unit moved to the city's outskirts, which meant he moved too, or he'd have no place to live. He now bikes several kilometers into town every morning. There's still almost no private ownership of cars in China. This country will be unlivable when that happens. And so, I suspect, will the earth.

Eight o'clock came and went, and I worried that the hotel management had refused to let him in. Then Mr. Ma knocked. He looked younger today, more like his summer self.

Though it was raw and raining, we went outside for more space and better light. I photographed his positions as he dictated relevant notes to Eli. Until he noticed I was shivering.

I was concerned about his getting to work on time; he was more interested in having me look up a certain Buddhist monk in San Francisco. People come from all over to study with this monk. Though I told him I live a couple of thousand miles away, he gave me a letter and reproductions of religious paintings for the monk, to be certain he'd take me on as a student. Eli finally got so aggravated he began to translate in very simple terms, "He's talking about the monk again." I gave Mr. Ma another copy of my book, MEMORANDANCE, since a friend had taken the one I gave him last time. He's anxious to introduce us to some artists when we return from Beiwushan.

It's four years now since I last sat on the balcony of the little hotel in Beiwushan. I'm sitting here now, and it's cold. I'm wearing an undershirt, long underwear, a blouse, three

sweaters, knee socks, jeans, tennis shoes layered with mud, a scarf, and gloves, and I'm not quite comfortable.

When we arrived, cold and exhausted, we walked directly to the hotel. It was padlocked. We stood outside and waited. Eli was sure, knowing the Chinese grapevine, that someone would eventually come.

After about fifteen minutes, we asked the people living across the street if anyone had notified the manager, and they invited us into their home to watch TV. We sat on a couch in their living room-dining room-kitchen-garage, a motorcycle parked in the middle of the hard-mud floor, charcoal briquettes piled in a corner, the television set occupying the place of honor.

I was excited at the thought of seeing Mr. Ho. However when the manager finally arrived, he was a stranger. He warned us that there was no running water, no place to shower, and no toilet. We told him we already knew.

Still, we were surprised when we did at last enter. The downstairs was no longer a general store but a two-table restaurant, though it seemed no one had eaten there recently. The upstairs was filthy, like an abandoned house, surfaces layered with dust, floors unswept, red plastic basin filled with black water. The new manager made our beds, a mat, a quilt, a torn sheet, a greasy caseless pillow with matching greasy towel, two more quilts as blankets, unwashed for months, or years.

If my first glimpse of the hotel made me want to get on the next bus back to Xian, nighttime increased that desire. During the day we'd found a little store and had bought fresh towels to put over the pillows. They were our only clean bedding. We kept all our clothes on and crawled under quilts that smelled like generations of feet. I shivered all night, nose running and throat sore, and I prayed I wouldn't need the outhouse. We hadn't been able to buy an extra cup for me to keep by my bed just in case. When I awakened at 6 A.M., I had no choice but to get up and walk through the cold, dark back yard. I could hear, already at that hour, what I thought was volleys of shots from a nearby army base. They turned out to be volleys of firecrackers, two hours thus far, greeting the end of the spring festival.

The family across the street is setting off fireworks now. A boy of about two hands them to his father who lights them and throws them into the air. Crack! Nasty sound and no flares. The father goes inside and the boy picks the last stick up from the ground. I'm not sure whether or not it's a dud, whether or not I should scream. He throws it down without mishap and is now peeing into what's left of the mountain stream.

I want to stay out here on the balcony and write, but it's too damned cold. I'd been warned that winter in this part of China is cold outside and in. Actually it's colder inside, without the sun to warm the air during the day.

I told Eli that there was no way I'd go to the top of Mt. Beiwushan, mountain-climbing is not my choice of how to die. Yet this morning, there I was, walking alongside the mountain stream on paths muddy from yesterday's rain and from melting snow. In several spots I noted that I was doing exactly what I'd promised myself I'd never again do, walk on a slippery, narrow ledge. We went only as far as the first monastery. And coming down, none of those spots seemed threatening. Walks like this remind me of why so many mountains are considered sacred. They inspire what cathedral-builders can only try for. And no cathedral has the gurgling stream, the mysterious birdcalls, the snow and mists and precipices.

Before I left Milwaukee, I had prints made from my slides of our friends in Beiwushan, and I wanted to distribute them as soon as possible. We went around the corner to the restaurant, which is redesigned, one larger room instead of two tiny ones, still big enough for only three tables. I knew the family would like my photos of the grandfather, father, mother, and baby, I had had no idea how much. In fact the whole village crowded in to look, passed them from hand to hand while we ate. I should have realized the restaurant family would never let us pay for the meal, should have given them the pictures afterwards.

While we were eating, a young man sat with us. He was Mr. Ho's son, and within hours of arriving in Beiwushan, Eli and I found ourselves sitting comfortably at the Hos' home, side by side in two easy chairs. When Mrs. Ho saw me, she came running in and clasped me in a bear hug, was practically speechless with excitement. "This is a very emotional day!" she exclaimed. And over and over she told Eli, "If you weren't here, we wouldn't be able to communicate at all."

She'd aged, had more pounds and less teeth, yet she was still a bustling, energetic woman. Mr. Ho seemed very much the same, a warm, smiling man, 69 now, and I kept thinking how special it was to see them again. Mrs. Ho said that whenever I'm in China, I come to Beiwushan because the scenery is so spectacular, and I said I come because I like the people. She practically jumped out of her chair with delight. And it was true, wasn't it, that I'd come halfway round the world to return to Beiwushan.

Right now we're locked in the hotel. While we were taking a short nap, the manager left and put the padlock on the outside. We have no idea how soon he'll reappear. Earlier today, when we got back from the mountain, we were locked out. We ate lunch, returned, the entrance was still padlocked. We waited awhile, then asked the nearby loiterers, who were watching us in amusement, where the manager lives. They wrote his name on the wrapper of some toilet paper we'd bought and told us to walk along the road, show people the name, and we'd find him. We did find him. Otherwise we'd probably still be locked out right now instead of being locked in.

Eli and I are playing scrabble on the balcony. An official-looking group just walked up to the hotel, an army officer and three well-groomed men in leather jackets. I said to Eli, Uh oh, they've come to tell us Beiwushan is off-limits for foreigners.

It turns out they want to stay here, too. Eli fluttered the toilet-paper wrapper down to them, and one of them set out to find the manager.

It's now six o'clock. We've been locked in for at least two hours, the officials have been locked out for a half hour. And I think I have a fever.

Eli took it easy on the manager in front of the new customers; he didn't want him to lose too much face. He simply said we were going out for dinner and want to get back in afterwards. In addition to its new design, the restaurant has an expanded inventory. In a wooden cabinet are packages of store-bought noodles, the father no longer makes fresh noodles to order. There's tofu and meat, no refrigerator, only nature, which is doing too good a job as far as I'm concerned. I can't warm up at all.

The other hotel guests came into the restaurant and settled down for the evening at the next table, with jiggers of rice wine, cigarettes, and every dish on the unwritten menu.

It was 8 o'clock and dark when Eli and I returned to the hotel. The manager's 17-year-old daughter was there to greet us. I took the flashlight out of my purse to go to the outhouse. Eli mentioned to her that my night vision is bad, an unfortunate comment, for she insisted on coming along and holding the flashlight on me while I squatted over the hole in the ground, my passport pouch suspended slightly above my crotch. I was so surprised at having company that I forgot to hold onto my shoulder-bag, which swung around and missed a pile by about an eighth of an inch.

There was a parade and performance that night, the grand finale of the spring festival. Eli had told the manager we'd like to go with him, figuring that if we spent the evening with the key, we couldn't get locked out. However I was too tired and chilled to do anything other than sleep. We paid for our room and said we planned to take the first bus back to Xian in the morning and would return in two days. The manager immediately invited us to his home for breakfast. Then he and his daughter left for the festival, locking us in and the other guests out.

When I got into bed, I realized that the window pane next to my head was missing. That was why I froze the night before, the wind was blowing right down my quilt. So I put on an extra pair of socks, wore my nightgown over my sweaters, kept my scarf around my neck, and slept with my feet towards the breeze.

The manager picked us up at 7 AM, locked the other guests in, and brought us to his home. His front door opened into a courtyard with a kitchen, a sty and two wallowing pigs, a well about thirty meters deep, and several chickens. The family of eight lived in three downstairs rooms. Three recently-built rooms on the roof were used for storage.

We had a delicious Sichuan breakfast of eggs with mushrooms and onions, and shredded carrots and Chinese cabbage over noodles. Once again, the wife spent most of our visit in the kitchen, and the husband entertained us. But even if it weren't so, I realized that on one fleeting visit, I can't go probing around in someone's life.

We left Beiwushan because I was too cold, and there was no place to get warm. When we got back to Xian, we splurged on a fifty-dollar room at the Hyatt after our two-dollar room in Beiwushan. We showered, shampooed, saunaed, jacuzzied, and steam bathed. And we bought clean sheets, a blanket, and long underwear for our next visit to the countryside.

We called home and discovered the Gulf War is over. Now, that is strange, to be this isolated from the rest of the world. We can't even get the INTERNATIONAL TRIBUNE in Xian, can't get the news on the hotel TV. The only newspaper we have access to is the CHINA DAILY. On the front page, the right-hand headline for Saturday, March 2, is "People's Friendship Society Established." The left-hand headline is "Pricing, Ownership of Housing Targeted." Between these headlines is a photograph of customs workers at the Beijing airport using a new computer system. There are two smaller stories related to the war.

Today's CHINA DAILY, well, yesterday's, it's delivered a day late, is the Sunday business weekly, and has no hard news. China plans to participate in the rebuilding of Kuwait. I imagine that means sending thousands of Chinese laborers to work at construction jobs in 120 degree temperatures. Now that all the Palestinians and Pakistanis and Indians and Egyptians have fled for their lives, they'll send in the Chinese.

China's tourism is making a recovery, says another article in this tourist newspaper. The industry has "survived its most difficult time." Does anyone read that without seeing tanks rolling over students in Tiananmen Square?

The Hyatt is a fifteen-minute fast-walk to tai chi, which would be fine, even nice, if 7 AM weren't the hour for sweeping the sidewalks. All that spit-laden dust rises into everyone's eyes, mouth, and nose. I was thinking this morning that at least it's better than Mexico City's dust, created by the dried raw sewage of millions. Then it occurred to me that much of Xian has no indoor plumbing. Who knows what evil lurks in the dust? I understand why so many people here wear surgical masks. I wouldn't mind wearing one myself. Though I put my hand over my mouth, exhale, and take large circles around the sweepers, there's no way to avoid the billows.

It's not as easy to find classical tai chi as it was four years ago. People are doing Western-influenced dance and aerobics. I did find four women and a man to follow, and they welcomed me. The leader came over several times to put my hands or feet in the correct position. Then someone handed me a sword with a flat-edged, metal blade, and they wanted me to go through a new routine with them. I couldn't grip the sword properly and quickly gave up.

Yesterday as we were walking through the Muslim Quarter, a young woman asked if we'd like to come to the Traditional Art Institute to meet the students and faculty and see their work. Though we knew this was a sales pitch, we went. She led us through a courtyard, under suspended lanterns and banners, and into a room with long tables set with tea cups and pots, the standard arrangement for business conferences. The walls from floor to ceiling were covered with artwork by pupils and teachers, mainly traditional and tight. Eli explained several times that we're artists and not potential customers. Still about ten people devoted the afternoon to us.

The students worked at tables rather than easels, two or three students to a room, and painted on rice paper, some doing their own drawings, some copying then filling in as if the paper were a coloring- book page. One student, about twenty-five years old, painted freehand, and his work was much more alive than the rest. Our guides said he had developed his own way of doing things. I wanted to check the price of the painting he was working on but was afraid I'd get his hopes up, wanted to ask him to paint tee-shirts for Adolph, but was unsure whether or not he'd consider that an insult or an opportunity. Even in this stifling atmosphere of copying the past, one creative mind stood out.

Before we left, the school's director did a rapid painting of Chinese goldfish, then wanted our reactions. We said we particularly liked the more transparent spots and the movement. At his request we pointed out the sections we considered most successful. He then insisted that since we appreciated it, we should buy it, for three hundred yuan. He didn't have a chance with us; it was his student's work that we wanted.

Adolph's favorite warm-weather garments are the tee-shirts painted by an artist in our hotel room four years ago. Today Eli and I managed to locate the artist, only to discover that he no longer paints tee-shirts. He claimed he makes his living from selling his art.

We immediately returned to the Art Institute and found the student we liked. His monthly stipend from the government is one hundred yuan. He wasn't in the least insulted at the chance to triple that with a few hours work. In fact, he was glowing. We spent the afternoon with the student and a professor named Wong. They were fascinated that Eli and I are mother and son. Wong said he was embarrassed to tell us, but at first he thought I was about 34, Eli about 30, and, he hoped I'd excuse him for saying this, that we were lovers.

I suspect that's most people's first impression. Wong's the only one who has said it. Since blond hair is rare in China, people think I'm in my 60's, or in my 30's.

As the artist and Wong became more relaxed, we discovered the sort of questions people really want to ask: what kind of relationship do we have as mother and son? Do most mothers and sons in the United States have such open communications? Eli said that the first time we visited him in Taipei, we brought him latex condoms. Mr. Wong loved that. If his mother found a condom in his bed, they'd both be so embarrassed that neither of them would ever mention it. When he brings a girl home, at ten o'clock his mother tells her to leave.

I asked Wong if he does everything his mother asks of him, and he replied that if she wants him to go to the store or to clean the house, he'll do it.

"But do you lead the kind of life your mother wants you to lead?" I pursued. Not exactly, Wong replied. His parents are angry that he refuses to marry the woman they had in mind for him.

That seems to be a major issue between parents and children in China, seems to be the point at which the parents lose control over their children's lives.

Mr. Wong and the student were shocked that Eli feels free to disagree with me on any subject. "Everyone says stupid things," said Eli, "Even mothers." And I laughed.

"It's better to be open and be able to say what you're thinking," said Mr. Wong. At one point Eli made a comment about my hair and reached out and tossed a tress upwards. Wong gasped, "I would never touch my mother's hair."

Before we left, he said to Eli, "Will you give me your address? I think we could be friends."

I don't know why the CHINA DAILY is always delivered a day late. After all, the Xian edition is printed in Xian. I guess it makes no difference, given the quality of the news. On the upper right-hand side is a large photograph of workers from the Beijing underground system giving free haircuts in the train station. It's part of a campaign "to emulate Lei Feng, a selfless soldier who died in 1961 and has been honored as a model to be learned from." There's a major article about "sacking" two government ministers, one for abusing power, the other for violating State discipline. And a deputy was removed from office for being AWOL in the United States since last April. China's foreign minister hopes Bulgaria can overcome economic difficulties and maintain social stability.

We've decided to visit Tongyu, another village at the foot of another mountain. This one is about forty kilometers from Xian and is famous for its hot springs. We're in a new, bright and clean bus station brimming with parents, children, sacks and bags. We just got in line to board, and a woman rushed over to check our tickets, led us on ahead of everyone else, and seated us behind the door at the middle of the bus. Although the seats are reserved, the crowd surged in, families with babies, peasants wearing blue pants and Mao hats and jackets. Eli, sitting near the aisle, was knocked several times by bags and behinds, and I was kneed in the rear. A young man in a sport coat is chomping on sugar cane and spitting out the residue. Eli is adding sunflower-seed shells to the mess.

Everyone had a seat when we left the station. Now, however, it's sardine time. A baby is crying, and its mother is going oooh ah. Someone coughs, the omnipresent sound in this land of dust and smokers. The people hanging over and knocking into Eli are speaking a local

dialect he can't understand. A truckload of logs, horse-drawn carts, flat-bed bicycles, a patchwork of plots of various shades of green and brown, the bus has a rather musical horn which sounds as if it was stolen from a train. A woman across from us definitely had garlic for lunch.

A stop, clamoring crowds, several people manage to board, a whiff of fresh green onions, twenty people couldn't fit and are standing near the open door and gazing at us. Mule pulling load of bricks, the bus tootles, Eli wonders if we can open the window and breath once again. He says these seats are not for people weighing over 120 pounds, and both of us exceed that. A man is half-sitting on Eli's lap. The buses in China must have been purchased right after the revolution.

Here's a market with vendors selling yams, cauliflower, and sugar cane from flat-bed bicycles. An hour has already passed, theoretically we have a half hour to go. Newly-planted trees. My back aches. Every time the door opens, it hits my knee, and fumes hit my nose. Haystacks, drying cornstalks, a mangy dog sniffing, hills, no cemeteries, just a lonely gravestone here and there. Land is too valuable to be reserved for the exclusive use of the dead.

Mists in the distance, a man and a goat, trees planted at the edge of terraces to prevent erosion, a pile of coal. Another stop, lots of garlic getting on, cigarette smoke, a fresh kneecap in my rear, a fresh rear leans on my knees. Peddlers are selling oranges, apples, pears, walnuts, giant pancakes, round flatbreads. Concrete block buildings. And now fields again, young plants in the rice paddies. Some people are talking about us, a nose blows, a gargle, a spit. Two men get off together, both with broken right arms. Haystacks, bus tooting. The terracing is so steep that the countryside looks like Grand Canyon. The dry, stony bed of a once-wide river, people working in the fields, a village, many of the brick houses are newly-built with pointed, Japanese-style roofs. Cows tethered to trees, an almost-dry mountain stream, hens, haystacks, a breeze blows away garlic breath. Time's up, and we're not there. Piles of bricks. The air is cooler, we must be high now though the land is flat. Oooooh, I exclaim as a suitcase hits Eli in the head. Someone, unaware Eli understands Chinese, comments that we look like monkeys. Peasants squat in the fields. And now there's definitely a mountain range.

Uh oh, the driver can't start the bus. He tries again and again. The motor finally turns over. The fields are crowded with workers. And we're here, last stop. Crowds are waiting to board for the return trip. I step out of the bus and hear gasps and a couple of hellos. All eyes are riveted on me.

As I wait for Eli to get our backpack, several people try in vain to talk with me. Eli's been my mouth and ears this trip.

A woman leads us along a side street, past haystacks and cornstalk stacks and pig sties, to her little pension, and right to a room with a double bed. Eli explains that we're mother and son. She laughs and quickly finds us twin beds. The pension is cheap, under a dollar a night, and so clean even the outhouse is not intimidating. It does have a barrel of disgusting goo at the entrance, probably lard or mush for the pig in the adjoining sty.

This town is different from Beiwushan; it's smaller, yet it has a definite main street with an elaborate red-columned building that may once have been a Buddhist temple or was recently built in imitation of one. It contains a restaurant, some tiny shops, and a large hotel where rest rooms have piles so high that we wouldn't dare squat.

Eli had imagined an idyllic spot about an hour up the mountain where a hot spring would bubble, and we would submerge ourselves in warmth while the air was cool. He immediately tried to find out how to get there. The only hot spring was several yards from the pension, in a bath house, which we checked out as soon as we got rid of our bag. A man showed Eli the men's baths, and a woman, on her way to bathe, invited me to come along.

She led me to a narrow room of grey stone with one window at the far end and a pool, perhaps eight by fifteen feet, steaming below in the murky light. She stripped down to her boxer shorts. Four or five other women had already undressed their children and were beginning to remove their own clothes. They all gestured to me. I sat on the stone bench and pretended I didn't understand. It would be awkward to strip down to the pouch that contains my passport, plane ticket, travelers' checks, and cash, and hasn't been more than a couple of feet from me since I left home.

I was seated in an incredible fantasy world, naked children standing at pool's edge, silhouetted by light from the lone window, steam rising from the water below, the pudgy woman wearing only boxer shorts wading in, the other women still half-dressed. I hated to leave, wanted to sit and watch and remember every detail. But if I didn't join in, I was a peeping tom. And I assumed Eli was waiting outside for me.

Yes, he was standing in the courtyard. He'd seen a man in an individual tub, surrounded by medicines. People come there from all over China for the healing power of the water, and he suspected you could pick up some new diseases as you tried to cure your old ones. Though it wasn't wisdom that drove me, I was probably wise not to wade in.

We ate at the restaurant in the ex-temple. Eleven men sat around a nearby table and loudly played a drinking game, getting more and more rowdy with each gulp of beer, rice wine, or rice whiskey. Eli and I consumed dumplings filled with scallions and ginger, eggs scrambled with peppers and carrots and ginger, a bowl of rice and ginger, and ginger tofu soup. Passers-by and other customers paused to stare at us or to find out why we were there. We met people with arthritis and with skin problems in this village where visitors seem to know each other by their diseases.

Back at the pension, several guests were squatting in the narrow courtyard and invited us to squat with them. We talked about their illnesses, a serious cut, leg and knee injuries, and about their cures. Some had traveled two days to get here, all planned to stay for a month, and all claimed that within a week their condition had improved. The owner invited us into her living room to watch TV, and I wish we'd accepted instead of returning to our room, which was lit by a bulb so dim that all we could do was sleep, on and off, from 8:30 to 7:30.

I agreed to climb the mountain with Eli, at least to the first monastery. This time it was the dryness of the paths that made them treacherous, no way to get a foothold in the dust. When I found myself unable to move either up or down, I said I'd had it. Luckily there was a road a few yards away...

We're following it at this moment as it curves along the edge of a giant reservoir. Now it's winding upwards, barely wide enough for a tractor cart.

I'm beginning to regret that I didn't want to carry my camera and bottle of water. I do have two mentholated lozenges, and I'm rationing them, one for the trip up, one for the trip down. Next time I come to China, if there is a next time, I'll bring a dozen packages.

We're nearing some tiny villages. The road has become a narrow path, not treacherous. Some areas of the mountainside are rocky, devoid of plants and trees; others, though steep, are arable, and even high in the mountains there's a checkerboard of fields. We hear strange bird chirps, see villages way above us and villages across from us. Now we're in a high village. A man sits on a step eating a gruel of corn and rice.

We ask a woman for a drink of water, and she invites us into her stone house. There's no way it would occur to her that I find this an incredible place to be, that I'd love to stay here if I ever return in warm weather. She lives alone, that's rare in China, in one large room with a platform for a bed, a charcoal stove, a table, a loom. She's very beautiful, her features reminiscent of the mountain people on Emei Shan; I'm surprised to learn she's sixty and has fourteen grandchildren. She gives me a low stool and pours boiling water into a not-quite-clean bowl for me.

The walls are haphazardly covered with paper, card board, and pictures, the ceiling has a layer of bamboo and one lone light bulb. She stands, watches us, nibbles cloves of raw garlic, greets a neighbor who stops by to check us out.

As soon as we leave her home, two well-dressed young schoolmasters invite us to tea in the tiny room they share. There's one dresser, a double bed, pictures illustrating an old Chinese tale on the wall, a blue oil cloth covering the ceiling. Though their native language is a local dialect, they teach Mandarin. "Funny," says Eli, "Their Mandarin's worse than mine."

I wince when Eli accepts the usual offer of a cigarette; I accept tea. They ask if we're used to Chinese food yet. And they warn us that the water at the top of the mountain is too cold to drink and are shocked that Americans use ice cubes.

We are now very high. According to Eli, there's a steep drop right next to me. I haven't peered over the edge. I can see two men down below carrying loads of wood far larger than they are, like ants working their way to an anthill. We've been walking for more than two hours now. It's time to turn back.

A dog is yowling; cows are grazing. Men are building houses way up here. We're cutting across a plateau, past cornstalk stacks, haystacks, chickens. Here's a one-room schoolhouse, kids gaping at us. Now we're looking down on a village of pink tile and grey tile roofs, clothes hanging in back yards, a family outside cooking lunch over a fire. A cow and calf nose the straw-littered ground, several cows are tethered to logs. Here are those men laden with wood, beasts of burden rather than ants when we're eye-level. A rooster perched on a tree branch loudly crows. More men building houses, this village is larger than we thought. Two men trudge along balancing heavy buckets of water; they stop to stare at us. Is this the path we took on the way up? Maybe the cows weren't out yet, and the workers hadn't begun construction. Things always look different when you go in the other direction; a back is not the same as a front.

At the moment I'm sitting in bed, my only warm-up spot in Beiwushan. It's not very amenable to writing since there's no way to lean back comfortably and almost no light. The tree outside the window is layered with snow.

The manager was prepared for us this time. He gave us his room, which has no missing panes, and put his electric pad under my sheet. In fact, I woke up too hot last night.

Although Tongyu was a lovely, friendly town, and smaller than this one, I had no desire to stay there. Too many outsiders come for cures, and it's harder to get a sense of the villagers. Each time I return to Beiwushan, I learn a little more. It would take a lot of visits that I'll probably never make to find whatever it is I want to discover. Perhaps it's whether or not the people are content with their lives, which might not be a question even they could answer. We probably each answer it on our death bed. I feel content, but on my death bed, forgetting I was so cold, I might look back and think I should have asked better questions.

It's the human condition to always want more, and people in China have so little, there's the whole world to want. And slowly, slowly, the outside world is creeping in. In this collective society that discourages uniqueness, I keep wondering if feeling unique is essential for everyone.

After we'd paid for lunch, we gave the restaurant family photos of them we had developed in Xian. When we returned in the evening, not to eat but merely to have a lighted spot to play scrabble and sip hot tea, they brought us a complete dinner over our genuine protests. Two local English teachers searched us out, and we were relieved to have someone to share with or force feed, I'm not sure which. The teachers practiced their language skills on us, an unfortunate way to limit conversation, for they'd never before heard foreigners speak. We left the freezing restaurant to go up to our freezing hotel room at 8:30, crawled under the covers to keep warm, and slept till 7:30.

Our first visit to Beiwushan it rained. Our second, it snowed, and the resulting muck made it difficult to get from place to place. With the exception of the paved main street, all roads were mud-logged. I was constantly aware that at any moment I could end up on my face or rear end and look like the hotel manager's pigs. And this wasn't mere mud, not with all the spitting, not in a village that lacks indoor plumbing. In some places the mud was so viscous I could barely lift my tennis shoes, in other spots so fluid I could barely keep from gliding to the ground.

Last week I mentioned to Eli that my hands get tired when I use chopsticks. He said his do, too, and we both realized that we were tensing them, which made eating with chopsticks more difficult. I complained about climbing on slippery mountain paths, Eli replied, "It's like using chopsticks," and I realized I was tensing my legs. The same principle applied to village mud. Once I got the hang of slogging and made a point of relaxing my body, it was easier, though not easier enough.

I looked forward to seeing Mr. Fan again and to giving him the photos I'd taken of his daughters four years ago. After lunch, the restaurant owner guided us to the Fans' home, through several blocks of sleet and muck, gripping my arm all the way.

About twenty caged chickens clucked in the Fans' courtyard, a definite indication of prosperity. And the house was cleaner now that their son is no longer two years old. He pees off the balcony instead of onto the living room floor.

Every house we've visited has combined bed and living rooms. The Fans' room had a narrow green sofa with a high back, two vanity dressers, a large armoire, a night table, a bookshelf, a cupboard with a color TV. on top, and a double bed in which the whole family sleeps.

Often the whole family isn't there. Mr. Fan's work unit moved to Xian. His wife never knows whether or not he's coming home. She does housework, takes care of the kids, and sees her husband often enough. I sensed she enjoys his absence.

I asked how her life is different from her mother's, and she said there's enough food now. Bulgakov's dog flitted through my mind.

I wonder if the people in Beiwushan ever take their jackets off during the winter. Perhaps they sleep with them on; I definitely slept with mine. Every bed we saw had an electric wire leading into it, an indication of heating mats. Mrs. Fan had an extra bed, with mat, where she wanted me to sleep for the next few days instead of at the hotel. However I don't think she had room for Eli. And I'd never make it, going back and forth through all that mud. If I'm ever there in May, May is the month to visit Beiwushan, I'd love to stay with her.

The two English teachers had asked us to teach a class at the middle school. Yesterday morning they came to the restaurant as we ate our rice gruel and noodle soup, and said some of the schoolmasters wanted to meet us. Soon we were seated with two Chinese teachers and a biology teacher in a tiny dormitory room which contained a bed with one quilt and an electric mat, a table, a desk, a chair, a wooden horse which doubled as a bench, two bicycles, three large brooms, and three small brooms. Except for those who live in Beiwushan, both the single and the married schoolmasters sleep in the dormitory during the week and go home on weekends.

And then Eli and I were standing in front of about seventy fourteen-year-olds and several schoolmasters and dozens of onlookers who peered through the windows. We had nothing whatsoever in mind. The teachers had asked us to teach phonetics; that didn't interest us in the least. After a few moments of what-should-we-do-now glances, we asked the most obvious question, Who is cold? Everyone. Who has a red nose? I certainly did. We went from there to other body parts and other colors, and clothing, and everyone's breakfast: rice gruel. The students were intimidated at first, rose when called on and then were too frightened to speak. So we had them answer collectively.

"Do you like snow?"

"Yes, I like snow," they replied in unison.

"If you are wearing a blue jacket, stand up." And the blue jackets stood up.

They were more passive and better behaved than American students. And they were very responsive, laughing at our pantomimes and at a silliness they'd probably never before encountered in teachers. "Who has white shoes with brown on the toes?" and I lifted my leg to show my mud-tipped tennis shoe.

I would have loved to teach an afternoon class, but I was cold. We decided to photograph the Ho family, deliver a snapshot of Mr. Mao to the forestry station although he was transferred to another province, then take the bus back to Xian.

As soon as we sat down in her easy chairs, Mrs. Ho brought us bowls of a rich vegetable soup and, not realizing we'd come to say good-bye, invited us to eat at her house from then on. Someone sent for Mr. Ho, who was at a town meeting to discuss putting up a sign with the village's name.

It was lunch time. Their grandson was home from the clothing factory, and their granddaughter was home from the middle school where she'd just sat through a class taught by two crazy Americans.

We're now staying at Xian's Bell Tower Hotel so Eli can work out in the weight room. He knows where the gyms are all over the Orient. And it shows. He's a muscular six feet, very noticeable as he strolls down the street in his army-surplus trench coat. Everywhere we go, we're surrounded by female smiles. And by people who don't expect him to speak Chinese. When we walk down the crowded streets of Xian, we often hear a sing-song of hellos. Eli says that's a way of making fun of foreigners. I think people are unaware they sound obnoxious.

Mr. Ma brought three friends to visit us today. A clerk telephoned from the hotel's front desk and awkwardly said, "Uh, there are some locals here to see you." I knew the staff would wonder about Mr. Ma, especially since he always wears his Mao jacket. He's a working man, not a businessman.

"Yes, I'm expecting them," I replied.

One of Mr. Ma's friends was an artist around sixty years old. He brought photos of his paintings, which imitated every style in the history of Chinese art. Mr. Ma told us he's the only artist who still paints that way, then gave us two original paintings, awful, and the photos. They expect me to sell the work in the States. I told them I can't even sell my own.

The artist's lovely daughter also came. Perhaps she hoped to escape China by marrying Eli. The third friend was a cook who wants to invest in Eli's bar and move to Hainan with him. When we mentioned we had to buy train tickets, he said he had contacts and would buy the tickets for us. It's half price that way. We told him hard bed for the thirteenth. Damn, there are no exchanges nor refunds, and that's still three days away. I'm ready to go now. I've suddenly had it with Asia.

Not long after Mr. Ma and his gang left, the young artist arrived with Mr. Wong to paint tee shirts. He brought some shirts he'd painted a few years ago, hoping we'd make the process shorter by buying those. The work was stylized and rigid, boy, had I misjudged. And I'd told him to buy twenty blank shirts.

We began with a horse, and I saw right away he was painting one small horse on an extra-large shirt. I asked him to add another horse, and it looked better, though his drawing of the hooves and legs bothered me. I suggested water buffalo for the second shirt. He painted one stiff little animal. I told him to put in another, and he made it parallel to the first. I again suggested that he paint larger, and with more movement, gently though, trying not to hurt his feelings. Birds singing in blossom-filled branches, they turned out well. Wading herons, flowers, peacocks, goldfish, he was feeling freer as he went along. After four hours and ten tee-shirts, I was exhausted. They wanted to do everything in one dose; I told them we'd finish in a day or two. Not only that, I couldn't think of anything else for him to paint.

It's 4:50 AM. I awakened shivering, queasy, and in a high-anxiety state. I'm sorry I changed my plane reservation; I'd love to go home in four days, except for leaving Eli.

And now I'm at breakfast and feeling better, though I still have chills. I slept through tai chi, which made no difference since it's raining, and since Mr. Ma is coming at three to teach me. We last saw the sun for a few moments when we were in Tongyu.

I slept most of yesterday and feel better today. The women with whom I've been doing tai chi were friendly enough this morning, but I sensed they'd rather I wasn't there. They feel they should do certain routines whenever I show up, even if they've already done them. And knowing I'm gauche with the swords, they don't use them. I should have had someone write a note: Do whatever you normally do, and ignore me.

Last night the young artist painted the second batch of tee-shirts. I stated clearly that I wanted larger images and more dynamic compositions. And I had him make several changes in the shirts he'd already done. Aware that I've been an artist for far longer than he has, he didn't resent my suggestions; in fact, he seemed delighted. He loved to paint and loved getting our approval. I should have kept in mind the first night that the Chinese are brought up to respect authority.

Mr. Ma was supposed to come yesterday to teach me tai chi, and he did show up. He brought the artist's daughter who brought her paintings for me to critique, which I was glad to do. She tried to give me one, and I told her she needed it to work from. I wish everyone would stop giving me things to carry back. I don't like luggage, especially with strings attached.

Mr. Ma did a little tai chi and talked a lot about that Buddhist monk in San Francisco. Mr. Ma has all sorts of expectations from his tai chi. He says you sleep better and have no dreams, I didn't tell him I love dreams. You don't catch cold, your mind's clearer. He says that eventually I'll be able to hold certain positions for several hours at a time.

Eli says Mr. Ma is more interested in doing business than in teaching me tai chi. I know he sees us as a way out of the system, and he's probably never before had any hope. His enforced move was to worse, not better, conditions. Without contacts and without money for bribes, no one has mobility. So Mr. Ma lives in a dream world where Buddhism tends to his body and soul, the Buddhist monk in San Francisco tends to mine, his artist friend becomes famous in America, the daughter marries Eli, Mr. Potential Investor cooks in the potential bar, and we all do business and get rich.

Eli asked if I'm disappointed, and I said no, then realized I might be. Yet I can't blame the man for his dreams.

Mr. Ma and his gang stayed late the first time they visited, so I'd suggested they have supper with us. Though I hadn't extended a rain check, they said they'd do it on Monday night instead. And today is Monday. When Mr. Ma was here yesterday, he asked whether we were paying for the dinner in dollars or tourist money or renminbi, and he offered to set up the meal somewhere ahead of time so we wouldn't be cheated. Eli told him we can take care of ourselves, and mentioned that we'd spent only two yuan on lunch. That's less than forty cents. We each had a bowl of homemade noodles in the produce market.

Eli says Mr. Ma is making a big deal out of this dinner. I said he'd probably never been invited out like that before.

Mr. Ma suggested a nearby restaurant owned by a friend of his. On the way there, he kept saying that he would have liked to treat us, but there isn't enough time.

Mr. Ma frequently eats at this place, it turned out. In fact he sat at the next table with the owner and the menu, and he ordered eight dishes plus soup for the six of us. We'd glimpsed the menu and had an idea of the price range, which was reasonable. Though I repeatedly told him no, once the food came Mr. Ma kept shoveling portions onto my plate, as if he were the

host. Finally I grabbed the serving spoon and served him as he'd been serving me. Everyone laughed each time I did it. And that solved the problem.

As we ate, Eli and I had a little conversation in English, unintelligible to the others, about the size of the check. He figured 75 yuan, I figured 85 at most. Neither of us figured 114 yuan. Neither did Mr. Ma's friends. When he announced the tab, there was a shocked silence.

You'd think he would have been more careful of the price. After all, Mr. Ma wants to do business, his friend wants to invest, the artist wants sales, the daughter wants some art lessons, the restaurant owner wants our friends to be his customers. I imagine they thought we'd consider 114 yuan, $20, cheap. In the States it would be.

Mr. Potential Investor had promised to bring our train tickets when he came for dinner. However he couldn't get hard bed, only soft, and he didn't know what to do. That gave me the chance to change the date and tell him we'll leave tomorrow. It's now 9 PM, he was going right to the station from dinner three hours ago, and he still hasn't shown up with the tickets.

Actually, we do like Mr. Ma's gang. If they didn't have such blatant agendas, I'd enjoy them more. I guess blatant is better than hidden.

This morning I walked over to the Hyatt Coffee House, about a mile, and had breakfast by myself. Walking back alone, it struck me that the only thing I've done without Eli is tai chi. Otherwise I've depended on him to interpret. I've even given him my money to handle, since he's the one who can negotiate prices.

I was suddenly enjoying my aloneness. Then I thought, aloneness is not what China is about, China is togetherness. People are brought up to be dependent, and it's very easy to let someone else make your decisions. And more satisfying to make them yourself.

Mr. Potential finally showed up a few minutes ago, and not with our tickets. He said he needed our passports. It's too late tonight, he'll buy the tickets tomorrow morning. Since I would never give a stranger my passport, I left the decision to Eli, so much for making my own decisions, who gave him both passports. Eli said he's not in the least worried. Mr. Ma and his gang would be in a lot of trouble if anything happened. We know where he works, and we've taken photographs of all of them.

Xian is fascinating once you get off the main streets. It's vibrant with crazy little side streets, each one with its own distinctive personality. And even at this time of year, much of life is lived on the sidewalks. Why not? The temperature's the same inside and out.

We walked down one street where everyone was making banners, down another lined with furniture shops, people loading a double bed onto a bicycle cart, tables and couches cooling in the wintry air. There's a block of little dumpling stands, another area has costume shops with bizarre masks and giant drums, another has produce vendors set up in the mud of unpaved walks. There are bars for hookers; we even went into one. The hooker was trying for Eli, but she got his mother, too. At a small counter in front, we could have bought high-priced drinks. Behind that was a corridor with tiny booths. Bead curtains offered less than perfect privacy. Not much is private in China.

I've been writing this almost as if the June 4th Massacre never happened. That's because people don't talk about it, except to mention that foreigners stopped coming "after Beijing." I don't want to bring up the subject. According to Eli, and to my instincts, that could

get someone into trouble. I'm surprised that no one seems afraid to talk to us. In the countryside people were as curious as ever. I wonder how much they know of the events two years ago. Someone in Xian mentioned in a low voice that there was a slowdown in services during the demonstrations. That's all he was willing to say.

The impact on tourism, however, is very apparent. The Hyatt is a ghost hotel, a monstrous complex with few guests. That's why we stayed there; the rates were cut in half. The CHINA DAILY has articles about tourism resurging since the low point two years ago. I've been here almost three weeks now, and the only Americans I've met are managers at American-run hotels.

It's 10 AM, and though he said he would be in touch at 8:30, Mr. Potent still hasn't called. I'm getting nervous. The train leaves in three hours, we have several errands to do, and there's no sign of our tickets and passports.

10:15. Where is Mr. P?

10:41. He made it here with only one ticket, a soft bed for tomorrow. He said we can get a hard seat at the station and switch off. He probably had one hell of a time getting even that one soft bed, but it's not what we wanted, and I'm afraid I let him know with a "No ticket is better than one." That much English he seemed to understand. Eli went down to the hotel's travel office to see if he could get another, and Mr. P and I are in the room waiting. I know he's upset.

Okay, here's how our little episode continued: The hotel's agent told Eli to hurry to the train station to buy a hard seat ticket. We said good-bye to Mr. P, taxied to the station, found the window that sells tickets to foreigners, and Eli talked the woman into selling him another soft bed ticket at the student price of 220 yuan rather than the foreigners' price of 500 yuan. But when she took a look at his passport and student card, she came out of her cage screaming. Maybe she'd noticed that Eli's student card had expired, or that it was a fake. She certainly was furious about something. Finally Eli stopped arguing with her long enough to tell me that this trip was going to be a mess. Mr. P had no contacts, he'd gone through regular channels. So she was the person who had sold the ticket on Eli's passport and student card a couple of hours earlier. We could have a soft bed for me at the full foreigners' price of 500 yuan, or we could buy a hard seat and try to switch once we're on the train. As the argument continued, they kept looking over at me. I put on my most perplexed and worried face.

The woman finally agreed that I would have problems all by myself and said Eli could buy the soft bed for 230 yuan. But when it came time to pay, we discovered we were missing 200 yuan. We emptied our pockets and my pouch and managed to get enough money together. Neither of us could figure out when we could have lost the money nor been pickpocketed.

We rushed out of the station to get a taxi back and search our room. Suddenly I saw a man standing in front of me and grinning. I know Eli was startled when I hugged a stranger on the streets of Xian. I, too, was stunned to see Mr. Fan standing there, though now I'm beginning to wonder if it really was a coincidence.

\There's hardly a soul in China who wouldn't sympathize with losing 200 yuan. Mr. Fan jumped into the cab with us, almost as curious as we were to see if the money was at the hotel. As soon as he walked into the room, he stopped, pointed at the ceiling fire alarm, and indicated we were bugged. I have no idea whether or not he was right.

We moved furniture, checked pockets, looked under and over and behind every possible object. The missing money remained missing.

Then Mr. Fan took us to a noodle shop on the city's outskirts where he insisted on treating us to some of the best noodles I've ever eaten. He'd been so upset he'd missed us in Beiwushan that he had asked a friend at the Xian police station to call the hotels to find out where we were staying. The friend refused, and Mr. Fan didn't dare do it himself. Instead he went to the train station yesterday on the chance he'd run into us. I'll bet that's why he was in that vicinity today. Even so, the odds were small that we'd be there. If Mr. P hadn't screwed up our tickets, we wouldn't have been.

We visited Mr. Fan's Xian residence, a cubby-hole big enough for a bed, a desk, a chair, a night table, and a broom. He smoked constantly, two packs a day. He claimed he could stop if he wanted to. I told him even secondhand fumes are dangerous, and he should never smoke around his children. I've become a bit of a proselytizer. Mr. Ma may be the only man I've met in China who doesn't smoke. The rest smoke and push their cigarettes on everyone else. I always make sure they know it's deadly.

Mr. Fan showed us his wares, yet didn't try to make any deals nor give us samples. Instead he concentrated on our next visit. There's a mountain range beyond Beiwushan where he'd like to take us. I told him we'd come only if he stops smoking.

When we got back to the hotel, I took some money out of my pocket for the taxi driver. There was the missing 200 yuan.

We've been on the train three and a half hours, thirty-eight and a half to go. I'm not bored, just aware that two days after this, I'll have an overnight ferry trip, and two days after that a 24-hour plane ride.

Our compartment has four beds and six apparent residents. We're on one side, two women from Jing Jiang province on the opposite lower, two men from Xian on the upper. They're talking about me, making some sort of comment about my hair. Eli, tired of interpreting, is up above pretending to sleep.

Now they're laughing at Eli's size twelve shoes.

I took a walk in Xian yesterday, enjoying my meander as I tried to figure out where to have dinner. Well of course! We should take advantage of our unexpected night in Xian by eating once again at Mr. Ma's favorite restaurant.

The owner was delighted. He immediately handed us several copies of his card. Then Eli examined the menu and asked him to point out the tofu we'd had the night before so we could order it again. Three and a half yuan, Eli muttered to me. He asked what chicken we'd eaten. It was so delicious he wanted to memorize the characters. Nineteen yuan, he told me. And what excellent fish, which one was that? Ah hah. Eighteen yuan. Chicken and fish were the only big-ticket items, so we knew the check could never have come to 114 yuan. Maybe they were double portions, we conjectured, and we waited with great curiosity to see our plate of tofu. It was the same size as the preceding night. We had tofu, peanut chicken, rice, and tea; the check was 17 yuan. Eli found a mistake and got it down to fifteen. Then he said, "Isn't it strange that tonight it's so cheap and last night it was so expensive." I was enjoying this immensely.

While an embarrassed waitress stood outside the door to save face for the owner, Eli sat down with him and the menu and went over last night's dinner, giving him the benefit of every doubt, like ten bowls of rice when we knew there'd been only seven. Even so, the owner couldn't get the bill to add up to more than 90 yuan, which means it should have been around 75.

I thought Eli was very kind. He simply paid for our second meal and said good-bye. He figured we'd made our point.

Now I'm left with the question, did I misjudge Mr. Ma when we couldn't communicate with words? Or did I see something in him that his words, and actions, cover? He'd been anxious to teach me tai chi four years ago, though he had nothing to gain, except perhaps a convert. Of course he must have had a secret hope that one day I'd return with an interpreter. This society is based on doing favors and getting favors in return. Mr. Ma did all he could for his friends, including the restaurant owner, and not including me.

Yet there was a moment in our hotel room when he paused during his chatter to demonstrate tai chi, and I remembered it was his enthusiasm, his love for what he was doing, that drew me to him. And still does.

When our male bunkmates first entered the compartment, they sat down on their bed, lit up cigarettes, and I thought, oh no, I'll suffocate in this small space. I coughed, and they got up and left. Ever since then they've gone out into the corridor whenever they smoke, which is often.

They went out a few minutes ago, and I turned over on the bed to sleep. Soon I heard one of them come back in and bang something on the table a few times. I heard a scraping sound after that. What was he doing? Maybe knocking his jack knife against the table to open it, and was now cleaning a pipe. I love playing little guessing games. Then I heard him chewing, which didn't fit my theory. Once he'd finished and left the compartment, I checked the ashtray. It was filled with egg shells.

After dinner last night, Eli and I sipped yogurts and ambled down some of Xian's narrow streets, past bubbling pots of noodles or dumplings, skewered meats roasting, counters of candy, or socks, or underwear. It was our last evening there, and we were relieved to have it to ourselves. Actually I'd been nervous about all the visitors we'd had in this nosy country. The hotel staff viewed us with curiosity, if not outright suspicion. In four days Mr. Ma and various members of his gang had shown up five times, Wong or the artist three times, and Mr. Fan once.

After our stroll, we relaxed in our room, and Eli turned on a grade-B film, the only television show available. We watched until Mr. Fan unexpectedly showed up. He brought us the handiwork he sells and told us he planned to see us off on the train. Most of all he wanted me to know he'd stopped smoking so we'd return sooner, and he was already climbing the walls.

Within minutes he and Eli were making plans to go camping in the mountains and comparing the bears and poisonous snakes in Canada and China.

I made it through the night without using the CESUO. The Chinese word seems appropriate; it probably comes from cesspool. And the train's cesuo, though free of piles, has its drawbacks, like the ashtray which is filled with water. I discovered soon after sunset that

the light in there wasn't working, and it was so dark I was afraid I'd into the hole. Later on Eli got locked in and had to bang on the door until someone rescued him.

Eighteen hours gone, twenty-four to go. The scenes from this window are passing too fast to digest, everyone pedaling to work on bicycles, garbage on all sides, people on all sides, shanties, more garbage. We just crossed a wide body of water, and now we're in a heavily industrial area.

Eli seems to have food poisoning. He made some instant noodles last night from a bag that was mysteriously open. Another river, wide and mist-bound. Two men are sitting near a bonfire next to the tracks.

Mr. Fan did escort us to the station yesterday, which was lucky. The weight of our luggage had increased drastically, with sheets, blanket, tee-shirts, art supplies, and food for the trip: twenty tangerines, sunflower seeds, breads, peanut butter, tuna, and, unfortunately, instant noodles. We're passing that fairy-tale section of tiny, curving, terraced plots and paddies, lotus ponds with the beginnings of plants, red earth, stone and mud houses. There are patches of brilliant yellow flowers, edible I'm sure, which is more than I can say for the food we brought along. Eli's fasting today. I'll survive on sunflower seeds and tangerines. More of those startling yellows, otherwise as usual the day is grey.

The banks of earth leading down to the train tracks are planted with leafy green vegetables, surely collecting soot. Occasional garbage from train windows settles into rice paddies. It's raining, which makes the colors more intense. I've been snapping photos through the filthy panes, ducks in a rice paddy, terraced hillsides, no one's working in the rain.

I just learned this trip is shorter than I thought: we arrive in Canton at 4:30 A.M., not 7:30. That's not good news.

When the conductor turned on the lights and pulled the bottom sheets out from under our slumbering bodies, I assumed we were there. However it was only 2:46.

It is now 4:05, and we arrive in five minutes. What a pain. Whenever I leave a hotel around 6:30 to do tai chi, I have to find someone to let me out. I hope we can find someone to let us in. At least this has been such a vegetative 39 hours that I'm not at all sleepy.

I think we hit a horse in the middle of the night, a loud whinny getting louder, then fading as the train sped on. I kept imagining the injured animal, the grieving owner, the scattered load. Some cheery music is blasting into our ears. And now the ever-present Big Sister says good morning or good-bye.

The Canton train station at 4:30 AM has a nightmarish quality, the travelers, the homeless, the shysters, the pickpockets, and, thank goodness, the cabdrivers, all thrown together for a few moments, until the fare is negotiated, and those who can afford taxis escape.

The doorman at the Victory Hotel said there were no vacancies. After a discussion with Eli, he let us in anyway. The desk clerk stored our luggage, and promised us a room in a few hours. At 5:30 we strolled through the awakening streets, past the sweepers, past practitioners of tai chi, past a group of boys playing basketball in the park.

If I'd stuck to my original plans, I'd already be back home. Instead I'm eating a dim sum breakfast after a delightful morning. I did yoga at 6. Then, since we're staying on Shamian Island to get away from excessive crowds and traffic, I had to find a new tai chi

contingent. In the long, narrow park that cuts through the center of the island, everyone was doing his personal routine, bending, stretching, kicking. I wandered to a park next to the Pearl River. Most people were milling around, some manipulating swords in time with music. I watched a tall, awkward woman become agile and graceful as she glided through her sword dance.

Finally I found someone doing a tai chi routine, located myself in the best position for following her, then was startled by an old man screaming at me in such a nasty voice I almost screamed back. Till I realized he was telling me to get off the grass. I have to admit the grass is much greener in city parks now that millions of trampling feet have been screamed off. Still, he could have done it more gently.

The music changed to a persistent beat with voiced instructions, and everyone gathered more or less equidistant from each other. I did a strenuous ten-minute aerobic routine with about a hundred other women my age and up, did it again, then found a tai chi group.

By the time I left at 7:45, the streets were alive with people pedaling to work. The early-morning bikers are the fastest, determined to arrive on time. Parents were walking or biking their youngest kids to school. The sweepers had already gotten rid of most garbage, though I still had to veer around broom handles.

I was staring at a boy of about seven. He probably hadn't had a bath nor clean clothes in months. As I watched him standing next to his father, "The Old Rag picker" played in my head. I mused on his mother, his next meal, the next basin of water. The boy's face lit up when he noticed my rapt expression.

The back yards of Canton, the high-rises with balconies and drying laundry, plots of lettuce along track's edge, markets with shapeless clothing hung in outside stalls, Sunday streets brimming, and we're on our way out of China, passing banana trees, tiny gardens, rice paddies, though we're still in the city. More and more countrified now, row after producing row of greens, that's what we ate last night. Some friends took us out to dinner. Bikers waiting at every crossing, peasant plowing with a water buffalo. Fields filled with Sunday workers. Three years ago we helped one of their daughters come to Milwaukee. They have no idea when they'll see her again, yet they told me I've done a lot for them. Their other daughter longs to get out of China. She's fastened onto the idea that her future depends on whether or not her sister can become an American citizen. I wanted to tell her that she's a bright, open, questioning woman, and her future is in her own hands. But who am I to say that to someone growing up here? The young people in China keep telling me that they have no choices.

If people had choices, the economy would whip out of control. Without choices, their lives are out of their control, and they feel they have no future. More banana trees, more peasants in the quilted countryside. If the peasants had a choice, would they flee to the already-chaotic cities? Big Sister is advertising duty-free Chinese products. A river of decaying wooden junks, placid fields. Who would supply the food if no one stayed on the farm? Oriental music now as we roll through fields and paddies, hoeing, sowing, reaping, four seasons in one. Part of me is glad to leave, part of me is sorry. It's like not finishing a cross-word puzzle, except this puzzle is on an endless scroll. Every time it unrolls, it exposes a fresh set of clues. We cut through a chessboard of fields, and the pawns move a square at a time.

One of the men we met on this trip bought his way out of his work unit. He makes a lot of money, but lives in a tiny room. He doesn't tell others he's doing well, or they'll all want

something from him. He's a small, wiry man who secretly studies Kung Fu. "You have a secret life of business and one of Kung Fu. Is there some other secret life you're not telling us about?" I asked.

He smiled.

I'm in the plane; I've said good-bye to my son. I wish I knew when I'll see him again. At least I've met his friends, seen the places where he hangs out and works out.

It's a real advantage to travel with someone who knows the language and the ropes, though it made me lazy. Next time I'll do more on my own. Visiting China does seem to be a long-term process. Each time I go, I get a little further under China's skin, and China gets a little further under mine.

Once again I happened to bring the right book along. HEART OF A DOG reinforced the importance of looking through other eyes. And imagining each life helped me to accept people like Mr. Ma without too much disappointment.

And now, 22 hours after leaving Hong Kong, I'm landing in Milwaukee. I feel as if I could hop right back on the plane and do tai chi in the park tomorrow. Yet even if I never again return, China has become a part of me, and that's worth the trip.

