

Two For a Dollar: A Chinese Odyssey

Forward: A note of thanks to Joe Farey who suggested the name of this journal. Upon arrival in Beijing, our guide informed us the first bottle of water was free, all subsequent bottles were “two for a dollar.” This became something of a Bus 3 theme for the entire trip.

Before the Beginning

This vacation had a most dubious start. The Wednesday before leaving for Sacramento I left work with an extremely painful stomach condition. In bed from Two in the afternoon, at 12:30 AM the illness became volatile. (I'll leave it at that.) I was well enough to catch my flight Friday evening with no side effects of that night's activities.

Round Two started up at 2:30 AM on the 4th. It became very clear in a short period of time this was going to be worse than the first. Up in Anderson, I needed to get back to Sac. later in the day. By the time to leave came around I must have been a mean shade of white. Mom suggested a trip to the hospital if I didn't improve on the trip back.

I didn't. And a trip to the ER was in order. This in itself was quite an experience. After filling out the proper paperwork, which is difficult in the condition I was in, I was escorted to an interview room for Q&A and the usual vital readings.

I guess I was bad enough to warrant a bed immediately. More vitals and it was determined I was suffering from extreme dehydration. It took a nurse five minutes to find a vein fat enough to stick a needle into. Even then, it took a while to insert it.

ER's being what they can be on holidays, I was ushered to a bed in a hallway alcove while my body sucked up the IV. Something the doctor gave me left me very drowsy. I think I was in and out of consciousness for some time. But I had company for the more lucid periods. Big brother Anthony found me in the hall and stayed at hand. Good thing too. If he had not been there I was going to be spending the night there.

Also, I got all the juicy details of the other visitors from him.

Accidents, especially on a holiday, are expected. The rest was a bit out of the ordinary. One group was escorted in by police because of the fight that put them in there. Rocks were the main weapons of choice.

Three IV's and 5 ½ hours later, a diagnosis of dehydration due to stomach flu, one Diet Sprite (disgusting in my condition) and orders to consume only clear liquids for 24 hours, I was on my way.

My round of golf for the next day was cancelled in favor of bed rest. The hope was that I would be healthy enough to get on the plane on Thursday. Thank goodness I made it. I would have hated to miss it.

The Beginning

Being well informed works wonders. What looked like chaos in the making at the college went off without a hitch. Buses were loaded quickly and off we went.

The ride to SFO was uneventful. Except for a Merry-go-Round at the airport (three time around) looking for our drop off point, and checking in a couple hundred people in an hour and a half, we were off to China with no problems.

Nine hours into the flight, the navigation system says we are northeast of Sapporo, Japan. There were bad movies with Chinese subtitles, somewhat tolerable food, two half-hour stretching periods, and something resembling sleep. There is a chain massage going on in front of me. It reminds me of the unemployment office scene in the Full Monty.

Of course, if you're going to travel with a choir, you've got to expect a session or two of joyous bursting into song. This came from somewhere in the back of the plane. Good thing these guys are good at it.

Beijing

The cattle-call immigration check went well. Buses were at hand and it's off to the hotel during rush hour. It was slow going. I know it was because of the traffic but you could make a case it was because of the very dense smog. The hour and a half bus ride was difficult after the eleven-hour flight but we were there.

Not all the rooms are ready so it's straight to dinner for the half of us without keys. First lesson: "Spicy" means SPICY. Must be sure of what you grab to eat. Also, I'm still wondering what I should (or should not) be drinking considering my prior condition.

The room is nice. I'm there first because Russell was on the other flight so I'm grabbing the bed. (Versus the cot) I had heard stories about how hard the beds are but this is plywood hard. It's the cot for me.

First Day

Breakfast is done (American style), emails checked and it's time to start!

Getting anywhere in Beijing is slow going. (Imagine L.A. with 9 million more people)

In 1997, the government stopped providing housing for the people. They have to buy a flat from the government. Social Security is only for people that live in the metropolitan areas. State provided health care is just now getting to the rural areas and very few areas have it.

The single-child law is seen as good but the female infant abandonment rate is very high. Farmers are allowed to have two children to help with farming chores.

This little bit of history is for all of you that thought I wasn't listening to our wonderful guide.

Tiananmen Square. Street hawkers abound. I bought Chairman Mao for \$5. At least a watch with his smiling picture in it and him waving at us. Must have been amused at the changes in his China that would allow for this type of Capitalism to exist.

On the way to the square, we questioned our guide on certain "issues". For all the movement toward an open society, there are still many reminders of the underlying Communist regime. Our guide would only talk about the 1989 incident while on the bus with the doors closed and asked not to speak openly about it once we got off the bus. Also, religion is an odd topic there. Party members are not allowed to be religious and non-members cannot discuss it in public.

Mao's tomb is there on the square. The line to see him seems 500 yards

long and six bodies wide. Just off the square is the Parliamentary Building. This seems a bit contradictory to me: Communists with a Parliament?

The little girls must have liked my Indiana Jones look because they were asking to take pictures with me. I'm sure everyone else was getting a fair share of attention. We Americans seem to be a rarity here in Beijing.

The stop in the square was short. First lesson: Stay up with the group! The under the road stairway was packed and an elderly couple was trying desperately to get in line with no luck. It seems the Chinese people can be a bit rude when going from point A to point B. So, being the wonderfully sweet guy I am, I helped them in line. Being elderly as they were, they were very slow causing me to fall way behind the group. The tour company has extra people on each bus and until then did not know why. I was greeted at the bottom of the stairs by one of these and he explained the necessity of staying WITH the group (by gently prodding me into a trot to catch up). I only made this mistake one more time later on.

On to the Forbidden City, home of many of the Ming and Xing emperors. This place is huge. First mistake: only one bottle of water. Thanks goodness there were places to buy more along the way.

Lots of people. You pretty much had to move in one direction at some points when moving from one city ring to the next. Also, much of the city has been renovated but there is still lots going on. Must be ready for the 2008 Olympics.

Another problem stemming from the crush of people, there are so many tour groups doing the same thing you are that it is hard to hear your tour guide above the din. Some actually were using megaphones. And, the "City" was using a loudspeaker to make announcements.

All that aside, this place is wonderful. Just thinking about the amount of labor necessary to build this in the time and era they did is mind-boggling. To try to describe it would take too much time. Take a look at the pictures. They say so much more than I can.

The Royal Gardens are a pleasant change from the stone courtyards of the city. For all the time we spent in the city, I felt rushed in the garden. It would have been nice to have a little more time.

After the long walk, a long ride (time not distance), quick lunch, another

long ride and we made it to the Summer Palace. What a beautiful place. Lots of renovating going on here too. Once home to the “Dragon Lady”, mother of the last emperor, she wielded great power for a woman in a man’s society.

The Olympics is a big theme everywhere. There are “Official” Olympic souvenir shops at many locations. Unfortunately, smog is also a big “theme” here. The lake at the Palace would have looked much nicer on a clear day. We took a walk along the lake to see the various out buildings built on the shore. There are lions at the entrance of many buildings in China. One has a ball under foot (presumably a globe). This is a male and it seems to signify dominance. The other is female and has a baby under foot. Care and nurturing?

I thought after a day of haggling with vendors I had a handle on the various angles. I was wrong. A man approached while I was taking pictures and asked to borrow my pen. He started a seemingly aimless conversation with me all the while doing something with his hands. As I was being quite the shutterbug I wasn’t paying too much attention to his activities. After a while he shows me the etching he had done on my pen. In Chinese, it says “Summer Palace, Beijing, July 8, 2006. He then demands \$2 for the effort. Even by American standards a pretty penny for 45 seconds of work on a 30 cent pen. We haggled.

The Stone Boat. I don’t know what to say about that except look at the pictures. Two decks above the waterline, I’m not sure about the significance of a boat that goes nowhere on a beautiful lake.

We hop onto a real boat in what I assume is a trip to the palace/temple on the island but we just cruise on by back to our original starting point to load onto the bus and head out for dinner. The camera battery died on the trip across the lake. It’s OK. Darkness is coming soon.

Dinner turned into a birthday celebration for the dozen members of the tour having birthdays while on the trip. Perfect time to burst out in song again. Good thing we had a choir around.

In case you think you know what ‘rush hour’ is, “Elevator Rush” is a whole new experience. 200 people, three SMALL and very slow elevators, it can take an hour to get to your room. In the morning, figure for 15 to 20 minutes to get down from the upper floors, more from the lower ones. (Full elevators.)

Time to turn in and charge the camera batteries, not to mention the biological ones. Probably took 150 or more pictures today!

Day Two

The Panda Experience

We visited the Beijing Zoo today just to see the Panda bears. They are cute cuddly little creatures but not very active. If not for feeding time I don't think we would have seen any movement at all. The pictures I did get were not 'action' shots. I had fun at the souvenir shop here. Panda hat pins. Panda coin. Panda magnets. Hmm, there's a theme there! One hour there and back on the road.

The Pearl Factory (store) was next. Utterly amazing what they do with pearls. (And their mothers) We learned about the fresh water (many pearls per oyster) vs. saltwater pearls (one per oyster) development. Five minute lesson over and it's off to the showroom floor.

They use every pearl, perfect or not, in something. Animal figurines were a common theme. I was completely enthralled by the globes. Beautiful. If not for the size, I would have one now. Soon. All colors of pearls. Black, white, gold.

Lunch time. Chinese again. Go figure! Good food. I know Wayne doesn't agree but oh well. It's very hot and humid in the restaurant. Soy sauce is not a condiment you will find on many tables in China. And you better know how to say it in Chinese if you want it.

Time for an afternoon ride to the port city of Tianjin. And while we're riding, a little Chinese lesson. Tian means heavenly, Jin means port. May Gua (not sure on spelling, do it phonetically) literally translates into 'beautiful country'. Surprisingly enough, it means United States.

It's sort of a dismal day. Rain on and off all morning. It makes for a cooler day but the gray doesn't do much as a backdrop for our pictures.

Trees! The highway is lined with them. Six to eight deep. Weeping Willows, Ash, etc. They are layered as if to hide the countryside from travelers. By the time the Olympics start, you won't be able to see through them at all. But for now some gaps show nothing but farmlands and small towns. An occasional military facility peeks through. Maybe there IS something to hide! For those of us of the golfing persuasion, I did see a few along the way.

The Concert

It's time for the first of five concerts. We're a few minutes late for rehearsal

but no problem. Us choir groupies are given a little time to explore. There was a park across the street with kite flyers, skaters, artists and flea merchants. The International Center Building is the main attraction. They have a museum-like history display set up in the lobby. Enough time to breeze through it but not to fully understand (all text in Chinese). I did strike up a conversation with a young couple regarding one of the pictures there. It was good to hear English from them. The people there seemed thrilled to see us.

Time to get back to the hall. Pedestrians are obviously worth two points because the cars don't stop for anything or anybody. Let's clear this up right now. Pedestrians are the lowest form of transportation life in China. Nothing, not even bicycles, will yield to a pedestrian. If there is an accident and you're the walking victim, you are at fault. This is the "Golden Rule" of China I think.

Rehearsal is still going on so the groupies are sent to dinner to speed things up. I think us crazy Americans confused the wait staff on the buffet line at the restaurant. We see a buffet and we go to one end and start. They wanted us to start in the middle and work out and around. Never did quite work out the way they want it to. But the idea of a buffet is to eat and we did.

Now for the fun. The groupies were assigned the first three rows in the balcony. Unfortunately, there were tickets sold for some of those seats. The owners of those tickets were a bit upset. A battle ensued. Our guides went toe-to-toe with angry residents. During the screaming, some of our group moved to let them have good seats. Most were appreciative but a couple kept up the fight to the bitter end.

As this was my first exposure to this choir, I had some personal expectations of what I was about to hear from these American cultural ambassadors of music. I admit I was surprised to hear African and European selections to start the concert. The concert was good but the number of cell phones ringing during the songs was annoying. I guess Americans are not the only ones addicted to their cell phones.

The US and Chinese choirs both performed individually before combining for a joint performance. It was very good. I heard this morning they rehearse 4 hours, five days a week.

The bus ride back to Beijing was quiet mostly. We got in at 12:30 AM. Elevator Rush again. I'd use the stairs but 18 floors is a bit much considering all the walking the day involves.

General notes:

Knee How = Hello.

Knee how ma = How are you?

Wall eye knee = I love you.

Workday for Government workers = 8-12, 2-6 with a two hour lunch and nap period.

Another storm blew through last night. Very vocal.

School is publicly funded through Jr. High. Past that is optional.

Day Three The Great Wall

I haven't had any problem collapsing at night. Tonight will be really easy. We made the trip to the Great Wall of China today. Russell and I headed up the wall with the intent of going to the top. I made it to the first guard station and figured that was about as far as I could go. Russell kept on. I did the tourist stuff available at that level and started back down. It was as hard that way as up. My knees were quaking with every step. I thought each step would be the last and I'd have to be carried off the wall. But I took it easy and made it down. A Chinese family adopted me on the way down and took many pictures of me with the various members. I had 'dad' take a picture of me, 'mom and little brother' with my camera. They offered me food. I guess I looked like I needed something.

What a great experience (excuse the pun). I keep thinking how much better it would have been with clear skies. How much of the beauty are we missing because of the dreary weather and smog?

Don't forget, this is also Concert Number Two. As Russell and I walked up, we could hear the voices of the choir lofting up after us. Quite the experience. That and the rain. Umbrellas were bought. Also, I'm really glad I bought the Indiana Jones hat.

Time now to pause and reflect on the immensity of 'The Wall'. Even by today's methods, this would be a monstrous undertaking. Imagine the effort involved then. The wall is built on the ridges of the mountains in this area. I had trouble walking up the steps because of the incline. They had to build the steps on the incline. And the guard towers. And the wall is about 45 feet tall. And is about 5000 kilometers long. WOW! That isn't enough to say but what else is

there.

More rain.

The Cloisonné Factory

It's hard to look at a piece of cloisonné and imagine how it was made. I hate to keep saying to look at the pictures but they do follow the process fairly well. A copper base is molded into the shape needed and then hand-etched with the design. It is then hand-painted with a paint that can then be cooked into a hard enamel finish.

I bought a pair of 'health balls'. These are balls you roll in your hand to help calm yourself (I guess) and have some sort of chime built into them. They are green with a Phoenix on one (female) and a dragon (male) on the other. This is a recurring theme in China.

Just a quick note here for my family members: If you go to a dictionary and look up a definition of shopaholic, don't be surprised to see a picture of Michele there. This woman goes back for more when the bus is loading.

We had lunch at the factory restaurant. It was the first appearance of hard liquor on the table for a meal. 114 proof alcohol, something similar in taste to Scotch, that curled your nose hairs.

It's back to the buses and everyone is showing off their buys.

General Notes:

I think I will stop saying how great/wonderful/beautiful/amazing/incredible everything is. It all is. When Americans talk about history and antiques, we look 200-300 years back. When Chinese speak of these it's 2000-3000 years back.

Billboards: They waste no space when it comes to advertising. We think freeway billboards are a blight. The Chinese use every rooftop, open area of any kind and I actually saw a concrete canal with a billboard-sized painting on the wall advertising something. If it has the room for one, it's a safe bet there is one there.

Cranes: I wish I had the franchise on cranes in Beijing. We must have seen 500 or more being used on new high-rise buildings. Everywhere they are tearing down single level and going vertical. That's how they put 16 million people in the

space they have.

The Beijing Acrobatic Theater

The journal says to say amazing again but I'll resist. I just chalk it up to good planning on the part of the tour company. They won't take us anywhere that isn't amazing.

The troupe's performance was wonderful. I think they had 10 people on one bicycle at one time. The bowl toss to the head on the third level. Of course, without pictures, all this is so much babble. My notes actually say, "a thousand words limits what the pictures would say." See the pictures. I don't type that fast.

Capitalism in action: We were in an accident and the driver paid the 'victim' Y300 (\$37.00) to settle the whole matter. We took up a collection to cover it for him.

I'm losing track of the days so I'll dispense with numbering them. Another note on the test of the Great Wall: Went up to the room at 8:30 for a short rest. I got up at 3 AM to undress for bed. First signs of stomach distress have shown up but by the morning call things had settled. (Knock on wood)

The guy in front of me is reading the weather news from yesterday. It seems the heavy rains and lightning storm shut down Beijing airport for a while.

The Silk Factory

I never had any preconceived notions of how silk worms did what they do. I just never put any effort into finding out. The whole process is interesting. We learned about single and multi-strand silk. I held a strand of silk in my hands and could feel it but not see it, as it is so fine. They put eight strands together to make one thread. And how they stretch the multistrand to make a quilt. Weird.

Of course, now it's time to shop. Couldn't resist buying the silk boxers for J.O. (roommate). Where's Michele? Stupid question. At the register again!

Temple of Heavenly Harvest (& People's Park)

There are lots of things going on in the park. Music. Dancing. Cards. Mahjong. Exercising. More. So many people relaxing and having a good time. The park is very green and inviting but the signs say to stay off the grass. Too bad.

The Search for a Chinese Laundry

Brother Russell and I need to get our laundry done. So we check the laundry 'menu' in the hotel room and figure it will be a \$50 tab to have them do it. So we decide to do some exploring around Beijing and do our own laundry at the same time. So the search begins.

We stop at the hotel counter for directions and off we go. About 15 minutes into the trek, we realize we may not have fully understood the instructions from the hotel clerk. It's time to ask the locals for help. English anyone? It was almost as hard to find someone that spoke English as finding the laundromat. Six lovely young ladies indicated they did speak English and once they understood what we were looking for informed us they had laundry facilities on the premises of their business...a massage parlor. Russell decided to check out the equipment to make sure it would handle our needs. About the time I noticed three of the ladies dragging him along I figured I better have a chat with him about their claim. The other three had grabbed my arms to direct me to the laundry area. Their claim of laundry service quickly went out the window when one took hold of the laundry I was wearing slightly below the waist and announced she could 'do my laundry real good.' About then Russell came around the corner beating off the three and we were heading out the door looking to get our dirty laundry done, not our clean stuff!

Amazingly enough, we ran into a Canadian gentleman who lives in the area and he tells us there are no Laundromats in China. Something about how the Chinese will not wash their clothes in the same machine as a stranger. Search over, back to the hotel to drop off our clothes and head out for dinner.

The Dining Experience of a Lifetime

Russell and I again go exploring. We decide not to go to dinner with the group and struck out on our own to find dinner. The LouJong Grand Restaurant. It had the look and feel of a ritzy hotel. We were greeted at the door by a gentleman asking if we had reservations. No, we're just here for dinner. He escorted us to the dining area and left us with the hostess. Seated, we order our drinks and get ready for our meal. Sticker Shock! The first item on the menu

costs Y8888 (\$1111). Shark Fin Soup. The prices got better from there. Only \$125 for a variety of abalone soup. There were pictures so we could understand what was being offered. Deep-fried Duck Heads. Chicken Feet. Those were only \$25 per plate.

Mild panic set in and a discussion of a graceful exit came up. At this point I think the waitress understood our discomfort and brought us a second menu. The pictures were much more appetizing and the prices MUCH more reasonable. Oddly, they insisted we each order two entrees.

Everything was 'healthy for you'. Even the pork with 93% fat was 'healthy'. They laughed at the foolish Americans for trimming off the fat.

Our waitress was 'our' waitress. She stood at table's edge to serve our every need. Fill our glasses when they were down a couple of sips. Bring our foods. She kept talking about showing us her "company" when we finished eating. Entire meal ended up costing \$25. Plus a tip she tried to return. We were told tipping was not a custom in China. It's not. She went to ask permission to keep it once we insisted.

It's time for the tour of the company. The place is exquisite. Marble floors and pillars. Tropical pond on the first floor. She took us to the second floor where we are greeted and taken to a conference room. Very nice, well-furnished room with a dining table set for 12, comfortable seating away from the table and plasma TV's for your conference viewing pleasures.

The hall outside this room is lined with another 30 or so rooms, which she says are all, like this one. Except the grand conference room. This room is so nice I want to live in it.

Lining the entryway are three rooms. First on the right is a bathroom, second is a poker room complete with a felt-lined table. The room on the left is a conference room similar to the first conference room we had seen. After the entry, the suite opens up to a room so large it has a table set for 15 guests with a large plasma TV at hand, and enough couches to seat another 30 or more with many more TV's. In the back rooms of the suite are another bathroom, a medium size conference room and a small conference room. Each of which are bigger than the one off the entryway. Sheer elegance.

Next is the wedding room. Big enough to seat 300 people. Then up to the third floor to the health club. At this point we head back to the lobby to view the seafood tanks. All live. Shark, eel, oysters, abalone, frogs, turtles, lobster,

mussels, trout, etc...must have been 30 tanks.

Weather kicked up again about 4 AM. Heavy rains, lightning. Off to Xian in the morning.

Xian (She On)

Hot and humid. I know that is not a new theme but it seems hotter and wetter than Beijing. Annie, our guide, is from Xian. She says that Xian has very nice, but very short, Fall and Spring. There are long, hot summers and long, cold winters. This is a provincial town, all 7 million people worth. I get the impression anything less than 10 million is a 'town' to these people.

The area is big in agriculture, textiles and other industrial plants. Also, it is the burial area of more than 70 emperors and their administrators. (Sounds like being an administrator could be hazardous to your health.) The city wants to put in a light rail or subway system but every time they go to dig, they find archeological sites that stop progress. It was too slow of a process to keep going.

Went to the city wall for our welcome ceremony and the presentation of the Key to the City to Dr. Kendrick, the choir director. If I heard right, the only other Americans to receive the Key were Richard Nixon and some hillbilly from Arkansas.

The ceremony is impressive. Dancers and guardsmen in traditional dress, politicians giving speeches, musicians and singers were all part of the welcome. Let's not forget the police escort that led us to the gate.

The wall basically acted as a castle in feudal days complete with moat and drawbridges. In case of attack, the townspeople gathered inside for protection from the marauders. Unlike castles, the walls are very long. Again, my memory isn't the best but I think Annie said 6 X 8 Kilometers. She actually competed in an annual race that is held on top of the wall and came in third.

I filled my first one-gigabyte photo card today. Good thing I bought the extra one.

Dinner was at a nationally famous dumpling restaurant. Eighteen courses of dumplings. The place is miserably hot. One woman was taken out suffering from heat exhaustion. And to add to it all, the last course was a hot-pot, a soup with pearl dumplings on an open flame. Good thing it came last and we could

get out of there.

Story has it the dumpling maker of yore needed to be creative in his dumplings to keep the interest of the empress. When she got bored with a cook, he didn't live long. The number of pearl dumplings in one ladle of soup had different meanings. One for happiness, two for long life, three for wealth, etc. But what if I get none she queried? None means no worries he replied. I had no worries.

General Notes:

1. The heat: You are not going to get away from it. It wouldn't be so bad for this Phoenix boy but the 80% + humidity is brutal.
2. The bathrooms: They reek! Get use to it or get over it. Depending on your philosophies of life either hold your nose or close your mouth.
3. English: As long as you are with the tour group you will find a fair amount of English-speaking Chinese. If you leave the group for a little independent exploring don't expect to hear much of it unless you talk to yourself.
4. The Big "D" (and I don't mean Dallas): From the sounds of it I have done quite well. The stories range from minor discomfort to an everyday torture.
5. The factory stores: Wonderful places. However, you need to forget all you have learned on the streets about haggling. Rumor has it they have to pay the tour companies 30% commission to direct the tours to the stores. They can't afford to haggle. Chances are you will find the same item at your hotel gift shop or local curio store for much less (after haggling). My silk Panda tie was Y40 at our hotel but Y150 at the store.
6. Prescriptions: You are not going to get them filled. If you think you might need them, bring them with you. This became an issue for a couple of our group.
7. Bigger IS better: The biggest thing on the road makes the rules. Period! Our bus is constantly cutting off other smaller vehicles and they seem to expect it and move out of the way. (I think the one guy we hit was a Whiplash Wong and he really hit us on purpose.)

Terracotta Warriors

It's hard to describe the immensity of this archeological find. Found in 1974, they are still digging to uncover the entire site. It is easy to be amazed here, and rightly so. The tools they had back then (or lack of them), makes it so much more than amazing what they accomplished.

An entire army, complete with infantry, archers, cavalry (with their horses), chariots, privates and generals; its all there. Thousands!

And commercialism too. A Coke Light, similar only in name to Diet Coke,

was Y20 (\$2.50). At the Beijing airport they were Y3.

Out to the opera hall for a traditional dance and music performance. Some of the skits were Ho-hum, but one in particular stood out as a crowd favorite. I call it 'Dueling Cymbals'. The group consisted of seven musicians with a variety of sizes of cymbals and two xylophone-type instruments. Through body movements, facial expressions and musical tomfoolery, they created a comical atmosphere reminiscent of slapstick. Despite the grand finale later, this was the hit of the show.

The Big Wild Goose Pagoda

The story goes something like this: Eons ago there was a drought across the land that was causing death from starvation due to the lack of food from farming. One day, a flock of wild geese flew over and on their heels was a storm that brought much needed rain and more storms followed and the drought was broken and all lived happily ever after. As a tribute of thanks to the geese the people built the Wild Goose Pagoda. Coincidentally, another town in the area had the same idea and built themselves a Wild Goose Pagoda. But it was smaller so it later became the Little Wild Goose Pagoda.

Back to the BWGP, it is seven stories tall and Russell and I walked to the top. Seven stories, 95 degrees, 90% humidity. Our hotel has a sauna you can use. I'll bet it's empty! This country would be beautiful if not for all the smog. Their idea of smog control is to use less electricity. I don't think it's working.

The Jade Factory

We had a lesson on how to grade Jade. The different hardness and colors and their value. The real lesson was seeing the price on a LITTLE pendant trinket that was Y24000 (\$3000). Lots of pictures taken here. The cranes on glass, various green and orange jade pieces, and the flowers that look so real. One interesting one is of a dragonfly perched on a flower bud. (Must see pictures!)

Lots of air conditioning here. Good place!

Had our first lazy day. Nothing until noon when we went to the restaurant. Then we had a couple of hours to check out the local stores before leaving for the airport. The A/C on the plane needed to be fixed. Have I mentioned the heat and humidity? If there is such a thing as 'Sweat Equity' we will own China by the time we leave. I hope Jinan is better than here. It's 32 degrees C and humid.

Jinan
(Gee non)

Jinan is the sister city of Sacramento. It's a bit smaller than Xian and seems like a garden spot. Everything from the airport to town is green and manicured. Still smoggy. The hotel is very nice. One of the best I've been in. There were little stuffed toys on our pillows when we check in. And when we went to the bar they gave us another little trinket. They tell me there is a golf simulator in the health club down stairs. Sign me up!

I went down for the golf simulator. Y80 per hour but it didn't work. Darn!

The people here seem more fascinated by us Americans than in the other cities. I think Jinan is a bit off the beaten path of tourism. Face it. We were there because of the sister city connection. Too bad for the other tourists.

The People's Park is very nice. There is a "Hall of Fame" of various philosophers of ancient China, Confucius included, built at one end of the park. If you do get to see my pictures along with this journal, look for the picture of the pink flower. There seems to be a bit of attention given to that flower. In the park, there is a stainless steel likeness of it perched above a pond. Three times a day, there is an aquatic ballet set to music with the flower as the centerpiece.

There was a group in traditional dress playing music and dancing. And what looked like a used car lot right in the middle of the park. The story was that this was a celebration for the return of stolen cars and when it was over, the owners could take their cars back.

At the far end of the park is a very nice garden around the natural springs they have in Jinan. Also, there is a museum dedicated to a very young poetess from feudal times that seemed to speak the mind of the people. Obviously she was very well thought of but died early and poor; the story of many artists around the world.

On our way to dinner, our sponsor requested we stop to buy cakes for the two members celebrating birthdays that day.

After dinner came exploration time. Russell and I took off on foot to see the town. The buses went past us on the way to the concert hall. One of them stopped to pick us up and the guide insisted we get on. We explained our

intention sightseeing and heading back to the hotel. She was having none of this. We must go the concert hall!! After seeing the error of our ways we agreed to meet them at the hall. We must have taken a wrong turn because we ended up at the hotel.

We stopped in a few stores along the way. One store was selling scooters for \$1500. (Something more than a Moped but less than a motorcycle.) Stopped in the various smoke shops looking for Cubans; no luck!

We had been heading for a large stadium because it looked so big and modern that we wanted to get a closer look at it. There was a large plaza surrounding it with a big hole in it similar to one I had seen at the People's Park. There were stairs leading down one level where there were stores of various types. We decided to have a look at one.

This place was huge! This was a department store every bit as big as a Walmart. We walked down one aisle and back up the next. Very big, very modern and very underground. After walking the whole floor, we took the escalator down to the next floor. Just as big. There was a grocery section complete with 'fresh' seafood. (I had found it difficult to get near raw seafood in China, especially right after eating a meal.)

Back in the plaza, a groundskeeper noticed me peering through the gates at the field and invited us in to see the stadium. It was a very nice soccer facility. At ground level all the way around were the luxury boxes.

On the outside, under the stands, were businesses. They utilize every inch of free space there. There were several car dealerships: Chevy, Buick, Hyundai, VW, Toyota, etc. Movie theater. Nightclub. Health club.

On the plaza, kids were flying kites, rollerblading, and playing soccer. It was a very nice place for people to relax and enjoy themselves.

About then is when we took the wrong turn and ended up in a botanical garden. Unfortunately, from a picture-taking standpoint, it was getting dark. From what we did see it was magnificent and should have been part of the tour. Also, I was reminded of the lack of English spoken away from the tour. A search for 'facilities' took a bit of time and queries to several residents.

One interesting activity was the outdoor free theater. They were showing a movie in the park. We were joking that the problems they were having with it reminded us of the old reel-style projectors and surely they had progressed past

these by now. Apparently not. The projector broke.

About then we ran into Wayne and Mike. Time for a beer. Budweiser.

Went to the business center in the morning to check email. The girl put me on a computer that only typed in Chinese and couldn't understand why I would have a problem with that! Stupid American!

General Note:

Toilets: (If I didn't mention them before) If you get away from the American-style and newer restaurants, get ready to squat. A number of people have commented why these people sit without chairs out on the street. Answer: They're in training for going to the bathroom!

We headed off for a day trip to Qufu, hometown of Confucius. Along the way we stopped at a truck stop for a stretch and refreshments. These stops more resembled parks with stores than oversized gas stations. Very nicely manicured greenery was the centerpiece of each stop.

The landscape took an interesting turn as we headed out of town. If there was a flat piece of ground of any significant size, it has crops on it. Ten by ten was not too small. In some places it was obvious they had carved out a little bit of hillside to create flat ground. Again, no wasted space.

Confucius' tomb was interesting from a historical standpoint. His descendants are allowed to be buried there with certain exceptions. Females that 'marry out' are no longer considered eligible. Conversely, females that 'marry in' are. Those with criminal records are out. As are those with physical deformities. As far as proof of ancestry, it seems the Chinese keep pretty good tabs on his relatives to the point they have identified several living in Korea.

The Company Store

This is the one thing that annoyed a bit. Coming out of the tomb was a gauntlet of souvenir vendors at least a hundred yard long. While they mostly had the same fare as every other booth we had seen, there were some items I was interested in. However, our guide hurried us along with the promise of visiting a store close by. Once inside, it was obvious this store was a condensed version of the factory stores we had already visited. Nice stuff but it would have been more fun in the gauntlet.

Did I mention the humidity? Just checking. Went to Confucius' tomb, mansion and temple. All very interesting but the heat and humidity took its toll on the group this day. Three and a half hours of walking and I was drenched. Even the cloth wrist strap on my camera was dripping with sweat! There was not one square inch of clothing on me that was dry.

And the guides offered to take short cuts back to the buses at different intervals of the tour for those who had reached their limit. Two hundred went in one end, forty came out the other. I was so wet I was afraid the A/C would give me pneumonia.

It's time for the long ride back to Jinan. Great scenery but I think we all will sleep.

I think the heat and the pace are starting to take a toll on people. One woman on our bus had to go the hospital today. She needed to be cooled down a bit. Two more days to go.

The Long March (or at least the long bus ride)

Tomorrow we head home but today we take the long bus ride back to Beijing. Eight hours, six buses, and a boxed lunch that was FAR from appetizing. For all the praise I have for the Shandong Hotel, this lunch left me scratching my head.

Coming out of the mountains to the flatlands of Beijing gave us a good view of the varying countryside. Crops. Lots of them, mostly corn. A wild guess says 60 thousand acres of corn. As far as the eye can see (in the smog) on both sides of the highway. And there is more coming. Next field, corn. And the next too. Ten miles, still corn! No end in sight. The next 15 miles shows a slow shift to other crops. Squash, tomatoes, etc. But 20 miles later it's back to corn.

There are two funny things in all this:

1. The farmers have built shelters in among the crops. It looks like they are living for a few days the fields without going home.
2. They are using fruit and nut trees as field breaks. Not that this is an unusual practice but their crops are grown without stopping as if the line of trees just grew in the middle of a field with crops.

Hundred sixty miles, (Based on guesstimated speed X time calculation) and the crops are still coming. It's already the biggest continuous agricultural area I have ever seen (and I have been to Kansas).

Just woke up to a town growing up in the middle of the crops. Yawned once and the town was gone. More crops. Corn. Go figure!

Odd note: In a communist country, why do they have toll roads?

Back at the hotel in Beijing for the elevator rush. Almost an hour to get everyone up!

The End

The day of departure has arrived. Talk about mixed feelings. This has been a GREAT vacation. Fun people, exciting places, interesting (and sometimes good) food, no worries (the pearl dumplings were right).

But I am looking forward to my first real Diet Coke in three weeks, food I recognize, and brushing my teeth without bottled water.

And my favorite Chinese restaurant that serves Americanized Chinese food.

I normally sleep in a firm bed but I'm afraid after this trip it will feel too soft for a long time.

I'm looking forward to getting into the Phoenix summer so I can dry my clothes and my body. I can't remember any time in my life being in this much humidity. (Note: First full day home was 118 degrees high and 97 degrees low, 7% humidity...hallelujah)

I still have Y107 left. And still an airport to spend it in. I think it's a clear day. You can look at the sun through the smog without sunglasses. Won't miss that.

Most interesting city: Beijing.

Because there is so much to do and see. I never imagined the Great Wall was just outside the city. They talk about the Summer Palace as if it is in some distant mountain region. By feudal standards I'm sure it was but now it's a short ride from the city center. It seemed less than 40 miles from the Forbidden City.

Prettiest City: Jinan.

Absolute garden spot. As big as it is there, the greenery is meticulously manicured. Seemed a very good choice for a sister city of Sacramento.

Hottest Place: Xian.

And 'hot' did not translate into 'dry'. My clothes were as wet as used dishrags.

General notes on the people:

The people seemed to fit into three groups:

1. Ignorers: As if we were invading their reality and if they didn't look at us we weren't really there.
2. The Scoffers: They outwardly showed their disdain for us. Old-school feelings that we are the enemy I guess.
3. The Smilers: Most people fit into this category. They seemed genuinely happy to see us there, to talk to us and take picture with and of us.

Interesting note: I felt before going there would be these three groups but I thought it would be divided by age. Each group actually seemed equally split among all age groups.

I left the room early to get in one more email session. It took 25 minutes to get down. No time to check!

Epilog

There is a saying: Getting there is half the fun. While that may be true, it is equally true getting back is half (or more) the agony. You are wired from the whole experience. Sleep not only escapes you on the flight but on the night before as well. As it is I was awake before the 4:30 AM wakeup call for Russell who was on the other flight.

Actually got up at 5:30 (2:30 PM, 18th Phoenix time) to shower, breakfast, emails, wait, checkout, wait, bus ride to airport, wait, board plane in a rush, wait on runway, flight (10 hours 45 minutes), buses to Sacramento, killed some time (with an ill-advised round of golf that was better than expected all things considered), shower, off to the airport for 7:45 flight to Phoenix (Actually got on a 6:00 flight), into Phoenix at 8:30 PM, pick up car, leave luggage until tomorrow, home and in bed by 10:30 PM 19th. You count the hours, I'm too tired! Total exhaustion?

Most likely. Happy to have done it? Absolutely!

Up for work at 5:00 AM, 20th!