



notes on life as an
American teaching
English in China
Volume 2

Thomas Kenning

\$4



**Transmissions from the Emperor's Heavenly Ford:
Notes on Life as an American Teaching English in China: Volume 2**

First Printing: December 2011.

Originally published in a modified form at cattywampus.tumblr.com

Contact: tkenning@gmail.com

Published by Insignificant Press.



   Except where otherwise noted, this work is licensed under <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>

Like dropping a quarter out of my pocket, it came spilling out. → October 11, 2010

I came to China to learn about the place and its people, but also about myself. So far, I've probably done a lot more of the former than the latter.

Today, this revelation occurred to me while I was writing to a friend. Like dropping a quarter out of my pocket, it came spilling out like something that I knew was there all along. Accidentally and effortlessly it revealed itself, just like the most obvious truths about ourselves have a way of doing if we let them:

I love teaching. But I waffle on it here. So many of the kids at Tianshi College don't care, and many of the ones who do are so quiet and shy... I think in some ways, I'm a really bad teacher - in order to be effective, I need to be getting something out of it. I'm like a performer. I've got to feel the energy I bring to it being reflected back to me. And when I don't get it, I get irritable and pouty like temperamental artist. The students who know me the best in the U.S. can attest to this. And with the language barrier and the cultural barrier here, I don't get much energy reflected back a lot of the time. I really need to take this as an opportunity to grow professionally. Which is not to say I should settle for less from my students – just get better at not getting so demoralized when that's what I get.

Welcome to modern, prosperous China! → October 14, 2010

I've been out of the United States for nearly seven weeks at this point. The newness of my surroundings is officially wearing off. I'm no longer nervous to wander alone outside the school. National Day, with its extended week-long vacation is behind me, with no other breaks to look forward to until the end of

December or the start of January. What that means for me is that I probably won't be doing much more travelling for a long while, aside from the occasional day trip to Beijing.

So culture shock has come and gone. I'm left alone – almost quite literally alone – with the fact that I am living in Wuqing Development Area in Tianjin, China.

To fill my spare hours here:

I spend a lot of time reading... About 200 pages a week, and I am pacing myself – Americana is a favorite, in the form of Mark Twain, a history of *Sesame Street*, a biography of Thomas Jefferson. And running... Around 25-30 miles a week in the thick, smoggy air. Not good for my lungs, I know... I also watch movies... *RoboCop*, *Rocky*, episodes of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*... Wuqing itself seems to me like a ghost town – there aren't really people to meet, mostly just empty streets. Nor places to go with them, if I did meet them – the area is a lot of factories, including Magnaquench, a corporation that left my hometown for the cheaper labor of China a few years back. I have polite relationships with a few staff and teachers on campus... but there isn't much to do except see them at breakfast or dinner. Even then, when they are with their Chinese friends, they seldom invite me to sit with them, so as often as not, I eat alone. There is a street market fifteen minutes away by cab. I go there once in a while... but if you know me, you certainly know how little joy I take from shopping.

So strip away the novelty of living in China, and what's the assessment of life in Wuqing Development Area?

It kind of sucks, but I also think it's a pretty accurate picture of life for the average Chinese, and I'm glad to have that. A lot of

those factories have attached dorms. And many of my students are so poor that they didn't leave for our recent week-long vacation. To these workers, to these students, the alternative is life in a remote preindustrial village somewhere in the interior, working as day laborers or farmers, or not working at all.

I came here with the Wild West in mind – people seeking their fortune in a land where you can make it if you're just willing to work hard enough. But maybe the Industrial Revolution would have been the better analogy. And here it is. Right outside my window. I say this with no irony, only with a bit of the bittersweet tone that results from dashed romanticism:

Welcome to the modern, prosperous China, reality for nearly a billion of our fellow men and women.

A main course which will leave you hungrier and thirstier than when you sat down → October 15, 2010

All of our meals here are served by Chinese lunch ladies through a big window.

There are various giant lunch lady trays back there, and they use one spoon to scoop up whatever you ask for.

There are no signs, either in Chinese characters or pinyin, so I pretty much just grunt and point.

I once made fun of my friend Assy for this when we visited a restaurant in Switzerland. "Follow my lead," he said when I asked how you knew when to speak German or French there. And he proceeded to grunt unintelligibly and point at items on the menu.

The food in the canteen isn't awful, but it is repetitive, and the unifying theme is cheap.

Breakfast is usually a hardboiled egg, some unsweetened fried dough, a piece of naan-like flatbread, and pile of pickles. Or pickled cabbage. Today, it was actually salted celery, which is possibly the worst meal I can imagine.

Not the worst, I guess. Just a good contender for most ridiculous – a main course which will leave you hungrier and thirstier than when you sat down.

Sometimes I fantasize it's all one big prank on the foreigner.

The menu will keep getting more minimalist until I crack. They'll take away the salt on the celery, and that will be the moment.

And then they will have a big laugh that I put up with it for so long.

And they will break out the General Tso's and the egg rolls.

**T
E
R
R
O
R**

I
NO. 49
OCT-NOV

I
10¢

PICKLES AGAIN FOR BREAKFAST

TALES TO TURN YOUR STOMACH



EVERY DAY IS EXACTLY THE SAME!

Drawing also helps to fill my days. Usually I sketch from real life.

He speaks English like an automated phone menu - measured, unvarying, and as a result, his speech is disjointed and sometimes nearly unintelligible. → October 16, 2010 (My Students: Part One)

Albert is one of my best students. He speaks English like an automated phone menu – measured, unvarying, and as a result, his speech is disjointed and sometimes nearly unintelligible. But his vocabulary is large, and he works harder than any student I have ever met in my life. Sunrise and sunset often find him in a disused corner of the school grounds, reciting English passages aloud from any number of textbooks and test prep books that he picks up from the school library.

Albert was in the English-speaking competition that I judged last month. Students delivered a prepared speech about their “top concern.” Albert’s top concern was study – he was driven to success because he comes from a poor farmer’s family. He revealed in the speech that his father beat him while drunk, and this instilled in Albert the conscientious manner that he has affected today. Do not slack, or you will be beaten. It didn’t sound like he was playing this for sympathy, either. The tone was more like he was observing a simple and obvious fact, like, “Because I am Chinese, my hair is black.” “Because my father beat me, I do well in school.”

Astonishingly, no one in the room reacted as if they even heard these statements. Or maybe they just didn’t understand them because they were made in Albert’s stilted English.

Tonight, I buy some bananas from the little convenience store on campus. On the way back to my apartment, I see Albert through the window, in his usual Saturday night seat near the back of the study room. I go in, make some small talk, and I give him one of my bananas. He freaks out and gets super

excited because he doesn't have money for fresh fruit. Then he tries to give the banana back, saying he can't accept it.

I deflect and ask what he's working on. He speaks generally, and then says he wishes he had words to express his feelings – because none of the textbooks or test prep books he can find deal with these words and expressions. They focus on polite small talk and business conversations. He has no computer of his own, so he can't watch American movies to learn about this kind of vocabulary, either. He does have an mp3 player that looks like it has been run through the digestive tract of a goat possessed of an especially strong constitution – it is broken, beaten, cracked, and stained. I think of my collection of *This American Life* podcasts and offer to give him a few to listen to – at least he can imitate the accents and inflection of Ira Glass, and that would be awesome.

Albert tells me that God looks down upon him and blesses him. If he had not chosen to come to this school, he never would have met me.

I thought at first that this might be because they didn't understand enough English to know the meaning of the words, "Be quiet." Turns out they're just disrespectful. →
October 19, 2010 (My Students: Part Two)

But to tell you the truth, Albert's class is one of the worst I have. It tries my patience every week. At times, it makes me want to say, "Screw it, I'm going home."

While I'm taking oral roll call, the students continue to talk to each other in their normal voices. Despite my repeated requests for quiet – week after week after week. Some in fact laugh when I tell them to be quiet. I thought at first that this might be because they didn't understand enough English to know the

meaning of the words, "Be quiet." Turns out they're just disrespectful. So much for all those stereotypes about how all Chinese students are well-behaved little automatons.

Several students show up at the door nearly fifteen minutes late. This is also an almost daily occurrence in even the best-behaved of my classes. Some students show up close to half an hour late and expect entry – and not just entry, but they expect to be counted as present on the roll. But, there are bells at this school, so everyone knows what time classes begin and end.

The best participation rate I get in any class is around 50%, but in this class, it's far below that. The rest of the students sleep, talk, or text. Sometimes when a phone rings, the student gets up and leaves class to answer it. Then returns when she's done with the call.

Alice is a Chinese teacher who often sits in on this class – the subject is culture – for her own edification. She witnesses all of this behavior, as well as my exasperation with it. She sheepishly concedes that this is typical at this school. It's a private college, she says. There is no written policy for admission, but the general attitude of the powers-that-be is that anyone who can pay the tuition gets in, regardless of how low their test scores are.

There's a lot of hyperbole around here about wanting this school to develop a strong international reputation. I ask her how the people in charge square this with the fact that their student body is at least 50% shiftless. Beyond shiftless, really – actively disruptive of the classroom environment for those students who do care to learn. I ask her how the leaders of the college expect their school to earn a strong reputation if that bottom fifty is flashing diplomas from this school around while carrying their poor attitudes and lack of education out into the work force.

She admits that the whole spiel about reputation is just sales patter. This place isn't credible, and she flat out says it.

Ernie confirms it all later, too, in case I wasn't convinced. He says as long as his paycheck is deposited on time every month, he's ok with it. I call him grizzled and cynical, myself young and idealistic. He laughs and feigns offense, but doesn't deny it.

It's China. The best thing to do is not take any of it seriously, he says.

I came here for personal exploration, to try new things, I say.

But I'm not sure if it's in my nature to be a cog in this kind of wheel.

Because some of these kids, such as Albert and a number of others, are really dedicated – really earnest, kind, hard-working kids – and it seems that ultimately in a place like this, which seems to be run like a really elaborate mail-order diploma scam, the joke is on them.

She wants to know if bananas taste the same in the United States. And apples. And oranges. → October 20, 2010 (My Students: Part Three)

But as if on cue, the really earnest, kind, hard-working kids come streaming out of the front rows, where usually they sit passively. It's like some bizarre Chinese rendition of *A Christmas Carol* – three students approach me, each offering a glimpse into their lives, reminding me of the true reason for the season.

--

Nash takes his name from the shaggy basketball player. Last night, after dark, while I was out walking on the track, he was

jogging. He slides up beside me before long. After some appropriately random Chinese questions – like, “How tall are people in the U.S.?” we get to some more personal talk. His girlfriend goes to the best university in Tianjin. She’s really smart, he says, but he knows where he stands, and why he is at this school. He wants to sell cars, and he thinks English is a good skill – because sometimes foreigners need to buy cars, too. Nash tells me he likes my class, because I’m fun and I give interesting lessons.

--

Eddie is the savior of one of my classes. His peers remind me of puppies – they have no idea what I’m saying, because they speak no English, but they sit quietly smiling at me the whole time. For sure, they don’t really care to learn any English – they show up without pens, paper, or their textbooks most days. But they are always grinning, so it’s hard to get too upset. Eddie translates my simple instructions into Chinese for them. Today he comes to my office hours.

His spoken English is truly excellent – but he’s worried about the achievement test he has to take this weekend. The results could determine if he has the chance to study abroad. He wants to know if I have any shortcuts for reading extended passages, because he’s a slow reader. I don’t, of course, but he’s not too phased. He’s really excited to practice his English, since the class he is in moves so slowly that he doesn’t learn much. We talk for another half an hour about his dreams which include foreign travel, and hopefully school in Canada or the U.S.A.

--

Bella shows next. She’s named herself after the *Twilight* character. She won the English competition where Albert

revealed his abused childhood, and she's about to move onto round two at another more prestigious university. She's really concerned because she knows she's one of the best speakers in this school – but she also knows that that doesn't necessarily put her at the top in comparison to kids at other schools. We go through her speech line by line, practicing her pronunciation, but she drags the topic off in different directions. She wants to know if bananas taste the same in the United States. And apples. And oranges.

(In case my readers at home are wondering, all of them do, except oranges, which tend to be more tart according to Chinese preference.)

Apparently the last guy to have my job refused to talk to students outside of class – he told Bella that Chinese students didn't care about him as a person, they just wanted to practice their English. I tell her that I think that the proper English term for him is not “teacher,” but “asshole.”

Maybe this is so obvious that it doesn't really need to be said, but Bella said it, so I will repeat it here: as a student, she is glad I am not like him.

--

The best teachers, if you catch them in a candid moment, will tell you the same thing: A lot of days, teaching can be in turns aggravating, thankless, and somewhat humiliating. You just have to put your ego aside in service of a larger goal. That's the truth in a lot of jobs, though.

But in how many of those other jobs do you also get earnest, kind, hard-working kids confiding their dreams and ambitions to

you? Or telling you that you have made their life better just by showing up to work and being yourself?

In how many jobs do you get to go to bed with direct verbal affirmation that you left the world a little nicer than the way you found it that morning?

That's a pretty sweet feeling. One that can swell a deflated, self-pitying ego back up to a healthier size.

The People's Liberation Army is everything to everyone, especially when that thing contradicts another thing. → October 23, 2010, Beijing

Today my sister is getting married in Indiana, and I'm not there.

Rather than sit alone in my room and dwell on this fact, I decide to do what I came here to do – experience China firsthand. So I catch the high-speed train to Beijing. My destination – the Military Museum.

If you've read this far, you know I'm alternately amused and infuriated with the Communist Party. I find their authoritarian impulses to control their people through limits on expression and movement to belay a petty elite, paranoid about their own grip on power and privilege. It's an abject lesson in the sort the guard against arbitrary rule that the United States Constitution is designed to guard against.

The amusing part comes in the bizarre propaganda that the government treads. The government-approved textbooks issued by the school read like they were written by a racist old Chinese man who visited Iowa sometime in the 1950s. He writes about how Americans want to move from their current suburban house into one with a bigger swimming pool. It says the purpose of American dinner parties is for the host to show how

rich he is compared to you – you will leave hungry, he warns, because the host doesn't really care about you. He says that most American restaurants are boxcar-shaped diners that serve hot dogs slathered-to-drowning in ketchup – Chinese stomachs will turn, he warns. When Americans aren't eating in these diners, they're at drive-ins, where they park their cars and eat right in the front seat.

I'm hoping that the Military Museum will be full of such half-truths and distortions, and I am not let down.

It's an Orwellian gesture of self-aggrandizement as only the Chinese (or perhaps Kim Jong Il) could muster. Five marble stories, a cross between neoclassical fascist architecture and 1950s-era Soviet design. Inside, the People's Liberation Army is everything to everyone, especially when that thing contradicts another thing.

During World War II, (in China called the War of Resistance Against Japan) the Communists struggle heroically in the face of Japanese atrocities which get more floor space here than any other single topic aside from individual profiles on seemingly allegorical people's heroes and martyrs. The Japanese are ultimately brought to their knees – seemingly singlehandedly thanks to the efforts of the Chinese (no mention of the U.S. or the U.S.S.R.). The surrender inexplicably takes place on an American battleship.

During the civil war, the Communists are a democratically-mandated force fighting against the Nationalists, who, despite superior numbers, are hated by *all* Chinese except a few foreign-funded traitors.

The Communists prevail, of course, just in time to engage in the War to Resist U.S. Aggression and Aid Korea. Here, the so far

exhaustive English audio guide that I rented offers no narrative. There are precious few English signs in this wing, either. I can discern a few artifacts – U.S. Army Field Manuals and scraps of destroyed U.S. fighter jets. The few English captions present reveal one interesting fact – apparently the Communists decisively won this war. By what standard, I'm not sure... Here I thought it was still an unresolved stalemate as of 2010.

Still, this novel account of history is one of my favorite things about living in China – sure, it's insidious, Nationalistic, and an anathema to everything I stand for as a history teacher. But it's instructive about how the United States – both its politicians and its apologists – do similar things. Sure, the War to Resist U.S. Aggression and Aid Korea is editorial – but the term “Korean Conflict” is just as fraught with half-truths. They're just in service of a different national agenda.

Did Wayne miss pickles and salted celery and all the rest?
→ October 24, 2010

I want pizza again. It's the food from the U.S. that I miss most, maybe. I need someone Chinese to order for me – my meager, atonal Chinese cannot be understood without extensive support from my wild gesticulating limbs. So ordering food over the phone is a no go. I have no illusions about that.

Ordering out for food is a financial extravagance for everyone here except Ernie and I. With the amount of money the school pays us, they could easily pay for about three Chinese teachers... So I feel bad every time I need a Chinese person to help me with this task. Like I'm hiring a homeless man to vacuum my magnificent twenty bedroom mansion, then kicking him back to the street before the sun goes down. So to avoid this dynamic, I try to ask Wayne for help, since he is a friend. He may even accept a slice of corn-covered pizza!

By way of explanation, I try to express to Wayne how much I am missing American food. I ask if he missed any Chinese food while he lived in the U.K. for two years. He thinks about it for a while, his face contorting as if this is a new and novel thought that never occurred to him before. "Did... I... Miss... Chinese... Food?"

"No, not really at all," he says, somewhat surprised himself.

Honest words from the mouth of a local! No worries, Wayne – I don't think I will either! Thank you and good night!

**I think I am going to Xian? Maybe. On November 5? Maybe.
→ October 25, 2010**

I want to go to Xian where the famous Terracotta Warriors who guard the tomb of Shi Huang Di are. Xian and Tibet were my two must-see stops in China, and I've already failed in my attempts to reach Tibet. I don't want Xian to be oh-for-two.

But my proposed trip is already been fraught with complications. A few things you should know about train travel in China:

You cannot book tickets online.

You cannot book tickets over the phone.

You must buy your tickets at the station of departure, or hire a "travel agent" to do so for you.

You cannot buy tickets more than a week in advance.

Today, I make what amounts to progress on my goal.

I go to the travel agent. One of my prize students – Luckiya – sees me getting ready to leave campus. We speak, and she asks

if I want help. Thank goodness! Because I would not have been able to handle it alone.

The agent is just some dude who sits there behind a desk in a book store with a cell phone. When you tell him what train you want, he calls someone (a clerk at the train station, I assume) and asks if there are tickets available. He won't ask about other trains going in that direction around the same time - just the one you asked him about. Finally, through process of elimination, we figure out that all of the trains for this Friday are already booked.

So, I say "What about Friday, November 5?" Luckiya translates.

He sits there and looks at us for a while.

Then he takes a deposit of my money.

Of course, he cannot buy any tickets for next Friday until this Thursday - because, remember, you cannot buy tickets more than a week advance. So I have a receipt that says he is going to try to buy them on Thursday when they go on sale. He is going to call Luckiya's cell phone to let us know if he gets them. If he does, I can go to the store to pick them up. If not, I can go to the store and get my money back.

So. I think I am going to Xian? Maybe. On November 5? Maybe. I don't know. His incessant but unhurried doodling on the blotter pad in front of him during our entire transaction seemed to suggest that he puts a real premium on customer service, so I like my odds.

As with so many things in this country, it is not good news or bad news, it is just complicated.

Just look at how long this account of not buying tickets is!

But I have to admit, two months in, there is a certain charm to all of this convolution. Fatalistically, you have to sort of consign yourself to the idea that the outcome of any given transaction doesn't matter in the grand scheme of things. I will live if I don't go to Xian, and instead I will have some other adventure in Tianjin.

To thank Luckiya for her help (and to avoid another dinner in the canteen) we go to KFC, which is right across the street from the travel agent. At first, she refuses to order food because it is too expensive (about three U.S. dollars), but I insist.

Over dinner, she tells me that her mother works to support her, her little sister, and her grandparents. Her mom runs a little shop to do all of this. Her father is not in the picture.

She mentions that she has never seen a U.S. dollar before, so I show her a ten dollar bill that I have in my wallet. Her eyes light up, and she becomes ebullient.

Her dream is to study in the U.S. and become an English translator here in China.

If she can come up with the money.

To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time. → October 27, 2010

Today, I took all of my self-pitying frustration from the last couple of weeks – all my disappointments and wishes for something different – and I did a good thing. The best thing that I have done since I came to China.

Dissatisfied with the level and quality of participation coming from my classes at large, feeling for those kids in my classes who are really serious, who have the desire and ability to do

more, but who aren't being challenged... Rather than whine, I decided to do something about it.

This is becoming my calling card as a teacher, I guess. I try to help everyone, but I have to acknowledge a real affinity for those gifted students with so much potential – that could be so much more, if given the right opportunities at formative stages. The kids that, in an education field that is currently so focused on annual yearly progress and accountability, are often left to their own devices because “they are smart enough that they will do fine no matter what.”

I just don't think that's acceptable.

So pluck five of my best students from different classes. The kids who finish the assignment before I even finish explaining it to the rest of the class. The kids who not only finish the assignment in that amount of time, but then turn around and help me explain it to the rest of the kids whose English is so limited that they have trouble understanding simple instructions like “Do question number three.”

I choose Evangeline, who has been giving me short Chinese lessons once in a while, Luckiya, who is helping me with my Xian tickets, Bella, who won the speaking competition, Eddie, who is the savior-translator of one my lowest ability classes, and, of course, Albert.

All of them have told me that they are worried about their limited English conversational skills, so I tell them I want to help. Just meet me in the classroom at 6 tonight.

I buy them Cokes and snack cakes.

In a nod to Robin Williams by way of the person who introduced me to *Dead Poets Society*, my incredible eighth

grade English teacher, Mrs. Rukavina, I prepare our discussion topic. Robert Herrick's *To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time*.

Gather ye rosebuds while ye may,
Old Time is still a-flying:
And this same flower that smiles to-day
To-morrow will be dying.

What ensues exceeds my own criteria for success. Before tonight, I decide that if we talk for half an hour and everyone says they would like to do this again, I would call it a hit.

Instead, we talk for three hours, the conversation stemming from the poem's first stanza, evolving organically, and finally ending up 270 degrees from its original point of entry – like any good informal conversation should. At the end of the evening, after the night watchman has told us to clear out, the kids are exchanging phone numbers – they are sophomores, and most of them have never even met before tonight, because they have been sequestered as the sole overachievers in their respective cohorts. They are already describing our group as a new family. Their joy is palpable.

And expressed in English. Throughout the evening, pens and pencils are scratching furiously every time a new and delicious word is served up. They are collectors. They are connoisseurs. They are starved, and this is a feast.

I ask if they'd like to do this again next week.

Bella says, "You're kidding, right?"

They want to do it every night.

So I suggest a Halloween party for this Sunday.

They want to carve a pumpkin and watch a scary movie like real Americans would.

So that's what we'll do.

Here's to taking control of a situation instead of letting it take control of me. It seems like these kids were just waiting for someone to do something to make their situation a little better - just like I was, until this idea occurred to me over the weekend. Who knew we were all experiencing the same feelings, bored and sequestered in our rooms each night?

There has been a fog of uncertainty and homesickness hanging over me since my return from the Philippines. Tonight, I've found purpose and place as a foreigner in China, and those feelings are gone.

Carpe Diem, indeed.

When did I get good at using chopsticks? → October 28, 2010

When did I get good at using chopsticks?

They laugh in time, on cue, like a symphony with Chuck Jones as the conductor. → October 31, 2010

I think one of my favorite things about this country is how really simple things can thrill my students. They're twenty years old, and when I show them a Bugs Bunny cartoon, they laugh with such pure, unpretentious glee. No Americans laugh at Bugs Bunny this way - kids are too small to get a lot of the humor, and older Americans are too self-serious. But not these Chinese kids. They laugh in time, on cue, like a symphony with Chuck Jones as the conductor.

And so it is, too, with Halloween. Albert, Luckiya, Evangeline, Bella, and I have our own private celebration. Lacking costumes, we paint our faces – a pirate, a cat, a bear, a playboy, and I'm not sure what I am supposed to be, because I don't think they have Bowie or *Jesus on a Rug!* here. We settle in for snacks and a scary movie. About all they can handle is *Zombieland* – and even that is a little scary at times for the girls.

We carve Chinese pumpkins, which are only slightly larger than softballs. Lacking candles, we take our jack-o-lanterns out into the street, stuff them with newspaper, and set them alight. They look like something the Green Goblin might throw at Spider-Man, and my kids are as excited as three year-olds. And I mean that in the absolute best possible way – the way that leaves you no choice but to be just as excited yourself. It's pretty incredible to be twenty-six years old and seeing my own culture with a sense of wonder usually reserved only for those to whom it is brand new.

**They give me a glass full of boiling hot water for refreshment, then one of them challenges me to arm wrestle.
→ November 3, 2010**

There are guards stationed at the gates of the school and they've got uniforms that look like something out of Soviet Russia circa 1955. Elegant, somewhat ornate for their station, and therefore intimidating and authoritarian.

But all of them give me big grins whenever I come and go at the school gates. When I approach, they're usually slumped down in a chair snatched from the school dining hall, fighting with an afternoon nap (which certainly takes away from any awe that that uniform might inspire). But they hop to their feet and offer me a broad and cartoonish salute to go with their gap-toothed

smiles. Instead of intimidating, they're friendlier and more cheerful than just about anyone else in China.

It's probably one of my favorite details about this campus.

Today, after I finish a short run on the school's track, a couple of them wave me toward their little guardhouse. At first, I think they're shooing me away, but then I realize that that backhanded gesture must be the Chinese signal for "Come here."

They speak essentially no English, and I speak essentially no Chinese, but this doesn't stop them from welcoming me in the warmest possible way:

I am sweaty and panting from my run in today's hazy air, but they invite me in. They give me a glass full of boiling hot water for refreshment, then one of them challenges me to arm wrestle.

He wins, and his grin grows even bigger. I pantomime that his arms are big and strong, by flexing my own bicep and pointing at him. Cue an even bigger grin. He returns the compliment by pointing to my legs – he always watches me as I run laps, and seems to make a game of guessing how many I have run on any given day.

I tell him that I completed about ten laps – but he may take this to mean ten kilometers. I don't really know. Either way he's very impressed.

Through exaggerated motions, I manage to ask if he plays any sports.

Through similarly exaggerated motions, he tells me he's best at eating and sitting on his butt.

This train car is like some Greek myth of the afterlife - I am the Sisyphus of sleep → November 5, 2010, Beijing to Xian

I'm riding in what the Chinese call a hard sleeper car on the overnight train between Beijing and Xian. Stacked three high, I'm on the middle bunk, and there are three more stacked immediately adjacent. To call this a cabin would be overstating the fact – it's an alcove.

My alcove-mates and I are cast for the kind of 1970's disaster movie parodied in *Airplane* – we've got the middle-aged hipster (I think he's the star, and I am just a supporting player, which doesn't bode well for my chances of survival), the two gruff, working-class guys, the old man who snores, the young mother and her innocent infant child, and me. I'm the foreigner, added to provide greater demographic balance and to mutter expletives in my native tongue every time something goes wrong.

I really love this means of travel, even though I don't sleep well. Every once in a while, the train hits a pig or some kind of warped section of track or something (who knows), and it lurches violently. This wakes up the old man and mercifully his snoring ceases. On the other hand, the innocent infant child is also jolted awake and begins to howl.

This train car is like some Greek myth of the afterlife – I am the Sisyphus of sleep.

Before political power made Beijing, before international commerce shifted to the high seas and made Shanghai, there was Xian → November 6, 2010, Xian

Xian, for the moment, is a glorious cosmopolitan mess. The Chinese are doing their best to spoil it and bring it into line with shiny, developed Shanghai, Beijing, and Tianjin – there's

demolition and construction everywhere. But for now, this is my favorite Chinese city. It's massive, because that's how Chinese cities are, but the streets are still narrow and easy to cross.

Some buildings look Chinese without being a cartoon parody – that is to say, they weren't built recently from rebar and kwik-dry cement, like you see in squeaky-clean and strategically central “Traditional Culture Street” in Tianjin. Yes, that is the proper English name of a real place.

In Xian there is an extensive Muslim district that adds a little visual and cultural diversity to the happy family of a People's Republic that tries really hard in almost every way to downplay the differences between its citizens.

Xian has been cultivating this shambolic, diverse air for centuries. It was the ancient capital of China's first empire, the end of the Silk Road. Before political power made Beijing, before international commerce shifted to the high seas and made Shanghai, there was Xian.

The main draw of Xian nowadays is the tomb of Emperor Shi Huang Di, one of China's true heavyweights. It was guarded by 8,000 unique terracotta warriors, buried all in formation, awaiting the order to defend or to attack anyone who threatened the emperor in his next life. They were lost to history for nigh on two millennia before being discovered by some farmers in the late 70s. The site is still under excavation, their number is so great, and they are truly a stunning sight. For my money, as far as China is concerned, only the Great Wall is in their league.

The tomb itself is a mound of dirt the size of the Pyramid. Legend says that it was extensively booby trapped and poisoned with mercury (which the emperor reported also had a habit of

ingesting on the mistaken advice that it was the elixir of life). According to the Chinese, this potential danger is the reason that the tomb has never been excavated.

I say, give it a few decades, then open the tomb to boost interest in Xian as a tourist spot. The Communists are too good as businessmen not to exploit this opportunity to the fullest – mark my words. “Come and see the newly-opened never-before-seen-by-modern-eyes Imperial tomb – complete with *Temple of Doom* obstacle course!”

I spend the rest of the day in Xian proper, wandering the streets, visiting its famous bell and drum towers, and sampling the local street food.

I watch the locals and the tourists jockeying through the crowded city center. I even talk to some of them. One boy wants to know if I believe in “Gee-su,” which I realize is Jesus after he begins to vigorously make the sign of the cross.

I really can't put my finger on what is so different about this place. Maybe there's just a different attitude this far into China's interior, and I'm a Midwestern boy at heart? The city feels really open and alive, and I'm soaking it up before I get back onto the train for Beijing tonight.

**The Chinese countryside blurs past the train windows. →
November 7, 2010, Xian to Beijing**

The attendants pull the curtains back around 6:30am, just in time for the full rays of sunrise to beam through, begging the question of why they drew them in the first place.

The Chinese countryside blurs past the train windows.

In the morning light, it reminds me of some dream of the Midwest, where the roads are dirt and the houses are brick cubes.

Maybe not a dream, but a memory I don't have, of the Midwest my grandfather might have known.

The Chinese haven't invented subdivisions yet.

Rumble under the bleachers. → November 8, 2010

Last week, walking outside, well after dark... I heard live rock and roll, coming from somewhere overhead. Real guitars, real bass – and real drums! Played really, way too loud!

It's a small group of Chinese kids that meets in the perfect practice space – a little concrete pill box under the bleachers in an unlikely third story gymnasium in an academic building here on campus. There is no such thing as a dry sound in this room. Sound jangles from Marshall amp to whitewashed wall to the teeth in your jaw on a direct line via your ringing, rattling ear drum, and it's all glorious.

The guys are kind enough to let me sit in on drums. This is a Chinese rock song that I don't know. Listen for the poppy vocals underneath all of the clatter.

The band leader is Robert, who shreds like Eddie Van Halen, solos like Joe Walsh, and admires Mark Knopfler's ability to noodle.

The rest of the band comes and goes, the room is full of smoke and Chinese girls stopping in for a peek at me or the boys or at all of us in combination.

English isn't really spoken here, but then again, neither is Chinese. It's all about jamming on Green Day's *American Idiot*.

His playground is a cramped bakery complete with a commercial oven and a deep fryer. → November 10, 2010

There's a little convenience store on campus, which the Chinese call a "supermarket" when they are speaking English. It's far from super, and much more like the inside of a particularly utilitarian gas station.

The best part of it is the family who have the back corner all to themselves. They sell fruit, nuts, and baked goods like cakes, moon pies, and homemade potato chips.

It's a husband, a wife, and a cute little kid of five or so. They're incredibly kind and generous. Despite the obvious fact that they are turning a subsistence level profit, they almost always ply extra free snacks on me. Or round the price way down when they weigh out my fruit.

I don't even know their names.

They speak no practical English. But they've taught the little guy to call Ernie and I "uncle" whenever we come into the store.

The little guy is always there in the afternoons and evenings, because who else is going to take care of him when he isn't in school? His playground is a cramped bakery complete with a commercial oven and a deep fryer.

Sometimes I ham it up. We play hide and seek around a drywall partition while his mom measures out my dried bananas.

A few days ago, his luck ran out – somehow he got splashed with scalding cooking oil. Ernie was there for the aftermath, as

his mom and dad stripped him down. The tough little guy was wincing and moaning, but not shrieking.

His arm, legs, and crotch were burnt pretty badly.

We didn't see him for a few days, but he was back today. They made a little nest of blankets for him under the counter where his dad kneads dough.

When he sees me, he bolts half upright from his prone position. He calls out, "Uncle!" with a light in his eyes.

I bring him some candy. Out of Chinese etiquette, his mom tries to refuse it.

But she relents.

And I'm glad.

Poor little guy.

In China, post-secondary education is a limited resource.
→ November 11, 2010

The Chinese version of the SAT tells you what level of degree you are eligible for and what schools you are allowed to go to. If you earn a score that says you should earn an associate's degree, that is the end of the story for you. There is no appeal. You cannot decide midway through your college experience to try for a bachelor's degree.

There is an alternate path open to Chinese students who want to earn a bachelor's – a series of fifteen interlocking state-administered tests that demonstrate mastery in different subject areas. If you successfully complete this battery of tests with a satisfactory score, then you can earn the equivalent of a bachelor's degree without attending a university to do it. But

you will forever carry a stigma when considered by future employers, and even for promotions once you have been hired.

In China, post-secondary education is a limited resource. The size of the population necessitates these harsh realities – otherwise, China's university system might be taxed beyond capacity.

So much for telling my students that they can do anything they put their mind to. I feel kind of stupid saying that now.

Americans thrive on the possibilities of the future; just imagine being 18 and having a pretty firm idea of exactly how far you can go for the rest of your life.

My sideburns are getting shaggy. → November 12, 2010

My sideburns are getting shaggy.

Luckiya, Evangeline, and Bella offer to help me out with this by taking me to a Chinese hair salon. I asked for a barber shop, but this is where Luckiya gets her hair cut, and I think it ends up being way more interesting than any barber shop.

Immediately, I'm fitted with a royal crimson kimono-style robe. Their first question – related through Luckiya, because no one here speaks English – is about my preference in music. I say that I like all kinds, really, but since I've been in China, I've really enjoyed hearing Chinese music.

No matter.

They make their music selection for my benefit – soon, Lady Gaga's "Bad Romance" is blasting with deep bass from their sound system, and my head is submerged in a shampooing station. This is followed by "Dangerous" and "Beat It" from the

King of Pop himself. Then selections from *Evita*. This afternoon's mix is designed to please the *laowai*, and so are the nimble fingers of my well-coifed shampoo-artist.

When my hair is luxuriously clean, he turns me over to my stylist for the day, who is introduced to me personally by the salon's manager (she is dressed like a flight attendant.) The stylist offers the slightest of bows and then gets down to work. The shampoo-artist waits eagerly in the wings, and every other employee in the salon makes a point of walking slowly past my chair, too.

My stylist finishes up, and someone hands him a thin book that looks like it's never been used. He pages through until he finds what he's looking for. It's a Chinese/English phrasebook, barber's edition. He points to "Is this style to your satisfaction?" He has done a really nice job, leaving my bangs slightly askew so that when I part my hair I've got just the slightest mod glimmer. I'd like to tell him this, but who knows the Chinese for it...? Thumbs up. "Hen hao."

Then the shampoo-artist takes over again, giving me a second wash. By this time, the soothing sounds of Enya wash over me like the waves of soapy water.

The whole process takes about half an hour and costs me about twenty yuan. Three dollars U.S. Luckiya, Evangeline, and Bella balk that this is expensive – they think it should only have cost seventeen or eighteen yuan. About \$2.75. I tell them it's ok. After all, I did get that extra shampoo.

There's a palpable hush of conspiracy in the air. →
November 18, 2010

There's a palpable hush of conspiracy in the air. Our voices are lowered, and from time to time, one of us checks the frosted glass pane of the classroom door for the telltale silhouette of an outsider. An eavesdropper.

Tonight, we are thought-criminals in the People's Republic.

We're talking about freedom of expression. From a list of English-language quotations that I give them, my friends Eddie, Luckiya, Evangeline, and Bella agree that this best represents the state of China today:

Censorship reflects society's lack of confidence in itself.
~Potter Stewart

Even if they can't say it publically. We've declared our little group meeting a slice of America, complete with First Amendment guarantees. Along with that comes the Vegas corollary to this postulate – what happens in this room, stays in this room.

During the course of our conversation, they ask me just what happened in Tiananmen Square in 1989. They themselves know only word-of-mouth, which is vague, since it's not spoken of openly or officially anywhere in China. They've never even seen that famous photo of the guy, his groceries, and four Chinese tanks meeting face-to-face in front of the Forbidden City.

They ask me what the deal is with the Falun Gong, a new age religious movement that faces violent repression from the Chinese government. They are told that Falun Gong members light themselves on fire to attain spiritual, so this why they are evil. Two of my students don't buy this, as it doesn't jive with

other things they have heard by word-of-mouth – that the Falun Gong are peaceful. One girl asserts that the fire-suicide story is true, as it happened in her hometown. I look into this later – the government asserts that seven people attempted to burn themselves in Tiananmen Square in 2001. International commentators generally agree that these claims are linked only speciously to the Falun Gong for the purpose of turning Chinese public opinion against the organization. Some commentators question whether a fire-incident even happened at all.

Also, my students know what Facebook is and want me to tell them all about it. As with almost everything, there is apparently a Chinese Facebook knockoff with limited functionality and servers located in-country for easy data mining.

As for the larger topic at hand – they think it's useless to say anything critical in this country. They feel like the pressure from the Party and general corruption is so great that even if there are good people at the top, those few well-intentioned people have little power to change things.

If you show up for an evening of free entertainment and get a minute less than three hours, you should demand your money back! → November 21, 2010

The air may be worse than what I breath in Northwest Indiana. But China sure is healthy for my ego.

Where else can I show up spontaneously to a concert that I heard about casually twenty minutes prior – and be guided to a front row seat and served piping hot green tea. The lights go down, and a spotlight falls on me – I am introduced as a special guest before the MCs introduce any of the contestants in this singing contest.

Laoshi Thomas. I wave, and the crowd goes wild.

I was told this would be a concert featuring Chinese music, so I expected *erhu* and other traditional sounds. What I get it is *Chinese Idol*, complete with pyrotechnics, judges who wave colored flags to eliminate competitors, and a couple of random break dancing interludes.

The rules of this competition are Byzantine – all ten contestants get two chances to sing. In a nod to empiricism, each of ten contestants sings the exact same song, a Chinese standard that everyone seems thrilled with on its first turn... and equally thrilled with after ten performances. After they turn the CD player off repeat, each contestant performs a song of their own choosing... No one sings anything that wouldn't seem out of place on an Eagles record. In every case, this is followed immediately by the “talent” portion of their performance. One contestant finishes singing, leaves the stage to scattered applause, returns, and dances for several minutes in awkward silence before leaving to even more scattered applause. Two kids do an Abbott and Costello routine. Another boy seems to actually be learning the flute right before our eyes and ears.

Tonight's competition exhibits all of the hallmarks of Chinese entertainment. The proceedings are so random as to be unpredictable from minute-to-minute, but the one inevitable constant is that it goes on far too long to hold anyone's attention. The audience is notably restless after two hours. But dammit, in China, if you show up for an evening of free entertainment and get a minute less than three hours, you should demand your money back!

I shouldn't mock the show, because I really do enjoy the first two hours. I can't speak to the last, because I beg off on the pretense that I have to make a phone call. You see, my chair is

getting uncomfortable, and restless, starstruck students have started playing musical chairs with the vacant seat next to me – filling it when the music stops, introducing themselves, asking if I speak Chinese, asking where I come from, and asking what the best way to learn English is.

I'm not sure what the prize is for the night, or even who won – but I'd bet my *yuan* on flute-boy. There was so much goodwill left over from how well he sang that maybe no one would hold his inability in a completely unrelated task against him in this singing competition.

The proud Chinese language reigns triumphant over yet another thick foreign tongue. → November 24, 2010

I've been taking twice weekly Chinese lessons since I arrived here in August. And I've been immersed in the language – it's written and spoken all around me. But still I can barely make myself understood beyond hello, numbers, thank you, goodbye. Basically, I know enough to hire a taxi or a prostitute.

And even then, if there's any kind of dispute, all I can do is flail my arms boldly in defense.

The proud Chinese language reigns triumphant over yet another thick foreign tongue.

I am literally mobbed on my way out by girls and guys wanting my picture and phone number. → November 24, 2010

I play with the Chinese rock band guys tonight at what I thought was just going to be another rehearsal. I am mistaken or misled or whatever, but it's all good. I am literally mobbed on my way out of the performance hall by girls and guys wanting my picture and phone number.

I think if I ever get tired of working for a living in the U.S., I could round up a few other middling musicians and make it here as a fairly successful rock star...

No doubt about it, in fact...

They feel lucky to know → December 1, 2010

The last time that I talked to Eddie, Luckiya, Evangeline, and Bella about Tiananmen Square, there was a hungry, hushed silence. The kind that begs you to break it. Tonight, I offer to show them a couple of videos – including a BBC news report that aired June 4, 1989.

Tonight, the silence is stinging. Shameful and shocked.

Eddie calls it humiliating to know the truth.

Bella is rapid-fire outrage. She vows to ask her grandfather – an educated man who was in the army in 1989 – about what happened.

I also show them the tank man.

They all agree pretty heartily that even though the public has no idea who that man is, he must certainly be dead.

We read the English Wikipedia page about the incident.

I should add that all of this information is strictly prohibited here. I got it myself using proxy software to circumvent the internet filters.

In the elevator, on the way out of the building, the kids remind each other not to speak of what they have seen. Even to their roommates. They know that very few others will understand –

and that sharing these things with the wrong people could be dangerous.

To myself I worry that I have shaken something within them – revealed a level of brutality and corruption of which these kids must now privately carry the knowledge. A little like finding out that the world is dream, but if you tell anyone this unsettling fact, the sleeper will awaken, and the world will end.

I ask if they are upset that I've shared so much information with them, to which they respond heartily that they are glad to know. They feel lucky to know.

Would you rather live in Oz or go back to your hometown to be with your family? → December 2, 2010

For the rest of my students, I've chosen to show them something a little more light-hearted. *The Wizard of Oz* plays well here, because it's sappy and sentimental, and so are the Chinese.

At the end of the movie, I ask the students three questions.

1. How would you explain this movie to someone who has never seen it?
2. Who was your favorite character and why?
3. Would you rather live in Oz or go back to your hometown to be with your family?

The first question is usually a no brainer, dead on, if simplified.

For most students, their answer to number two goes something like this:

"i like is favorite girl. she lovely. she is friendly to friends."

Every Chinese kid – boy and girl – uses the word “lovely” to the point of comic excess.

Everyone they describe is lovely.

The Cowardly Lion is lovely.

Toto is lovely.

You, too, would be lovely, if you came to visit China or Oz.

It is their favorite adjective, maybe because it works on everyone/everything.

Most students are passionate about the last question. The phrase, “There is no place like home,” strikes at something deep within the Chinese psyche. Students talk about how their family is warm, how their mother and father clothe and feed them. Every student except two has said they would choose to go home.

Of the two who said they wouldn't:

One girl said she would use Dorothy's ruby slippers to become a new good witch (bad witches turn green, so she didn't want that fate). She would use her witchy ways to travel back and forth at will between Kansas and Oz, thereby enjoying the best of both worlds.

The twister made a big impression on the other girl who chose Oz over her family. She said that Oz has sunny, warm weather with no storms. The skies always seem to be clear there, and the wind is never bad.

I may have instilled in this girl the unshakeable belief that Kansas is a God-forsaken expanse where death strikes from above without notice or compassion.

Oops.

Chicken with small hunks of bone, cartilage, and Sichuan peppers. → December 3, 2010

Tonight, I go to dinner with Luckiya, Evangeline, and Bella.

If you go into any halfway decent restaurant in China, your place setting is shrink-wrapped to guarantee cleanliness. It's fun to pop the plastic stretched taut over the mouth of the bowl with your chopsticks - it sounds like a gun shot, and even Chinese who are otherwise reserved seem to take a certain glee in this loud crack.

We have, from left to right:

Eggplant with a sauce something like General Tso's chicken (which itself is an unknown dish in China).

Chicken with small hunks of bone, cartilage, and Sichuan peppers. You can spit out the two former, but I recommend chomping down on the latter.

Fried green beans with Sichuan peppers. I had never eaten a Sichuan pepper before I came to China. The first time I bit into one, maybe a week or two after I got here, I thought I was suffering some kind of anaphylactic shock radiating outward from my tongue.

I thought – this is it, this is the end of Thomas Kenning. I am dying, right here, right now, in this restaurant in China where customers are spitting chunks of bone and cartilage right onto the floor.

Naturally, I kept this troublesome thought to myself.

Eating them is not so much a taste as a feeling. And I use the word “feeling” to mean both a sensation and an emotion. It’s the feeling of licking a rusty electric fence and being able to taste it with your whole face.

Once I was assured that this effect was only temporary, I became like a junky. I know each bite will kind of hurt – but I can’t eat enough. All I can think when I eat them is – I am 26, and this is a completely novel food-induced experience.

I don’t think I’ve had a completely novel food-induced experience since I was one or two and started eating solids.

Sichuan peppers, you little kernels of nuclear power, where have you been all my life?

I can see lights coming on behind her eyes. → December 4, 2010

The sun is the kind of orange that causes awe at sunset – but that makes you sick at noon. Since it’s turned cold, the pollution just hangs in the air, dark and dusty, biting into your sinuses. It’s alkaline, like touching a battery to your tongue – but somewhere deep behind your eye.

Bella and Evangeline, two of the students in my Dead Poets Society went to the supermarket today. Under a package of tissue paper they discovered a leaflet somewhat larger than the slip inside a fortune cookie. It read:

“If the Chinese people want to be free, they must move abandon the Communist Party.”

Evangeline tucked this slip of paper into her pocket. The whole episode unsettled Bella to the point that she seeks me out

tonight. After all, I am the dispenser of hard information about Tiananmen and other forbidden subjects.

We walk through the night. She wears a black and white checked surgical mask against the cold.

Since she watched those videos, her mind has been reeling with thoughts that I'm not sure she could express clearly even in her native language, let alone in English.

She's not exactly clear what the words "communist" and "capitalist" mean. She's under the impression that the U.S.A. is interested in dominating China with the aid of Japan. That's what she's been told, at least.

Also, in history class a few weeks ago, her teacher told her about a top secret U.S. document exposed by Chinese spies – a secret plan for cultural erosion of the traditional Chinese society through forced exposure of American movies and products to the Chinese people.

I ask her if she likes American movies. She does, especially *Avatar* and *Twilight*, from which she draws her English name.

I ask her if someone forced her to watch these movies, or if she chose to do it. She admits that she chose to – they have exciting stories, and they are fun way to learn English.

I ask whether that's a secret U.S. plot or whether she is exercising her own individual taste.

Recalling Potter Stewart, she tells me that the lies that the government tells and the things that it forbids betray its lack of self-confidence.

I can see lights coming on behind her eyes.

Gelivable. → December 7, 2010

Chinese kids are proud to have invented their own “English” word - *gelivable*. Pronounced guh-lee-vable. In the original Chinese, “Gei” means “to give.” “Li” means “power.” Together in “Chinglish” it seems to mean “awesome” at the same time that it expresses excitement over synchronicity of vision between the speaker and the receiver. Something like saying, “We’re on the same page.” But hipper, more economical, and more Asian.

They even have an antonym for this word – *ungelivable*.

One kid claimed this has been added to the English dictionary. I told her I’d have to check on that...

**And the so-called winners just walk off with their friends.
→ December 9, 2010**

It’s the dead of winter. The air is right around freezing. And the school has decided that today is the right time to hold the first outdoor athletic competition of the year. I have seen many odd things during my four months in China, but today manages to both typify and outdo all of them...

Chinese are completely averse to drinking chilled liquids, especially when the air is cold. They think that is the quickest way to get sick. Yet they see no hazard in a not-quite-5k race in this weather. Two hundred kids have lined up at the front gate of the school in sneakers, jeans, and winter coats to run a race today.

They mull around in confusion for 40 minutes.

A truck makes a delivery to the school, parting their huddled mass.

While everyone is distracted by this, someone fires the starting pistol, and the runners are off.

They all run out of the gate. They will follow a circuitous route amid the surrounding factories and eventually loop back to the campus. A few spectators walk to the other side of the schoolyard to the track where I usually run.

On the track, several students hold a large red banner to denote an improvised finish line. After about twenty minutes, the first runners cross the line.

After the first three runners cross the line, the student organizers take the finish line banner down, and spectators start going home.

Even though there are still like 197 kids who have yet to finish the race.

I wait around with Eddie, Luckiya, and Evangeline. I teach my students the word “anticlimax.”

And there are runners – kids – just sprawled out on the track and on the Astroturf soccer field at its center.

Red-faced.

Panting.

Gasping for air.

The fallen. It's like a massacre. I'm not sure what they got out of all of this discomfort. I mean, some students were serving hot tea. A viscous solution. Brown and sweet, tasting like something they served on your field trip to that pioneer village in fourth grade.

But there are no awards handed out.

No one takes any pictures.

No one congratulates anyone.

And the so-called winners just walk back to the dorms with their friends.

The overall effect is sweaty and awesome, even in this drafty little private room above the restaurant. → December 10, 2010

There are certain things you should do if you visit China. You should walk through the Forbidden City and on top of the Great Wall. The Terracotta Warriors are a must, and I'm not sorry that I walked the Bund in Shanghai.

And you should try hot pot. Anthony Bourdain says it, and now I do, too.

Eddie, Bella, Evangeline, and Luckiya – the four students with whom I am the closest – want to show me a good time before I leave China in a few weeks. Hot pot is first on the agenda this afternoon.

We start with this giant wok full of chicken. It's possibly the spiciest thing I have ever tasted. Face-melting. Sichuan peppers. And it only gets more intense the deeper you go into the wok. We're given green tea and a piece of garlic flatbread to take the edge off the heat, but that's not really cutting it.

When we finish the chicken, there's a puddle of peppers and spices at the bottom of the wok. A waiter enters our private room with a kettle of hot water. He fills the wok up to the brim, lights a gas-powered burner beneath the wok, and leaves us to boil our own selection of potatoes, lettuce, sprouts, and

tofu (both original and fish flavor). The level of spice in this broth will leave you physically sweating.

The overall effect is both clammy and awe-inspiring, even in this drafty little private room above the restaurant.

After that, it's time for karaoke. The place is called KTV. They are as common in China as Starbucks is Stateside. The décor is faux-marble and gilt trim with low lighting. You get a private room with pleather benches, a waiter to replenish the beer, a giant flat screen TV, and a crisp, killer sound system for maximum fidelity on your reverb-drenched vocals. There are two mics to double your pleasure.

My friends choose some Chinese songs - always stuff that would make your dentist's selection of music seem edgy. They choose some English songs, too - Beyonce, Alicia Keyes, and Michael Jackson. Songs like the latter's "You Are Not Alone." In other words, all of the most saccharine ballads that these artists have to offer.

Eddie can hit notes higher than the girls, keeping up with his favorite singer of all time, Taylor Swift. Bella and Eva aren't shy, though, belting it out right behind him. Luckiya is timid at first, but there are a few songs that even she can't resist crooning along to.

I'm an awful singer. No one will argue that. Least of all my friends. But since today's festivities are in my honor, I'm given a song all my own to sing. Lady Gaga's "Bad Romance." I caterwaul along as best I can, and by the last chorus, I have to admit - this is genuinely a good time. Maybe even a great time.

So while you're at it, add "KTV with real Chinese locals" to the list of things you should do if you visit China.

I wanted to face east, to look across the open water,
stretching off over the horizon and on toward home. →
December 11, 2010

I wanted to see the sea from China. I wanted to face east, to
look across the open water, stretching off over the horizon and
on toward home. To have a sense of where I am in relation to
where I was.

Tianjin is supposed to be an important port city in China, so I
figure my quest shouldn't be too arduous. I ask around among
my students. The consensus is that Tanggu, a smaller city that
is under the jurisdiction of Tianjin, is the place to go to see
Bohai Gulf. Bohai Gulf is big, and it opens into the Yellow Sea,
separating China and the divided peninsula of Korea. It's
several hundred miles across, so it should fit the bill of
stretching to the horizon. I even get a detailed set of written
directions to use a hodgepodge of public transportation to reach
my destination.

Bella, one of my students, agrees to accompany me. Tanggu
isn't a foreign tourist stop, so that's a good thing. Her Chinese
will be invaluable. No giant English signs or guidebooks are
going to help me on this trip. And it turns out that my
handwritten directions leave a lot of minute but vital gaps in my
path. Gaps that can be filled only by locals. And even then, we
discover, inexpertly so.

Bella and I leave the school at 10am. We take a bung bung cart,
a bus, another bus, and a train before reaching the city of
Tanggu. We've got the name of the park written down, and we
ask a succession of merchants and street sweepers how to find
it. There's little agreement on just where the water is in relation
to the city. We manage to turn the average of their directions

into a meandering hike to our destination – Bund Park, on the waterfront. Well, more precisely, on *a* waterfront.

It's about 5pm. And instead of wind open Bohai Gulf, we find the dirty, industrial Hai River. It's no more than a quarter mile across to the spewing smokestacks on the opposite bank.

Which, admittedly, do make for a vivid, rusty sunset.

The park itself is a multi-tiered monstrosity of pavement and modern sculpture. Three giant waves of steel girders, a hundred feet high. Barely a tree or shrub or blade of grass to offend the eye. It's 32 degrees, but Chinese carnies are still set up on the boardwalk, mostly running cheap ring toss games. Their prizes are laid out in a grid, and you throw bike tires at the prize you want to win. It would probably be dismal in the summer months, even with people around.

As it is, there are just a few teenage mooks posing for photos with a bronze statue. It's a little Chinese boy standing in a row boat, urinating into half of a clam shell. His form is tarnished green, but his penis is resplendent in the last rays of sunlight, polished by supplicants, perverts, and those who were just curious.

There's no open water in sight, but somehow I still don't feel all that let down.

Could you write happier endings for the leading characters in your book about China? → December 13, 2010

Sometimes in our quest for meaning we like to impose a neat narrative arc on our messy lives. And sometimes we don't have to try very hard at all to do this. Sometimes for ourselves and for all of the supporting players in our lives, the road ahead seems to straighten out all at once. We can hit the gas and

motor on to the horizon, leaving our tangled metaphors and unsubtle attempts at happiness behind us.

So it seems to be as my time in China comes to an end.

I've been busy playing drums, looking for the sea, eating hot pot, and otherwise taking China in. So my meetings with Wayne have been fewer and farther between. But tonight he claims partial responsibility for this.

You see, he's found a girlfriend. He's got pictures on his iPhone as proof. She's a cute girl, striking fashion poses in front of bell towers on the Great Wall. Their romance is three weeks old, but they're wasting no time. On Saturday, Wayne met her in Tianjin's busiest shopping district. He had a dozen roses and a dozen languages with which to say "I love you." He got down on his knee to recite them. She was duly impressed, and a small crowd of similarly sentimental Chinese gathered around to bear witness.

He's always been shy around girls, but she makes him feel bold. Suddenly, with his girl nearby in downtown Tianjin, his five year contractual sentence at this college seems like a holiday.

Ernie hasn't been home to Canada in years. He's left some heartache behind there and has little reason to return.

But he has just legally adopted a Chinese orphan. A little boy of about eight. His daughter and her husband will raise the boy back in Canada. They lost their own child a few years ago, and have had a really rough time since. Their lives will brighten immeasurably, but that's still dim compared to the promise with which this boy's future now glows. And these days, all of that light is beaming out of the grin on Ernie's face.

Even Tracy, my occasional handler here at the school, is eloping with her longtime boyfriend next week. The plan for them is to move to Canada, too.

As for me, I'm moving to Washington, DC in less than a month to begin work on a graduate degree in history. That's been my goal for almost three years now. It's finally coming true, and under circumstances so ideal I couldn't have conceived of them those three years ago.

Could you write happier endings for the leading characters in your book about China?

Tonight for dinner, I ate boiled duck's blood. → December 17, 2010

Tonight for dinner, I ate boiled duck's blood.

It looks a little like dark brown opaque Jell-o.

And tastes a little like a bloody lip.

This was served in a kind of hot pot situation.
With duck meat and peppers.

I can't say I'd go for it again.

But like so many things, I'm glad I did it once.

There's a reeling moment of indecision, huddled on a busy Beijing street as we develop a new plan. → December 19, 2010

D minus seven days and counting until I return to the U.S. It's my last Sunday in China. My plan is to visit the Great Wall again. I went the first weekend that I was here, and I thought it was pretty fantastic. Eddie, Luckiya, Evangelina, and Bella –

my friends – catch wind of this, and they ask if they can tag along. Of course they can – only one of them has ever seen the Great Wall. I've found that most of the Chinese I meet have never seen these cultural landmarks – too boring or too expensive or both.

We ride the bus from Wuqing to Beijing – 90 motion sick minutes of stuffy air and Chinese workers sneezing and not covering their mouths, compared to 20 well-ventilated minutes on the fast train. But this is far and cheaper, and it's how my friends (and many other Chinese) can afford to travel.

We subway across the city for another half hour to the embarkation point for Great Wall-bound buses, only to discover that the government has declared today to be a traffic control day. Too much traffic. So, somewhat illogically, only a limited amount of mass transportation is allowed on the road out of the city toward the Great Wall. Meaning that the price of tickets has just quintupled spontaneously.

There's a reeling moment of indecision, huddled on a busy Beijing street as we develop a new plan. We toss around a few ideas, and eventually Luckiya mentions that she's never seen Tiananmen Square (or any of Beijing except the inside of a train station) and Eddie says he'd like to see the Temple of Heavenly Peace. I've been both places, but of my four friends, only Eddie has ever been to Tiananmen Square, and none has ever been to the Temple. The general consensus is that these places are actually pretty cool and beautiful. And I have to say that in the company of my friends, I like them a lot more than when I saw them solo back in August.

My friends are Asian, and Asians here behave much the same way that Asian tourists anywhere do – they take lots and lots and lots of photos. I hand over my camera, and by the end of

the day, the battery is dead and the memory card has nearly 300 pictures on it. About 298 of these are iterations of the five of us in different poses in different locations.

But it's so much fun. Lesson number one on the list of things I have learned about the world from my stay in China – it's not where you are that counts, but who you are with. The camaraderie of these four friends has really made my China experience not just memorable, but something I will truly miss.

I try explain this to them at the end of the day, standing by the school's back gate, holding my hands close together. "When I first arrived, China meant this much to me. I thought maybe I kind of hated it here. But then I became friends with the four of you." I spread my hands wide. "And China holds a place this big in my heart."

It's the most heartbreaking band break-up ever. → December 21, 2010

In the concrete bunker under the bleachers, I join my friends in the band one last time tonight. We riff on some of our old favorites, jam on some heavy metal originals. Pose for a picture. And then these rock and roll guys hug me one by one. They don't want any of my thanks for letting me sit in with them – even the drummer whose throne I took – they all thank me. It's cool that I'm a real American. When it's time to go, they all walk me out. It's the most heartbreaking band break-up ever.

As I slow dance with each boy, I point out the room full of good-looking nineteen and twenty year-old girls surrounding us. → December 22, 2010

Christmas is exotic for many Chinese the way that Cinco de Mayo is for many Americans – little understood, devoid of any

cultural context, but irresistible because you celebrate by doing something you wanted to do anyway. Whether that something is drinking or giving a gift. In China, the most common gift is an apple wrapped in brightly colored tissue paper. Vendors line up outside the school gate and in front of KFC to hawk them. With the wrapped apples all together like that, arranged in clusters, it looks like a botanical garden has burst through the pavement. A Christmas miracle that would be welcome right now, as Tianjin is gripped by a subzero cold snap that penetrates my shoes and my pants.

Ernie and a few of his students are throwing a Christmas party at six o'clock. They've hung Christmas lights and draped our classroom in tinsel. Ernie even stole the sad, lopsided, undecorated Christmas tree that's been sitting in the vestibule outside the school's canteen for weeks. They dragged the classroom tables into the hall and arranged the chairs in a big circle following the perimeter of the wall. American dance music blasts on the classroom's sound system. The room is packed and the lights are dim by the time I arrive. If the room wasn't full of Chinese kids sitting in a respectful, orderly fashion with their hands in their laps, self-segregated by sex, it'd be what I imagine a dance club to be like.

Julia, one of the girls who planned the party has an idea in mind for entertainment – Ernie and I will speak English. That's usually her idea when she plans something like this. Ernie and I demur, instead offering a few opening remarks of thanks and merry Christmas. Ernie dedicates the party in my honor, in anticipation of my departure. Then he sets about trying to get the kids to dance.

These Chinese students have never had a dance before – they're more timid around the opposite sex than your average American middle-schooler.

They pretty much flatly refuse to dance, their butts parked in their chairs. Ernie and I coax a few kids out onto the floor – the girls lured by the promise of dancing with me. When they actually come face to face with me, though, they are so shy that all they can do is hide their giggles with their hands. The boys are also lured by the promise of dancing with me, but they are brave enough to follow through. There's some up-tempo Michael Jackson song from *Thriller* playing, but they want to learn how to do a proper slow dance. I protest that I don't know how to do a proper slow dance. I can't even *name* a proper slow dance. But they insist. I lead, my hand on their hip. As I slow dance with each boy, I point out the room full of good-looking nineteen and twenty year-old girls surrounding us. Outnumbering us. The odds are in your favor, I say. They will hear nothing of it and dance with each other instead.

Ernie has snack cakes and tissue paper-wrapped apples which he launches into the crowd. They cheer like it's a rock concert.

Kids sit, watching Ernie and I rumba.

A student named Julia presents us each with a binder collecting holiday wishes from many of our students. I'm a sucker for this kind of thing, and this one does not fail to disappoint. The unnatural Chinese syntax makes the letters inside even more endearing.

The party goes on for a total of two hours, and as far as I can tell, almost no one leaves early.

Some guys are even shoveling the snow off the grass. →
December 23, 2010

I wanted to see it snow here so badly. Even that turns out to be a different experience than in the U.S.

It's the first snow of the season in Tianjin – a light dusting. The school's custodial staff is out in full force with brooms made of weeds, sweeping the snow into piles, loading it onto bicycle powered carts, and carrying it away. Some guys are even shoveling the snow off the grass.

For four months, I was another person in another place in another time. → December 23, 24, 25, 26, 2010

My last few days in China include a torrent of bittersweet flavors: a trendy dinner in downtown Tianjin with my favorite students, then an all-night stay at KTV with them. That's something very popular among Chinese students. It's all very good fun, even when the dangerously drunk Chinese boy and I meet by the urinals. He tells me destiny has brought us together – I am to be his first foreign friend. He follows me back to my KTV room, and it takes his more sober younger brother to finally get him to leave. Eddie, Evangeline, and Bella finish off the night around 6am, dedicating a tearful rendition of a Chinese song about the power of friendship in my honor. We walk to breakfast through the snow and the dawn with the workers of Tianjin, eating in a basement kitchen full of blue collar Chinese. This improvised restaurant comes complete with kitchen cabinets that the regulars open when they need a napkin. One cold hike to the bus stop later, and I'm saying goodbye to Tianjin local Eddie for the last time. It's heart-wrenching, as I realize how much of myself I'm about to leave behind in China. Hugs and tears. Eddie leaves me with a Christmas card that

tells me I am his best friend. The next 24 hours is more of the same.

On Christmas day, Luckiya, Evangeline, and Bella take me out for lunch at one of our favorite little dives. Nearby, there's a Chinese funeral taking place. It's loud and brightly colored. I stop to watch, not knowing at all what is happening, and my three friends are thrown into a panic. You do not look at a funeral – not because it is rude, but because it can attract undue attention from the spirits of the dead. I am about to travel, and I do not need that kind of trouble.

Bella and I part after lunch, right outside the restaurant. She's crying and doesn't really want a goodbye that's any more protracted. We hug, and she says she's wants to be alone with her thoughts. But ends up running after my bung bung cart as I head back to the school to collect my things. Scene from a movie. It's wet, with lots more tears. Luckiya, Evangeline, and Ernie walk me to my taxi. Deep hugs and tears all around, in the dark, cold Wuqing night.

I spend Christmas night on a bench in the Beijing airport. Christmas tunes play over the PA until late, and then there's nothing but a melancholy stillness that fits my mood perfectly. At exactly 12:01am, a crew of workers materialize, removing the Christmas lights that decorate the international departures hall. Their work is befitting a country where Christmas is a western affectation, both celebrated and torn down without sentiment or ceremony. As quickly as those lights go out, so too does my life in China come to end.

The flight back to America leaves Beijing at 7:50am on Sunday. Flying north, the sun rises and sets over the Mongolian and Siberian wilderness before plunging below the Arctic horizon. I arrive in Chicago at 6:30am on Sunday, nearly ninety minutes

before or twelve hours after I leave, depending on how you count. A day like this leaves you wrung out and disoriented. Deeply emotional, but numb from exhaustion.

There is no gap whatsoever in the continuity of America.

CNN prattles on in the airport, as it always does.

Billboards line the Kennedy Expressway, written in English, but somehow less significant than their unintelligible Chinese counterparts.

Home looks like it always does. My room has even been dusted, just to make sure that it seems like no time has passed.

For four months, I was another person in another place in another time. Concerned with different people and things, eating different food, learning to speak another language, learning to live according to the rules of an alien society. I'm left with a question that I'll ponder in my quiet moments for quite some time to come: What bearing does any of that have on my life in the U.S.A.?

My parents could have dropped me off at the airport, driven around the block for ten minutes, and then picked me up again immediately before bringing me home.

But in those ten minutes, I lived another lifetime.

How do you think I did? → December 31, 2010

Since I have returned to the United States, I've talked almost nonstop about my life in China. My friends and relatives have had lots of questions, and I'm more than fine with that – even if they weren't asking, China would be the only thing on my mind.

I went to China with some very nebulous expectations about what I would find. I imagined a sort of Wild West – free, open, and messy. In the street, that's very true, except the horses are three wheeled bung bung carts. In the streets, China is sloppy and rough – you can buy anything for less than you think it should be worth, and not even the police pretend to obey traffic laws.

But officially, China is a land of order and control – the government wishes to impose regulation that would make any American chafe and chomp. The opportunities of the average Chinese are proscribed from very early on – most of my students have a very clear picture of what their life will be like based on standardized tests they've already taken. You can't own land, you can only rent it from the government, and the government sets the price by fiat. As a Chinese, you cannot speak your conscience about anything the government does without fear of harsh reprisal.

There is contradiction there, and that is as compelling as it is confounding.

China is even more a riddle to me after four months of inspection than it was when I first arrived. I know considerably more about it, but as a result, it's harder to draw many definite conclusions.

I do know that I left part of my heart with the Chinese people. They are both shy and curious simultaneously, seemingly afraid to talk to me, but happy to take pictures of my blond hair as I walked through the market. They feared for my health because I didn't own any long underwear and I drank cold water instead of hot. At the same time they spit and shit in the street and welcomed stray cats into their restaurants on cold days.

I miss so much about them.

When I left for China back in August, I wrote that I wanted to be able to say, “This is what it looks like from over there,” and “This is how I measured up.” After four months, I’m still not sure I have a complete answer to either. The closest I can come to a cogent response is the 30,000 words I’ve written on the subject for this journal.

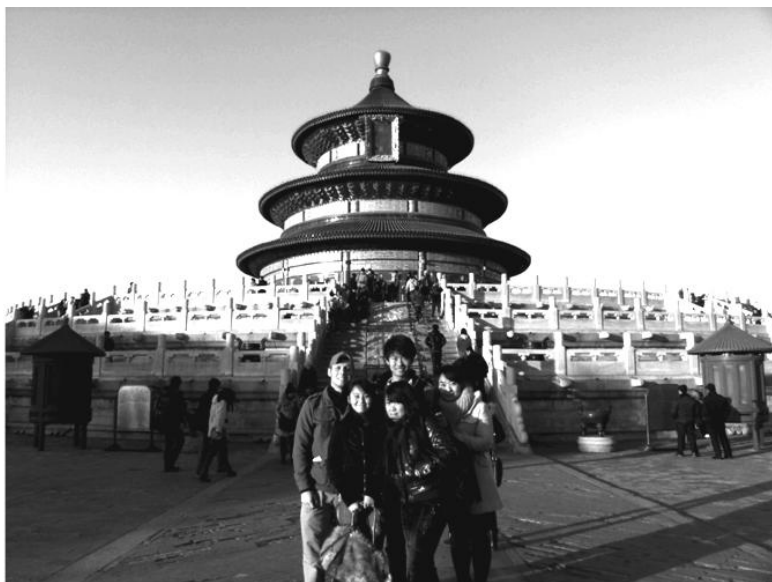
Now that you’ve read it... Do you think you could do better?

Acknowledgements...

I want to offer a deep thank you to all of my loved ones. They have all been so incredibly supportive of my whole “I must go to China” phase. Especially my sister, whose wedding I missed. And my mother and father, whose daughter’s wedding I missed. But also, my aunts and cousins and my friends for writing to me and sending me things to make sure that home was never far from my mind.

Thanks to all the kind faces and new friends I’ve made along the way, even though many of them live behind the Great Firewall and may never read these words. Wayne, Ernie, Tracy, Bella, Eddie, Evangeline, Luckiya, the guys in the band, Mikel, the kind Filipinos at Our Melting Pot, on down to all of the friendly Chinese guards and workers who spoke no English but offered warm smiles as I wandered around the schoolyard. All of you were more than just friends – you were hosts and protectors and guides to a stranger in your homelands. I couldn’t have done very much without your sustained benevolence and generosity.

And a mighty thanks to anyone who read about my adventures here or anywhere else that they’ve appeared. I hope you’ve enjoyed them. I can’t wait to hear about *your* adventure someday soon.



Signing off from Tianjin.

