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Here

notes from the present

Cover by Sebastiano Buonamico

The pictures. On the front cover: "Beijing; from

the window of my apartment"; on the back cover: "Beijing; in a *hutong* (alleyway)". Photos by Cristina Tabbia.

This review exists through the voices it gives expression to, in their variety. All contributions are welcome. Please write to *Here-notes from the present, via Bastia 11, 20139 Milano, Italy, phone-fax 0039-02-57406574, email: massimoparizzi@alice.it.*

Hao Wu's diary

Hao Wu, born in 1974 in Chengdu, Sichuan, is a documentary film maker. He got back to Beijing after living in the USA from 1992 to 2004. His diary pages come from the blog "Beijing or bust" (http://beijingorbust.blogspot.com), which is inaccessible from inside China. We thank him for allowing us to publish them.

Beijing, June 22, 2005

I moved to Beijing in May 2004 after having lived in the US for almost twelve years. The first few months were exhilarating—the construction sites, the smog, the traffic jams, and especially people's smiling chatter, all conspiring to evoke a tender nostalgia of a past I had emphatically abandoned. I wanted to write then. […] And I was doing a documentary then, about how expats view Beijing and its dizzying changes. Many times I found myself repeating the doc's sound bites, praising the development but condemning the pollution, plus the usual complaints about traffic, people going nuts over getting-rich-quick, etc. It's hard to make one's voice unique.

Then something happened yesterday. I have started researching my second documentary after

finishing my first (ok, it's never really done). My plan is to follow several Chinese Christians in Beijing and to explore why they believed in this non-native faith and how that belief impacts their lives. I visited several state-sanctioned churches in Beijing. At Gangwashi Church, the Protestant church in Xi Dan where Condi Rice attended the Palm Sunday service early this year during her trip to Beijing, the young minister said to me, "So you are from the States". Pause. "Have you watched a documentary called *The Cross*?"

The Cross is a three-hour documentary on the underground Chinese Christians and the persecutions they suffered. It was shot in secret in China by Chinese Christians from the States. I hurriedly explained, "No, my interest is not about the government's policy toward religions. All I care about is the believers and their lives in Beijing." I need the permits to shoot in any church. He shook his head. "I don't understand why those in the countryside would go against the official church. Anyway, go talk to the Three-Self Committee. Maybe they will even help you on this project." I had gone out of my way to point out the bad press that the official Chinese churches had acquired overseas and how my project could help improve that image.

The Three-Self Patriotic Movement Committee of the Protestant Churches of China is the state-approved self-governing body of the nondenominational Christian churches in China. I found their number from the directory service and called. A male voice on the line informed me that the committee could not make the decision. I had to call the Religion Bureau. The Religious Bureau had just moved and did not have a listing with the di-

rectory service. So I called the Beijing Municipal Government and got their number. The guy answering the phone asked me to call their Religion Department. I called and was directed to call the Missionary Department.

"Hello (*Ni Hao*)." A gruff male voice picked up the phone. "Hi, I'm an independent filmmaker. I'm planning to do a documentary about Christians in Beijing and how their faith positively influences their lives and social cohesiveness. I'm wondering…" "You can't do that. It won't be allowed." The reply came curt and sharp. "But I only intend to…" "Don't even think about it." He hanged up the phone.

Just like that, all my research and preparation swiftly went to naught. For a moment, I sat holding the phone, unsure whether I should seethe with anger or laugh at their stupidity—what are they trying to hide? From what? Then I remembered my trip to the National Library a few months ago. I wanted to get some shots of newspaper reports on the 1999 Chinese protests against the NATO bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade. The National Library was just starting a major expensive facelift to modernize for the 2008 Olympics. The librarian told me that I needed a level-two engineer's certificate or a permit from my work unit in order to access any newspaper more than two years old.

This defensive phobia, this tendency to hide, is endemic in the system, even after more than a decade of opening up to rampant prostitution and western-style professional PR damage control. It's at moments like this that China makes one want to bang her head against the wall. […]

Chengdu, Sichuan, July 4, 2005

Whenever I tell people I grew up in Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan province, invariably they would comment, "Ah, that's a good place. Good food. Relaxed people. Truly *Tian Fu Zhi Guo* (heavenly country)." And if I let them know I haven't been back there for seven years, those who have visited recently would turn dramatic: "Really? Oh it has changed so much. You wouldn't recognize it when you go back." Sometimes, the dramatic is not nearly dramatic enough. The fact is, I don't recognize a *trace* of Chengdu since I came back three days ago. Glitzy high-rises now dominate the Chengdu skyline. The fancy apartment building my parents moved into eight years ago, is now the shabbiest in the neighborhood. On my last visit seven years before, there were still old tile-roofed traditional houses in little alleys. Now they are all gone and the alleys have been widened and paved into avenues. The sight of cranes and construction sites rivals those in Beijing and Shanghai. And the big shady phoenix trees have been replaced by dormant neon signs waiting for the night to come to life. It is as if I was in a dream and some voice insisted, "This is Chengdu!", and I kept on shaking my head in disbelief.

The Chengdu municipal government, proud of its urban development efforts, had invited Long Yingtai, a famous Taiwanese writer to visit the city. Expecting some roaring praise, they got some harsh criticism instead. The ancient city had completely lost its charm in its bid to keep up with Beijing and Shanghai. In the taxicab, I asked the driver if he knew of any old neighborhood still existing. He mentioned some place the name of

which I no longer recognized. The government is preserving it for tourism purposes, he said. My mom shouted from the back seat, “Why do you want to go there? So backwards.” My parents have just moved back to Chengdu after living in Shanghai with my sister for two years. Their apartment got robbed. The robbers got in past a security guard and through the front door. The apartment complex they live in has iron fences now covering the balconies of the first four or five floors. They had missed Chengdu when they were in Shanghai. Now they want to move back to Shanghai.

The driver concurred, “Those old buildings should have been knocked down a long time ago. Who wants to live there? So crowded, and dark.” I don’t want to live there either. I remember the days when the whole family of four, or even six or eight, had to squeeze in a one-bedroom apartment, when the neighbors would fight over using the stove in the communal kitchen, when the aunties in the same work unit would gossip about every action of yours. I don’t want to go back. But memories would dissipate if bricks and walls that used to harbor them disappear. However, the question often is, for whom we are preserving the past?

“Look, there’s an old building.” The driver called out to my attention. To our left, crushed between two construction sites, limped a traditional house with its inside gutted. The white wall and the gray roof tiles looked anemic. There was a big Chinese character “Chai” (demolition) written on it. The driver chuckled, “It’s still there because they have forgotten to knock it down.” We drove by a road construction site. There was a gaping

trench along the street. Workers were digging. "This place will be very pretty once the work is done." My dad commented, satisfied.

Chengdu, Sichuan, July 5, 2005

For all the changes that have happened in Chengdu, one thing has stayed the same—the locals' love for an easy life. Most visitors notice the slower pace of life very soon after they arrive. Locals spend hours drinking tea at teahouses and playing *majiang* by the street-side. And they love their food. "Beijing, I've been there." My friend Wang Hai said to me at the dinner table in a noisy Sichuanese restaurant. We were waiting for ten more high school friends to arrive. He continued, "It's just a big village to me. Look at what they eat there. They don't even have decent Sichuan restaurants!" I didn't want to tell him that there are far more cuisines in Beijing than in Chengdu. In Chengdu, it's spicy Sichuan food or nothing; I hardly noticed here any Hunan or Yunnan restaurants that are popular in Beijing, let alone Italian or Indian. I let him talk, enjoying the local dialect that's smoother and more sing-song-like than the Beijing Mandarin.

Our friends arrived slowly. There was Bin who used to hang out with the "hooligans" on the street and once, if I remember correctly, stabbed someone and stayed in the police station overnight; now he's the security chief of a big municipal bureau. Li quit her job with a state-owned enterprise and went into reselling insurance policies; now she owns a car and travels frequently and comfortably. Ming is still satisfied with his police job su-

pervising small vendors, his fat belly serving as the evidence. Yongheng has been with a bank for over thirteen years now. His weight has breached the danger point and he asked me for fitness tips. Song was a mediocre and quiet student in high school; today he's the most successful of the pack.

I asked Song what exactly he did. Yongheng laughed, "wine and dine, relationship building, I know what he does on a daily basis." Yongheng had helped Song on several deals in the past. Song smiled wryly, "that's how you do business in China." He traded land rights which he had acquired through *guanxi* (connections); that was low-risk high-return business. Now with the government crackdown, he had changed to real construction and some merchandise wholesaling. He had just won, yet again through *guanxi*, a big contract to service the local People's Liberation Army on something.

I couldn't control my naivety, "I have many friends in the hi-tech business in Beijing. Their business practices seem more professional, less this type of under-the-table dealing." Everyone laughed. Wang Hai tugged at my shirt, "Mouse (my high-school nickname), you've been away for too long. Things have changed. I know the hi-tech businesses in Chengdu. It's all about kickbacks." Or have they changed? The 1989 student movement started as an anti-corruption rally. I remember that clearly. Some more friends arrived and the dinner was served. Every dish was soaked in hot chili oil. Beer flew freely. I had to *ganbei* (drain the glass) with everyone since not *ganbei*-ing would make the other lose face. By the time we reached the teahouse by the river, I was half-drunk. We had some tea, and talked about the sweet memories of

our high-school years. Those were the best years of my life. I stared at my friends and in my drunken state, saw all still as the young and cheerful friends I used to dream about the future with.

We moved to a KTV [karaoke center] at midnight. Ming's girlfriend (Ming was divorced) told me that usually Ming would go "talk business" late at night; but tonight to give me face, he's staying with the crowd. I asked what "talk business" meant. Everyone laughed again. Wang Hai pointed at Bin, "That's why his wife divorced him. Too much business with pretty girls late at night." Bin ignored him, and picked up the mic and sang a sappy Chinese pop song. He still had a great voice; but he's noticeably balding.

Wang Hai sat down next to me, holding a beer. I had always thought Wang Hai was gay, but he turned out to have been married for six years. We avoided talking about our respective relationship status as much as possible. Everyone picked some Chinese pop song and stood up with the mic. They sang about how they would die for the love of their life, how they would shed tears over the misunderstanding, etc., etc. It's funny to see the overweight macho men emoting in front of the karaoke video on the giant TV screen. After a few more bottles of beer, I got misty-eyed—alas, these were still the friends I knew. […]

Sichuan, July 16, 2005

"Don't call me Miss. In our Qiang culture, Misses are the lazy ones who just want to stay home and be taken care of. Call me *A-Mei* (sister) instead." We were sitting on low stools around A-Mei and

watching her fingers nimbly running over tea-cups, teapots and an electric stove. It's the last day of our Jiuzhaigou tour and we were on one of our last obligatory shop visits, tea tasting at a Qiang-minority tea garden, before we could go home to Chengdu. The 27 of us were crammed into a small demo room, the walls worn and bland, reminding me of my elementary-school classrooms from way back in the early 1980 before they got torn down.

"In our Qiang culture, women have to go out and make a living while the men stay home raising pigs and babies." A-Mei lowered her head after the sentence and carefully poured tea into the tiny ceramic cups lined up neatly in front of her. The guy from Guangzhou, who's sitting right next to me, looked around the room and commented smugly: "The Qiang culture is still matriarchal. Very primeval." A knowing "Ah" then followed through the room. The tourists, exclusively of Han ethnicity, murmured among themselves about the unexpected discovery of the exotic.

Ignoring the attention now focused on her, A-Mei pushed the tray of teacups towards us. She's wearing a bright-pink traditional Qiang dress with a checkered multicolor apron around her waist. Other than the dress, she looked no different from any late-teen Han girl. She spoke Mandarin with a labored choppiness, typical of Sichuanese, which would cause her pigtail to bob up and down. "This one we are about to taste," she indicated to us to pick up the teacups, "is called Fragrant Over Thousand Miles. It has many different kinds of pollens blended in. Drinking the tea cures hangover. It also improves the gastrointestinal and endocrine systems. In addition, if you mix used tea

leaves with egg white and honey and apply to your face daily, it can prevent wrinkling." Like everything traditional in China, it had many magic powers.

The tea did smell good. An anxious few picked up their cups. A-Mei raised her voice: "Before you continue, remember the right way to taste this tea is to finish the cup in three sips," She finished hers in three elegant movements of her mouth, "and do this." She smacked her lips like a sparrow and let out a satisfied "Tse, tse, tse." Everyone raised their cups. Some giggled. "Remember, three sips." She added. "Those guys who do two or four sips, A-Mei will have to keep in our village and raise pigs for three months." Laughter and lip smacking surged through the room while A-Mei observed coolly. Guys poked at each other. "Raising pigs for her would be nice" could be heard in the noise, together with something like "I'd like to have a Qiang wife to bring in the dole". Women pretend to hit their husbands' backs to restrain their rowdiness.

The Guangzhou guy called out to me, "Hey, college student (somehow they all think I'm still in college), you are the only single guy here. Why don't you stay and raise pigs for A-Mei?" "Ha Ha," I chuckled dryly, finished my tea and smacked my lips. "Tse, tse, tse." "No A-Mei wouldn't like Han guys." A-Mei moved to collect the teacups. "You Han guys are too educated. A-Mei didn't even finish junior high. If A-Mei's man was more educated, how could A-Mei control him?" She washed the teacups in a bucket of water and left them upside down on the tray to dry.

"You don't go home and give the money you make to your husband?" The Guangzhou guy's wife

was incredulous. “No,” A-Mei started heating water for the next tasting, “my grandmother is still the one managing the family finances. All of us have to give her most of our wages.” The room nodded in sync with an “oh” while she poured hot water into the teapot and then quickly drained it, to wash the tea leaves. “Are there more kids going to school now?” I asked, remembering the elementary school we saw on our way to the tea garden. The school looked pretty new and had a big plaque on the gate displaying the name of the donor company from Shenzhen. “Of course.” A-Mei expertly washed the tea leaves a second time, poured in fresh water and let the tea brew. “Now with the nine-year compulsory education, everyone gets to finish junior high. But more education is not that good.”

“Why not?” A mother who’s traveling with her teenage daughter was puzzled. The Chinese families were notorious investors in their kids’ education. “More education makes one restless. Like my sister. She finished college and then didn’t want to come back to live in the village anymore.”

“But life is still getting better right?” The Guangzhou guy quizzed A-Mei in a condescending tone. I disliked the guy because he had picked five rhododendron flowers right outside of Huang Long Nature Reserve, pulling their roots up. I wondered what his definition of progress was, how his opinion could represent the prevailing view in China, and whether this sense of progress lacked the necessary self-reflection. “Yes,” A-Mei replied without any etymological or philosophical equivocation. “Our village used to be so poor that we could only have one meal a day.” A-Mei began turning the cups straight up. “Now we are making more

money, every family can afford three meals a day. But most are still not used to it. In my family we have two meals a day." She started pouring tea. "We have internet cafes in the town now, even though I've never been in one myself."

Wait, progress cannot be this straightforward. I remembered Gao Xingjian and his encounter with a Qiang-village elder in his Nobel-prize-winning *Soul Mountain*. In the book, the Elder sang ancient Qiang epics to Gao while Gao commented on the beautiful Qiang language losing out to modernity. The Qiang language doesn't have any written script and can only be communicated verbally. "What do you speak at home?" I asked. "Sichuanese (a dialect of Mandarin Chinese)." A-Mei was once again indicating to us to take our cups. "No Qiang language?" I was getting somewhere. A-Mei turned to look at me with her cool eyes. "Not in the town. In the villages high up in the mountain some still know the Qiang language. Like in my family, my grandmother still speaks it to us. We understand it but we don't know how to speak the language so we answer her in Sichuanese." She then turned to the room, "It's difficult to learn and keep the Qiang language because it doesn't have any written script." She paused slightly. "Very soon nobody will know the language anymore. Things are changing."

She said it without the least hint of sadness and proceeded to describe the many cardiovascular benefits, among others, of the new tea in our cups, her pigtail bobbing. For a moment I held on to the image of the Qiang elder chanting epics to Gao Xingjian around a bonfire in a mountain village. But then, I remembered how we Han Chinese abandoned the traditional literary Chinese

and how the Europeans abandoned Latin. Who am I to lament the loss of change?

Chengdu, Sichuan, July 19, 2005

Interior Sichuanese restaurant—evening (transcribed from videotape with necessary editing). My family of eight sit around a table piled with spicy Sichuan dishes. Aunt Lingling (early fifties) hangs up a call on her mobile phone. *Aunt Lingling* (to me): "Sorry, your uncle Zhao can't come to dinner. He's waiting to talk to a prospective employer". *Mom* (early sixties): "Zhao should learn how to hustle out there. He's been out of work for two years now". *Aunt Rongling* (mid-forties, aggressively to Aunt Lingling): "Your Zhao is so old school, and stubborn. He needs to adapt. He can't stay his old mute way. At his old state-owned enterprise, maybe that didn't hurt much. Now it's all market economy. Everyone needs to fend for himself. He should go out and meet new friends. Why don't you teach him that? He needs to set a good example for his daughter". She stares at cousin Jin (thirteen years old, in a pink skirt) who quietly shovels rice into her mouth. *Aunt Lingling*: "He still thinks the same way as in the 70s and 80s" (chuckles awkwardly). In fact, sometimes I feel like that way too. *Mom* (to Aunt Lingling): "I don't know how you young people feel. For me, I like the 60s and 70s". *Me* (holding camcorder, swerve to grandpa): "Grandpa, which decade do you prefer?". *Dad* (mid-sixties, laughs): "Grandpa likes every decade". *Grandpa* (early eighties): "Me? (Pause) I like this decade but I'm getting old. If only I were younger…". *Mom*: "What's so good about this decade?". *Grandpa*:

"This decade is quite good". *Aunt Lingling* (to Mom): "See, you can't even compare to dad". *Mom*: "I still like the 60s and 70s. At that time people lived harmoniously, and were honest with each other". *Aunt Rongling* (impatiently): "You've become dumber after the few years living in Shanghai". *Grandpa* (pointing at Mom): "Your brain is getting too old". *Aunt Rongling* (her voice up a notch): "In the 60s could you live in a three-bedroom apartment like now? Could every family take showers every night?". *Mom* (waving her hands): "I'm not talking about material life. I'm talking about the inter-personal stuff". *Aunt Lingling* (gently knocking the ceramic rice bowl with her chopsticks): "Aiya, the economic base determines the superstructure". *Grandpa*: "We live in a commercial society, don't you understand? A commercial society *is* like this". *Aunt Rongling* (to Mom): "You need to change your old way of thinking". *Grandpa* (repeating emphatically): "Commercial societies *are* like this". *Aunt Lingling*: "Our economic condition has changed, how can people not change with it?". Mom eats, staring ahead blankly. *Aunt Lingling*: "Sister, the human relationship you like can't possibly exist in today's society. Impossible". Mom swallows and makes another attempt. *Mom*: "Material-wise, I like the current decade. But for the way people communicate with each other…". *Aunt Lingling*: "Completely impossible". Dad has been quiet so far. *Dad* (to Mom): "The society is progressing. Your way of thinking has stagnated at the level of the 60s and 70s". *Mom*: "I only hope…". *Grandpa*: "In the 60s and 70s the material life couldn't have been this rich and diverse". *Aunt Lingling*: "You can't continue to think that way". *Grandpa*: "Only in a commercial society can material life prosper.

We all need to grasp the laws of economics". *Me* (swerves camcorder to dad): "Dad, which decade do you prefer?". *Dad*: "Of course I like the present decade. Life in the old days was so boring. Your mom's way of thinking is outdated". *Mom* (cutting in): "Like the maids in our days, for twelve kuais a month, they diligently helped the family raise babies. Now you can't find a decent maid even if you pay thousands a month". *Aunt Lingling*: "This is an indication that the society has progressed. The economic base has risen". *Grandpa*: "You still look at the maids with the old perspectives. You should treat them with a new one". *Aunt Lingling* (to mom): "I'm just a pragmatic person. For those things you can't change or stop, you have to accept them. Like my husband has been laid off and I'm about to retire with a puny amount of pension. I have to accept that. For you, you want this and that as you would like. It's impossible. You'd like to have people the way they were in the old days, but a modern material life. That's totally impossible". *Dad* (chuckles): "The economic base determines the superstructure". *Mom*: "Ok ok, I accept that". Everyone eats.

A different visit

by Saverio Caruso

About thirty-five years ago, in the era of fanciful love affairs with China, a visit there inspired different diaries and stories. You set out from the West

already in love: not trying to keep your distance from a world you said you wanted to study, but rather eliminating every form of distance, not making the attempt to analyze and discuss it, but rather looking for confirmation of images you had already formed. Back then as well, for different reasons, it was "hard to make one's voice unique."

China, however, even stripped of all idealizations, seemed to be a different country. In that period, a process of socialization was underway in every field, aimed at expanding and deepening participation in the management of power and in forms of self-government, strengthening egalitarian distribution of wealth, and struggling against material incentives in every aspect of life. Political consciousness and solidarity were present and visible, both concretely and symbolically. The study group I belonged to, which travelled China from north to south in June 1973, through the cities and countryside, was able to see the enormous ideological exertion that existed in the institutions, made up of men and women, and set up to tackle material and human issues related to development in a poor country.

Relying on people and on mutual aid was the byword proclaimed at every meeting. The party was everywhere, urging on the campaign. The party was there in the work brigade of Shashiyu, in Hebei province, forced to pulverize the bedrock to conquer a bit of arable ground; it was there in the delegations of farmers visiting the brigade, each carrying a bag of soil as a symbolic contribution to the struggle for advancement in a difficult environment. On June 2, 1973, as I read in my journal, we met with some of these solidarity delegations.

The party was leading the fight for the emancipation of women, who at home, in the institutions, and in the workplace, were called upon to hold up half the sky; the party was there in the organization of labor, which aspired to create a liberated relationship between man and machine in the factories; even on the assembly line, as I saw with my own eyes, the pace was slow, in fact, there seemed to be no calculation or monitoring of the pace at all. The party assigned the heavier, riskier tasks to the most politicized workers; this was the case, for example, at State Cotton Mill # 2 in Beijing, where technological backwardness made the air impossible to breathe because of dust from the cotton, and the noise of the automated looms was truly unbearable, making it impossible to even talk to each other.

The party was there in the city, organizing mutual aid among families. A revolutionary committee and twenty-five residents' committees, in a Beijing neighborhood in 1973, would look after children and the elderly in families where both parents were working; what's more, they would go grocery shopping for others, help children study after school, take care of the house; elderly people without children were helped with housecleaning and laundering clothes and blankets; people helped out at the health clinics (there was one for each residents' committee) which were responsible for promoting good hygiene, organizing the campaign to wipe out the "four pests" (flies, cockroaches, mosquitoes, and rats), preventing certain diseases, educating people about contraception and family planning, giving vaccinations, etc.

Relying on people and on mutual aid: China, back

then, was a different country; different above all from the China described in Hao Wu's diary, which is gripped by gold rush fever, the byword of "making money", where everything is about the market, even the soul, even life itself. A different country, but definitely weighed down by a surfeit of ideology. The meeting with the Communist Youth League in Shanghai (June 19, 1973) was dominated by this kind of excess. The speech made by the municipality's permanent representative in the League was a violent indictment of Liu Shaoqi, called "a traitor of the working class, an enemy agent who has infiltrated the party, a fraudster who has chosen the capitalist path"; Liu was guilty of wanting to reduce the role of ideology, as the study of Marxism/Leninism and Maoist thought was called, to expand the role of culture and science as applied to the economy, and of stating that young people should stop trying to fuel a class struggle that no longer had any basis in reality, and rather become experts in every field of production, work, and life.

The Cultural Revolution (which no one talks about in modern China, the very memory of it being forbidden), which mercilessly quashed "Liu's revisionism", had lost its virulence by 1973; groups of Red Guards could be found everywhere among the population, but they had quieted down, and had almost no purpose or importance. But the surfeit of ideology persisted, and if you asked (as we did for an entire month) men and women, young people and adults, about their personal aspirations with regard to work and life, the answer you got was a rote formula, always the same, in the countryside, in the cities, in the factories, and

in the schools: “I will do whatever the revolution here in my country, and throughout the world, asks me to do”.

It sounded like a stirring answer, but a unique voice can pipe up even in someone who is in love with China, and at that point doubts would emerge about the durability and credibility of this sacrifice of individual aspirations, which are irrepressible, legitimate, and essential to the development of a human community. This unique voice would pipe up again when we travelled through the countryside on our visits to the communes, and could see groups of schoolchildren and teachers, students and professors, gleaning the fields in obedience to the principle that students ought to join ranks with the farmers, and intelle ctuals ought to be re-educated through manual labor. We didn’t have the chance to ascertain to what degree this approach was based on the consensus of the people involved, but these scenes in the fields in June 1973 were the result, if not of coercion, then of ideological pressure (later one would come to hear of atrocious violence against intellectuals by the Red Guards).

The sacrifice of individual aspirations and the scenes of gleaning in the fields were meant to embody a sort of political consciousness in which the collective interest took precedence. However, selflessness and self-sacrifice, unless guided by reason and by respect for the individual, can destroy human freedom and dignity. And there was the death penalty. The different China of today, with its over-commodification, may create wealth, but it exploits and corrupts men, destroys life and the environment, and denies human rights. And there

is the death penalty. We are still in search of a decent society, where there is no place for practices and mindsets based on the exploitation and humiliation of human beings.
In the era of fanciful love affairs, I too was once in love with China.

Hao Wu's diary

Here

notes from the present

Beijing, July 22, 2005

On my way to the Beijing Grand Hyatt today, I was busy memorizing Chinese translations of English words. One of my close friends had helped me get an English-Chinese interpreter job at a big seminar on online marketing. […] At the seminar, I was introduced to a very young CEO of a famous American sports brand's online subsidiary. When we reviewed his slides together during the break, I asked why he included several graphs on the monthly traffic to his website. He said he suspected that the Chinese Internet companies do not operate based on numbers; he wanted to remind them of the importance of numbers. For a moment, I stared at him speaking in that childish or arrogant (depending on how you look at it) tone of his […]. I told the CEO not to spend too much time on the numbers, knowing the Chinese Internet companies tracked the same numbers as their

American counterparts. Then the conversation moved on to his big plans in China, following the now familiar logic—China has a big market, a huge market (!); there's no category leader for the segment his company is in; they already have manufacturing in China; they'll win the market once they decide to invest in marketing…
The CEO looks no older than 26. His eyes sparkled when he spoke. He also told me excitedly that he had been telling his friends to convert US dollars into Chinese renminbi in anticipation of the renminbi's appreciation. Last night China unpegged the renminbi's link to the dollar and the renminbi appreciated 2%. "It's just the start of the trend. But it sure feels good to get what I've been saying validated." He then winked at me. "Know why I was late for lunch? I went to the bank and changed a lot more dollars into renminbi." He had already converted some before the rise of the renminbi. "The States are spending on credit from China. Now the renminbi is appreciating, it would make little sense for the Chinese government to continue buying US treasury bonds. And once China stops buying US treasury, the interest rate will go up and then no more consumer spending." Basically, he was predicting the collapse of the US economy and a continued rise of the renminbi. "That's why I started learning Chinese two years ago. The future is here, man." He continued on in an excitement almost like agitation. […]

Beijing, August 9, 2005

I live in a gated community in Beijing's CBD, Central Business District. It is one of the many high-

rise apartment complexes that are shooting up in Beijing's posh neighborhoods, which are many, catering to expats and rich Beijingers (don't ask why I'm living there). Where I live, the rooms all have Western-style amenities, and the complex has a gym where half of the people exercising are white. Every day at the community gate and in the building lobby, I pass by security guards who look barely out of their teens. They make 600 yuan ($ 80) a month and always smile at me courteously. My neighborhood is undergoing a dramatic change. To the south there's a complex called SOHO (Small Office Home Office), one of the earliest high-rise complexes in Beijing modeling after Western architecture and management. To the west are Gold Field and Wanda, two brand-new communities consisting of commercial and residential buildings. To the east is a complex called China Trade which will include a Ritz Carlton and a J.W. Marriott, in addition to some of the most expensive residential buildings, a water park and a huge mall.

One of the real estate people I know predicted a glitzy future for the area. There will be wide promenades, dancing water fountains, and a huge happy shopping destination for Beijing since every building in the area has set aside a mall space. The real estate price will continue to climb, of course, according to him. But until that glitzy future arrives, the area outside the gated communities is nothing but China-style chaos. Construction cranes are doing their smooth but persistent dances in every direction you look. Dust everywhere. Huge billboards promoting new residential complexes with fancy Western names like "Upper East Side" and "Yosemite" everywhere. Few observe traffic rules.

During rush hours, donkey carts fight with pedestrians, bicycles, buses, private Audis, taxis and illegal taxis for right-of-way; and the buses, private Audis, taxis and illegal taxis angrily honk back at the donkey carts. Traffic simply stalls.

I find the chaos endearing. A daily reminder of China's reality for me who spend too much time living in the comfort zone inside the gates. When I walk to the subway station, I pass stalls selling beef cakes, newspapers and fruit mixes. In front of these stalls are illegal street vendors peddling everything from Tibetan trinkets, pirated copies of popular or underground books, fruit, to cheap cameras "directly from the factory". Scattered between the illegal vendors are beggars of all kinds and shapes, some with their whole family, some playing the Chinese traditional instrument *erhu*, some deformed and prostrating on the ground. Pedestrians rush and stop haphazardly, causing traffic jams on the sidewalk, as the voices of peddlers and speakers from the stalls rise with the dust. Sometimes someone on the lookout would spots the police coming near. Then the whole sidewalk clears instantly, leaving waste paper, rotten fruit and other garbage to the pedestrians. Then last weekend the government came in and cleared the trees on the sidewalk. The street is to be widened and the trees were in the way. When I talked to the cab driver about this, he said: "Those trees are poplars. They are useless." I asked what he meant by useless. He replied: "Oh, they are just useless. We need wider streets." At dinner with my expat friends from various gated communities, we lamented the disappearance of the trees. It felt strangely spacious now walking on the street. And the little trunks left above the ground pain the

eyes. The Ritz Carlton is finally coming to the neighborhood. I can foresee the day, definitely by the 2008 Olympics, when the neighborhood will be glamorous and clean and spacious and full of happy shoppers. All the beggars and peddlers and donkey carts will have been cleared off. I'm confident there'll be new trees, young trees still growing tentatively. The area will be the face of the new Beijing, an ideal the whole country is aspiring to. And all the past chaos and the old trees will have been gone in people's memories, including my own and my expat friends'. For most of us do enjoy the comfort of Western-style amenities in quiet gated communities, which will continue to be the dream that will never come true for most of the Chinese people.

Beijing, August 14, 2005

The film co-production I'm working on assigned a van to each department. Mr. Hong is our department's driver. The middle-aged Mr. Hong is loud and vivacious, guffawing easily whenever my Australian boss attempts to speak Chinese. Yet unlike the other drivers on the team, he never lifts up his T-shirt to cool his protruding belly, no matter how hot the weather gets.

"Housing in that area is very expensive. How much rent do you pay?" He asked point-blank while out on an errand with me. I had just told him I live in the Central Business District area. "Oh, I have a roommate." I hesitated, not sure how much to divulge about my living situation. "We pay 3000 kuai (less than $ 400) each for a two-bedroom." The truth is we live in a small one-

bedroom apartment, but I don't want him to feel that we have little financial sense. "That expensive!" He banged on the steering wheel while the van squeezed its way onto the highway. "Ah, Wu, that's not very smart of you. You shouldn't pay more than renminbi 1000 for an apartment." Apparently he didn't hear the "each" right after the "renminbi 3000". "That's ok." Strangers in China constantly pry into your personal finances, so I tried to preempt any further inquiries about my current salary by stating; "I had some savings from the years living in America." "America." He said with a dramatic sigh, shaking his head. "Wu, if I were you, I wouldn't come back." "That's not very patriotic of you." I teased him because he is employed by one branch of the military. He is using the van owned by the military to make some cash on the side when he's not needed at work. "I don't love the country (*Ai Guo*—be patriotic). I love the world (*Ai Shi Jie*)." He laughed heartily. "One of my friends just paid 120,000 renminbi ($ 15,000) to go to San Francisco. I wish I could go."

The van stalled in traffic on the highway linking the Third Ring Road to the Fourth Ring Road. The smog was so bad that the air literally blended in with the gray concrete high-rises all along the highway. "What do you like about America? Most of my Chinese friends who studied and worked in America want to come back to China," I asked. Mr. Hong lit a cigarette, which I took as a sign that we would be stalled in traffic for quite a while. "Look at this." He pointed at the traffic with his right hand, cigarette smoke coming up from between his fingers. "Too many people in this place. Too dirty. In America, I figure things would be nicer. At least people's manners would

be a little better." He laughed again, self-deprecatingly, as if trying to discount what he had just said. "Maybe." I thought for a second, about the clean suburban shopping malls and shoppers who rush between Wal-Mart, BestBuy and Gap. "But the changes here are so rapid. It's fascinating…" I pondered briefly if I should say "to watch" or "to experience".

"Yeah, fascinating all right. But in many aspects it's not changing. Like democracy, I just don't think we'll be able to see it in China in our lifetime. The Communist Party is very good at feeding people. But…" He laughed again, and dragged a smoke. I was a bit dazed by this unexpected talk about communism and democracy. Or maybe it's because of the humid weather. "You work for the military and they allow this kind of thought?" I probed tentatively. "I'm a long-time Communist Party member too!" He chuckled. "But I don't like some of things the party does here. Like its tight control over the media. Every news outlet rehashes the same propaganda. No wonder America criticizes us all the time." "Why don't you go to America then, like your friend?" I wondered what the renminbi 120,000 was paid for—a fake marriage with an American, or a spot on a smuggler's boat? "You could drive taxis in New York." "I wish I could." He gave a last drag on the cigarette and put it out. "My friend speaks English. I don't." I thought about the impatient New Yorkers and how they would treat an immigrant taxi driver, and nodded. "My dream, "he sighed, and immediately followed with a laughter, "is to drive across America, to drive through all that open space, to Alaska. I want to see the grizzly bears and the snow peaks there."

I stared at the traffic and muggy weather ahead of us on the highway, and got lost in the dream of Alaska—there we wouldn't have to hide in air-conditioned vans and get stuck in traffic; the air would be pure between us and the grizzly bears and snow peaks. I was lost in my dream of Alaska while Mr. Hong turned the air conditioning up a notch, and started whistling a Chinese folk tune. Grudgingly, the traffic began to move.

Are there fireflies in China?

by Marco La Rosa

Here

notes from the present

Hao Wu's diary generates a sense of despair. Probably, though luckily, it's despair that can only grieve someone my age. Because I'm one of those who *made* the 1968 protest movement. Indeed, in those years I was a Marxist-Leninist, or *Chinese*, as we would say for short. A sense of despair then, but of a rather complex kind. In order to better explain myself, I have to refer back to some personal memories.

The students' committee of my faculty—that's right: ignorant and full of enthusiasm I took part in the 1968 movement at the right age, while I was at University—had to decide how to use the money we had. My proposal was accepted by acclamation and we spent all the money on propaganda: we bought a poster of President Mao from

a *Feltrinelli* bookshop and hung it up in the library. When the Dean filed a complaint against people unknown, he summoned us and, as we respectfully sat in front of his desk feeling a bit worried, he asked us whether *President Mao* required *celestial* before it.

I used to receive plenty of material from the Publishing House in Foreign Languages (Beijing). There were badges, illustrated books, the four volumes of Mao's *Works* with a rice-paper cover, the little red book in Italian and Chinese, a colour magazine entitled "China", a comics magazine. We used to take it for granted that the material was free, even though I can't tell now what justified our conviction; anyway, none of us Marxists-Leninists ever paid anything.

When Mao died, I received a sort of invitation to the funerals from the Chinese Communist Party Committee. There was an announcement to all proletarians all over the world, in which they assured that the President's correct course of action… etc. etc. And there was a photo of the Funeral Committee commissioned to erect a mausoleum and publish the fifth volume of the *Works*; in the photo there was Mao's widow, Jiang Qing.

I went to the Chinese Embassy in Rome with my daughter, who was then three, to give my condolences. There was a portrait of the Helmsman, and lots of flowers; the Ambassador and the party functionaries stood in line, stiff, with their faces powdered like lots of *Pierrots*. As I was waiting for my turn, my daughter wrenched free and ran towards the portrait, braking ranks. I recaptured her as she was taking a flower; as I was going back to my place, I noticed the quick gesture with which the Ambassador had broken his own

affliction and hounded a photographer who had suddenly appeared to capture that bit of local colour. And I started having some doubts.
I realized that the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution had some disturbing implications. I realized that it was a bit strange for anyone visiting China, from Dario Fo to Richard Nixon, to come back enlightened. I realized that comrade Lin Biao's betrayal too closely resembled a palace revolution. I realized that those small pale pink armchairs on which the President received his foreign guests were hideous. In other words, I realized what I had always known.
As I got back home from Rome, I found a new version of the invitation to the funerals and of the photo in my mail; Jiang Qing and the other three members of what had become "The Gang of Four" had been carefully erased and the background had been recreated by hand.
And so, back to my sense of despair. I could lie to myself and say that it ensues from the last effects of my own juvenile illusion. And there really is a cruel irony in seeing where the ship of the Great Helmsman has landed. Though this is not the reason for my despair. Or at least not the main one. While reading Hao Wu' diary, I took notes of the most striking facts. Here we go: domestic tourism, smog, obesity, the comical side of corruption, the farcical sketch of policemen inside an illegal church, fake brands, the grief of memory and an inability to rationalize it, censorship.
I've already seen this film though. Yes, because before *making* the 1968 protest movement, I—and like me many others—*experienced* the Economic Boom, that sort of Great Leap which turned peasant Italy into the seventh (sixth? eighth? fifth?

tenth?) World Industrial Power. And I can clearly remember the contrast between our bath tub at home, where I lay placidly taking care of my first erections, and the horrible cubby-hole at my Grandparents' house in Sardinia, where, while defecating, I could see between my legs chickens coming in from who knows where and binging on shit.
That's the reason for my despair. How many Neo-realist films will China give us? How many denunciation documentaries? How many dead people in demonstrations? And how many dead people at work? How much frustration, violence, corruption and lying will grieve the Chinese? How many dialects, cultures, universes will sink into nothingness? Will there be a Chinese Pasolini to miss fireflies? Are there fireflies in China? Will our planet be able to bear all this?
I just hope that, in the meantime, some Chinese teenager can take care of his first erections in a quiet, warm place.

Hao Wu's diary

Here

notes from the present

Beijing, August 23, 2005

11:00 am. In the van to the studio for morning crew call with my two bosses. Late start due to a late midnight wrap last night. Read newspaper ar-

ticle on a medical "accident" where a patient died in the hospital after a car accident because his family was 100 yuan ($ 12) short for a blood transfusion. The family had 400 yuan total. A blood transfusion cost 540. The wife begged the doctor to take cell phones and rings as deposits. The doctor said no. After the "accident", the hospital publicly refused to admit fault, even after the reporter pointed out an internal memo suspending the four doctors involved. The family demanded 230,000 yuan (less than $ 30,000) compensation. The hospital bargained it down to 30,000 yuan (less than $ 4000). They settled. The newspaper asked—How much is a human life worth in China?

Too heavy an article for a morning paper. Talk with my bosses instead about the Peking duck they'd like to have for dinner.

11:30 am. Arrive at the studio and have brunch with the Western crew in the dining room marked "Western Dining Room" on the door. There's French toast, omelet, bacon, oatmeal, fruit salad, cereal, coffee and tea, among other things. The Chinese crew eat Chinese congee, steamed buns, pickled veggies and boiled eggs out of plastic meal boxes out in the corridor. Apparently all Chinese whose job involves English translation are included in the "Western" crew; but the pay and benefits are far lower.

1:50 pm. Finally first shoot of the day after a long setup. The Chinese crew, about twenty of them, rush off the set as if running away from a plague. The bell rings. The Assistant Director calls "Action". I'm not needed on the set to assist with operating a second boom mic. Very bored.

2:25-3 pm. Lunch. The "Western Dining Room" serves salmon, quesadillas, beans, garden salads,

cheese bread pudding, among other things. Delicious food and civilized sittings. The Chinese crew eat Chinese stir-fries out of plastic meal boxes while squatting in the corridors.

3:30 pm. First shot after lunch. Have nothing to do after laying the cable before the shoot. The male and female leads, both well-known stars from America, passed by me on their way to the set. They carry this air around them which makes them stand out. Or is it just in my head?

4 pm. In the van to the hotel where the boss stays to fetch his laptop charger. Mr. Hong, the driver, yells the F word. The van just had an extreme close call with a bicycle. Mr. Hong curses "stupid peasant" at the bike rider. He says that the rider probably would appreciate the chance to get knocked down by a city car; the compensation payment from the car insurance companies would far exceed any amount he could make in a lifetime. The rider indeed looked like a migrant worker from the countryside. Lots of them in Beijing. I remember a conversation I had once with a Chinese lawyer friend about using compensatory and punitive damages to curb businesses' disregard of customers' welfare. My friend's opinion was that it would only encourage the poor and desperate to seek out accidents for the legal windfall. Life is cheap in China, he said. I'm longing for the day when China can have the likes of $ 250 million Vioxx [anti-inflammatory drug withdrawn from the market because of concerns about increased risk of heart attack and stroke] damage awards without many rushing to kill themselves for it.

5 pm. Back to set. Pass by a newly-cleaned restroom marked "Western Restroom" on the door.

The old restroom we've all used in the past few days was always wet with water (or something else) on the ground. Sometimes people didn't flush so the place smelt really bad. Some Western crew members complained. The "Western Restroom" still only has squat toilets and inside it still stinks. But at least it's quiet. I walk into the "Western Restroom" without any hesitation.

8-8:30 pm. Dinner in the "Western Dining Room". Juicy hamburgers (and dry veggie burgers) with salads and fruit and string beans. Chinese crew eat in the corridor with their plastic meal boxes. An American crew member comments on the "Western Dining Room" note on the door. It's racist and discriminatory, he says; it's exactly the type of things the civil rights movement was against. I nod. The funny thing is, he continues, in this case it's the Chinese production office that got the idea and put up the signs. I nod again. We Chinese all know that many of us have the tendency to discriminate against ourselves. I want to ask him though—would you really like to enjoy the Chinese experience, including squatting in the corridor at each meal and using a wet bathroom that's sometimes not flushed? But I keep my mouth shut.

12 am. I've been holding a boom mic for the long scene we are shooting. Long dialogues. It's late. Everybody is tired. The actors constantly make mistakes. The directors and assistant directors and camera operators are testy. I've learned to rest the long boom on my head during the long take, rather than holding it up straight like a good boom operator. I still sweat like a pig during the take but my arms are not as sore. A mobile phone rings somewhere. The take is ruined. We start again.

The male lead makes a mistake. We start again. A mobile phone rings. The Western assistant director storms out of the set. We hear him screaming—"Everyone turn off their phone! If a phone rings again the owner of that phone doesn't need to show up for work tomorrow!"

12:30 am. Break before the next scene. Just learned the two rings were from the same phone. The Chinese production manager, apparently enraged by losing face in front of the Western crew, fired the guy on the spot. The assistant filling me in with the details also said that the guy was a young kid from the countryside; he had a goofy smile on his face and apparently didn't even understand what he did wrong when he was fired.

1:30 am. It's got to be the 10th take now of another long difficult dialogue scene. I'm kneeling right in front of the female lead and holding the gun mic up to collect her sound. I can see the veins on her arm and the creases around her wrists. It feels weird to be so close to a famous star. As if I'm intruding on the mysterious aurora the celebrities have been so carefully cultivating and guarding. Up close, they are just like anybody else, stripped off the effects of camera lighting, engineered smiles and scripted interviews. I stare at her. She's having difficulty finishing a long line. She curses with the F word and then giggles. The director comes and whispers into her ears. She must have suffered a lot in her own way, and now she's reaping millions of dollars in return. I wonder what her lifestyle is like, living from one party to the next in the Hollywood hills, around glamorous people.

I feel so keenly aware of both the similarities and differences between us. Everywhere I look I see

these similarities and differences—the Beijingers vs. the migrant workers from the countryside, the Western vs. Chinese crew, the stars vs. the "normal" people. I also feel keenly aware that the position I'm in looks like I'm kneeling in front of a pedestal of a star and worshipping her.
2 am. We wrap.
3 am. Home in my comfortable bed. Dream of Nicole Kidman: she's in Shanghai shooting Wong Kar-wai's new film; we walk into a fancy restaurant chatting like old friends, her elegantly in the Chanel dress she wore in the Buz Luhrmann Chanel commercial. We sit down at a table and look at the Bund. The night is beautiful; she is beautiful. She listens to my dreams and I listen to her loneliness after Tom Cruise. In my dream, she's really no different from any of my other friends. And she's not wearing any expensive jewelry either.

Beijing, September 15, 2005

There had been two others before I resigned from my assistant position on the movie production set. Simon, the head accountant, left after being fed up with overseeing the "complex" finances of the co-production. I did it in order to focus on my own projects. Yong's excuse was something novel, I thought at first, in the current day and age. "The school informed me last week that I had to go back for party education," he told me while setting up the video monitor for the director, "it's not like we're having much fun here anyway."
"You are a Communist Party member?" I stared at him incredulously. He was a second-year graduate

student at the Beijing Film Academy, looking no more than 24 years old. He usually wore a tank top to work and read comic books when he's not working. "Wrong decisions in college," he sighed. "I joined the party in order to get a better job. You would be surprised how many big enterprises, even foreign corporations, would prefer hiring party members. I guess we are somehow perceived as more reliable." "Surely you don't need the membership anymore. You are going to be a director," I helped him sort out the tangled video cables. He had told me once that he would like to make fantasy films that entertain and sell. "Why don't you just quit the party?" I asked. "I can't. That would leave a big black mark on my personal files, which would lead to many future complications. Like when getting a job after graduating, getting a film grant, and dealing with the film industry bureaucracy. Ah Wu, you'd been away from China for too long." He started laying cables and followed the cables away from me.

Over the weekend, I called my parents in Chengdu to inquire about their fall vacation plans. The summer trip to Jiu Zhai Gou had triggered my mother's urge for more photo-snapping sight seeing. They had talked repeatedly about a trip to Yunnan, arguably among the most exotic travel destinations in China. "Oh we have to postpone it. Your father had to go back to his work unit for party education," my mother then moved on to recount all the ailments discovered in their recent physical examinations. "But dad's retired!" I couldn't believe my ears. "What does the party need him for?" And vice-versa. "It's not that bad," my father chimed in. "We only had to go back to study when they called. Maybe two to three times

a week. It started in August and will last probably through November." "What do you study?" "The progressiveness of the Communist Party."
It's only then that I started to realize the scale of this education. It's nation-wide, but apparently not much publicized, if at all. Is it like the anti-spiritual pollution campaigns in the 80s? No, my father replied—they were still studying documents from the party and having discussions; they hadn't reached the stage of criticizing other party members and self-criticism. Some not-progressive-enough party members would be asked to leave the party, my father said. "But aren't all party members more or less corrupt nowadays?" I wondered if my father also saw the irony. […] "And in any case, why can't you just quit the party and go enjoy your retirement?" I added. "We can't do that!" my father exclaimed and my mother laughed. "What would the work unit think?" "Why do you care? You are retired. They can't cut your pension." Really, I did not understand. "And all our colleagues and friends," my father continued patiently, as if explaining to a 10-year old, "they would be talking behind our backs." They probably would, that I know. But, "why do you care?" I persisted. "Ah son, you don't understand." They both laughed. […]

Beijing, September 18, 2005

[…] "Metropolis", an English-language magazine with an all-Chinese staff except for an American editor. […] The publisher was a warm and talkative Beijing lady in her 40s. "How about a book on the cultural dilemmas of overseas Chi-

nese who live comfortable middleclass lives in America?" I proposed while we were discussing the hyper-competition in China's publishing business. She had just proclaimed that "the competition is intense in China, much more intense than in the US. In fact, it's brutal!" "My instinct is," she countered in that fast and emphatic style common among Beijingers, "it won't work." "Why? Aren't Chinese always interested in and aspire to the lifestyles of Chinese overseas? Parents are always sending their kids to foreign countries for education, hoping a much better life for the kids. It's time for them to be told that the reality is not all rosy." "But you see," she assumed this slightly condescending you-don't-know-China air, "Chinese people don't want realities. They want dreams and fantasies!" We shared a laugh at her exclamation, and she continued, "the more you tell them that the outside is wonderful, farther than they could reach, the better the book will sell." She blew back a streak of hair that had shifted over her forehead during the laughter, "I tell you what will sell in China. You go to America and interview some young and successful geniuses. Of course not famous ones like Bill Gates. Everyone knows his story already. Give a positive account of how the geniuses came to be, and every parent in China will buy the book." I laughed hard at the familiarity of her observation, "yeah, I know, my parents were like that with me and they are doing that again to my niece." "See, this is China," she chuckled as well, "everyone is scheming to better themselves, to associate themselves with better people. That's why social clubs are so popular in China. People making hundreds

of thousands want to meet their likes so they can help each other make more. People making millions socialize with others making millions. […] If you could write a book on how to prepare kids for high society, that would definitely sell!" […]

Beijing, October 24, 2005

It's 10 am in the morning and I'm listening to KQED (the San Francisco public TV/radio station) streaming online and doing my part-time job. Directly ahead outside the window of my study, two construction cranes are waltzing away on the site where two business towers will stand one day. Behind them is the soaring Beijing TV Tower in construction, its empty metal frames glistening in the morning sunlight.

NPR [National Public Radio—US] is doing a show on obesity and dieting. First they interview the director of *Supersize Me* [a documentary film directed by and starring Morgan Spurlock, an American independent filmmaker. It follows a thirty-day time period—February 2003—during which Spurlock subsists entirely on food and items purchased at McDonald's]. The director summarizes his 1.5-hour documentary in thirty seconds—he ate three meals a day at McDonald's for thirty days; he supersized every time he was asked; he gained weight and suffered headaches, trouble with breathing, high cholesterol, and many other health problems. "McDonald's has the responsibility to inform its customers of the danger of its food" he exclaims. […]

The program then moves on to an expert of something, who lambasts the diet industry for conspir-

ing to fan the hysteria about weight loss. He claims that there is no clear-cut scientific evidence supporting the position that obesity by itself causes health problems. Getting on and off dieting does more damage, he says. Lastly a female writer comes on. She's fat, she struggled with dieting all her life, now she's resigned to be fat and be proud of and positive about it. She hates her friends and relatives who constantly pester her with suggestions of the latest fad diet. Nobody talks about public health, statistics, or any sort of data. It's very personal, subjective and, to many, engaging. Right by my laptop on the desk sits the latest "Time Out Beijing" magazine. It opens to the article I was reading on the modern architecture Beijing is ferociously building. A Western architect laments that Beijing is in danger of becoming, like New York, an ultra-modern wasteland of architectural mediocrity. Outside my windows, the cranes continue their languid dance in their conspiracy to transform Beijing into this mediocrity (come to think of it, New York is really not that bad, is it?). The radio show is now interviewing an American sumo wrestler who's huge in size.

I have a sudden attack of where-am-I-now confusion […]. On the other end of the Internet (does the Internet have ends?) is America, a future that Beijing is sprinting towards. It's a future in which Beijingers will have more modern buildings, eat more McD hamburgers, become more obese, and have talk shows discussing the personal opinions on dieting. Based on the number of fat businessmen and government bureaucrats roaming the streets every day, it seems we are already halfway there.

Beijing, November 9, 2005

When we moved into our new three-bedroom apartment, our friend Clayton reminded us every chance he got, "oh oh, you've got to hire Xiao Luo as your *ayi* (maid). He's so good at cleaning, doing laundry, and everything else in the household. He even pays the phone bills for you. And he needs the money right now cause his wife is pregnant with their second baby". Clayton is the kind of friend who'd drag you to his newly-discovered restaurant of the month and keep organizing dinner gatherings there until you agree it's one of the best in Beijing. He'd talked most of our expat friends into hiring Xiao Luo. So bowing to peer pressure, we hired him as well.

We liked Xiao Luo immediately after we all met. He's short with a dark complexion, and always ready to put on a smile when spoken to. His politeness was so extreme that it made me uncomfortable. For it seemed to remind me how big a gap exists between us. Our dry cleaner wasn't impressed though. "Why do you hire a man maid?" she asked when I made one of my last trips to drop off dry cleaning now we have Xiao Luo. She had just met him earlier that day when Xiao Luo picked up some clothes. "Cleaning is a woman's job," she said. I smiled and didn't bother to protest her sexist comment. Unlike the hourly maids who are mostly inexperienced country girls, Xiao Luo cleaned the rooms like my mother would, leaving no trace of dust behind. He agreed to come twice a week and we pay him $ 75/month. Twice as much as the hourly maids, it's well worth it.

The second time he came was a Sunday. He did laundry for us for the first time. As he was folding all the underwear neatly on our bed in the master

bedroom, I asked him about his background (he came to Beijing six years ago from Anhui province), how he followed his wife into the *ayi* service (the restaurant business he was first involved in was too competitive), and how they are managing a second baby with the family planning policy ("we are allowed to have two babies in the countryside"). Then he turned to me, "Mister, how should I separate out the underwear for you two?" The question stunned me for a beat. I thought Xiao Luo should have a decent gaydar running since he'd worked for over two years for Clayton and his partner. Clayton only has a sofa bed in his guest bedroom which is only pulled out when guests come. Surely Xiao Luo couldn't have thought that Clayton and his partner slept in the same bed to save on the heating bills during summer. "Mister, what should I do with the underwear?" Xiao Luo asked for the second time. "Oh," I snapped out of my wondering, "just leave it there. We will sort it out ourselves."

After Xiao Luo left the bedroom, my boyfriend, who had been watching nearby, turned to me, "What happened to you? Are you not the outest person I know?" I had often lectured him on the merits of coming out to his straight friends, and ultimately, to his family. "I… I just don't want to confuse him." I picked up the underwear and stuffed it into a dresser drawer as my boyfriend laughed. The issue kept on coming back. On several subsequent occasions Xiao Luo asked similar questions on whether he should separate dry cleaning, socks and shirts. Every time I gave him the same answer, "Don't worry. We will sort it out." And my boyfriend kept on making fun of my closetedness.

I still don't understand why I feel embarrassed to come out to him, especially after coming out to my family and now anybody who bothers to ask me any trivial question about my relationship status. Is he really that clueless? He never had to make the bed in the guest bedroom! But for Chinese who often grow up in cramped living space where several would share the same bed, this may not appear that strange. Same-gender bonding can be really close without raising eyebrows. Many in the educated class in Beijing have heard of homosexuality which they regard with curiosity and/or disgust. Nevertheless, in the Sanlitun embassy district, one can often spot off-duty security guards, mostly from the countryside, holding hands while strolling in their uniforms. Xiao Luo looks just like that, innocent and simple. I didn't want to disturb that innocence.

A couple of weeks later, Xiao Luo helped us organize summer clothes and put them away in storage. My boyfriend pulled out several long Ts, "these I'd like to keep for the winter." Xiao Luo grabbed them and stood up, "I'll go put them in the guest bedroom's wardrobe for you then." As soon as Xiao Luo went into the guest bedroom, my boyfriend gave me an evil stare and stamped his foot, "This is my apartment!" Xiao Luo had apparently assumed I was the owner and my boyfriend, who bought the apartment, was the one subletting. I laughed as my boyfriend continued to seethe with anger. "You'll have to do something," he said.

A week after that one of my friend was coming to visit for a week. I took this opportunity to instruct Xiao Luo that we needed to empty out the wardrobe in the guest bedroom and put all the clothes

of us two in the master bedroom. "Everything?" He asked. "Everything." I affirmed. For the next hour, I felt he avoided looking at me when he passed by me in the apartment. Or was it me? Regardless, he never asked again whether he should separate out anything for us from then on. Now we can admire the neatness of our underwear, carefully folded and organized in the drawers in the master bedroom, without feeling the slightest embarrassment about explaining anything.

Beijing, November 13, 2005

Let's say Mr. and Ms. Lee had been friends of your family for a long time, maybe since the time you were born. Maybe you had been their only son's best friend since high school, the two of you having gone to college, then to the US together. Let's say that Mr. Lee's son hated to visit China, because he hated the rotten Chinese family he had. So every time you went back to Beijing, you would visit Mr. and Mrs. Lee out of sympathy. And every time, they would tell you the same old stories the way they would to their own son […]
Mr. Lee was born in the 1940s when the Japanese armies were still galloping over China. His hometown in the deep southwest escaped the bombing, and he grew up in the relatively peaceful countryside with three sisters and two older brothers. His mother passed away when he was little but his stepmother was kind. His family was poor, but not starving like many of their neighbors. They had a small parcel of land on which the family worked hard. Most families in Mr. Lee's village shared the same last name as they all descended

from a big family that the Qing government force-migrated from Hubei province in the early 1700s. After the liberation in 1949, the farming village rode through numerous political movements. The peasants were classified on the scale of poor, mid-level and rich peasants and, the most despised, landlords (in the cities, the classifications were workers, intellectuals, and cadres). The local communist-party officials branded Mr. Lee's family as mid-level peasants, but in the late-fifties changed it to rich peasants. Mr. Lee's family, once considered class-neutral, became slightly anti-revolutionary. However, at least they were not labeled landlords. There's one family in the village that had some extra land and hired other peasants to work on it. They worked hard themselves and paid their hired hands fair. But during land reform the head of the family was executed and the wife and the kids lived on with nothing to their names.

Mr. Lee grew up well-protected by the family. The youngest and the only one smart enough to go to high school, the whole family pinned their hope on him. He would be the one bringing honor to the ancestors and the family. He had the least amount of household chores. Sometimes after school he had to feed the chickens or walk the water buffalo. He would read textbooks on the back of the water buffalo as the animal swaggered its way along rice fields.

When Mr. Lee passed the college entrance examination in 1958, it was great joy to the entire village. Finally a college student from the village. Finally the Lee family had a good son that made them proud. Mr. Lee packed the small bag of his and went to Beijing to attend a tech university. His third brother, the one closest to him, gave him a

fountain pen, a luxury item he had never had and cost a fortune in those days, especially to a peasant. His whole family told him—we cannot support you financially that much since you'll be living in the big city; but no matter how hard, remember the family is behind you, supporting you; no matter how hard, finish college and make the family proud.

So Mr. Lee worked hard. He didn't have to pay tuition, but he had to scramble to pay for his living expenses. His brother-in-law, the husband of his oldest sister, sent him five kuai a month, a handsome amount in those days. Books were luxuries. Food was a luxury. In 1959, during the Great Leap Forward, they were as starved as the rest of the country. For a long time they had only a meal a day. The memory of hunger stayed with Mr. Lee. Even nowadays he would save every leftover from every meal. After graduation he was assigned to work as an engineer at a migrating construction company. He had a few happy years. He made a small salary out of which he would send home some. He loved sports, especially basketball. Then it came the time for him to get married. A country boy like him wanted very much to marry a pretty city girl.

In 1966 the Cultural Revolution started. In 1967 he met the future Mrs. Lee. Mrs. Lee was also born in a village in the 1940s. But her father went to Beijing and got a job as an accountant. He established himself there. When Mrs. Lee was twelve, he moved the entire family to Beijing. Mrs. Lee's mother had two more girls after moving to the city. But Mrs. Lee remained her dad's favorite. He would go to school to pick her up and carry her home on his back, even when she's already a

teenager. Even though financially her family only got by, she grew up a proud city girl.

After high school Mrs. Lee got a job working as a low-level clerk at the construction company. When Mr. Lee courted her, she hesitated—she's beautiful and has many suitors; he's handsome and has a rare college degree, but he's from the countryside. A peasant. A laborer. Probably with a big extended poor family that's siphoning all his money away. Many counseled against their relationship. Their family backgrounds were different—her from a worker's family, him a rich peasant, borderline class enemy. But there was chemistry between the two, and he was nice to Mrs. Lee's family. He appeared to be a dependable man, Mrs. Lee thought. So she married him.

Alas, that was the end of the happy stories. Let's say Mr. Lee would tell you, sighing. After the marriage, Mr. Lee slowly found out that Mrs. Lee had a strange and explosive temper. It's in the family, he suspected, witnessing how Mrs. Lee's mother treated her father. Mrs. Lee, like her mother, was diligent and hard-working at making the tiny nest clean. But she's also turning into her mother, controlling, exacting and wanting her way or no way. No no no. Let's say Mrs. Lee once told you when you were with her alone. That's not true, she said. Alas, how I wish I could talk to my own son who lived so far away now, she would sigh. Let's say Mr. and Mrs. Lee treated you like their son because they needed someone to tell their stories to, in their fading days. You suddenly remembered that their son once told you—he ran away from all the stories to keep his sanity. […]

They were retired now. They spent most of their time inside their apartment, cleaning. Mrs. Lee

wanted her apartment sparkling clean. She covered everything with plastic. The furniture needed to be wiped every day. The floors needed to be mopped every day. And the clothes needed to be changed and hand-washed every day. Mr. Lee was directed by Mrs. Lee every day to do these household chores. And cooking. He only had a little free time at night, to watch a little basketball. […] Mr. Lee fought a lot with Mrs. Lee in the first few years of their marriage. I didn't expect her temper to be like that; if I had known, maybe… he hesitated. He said he stopped fighting with her after their son was born. He said he had thought about divorce. But he wanted his family to be together. Moreover, in those days, the party rarely approved divorces; those who succeeded usually had to go through a lengthy re-education process and carry a bad name for the rest of their lives. So Mr. Lee gave up fighting. He wanted to save face. […]

That affected Mr. Lee at their work unit. He saw his peers, those with college degrees, get promoted one by one. He thought it was because of his family background, the slight-anti-revolutionary rich peasant label. He wrote repeatedly to the work unit's party secretary to express his loyalty to the party. He wanted badly to be admitted into the party. He thought that's the only way to get promoted. Let's say you remember your best friend once telling you about reading those letters which he had discovered by accident. Let's say you remember him telling you that those letters were pathetic. That generation, that inexplicable red generation. After the cultural revolution, Mr. Lee finally got accepted into the party. The work unit gave him a few chances to manage projects. He got promoted, but still at a much slower pace than

his peers. One day, he finally garnered enough courage and approached his manager. After much hesitation, the manager told him—it's your wife; if you could not manage your home well, how could the work unit trust you with demanding work?
He was angry, angry at his wife. But the years of bottling up sealed the outlet of his anger. The most heart-breaking thing, let's say he would tell you, was actually not about the job. It's about his family in the village. Mrs. Lee had forbidden Mr. Lee to be in contact with his own family. How come? Let's say you would be shocked. One day, Mrs. Lee told you her version of the story—that when she was pregnant with the first child, Mr. Lee's stepmother came to the city to help. But Mrs. Lee had to take care of her, with her belly huge, and go around buying cigarettes for her, because the traditions of the countryside demanded that the daughter-in-law show respect to the mother-in-law.
Let's say Mr. Lee would tell you the contrary—that when his step-mother arrived in the city, she carried eggs and fruit and gifts from family, in a huge basket on her own back. She tried to help out in her awkward countryside way which Mrs. Lee detested. Then Mrs. Lee got furious when Mr. Lee paid more attention to his step-mother, out of filial tradition, than to her. From then on, whenever Mr. Lee contacted his family, Mrs. Lee would throw a fit. From then on, whenever there was a relative visiting Mr. Lee from the village, Mrs. Lee would throw a fit. The relatives slowly stopped coming. […] Let's say you would see tears in Mr. Lee's eyes. […]
Let's say you looked at his teary eyes, you wanted to cry. Let's say you would like to tell him about personal freedom, happiness and the courage to

seek them all, the notions that the younger generations grew up with. But you look around at all the marriages, all the personal struggles you know. You are old enough now to feel the weight of human stories and tell the complex of rotten situations, old enough to know that the same story is being replayed over and over all over China. What could you say? Let's say you desperately try to say or do something, to make their lives better, if only a tiny bit better, what would you do? What could you say?

Beijing, November 21, 2005

[…] On Tuesday and Wednesday I interpreted for an American reporter. The organization he works for is doing an all-out live reporting series on the "new" China. The reporter interviewed the CEO of Dangdang, the largest B2C e-commerce company in China. The office of Dangdang was as shabby as the government building of a poor Hebei county, with the walls cracking and the heating so high that people's lips were also cracking, which led me to suspect that Dangdang, for all the hype of the Internet's huge potential in China, is struggling financially. Of course the CEO still danced around the same tune of China's great Internet future. When the reporter asked to interview a few employees, the CEO dialed a few numbers and assigned several to be interviewed, who, not surprisingly, sang great praise for Dangdang.
On Wednesday we visited Dangdang's warehouse in southwest Beijing, tucked in a neighborhood which carried no trace of the hustle-bustle of the metropolis but rather resembled the poor Hebei

county in my imagination. The warehouse itself looked a bit like the Fox studios from the outside. There's no conveyor belt or computerized system shuttling goods in the warehouse. Young workers from poor countryside pushed carts around to collect goods from the shelves and relayed them to the shippers. The shippers manually put the goods into plastic bags, sealed the bags and dropped them in a pile which then got relayed to the boxers. The boxers put the bags in shipping boxes which the postal service shipped all over China.
"The employees get paid by the items they ship out. If they make a mistake their pay would be deducted. On average they would make 1200 yuan ($ 150) to 1500 yuan a month, which to these kids from the countryside is a huge sum." The Vice President of operations explained to us matter-of-factly when I asked about how the employees get paid. "They are not officially Dangdang's employees. But we do pay for medical insurance." "Where do they live?" I translated her answer to the reporter and asked another question. "They all live around here." The VP paused as the reporter recorded some sound near the assembly line which sped up since we walked near. She then added, "The rent here is cheap. For 100 yuan ($ 12) a month you can rent a room in a bungalow, which they share."
"Ah." The reporter and I both marveled at the cheap price. The area we live in commands rent of $ 600 to 3000. "Is there heating here in the winter?" The reporter asked. "No." The VP replied plainly. "It's not pleasant to work here in the winter." We observed the busy fingers over the books, the plastic bags and the shipping boxes silently

for a beat, then started off towards the office. The reporter asked his last question, "how come you guys don't have a barcode computer system to lower the chances of mistakes?" "Oh, we are getting one," the VP opened the door for us, and then told us quietly before we entered, "Unfortunately some of them will lose their jobs." In front of us in the office were girls and boys, seemingly in their 20s, many with a flush in their cheeks, perhaps from having worked too long in the fields, working away in a semi-disorganized way around the printers and the computers. […]

Somewhere close by, asphalt

by Andrea Inglese

Here

notes from the present

This is a series of poems written or reworked around the time that I was reading Hao Wu's diary entries. It is not intended as a commentary or counterpoint to the latter. There is simply a parallel relationship between them, based on the idea—anything but new—that geographic distance can matter and also *not* matter in the least, given the constants of contemporary urban capitalist civilization. Far and wide, distant or close, Italian, French, or Chinese, we walk on crusts of asphalt. In the crowd. No longer sure just what memory is, or if there is a thread to follow.

1.
I can't help but look at all the asphalts,
with wonderment, relief,
in the delicate exertions of crossing the street,
of making one's wary way, the crowd
evenly scattered out, and brisk young people
with backpacks or shoulder bags and old people
slowing the flow, who in their thoughts
are forced to halt, the varieties
of asphalt, every one, the long laid strips
still black and shiny, furrowed, and old
patches, cracked or burst, with layers
of grey mortar cropping up, and the dates,
all the carved-in dates, of one patch
or another, of an exhumed pipe,
or of braided cable in fresh aortas
among the entrails of electricity and plumbing...

These asphalts,

now that I study them, take pictures,
and dream at night of painting them
on wide whitewashed walls,
open up like folding screens or stage curtains.

These asphalts are purer
and more burnished than the sheer cliffs
and cusps of skyscrapers,
they hold more history than the air,
and are more mysterious and deep
than the insides of lined-up cars
when a passerby peers in,
they are more fragrant than the petrified
bark of acacia trees.

All of our final traces,
innermost struggles,

pressing biological needs,
are stuck there, slumbering,
as though in gluten, waiting for
a yeast that never comes,
the onions or squashed frogs, digestive
sludge, dried-up egg yolk,
the clots of paint, mysterious initials
drawn in chalk, shoestrings,
teaspoons, petals, doorknobs,
and gobs of food, fruit peel, carrots
grated by a heel, the nails,
powerful nails encircled
by red paint,
the very last nails
that may be holding it all
down, pinned to a crust
to something that is still terrestrial,
ancient, prehistoric, before
it all slips away with life,
the whole scaffolding, partitions, bottoms
that slide and come apart, the lightweight jungle
of commodities, and the cement shells
that live barely longer than we do.

2.
Here everything's a total sham, they're so naive,
they think I haven't caught on,
that I don't know they've all been trained,
those kids behind the chain-link
fence, when they talk
with altered voices like shamans
that magpie, in a flimsy-looking elm,
emitting an electronic noise,
stuck fast to the apparatus
of its branch.

A TV drama explained
the purpose and average length
of the hunt, when animals are not
enough, and men must
feed other men through their work,
or else it was the fable of achievements:
transoceanic cables, glass bridges,
hoverchairs. Other phenomena,
like plane crashes, panic
attacks and falls off balconies
can with very little effort
be memorized.

Someone is making mental notes
of even the appointments we
forget. The epidemic
that has been going round for years
is not visible to the naked eye.
In the mirror I play along: I see
a face that I have learned to recognize,
in fact I make it mine each time I speak,
although the words
float up from peculiar
waters, which is why they reach
the surface blurred.
Sometimes they don't even
make it past my lips.

3.
Look at them, going down doggedly,
and surrendering with every step, and forgetting
things beside them, behind them, just a few, all
that they have, a newspaper,
a packet of seeds, a plastic

cup, but forgetting names
as well, even of people
close to them, going down with them,
with water up to their groins,
and then seaweed and dirty foam
up to their chests, and then, with the pressure,
shortness of breath,
when even vision starts to fail,
they go down all the way, heads submerged,
until they capsize, all
bearings lost, the light
dimmed and green, no
chance of coming back up, ever again.

4.
At any point in time
we may have bungled it all: as others have
before who are now old or dead,
the errors looming enormous in their lives.

And in ours too, everything
begins to bloat awry,
and sidelong glances are darted
towards the steel of the sink, through the glass,
at the chairs pulled up around the table.
Tickets for some brief transport
must be pulled out of pockets, lists
of numbers or places better forgotten,
and postponed deeds, like stroking the cat,
fixing a broken lamp,
a phone call to someone
whose psychological profile
is growing more unstable and treacherous.
Everything will be solved, for now,
with a purchase: the whole morning

will be devoted to it, and looking
at what's rotting in the puddles
or blackening the plaster
will also bring relief. With the hope
of a complicit smile
from the cashier.

5.
You've kept all your deaths inside,
the massacre that they made out
to be useful, free of bloodshed,
by-the-rules, those few, their own, that they know
how to turn to such profit, while you go round,
pounding on this door and that door, you run,
digging a dark gouge, and if you fall, or sweat
it really happens, and the pain and sweat are yours,
grasp it tight, they say, it's all a matter of the grasp,
the silence of the grasper, that's where the secret lies,
but it's a secret you betray, when you muster your deaths
within your belly, you feel them, celebrate each one,
with the due anger, that's all that you've got left,
as they are quick to tell you, you're alone with your anger,
and it is profitless, it hampers and muddles the race,
but you do not grasp anything, any more,
you have decreed the end of all secrets
your poverty is visible and deafening.

6.
There is a point that will not move,
and will not grow, diabolically
close, so close you could say it is inside,
and poisonous, like a disease,
that makes everything shrink,
so that under a powerful constraint of gravity

even the lithest of poplars must bow down, or maybe
that's not it,
maybe as the final ruse, it's outside, just beyond,
the shadow of something, or someone alive,
dark paint under throat and eyes, in a white coat
or a cowl, coming closer
by one millimeter a year,
then coming into my face
with all his malignant thoughts,
"The things around you," he tells me
"crumbled long ago, if you grab hold
it is only so you yourself
can complete the lag,
freeze the last image, switch off
the lights after the blackout has come."

Hao Wu's diary

Here

notes from the present

Shanghai, December 6, 2005

We wrapped up shooting at 3 am Sunday morning in Old Town Shanghai near the Yu Garden. It was freezing and I was hugging my latte tightly. The water truck was coughing its way through the streets to create the effect of a recent rainfall when I had a revelation—"See," I said to a fellow assistant standing next to me while pointing at the lights and the extras that were producing the illusion of a busy happening neighborhood, "we shot

in modern skyscraper districts like Pudong and in old neighborhoods that are being preserved for tourism purposes only, and then we shop this collage of extreme contrasts all over the world. Audiences look at the images and probably think this represents the intriguing and enigmatic modern China. But how about the majority between these two extremes? We both know that for most Chinese, life is not in the glamorous Grand Hyatt or smoking water pipes in old buildings with decaying beauty; rather, life here is in boring apartment buildings with routines of going to work, cooking, trying to make more money, marrying and divorcing, just like everywhere else." My insightful observations depressed both of us. We sighed in mutual sympathy—"Hollywood. What do you expect?"

The last two days saw some crew members partying their heads off in hip clubs with African American DJs, some hurriedly getting on a plane back to LA, and others excitedly preparing for trips to Beijing and Xi'an. I cringed every time I heard someone talking about "seeing the real China" as if a few days with Lonely Planet is the holy grail to understanding this country. Then it's time for me to sit down and plan my Christmas vacation. I thought of visiting Thailand. I checked mainstream tourist-info websites and those for backpackers. The former told in sweet tongue why Bangkok is a must-see because it epitomizes the modern Thailand. The latter screamed that Bangkok is not real Thailand; for real Thai culture and people one has to go north, go to the countryside. I sneered at both—how could there be only one real Thailand? I told myself not to succumb to the temptation to arrange my itinerary around images

I had seen previously in movies and on the Discovery Channel. So I did more research. I visited epinions.com and read traveler testimonials such as "we met a couple of Thai people in a restaurant and we had a very interesting conversation. And oh my god what a nice way to know the real Thailand". I sneered at their naivety. But still I had to come up with an itinerary. What do I hope to do—understand Thailand in 10 days? Where to start? Which guide to follow? I imagined Thailand as this giant animal that could be an elephant but I could only touch its rough skin briefly to figure it out. After a few more hours of researching, I gave up. What am I expecting anyway? For all my gripes on foreigners custom-fitting China into their own fantasies, I was in no mood to see the "real" Thailand on my vacation, at least not the part of high HIV infection rate, sex slavery and wide wealth gap. For most of us who sample cultures in fast-food fashion during brief visits to foreign countries, travel seems primarily to validate our preconceived expectations. It's a leisured entertainment activity. Why should it be much different from Hollywood? There's a bar in my neighborhood in Beijing called "Want Travel?" and it has all the Lonely Planet guides. I decided this weekend when I fly back to Beijing, I would sit down with the guides and plan my Christmas vacation accordingly.

Beijing, December 21, 2005

I woke up late this morning so I hurried to get myself a cup of coffee, start Yo-Yo Ma's Baroque music and begin writing. Between coffee sips and

writing fits, I glanced at the sunny day outside and through my window, the same view of the shiny new Beijing TV Tower in construction.

At 9:40 am my cell phone rang. The call was from a number I didn't recognize. "Hello?" I answered. "Hi. In our hotel we have two girls newly arrived from our hometown. Would you be interested in opening their bags?" a rather mechanic female voice came through the line. The connection was not very good. […] So I asked, "What opening bag?" "You know. Virgin girls," she mumbled. Oh. She's asking if I would be interested in popping the cherries of two virgin girls from the countryside. "Where are you calling from and how did you get my number?" I managed to ask one more question despite my disgust. "We are in a hotel in Zhongguancun [the Silicon Valley of China located in northwest Beijing]. You left your number with us once," she said. Then she finished off quickly, "If you are interested, just give me a call." And she hung up. I couldn't go back to writing after the call. […]

Right by my laptop, in a pile of junk on the desk, lay a business card which was pushed underneath our door yesterday. On the front was the face of a beautiful and demure Chinese lady with the text "private care". On the back it listed the different kinds of massage services they offered. I dialed their number to confirm my instinct of it being a sex service. After a brief greeting with a sweet-voiced lady, I went directly to the point. "What's this Spanish Cavalier service you are offering?" I asked. "It's a special kind of oil massage," the lady answered. "Special in what way?" "Heehee, you are a very direct customer," she giggled. "It's a massage done with a body part that men don't

have." "You mean breasts?" But I could not see how massage could be done with breasts. "Hee-hee," she giggled some more. "Just come over and you'll know. Not breasts for sure. We have many girls here. You can talk to them about services not offered on our menu." "But still, what female part do you use for Spanish Cavalier?" I was obsessed with finding the answer. "Ha ha," she laughed out loud this time, "you still don't know or you are just playing with me? You are a very funny man." The conversation ended without me able to find out what Spanish Cavalier is.

I was left dazed by the two phone calls this morning. Sex was being pushed about for sale in this great capital of our communist motherland just like every other commodity, with abundant availability and a market penetration that leaves no stratum untouched. I knew I shouldn't have been surprised but I was grinding my teeth with anger because this market penetration was ruining my writing. […]

Beijing, December 23, 2005

[…] This morning I interviewed Gao Zhi Sheng, a famous dissident lawyer in Beijing. When I read the New York Times article on his struggle with the government on December 13, I was fascinated by his guts and thought his ongoing litigations against the government's violation of the citizens' rights a natural and engaging story arc for a documentary. I saved the article and contemplated contacting the reporter for Gao's contact info. But I decided not to in the end. I didn't want to get me or my family into trouble with the government.

This past weekend, at a Christmas party organized by an expat reporter friend of mine, I bumped into him. […] Gao was extremely open to my idea of a documentary. […] So this morning I hauled my filming gear to his office which was mostly empty now after the government took away his permit and shut down his practice. For two hours he told me cases after cases of the government totally disregarding the laws it had written itself, cases after cases of the powerless being stamped on. […]

When I got my gear together to leave, he invited me to go to an underground Christian service with him on Christmas day. It suddenly dawned on me—to continue filming him would drag me into a very political situation which could lead into real trouble. But not to continue meant all my previous emoting over the poor and the less fortunate had been just empty mental exercise over Starbucks lattes. And the battle of thoughts exhausted me. I had and have no plan to be political. But how can I maintain an apolitical state of mind in the presence of Gao? […]

So today I asked Hoo, a self-made entrepreneur, "Is China really as corrupt as Gao accuses?" Hoo's answer was "No, but...". The communist party does not have "evil" intentions, but 98% of the government officials he had dealt with were corrupt. They frequented prostitutes, asked for bribes, and took judicial procedures into their own hands. […] He had frequently bribed officials with thousands of renminbi in "massage" gift certificates.

I slumped into a depression in the black leather sofa. The giant TV screen in our room was flashing beautiful pop stars with their fancy hairdos and

simple happy tunes. We could hear loud off-key singing, or more accurately, howling, from the neighboring KTV rooms. Even at 1 pm, the place was buzzing with entertainment.

Hoo, in the low lighting in the KTV room, looked almost philosophical. "Nobody likes the system. But we have to make money. So we make do," he commented without the slightest trace of distress. How I wanted to retreat back to my apolitical well-kept apartment in my well-protected complex then. China, beneath the veneer of glamour, is busting with rotten flesh. And the sad part is that, as long as people can keep on making money, they wouldn't care; and that if and when we get over this phase of rotten flesh, the injustices, the voices of despair and indignation, all of them will be forgotten.

We went out to the buffet table for our second round. The speaker system was forcing a never-ending version of Jingle Bells on us. Waiters moved about under red joker hats. Young patrons checked the food trays in their nice clothes. Everything looked rosy. Everything looked prosperous. Everything looked hopeful. In that cozy Christmas atmosphere, I wondered if we could be apolitical without having to close our eyes.

Beijing, December 27, 2005

My first experience with a Chinese underground Christian church was very above-ground; in fact, twenty floors above. I went there with a friend on Christmas day. We arrived at an apartment complex just outside the fourth ring road at 2 pm. The buildings looked no different from any other dot-

ting Beijing's expanding footprint—new on the outside, but quickly decaying on the inside. My friend gave me a quick jolt once we got in the lobby. He scratched his head, "Darn, I forgot which floor it is on. 18 or 20?". Then he asked the security guard, who was dressed in some kind of police-like uniform with a heavy cotton army coat on the outside, "Comrade, do you know on which floor the underground church is located?" I thought we were going to be arrested right then and there, but the guard only replied impatiently, "What underground service? I don't know any here." We took the elevator to the 18th floor, which was his first guess. He buzzed an apartment. The little window on the top of the iron security door opened. A gruff male voice asked what we wanted. My friend asked again, "Comrade, do you know on which floor the underground church is located?" The gruff male voice replied that there were no Christians in the building. We climbed up the dark stairs to the 20th floor. His second buzz opened the door to the underground church set up in an apartment. The living room, now acting as the chapel, had no decoration except for a small cross on one wall, a poster of Christ's resurrection on the second, and a huge Chinese character Love on the third. At the deep end of the room stood a tiny podium under the cross, and the rest of the room was packed with chairs. Worshippers streamed in slowly as the service started until the room was jam-packed. The crowd seemed younger on average than the kind visiting the official churches. Altogether there were about 40-50 people, including a middle-aged woman who cried during hymns, a couple of trendy-looking young girls, a few from

Hong Kong, a hip-looking young artist type and one older guy who dozed off during the service. A grave-looking, middle-aged, overweight man with a long wild beard gave the sermon. He appeared to be some kind of writer, and was very eloquent. He preached for love and peace and humility. He claimed that Christianity was the best religion after he compared it to all the other religions he knew; the difference—the immaculate conception of Christ. He bashed democracy for its innate lack of a higher good. "Look at the democracy in Taiwan. It's like a farce. Democracy brought out the worst in us," he exclaimed, while sweat stained through his shirt. The central heating was turned unbearably high. "We need a higher good to guide us," he said. […] All in all, it was very similar to the service at the official church. I couldn't see why the government would ever want to suppress underground church services. The only reason possible is that the Chinese government dislikes anyone or any organization openly proclaiming a higher loyalty to an entity above itself, which the underground churches ardently do.

Beijing, December 28, 2005

Since Deng famously declared that "to get rich is glorious", the only money that my Chinese compatriots still refuse to take seems to be service tips, which is bizarre because first, it's completely legit, and secondly, it does not hurt anybody in any conceivable way.

When I first moved back to China in the summer of 2004, I was constantly intrigued by the military-style training of restaurant staffs. Depending

on the restaurant, the training might happen in the morning or afternoon, or both, and would consist of some form of group exercise and a pep talk by the manager on duty. The manager would urge the staffs to do better and admonish those who lagged in performance. Those chided would blush and stare emptily at the wall, or a clock, or the manager's tie.

I found the scene intriguing since it brought back some not-so-fond memories of attending schools in China and receiving paramilitary training in university. I had got used to rude American waiters and still feeling culturally pressured to pay them 15% tip. Thus I often wondered out loud why the restaurants would subject their poor staff, who gets paid very low wages, to such undignified treatment, often in public view.

My Chinese friends would explain that this being China, the staff was mostly from the countryside and often lacked proper manners. They had to be scolded straight. Still, why not encourage customers to tip them? In a market economy, shouldn't we promote money as the ultimate motivator of good, or just market-acceptable, behavior? So I insist on tipping whenever I feel like it. Most restaurants would not run after me if my friends and I left some small change on the table after dinner. But if I explicitly stated that I would like to leave a tip for their good service, almost all the time the waiter would just blush (or giggle) and push back the change.

One day in a local Xinjiang restaurant, I asked the Hui waitress if their boss forbade them from taking tips. She lowered her head to her chest like a school girl in front of her teacher, and mumbled something like "We are happy to serve our cus-

tomers". But her eyes kept on looking back towards a fashionably dressed woman whom I took to be the owner or manager of the restaurant. Another day I tried to tip the delivery boy from Jenny Lou. It took five minutes (ok, I'm exaggerating) of pushing hands before he finally accepted my ten kuai.

So it was refreshing to find at an upscale restaurant chain serving over-priced Sichuan food and boasting interior design by a famous European designer that they automatically add a 10% service charge to the bill. It was especially refreshing since my banker friend was footing the bill. When the waitress took my friend's credit card, I asked, for no particular reason, "the wait staff will get this service charge, right?" No, she said, it would be added to the revenue for the night. The staff got nothing.

As an ex-capitalist-in-training, I'm all for free market economy under a healthy legal system. But in current-day China, I feel there exists this pretense of serving the people, Lei Feng style, in order to make money, Wal-Mart style. It pisses me off, big time, that the bosses are reaping a disproportionate share of the benefits, asking the little guys to smile and be content, and then taking away what ought to belong to the little guys. It is time that the government come out and state emphatically—receiving tips is glorious, and pass laws to make sure it happens.

Lei Feng was a soldier in the People's Liberation Army of China. After his death, Mao Zedong began what would be known as the 'Learn from Comrade Lei Feng' Campaign, designed to use Lei as a good example to the Chinese people to be cheerfully selfless.

Beijing, December 31, 2005

I've been pitching an idea for a documentary series on the Olympics lately. The idea is to follow

eight Beijing individuals in the last two years of Beijing's preparation for the 2008 Olympics. No discussion of politics. No criticism of the government. No prostitutes, or AIDS patients, or displaced migrant workers. Just eight simple individuals as their lives are being impacted by China's whirlwind development, and Beijing's frenzied buildup for the Olympics.

I sent a Chinese synopsis to a Chinese production company. The general manager liked the idea. But he's very concerned with words in my synopsis like "impact" and "reflection". "That sounds too political. Can you change them?" he asked. I sent the full proposal in English to another production company under the State Council Information Office, an organization under the Ministry of Publicity (originally Ministry of Propaganda). A week later I called the producer back. Her verdict? "It's too political." Beat. "Your proposal sounded like those from the West," she added.

I scratched my head to figure out what's political about my proposal. Is it the "It will explore the complex social and cultural changes brought by China's rapid development", "the series will encourage the viewers to draw their own conclusions on China's rise as a new economic and political power", or "the filmmaker intends to present the complex economic and cultural realities in China"?

If the word "reflection" by itself raises alarm, if any discussion of the status quo is considered political, then honestly I don't know what's so great about having thousands of billionaires and millions of cars on the road (I know, I know, people need to be fed). […]

Beijing, January 9, 2006

When George Bush visited Beijing recently, I was in Shanghai translating for an American production company that was bringing a kick-ass music production to China. I had completely forgotten about his visit until I arrived at the famous outdoor Xiangyang market with a group of American colleagues. Knockoffs of the most famous brands were nowhere in sight. Instead, hustlers approached us in hushed voices, "North Face? North Face?", or "Bags? Watches?", very underground communist style.

We decided to follow a short guy in a fake white Adidas track suit. His gelled-up hair, spiking in all directions, happily bopped as he walked, since he would get a cut of all our purchases. We walked around the street corner, into a narrow alley between two apartment buildings with laundry hanging over us, up a dark wooden stairway and finally into a tiny room. Knockoff watches, wallets and bags were stuffed on the shelves like deformed Barbie dolls. I asked the "salesperson" why this covertness all of a sudden. President Bush was in China, he said, so a special "work team" was visiting from Beijing and confiscating knockoffs in the open market.

"Oh shit. This looks so fucking real!" One colleague gasped because the Rolexes and the LV bags look no different from the real ones he and his wife carried. With it began my weeklong responsibilities of taking group after group of colleagues to that same market, sometimes two to three times a day. Pretty soon my translation service was rendered useless, for when haggling, there's no such thing as a language barrier. A few

days after Bush left, the "work team" went back to Beijing and all the knockoffs surfaced out of dark plastic bags. My colleagues bought Rolexes, LV bags, North Face jackets, Mont Blanc pens, pashmina scarves, and Tiffany jewelry. Most finished their Christmas shopping there. […]

I had stopped buying knockoff stuff a while ago, because first, it was mostly crap, and secondly, everyone in Beijing and Shanghai was carrying LV bags and wearing Nike shoes. In China, brands mean everything but also remarkably little, since a Versace jacket literally means stitching a Versace logo on a simple jacket. Thus, it was weird watching my well-off American colleagues, who could afford the real things, haggling over $ 1 for a fake Mont Blanc pen.

The last day before they all left, we went back to the market for the last time. The famous brands disappeared again. […] I almost wished that the Bush government would just leave the knockoff markets in China alone. First of all, crackdown is futile. Secondly, if Bush is truly concerned with spirituality, what better way to help people see through the illusion of commercialism than flooding the market with knockoffs? With increasing international travel and gift-giving, that gospel would travel wide and fast.

Beijing, January 16, 2006

I fell asleep while waiting for the cops to come. I had planned to visit a family church in Hebei province over the weekend. On Thursday, however, I heard that on the previous Sunday, several cops harassed the family church in Beijing that I've

been following. They visited the church after most of the congregation were gone, and copied down the ID card information of the person in charge. Nobody could be sure whether the cops were targeting the church itself, or they were simply following a couple of the prominent dissidents who went to the church. Nobody could be sure either whether they would be back the following weekend, because they didn't leave any clear warning. I decided to wait and see, in that underground church set in a two-bedroom apartment twenty floors above ground.

After the opening prayers and hymn-singing, the preacher addressed the congregation of about twenty crammed in the small living room. He asked everyone to help look for a new apartment for the church, as the current landlord refused to renew the lease, perhaps under police pressure. He stressed that the church would continue to welcome everyone, including those attracting undesirable government attention. Then he went on to read and explain the Bible. After listening to it for ten minutes, I went to the next room and fell asleep on the sofa.

I woke up twenty minutes later, after dreaming of myself heroically going to jail for doing the documentary. I grabbed my camera and headed towards the living room. Just as I was wondering how long the preaching would continue, a loud knock hit the door from the outside. Everyone turned to look at the door. Usually when a believer comes, a buzz from the security intercom downstairs would precede the door knock. The air froze. I turned on my camera. The door was opened. In came two cops in uniforms and two men in plainclothes. The cop in the front started in a mild

manner, “One of your neighbors complained to the local police station that you are causing a disturbance here.”

Everyone considered that a lame excuse. A couple of believers volunteered to call the Environmental Agency. “They can come and measure the noise level of our singing and praying. In no way could we be disturbing our neighbors. Plus,” they exclaimed, “all of our neighbors know we are having a church service here. Why would they call the cops instead of directly talking to us?” The cop didn’t know how to respond. The man in the brown coat stepped forward, “Don’t you know that having a church gathering is illegal?” That statement immediately draw heated response from the believers. In the audiences sat a prominent human rights lawyer and a Ph.D. student in law at the famous Beijing University. China’s constitution guarantees religious rights, they said.

“I know you guys would be saying that, so I brought this.” The man in brown coat waved a booklet with the national insignia on the cover. “These are the regulations on religious activities in China. What you cited is just one line in the Constitution. This regulation fully explains what’s allowed by that line. Did you guys register with the local police as a religious group?” The law student’s agitation went up a notch. We are getting petitions for the national congress to review the constitutionality of these laws, he said with his fist held tight. Another chimed in that the congregation was not a religious organization, but rather a casual gathering, thus not subject to the government regulation.

I kept my camera rolling the whole time, about two meters away from the center of actions, in a

state of surreal daze. Various thoughts bubbled up in my heads: "Oh my god, I can't believe I'm filming the cops suppressing the family church, in real time!" "Oh shit, the cops seem way too reasonable and articulate. And calmer than the believers! I need more viciousness. Please!" "What should I do now shot-wise? I have zoomed in and out, panned left and right. What else can I do to make the final viewing more dramatic?" "Why are they letting me continue filming? Why? This is unreal!"

I stood there as if watching myself filming a legal debate in front of a Supreme Court that China doesn't have. I felt almost sorry for the brown-coated man who's not equipped to argue with the legal scholars. "I'm not here to expel the group. I just want to warn you about the illegality of gathering here," he proclaimed with an aloofness which could be interpreted as a threat or mere bureaucratic perfunctoriness. No, the group countered—it's you who barged into a private premise illegally with no warrant or permit.

He then asked to see everyone's ID. The group responded no again—China's law stipulates that the citizens be required to show their IDs only to those with a court warrant. The brown-coated man's cool peeled off, layer by layer, with each argument he lost. He checked around for a target. Then he saw me. "What are you filming?" he yelled. "You are invading my image rights." "Hey, I'm doing a private video on this church. You came into this picture yourself," I answered half-heartedly. As a huge fan of the rule of law and the courtroom dramas in the US Supreme Court, I wondered if indeed I was invading on his image rights.

"Turn it off, damn it." With that he took hold of my camera, "I want you to erase the part with me in it." I hold on to my camera. Is that a reasonable request? But those are my good shots! The group showered him again with more legal enlightenment—as public employees working for the government, cops don't have image rights. I could see the frustration boiling in the brown-coated man. He found his outlet in me, the only legal weakness in this unfortunate expedition of his. He dragged me and my camera into the room next door, where I had been napping ten minutes earlier. "Give me the damn tape!" He screamed.

I fought to keep my hands on my camera. Is this really happening? What is this? Am I heroically fighting with a vicious cop? Or should I observe the law and give him the tape, which he may truly have rights to? Would it be ethical to show footage of him even if I ended up keeping the footage? Why didn't any of the books on indie filmmaking discuss the ethical issues around dealing with cops? What does the law say? Oh how I wish China could have a real Supreme Court to clarify issues like the proper ethical ways of dealing with a cop. Oh my god, I'm going to lose my good shots! How can I keep it?! How can I?!

Garbage thoughts kept on popping up in my brain, making me dumb and confused. I kept saying no to him, without even knowing no to what. The brown-coated man finally yanked the camera out of my hands. "Give me the tape!" He fumbled with the camera but couldn't figure out how to open up the tape deck, thanks to Sony's ingenious design. He swung the camera around in utter frustration. My expensive shot-gun mic was dangling below the camera, still attached via a cable.

He kept on twisting and banging the camera to get out the tape. "Damn it!" He stared at me with a piercing anger, "I warn you. Don't cross us!"

My out-of-body legal rumination suddenly evaporated. In that brief moment, I stopped seeing the complexity of modern China, and quit playing with the constitutional issue of religious rights. I could no longer sympathize with him because he's merely a puppet in this insecure system of political and cultural ideologues. I looked into his eyes and saw a trace of evil glinting over his rage. Not the evil of the Communists, of the oppressors, or of Satan; but a hatred, out of deep frustration, and a desire to destroy, both of which seem to have deep root in our culture, and in the current political system with no reliable legal recourse, are unhindered by anything except for a consciousness that nevertheless could be easily crossed to reveal the evil in all of us.

"Give me the fucking tape, or there goes your expensive camera." He held the camera high. I was transfixed by the sight of a man sent on a mission to hinder and possibly destroy, holding my camera with all my good shots in it. He was determined to accomplish something before calling it quits, and there'd be no legal recourse or appeal to whatever ended up happening. Between losing my good shots and losing my camera plus the good shots, I chose the former. I gave him the tape. They left. I stood in the room kicking myself—I should've been more strategic! I should've switched tapes every five minutes! I shouldn't have acted so greedy, as if I were investing in the stock market! The rule does apply everywhere—what sounded too good to be true probably is!

When I went back to the living room with my

camera and a new tape, the cops were gone. The preacher was leading another prayer. He expressed great joy that none of the congregation ran away for fear of the cops. He told the group that they would continue to gather even though the cops would surely come back to harass them again.

They prayed.

I kept filming.

They prayed for God's guidance on overcoming the obstacles. They prayed for the many persecuted in the countryside for their beliefs. They prayed for the cops. Many cried.

I kept filming.

Still a devout atheist, I felt my nose itching to sniffle. I didn't know whether it was from mere exhaustion or from witnessing the real human drama right in front of my eyes, in real time.

I held back the urge to sniffle and kept filming.

Beijing, January 24, 2006

Before I went to the seminar on Memory and Literature last Saturday, I had lunch with a friend of a friend who's writing an article on the urban Chinese for a British newspaper. She asked what I thought of the generation gaps. I'm not familiar with the mindset of the younger generations, I said; my observation was that they seem more into materialism, consumer culture and individualism. I hastened to add that I consider those good traits. Between ideology and consumer culture, I'd chose the latter any day. China appears to have too much baggage on its shoulder—history, nationalism, glory and despair. It's liberating to see

young people able to live freely, unlike the older generations, able to live for themselves without the burden of memories for once, I commented.
After lunch I dragged my camera gear to the Sanwei Bookstore for the seminar. I had planned to stay only for an hour. A few writers from the church I'm following for my documentary were going to be there. I simply wanted to shoot some footage of them in action outside of the church. As I waited, the audience gradually streamed into the spacious meeting room on the second floor of the bookstore. The lantern lights and the Ming (or Qing, pardon my ignorance of Chinese furniture) furniture gave the room an elegant air of the traditionally learned. The organizers had invited a dozen guest speakers who sat around two long tables in the center. The rest of the room was soon filled with eager readers, a few of whom had to stand up in the aisle.
The host started by thanking everyone for their courage in attending, because there were cars parked outside belonging to plainclothes cops. Several foreign journalists were present. At that point I realized that the bookstore was the same one that housed Dai Qing when she gave a detailed report of the failed effort to stop the gigantic Three Gorges Project. My camera seemed to be constantly pulling me to the political hotspots in Beijing. The ostensible purpose of the seminar was to discuss two memoirs recently published. One author was sick so the talk was mostly on the other one, in which the author, a lady in her fifties, recounted the sufferings of her dad, once a government minister and one of the biggest rightists condemned by Mao in the late 1950s, through the Anti-Rightist movement and the Cultural Revolution. Most of

the speakers praised the publishing house's courage to publish the memoir in China, even though it had to be censored, thus shorter than the one published in Hong Kong.

The afternoon ended up being an emotionally-charged three-hour shoot for me. The guest speakers, all prominent writers, literary critics, scientists and philosophers, denounced the system's attempt to stifle people's expression in literature, to censor the truth in news, and to prevent people from remembering the past. "What great misfortune of you having to be Chinese?!" The literary critic quoted the exclamation of He Zuoxiou during his speech, "He Zuoxiou lacked any human decency when he said that. But he expressed the truth—what great misfortune!" He choked up. "Being Chinese means you can't hear the truth, nor can you say the truth. This is an enormous tragedy. So in my opinion, any fictional and non-fictional literary work has to share one common characteristic—it has to tell the truth." The critic was once the head of a rebel group in the Cultural Revolution. He had witnessed the deaths of many friends in the factional fighting. Now he's trying to compile a list of the dead. He frankly admitted that he didn't get modernism and post-modernism, because Chinese literature could not even enjoy the basic expression of the truth.

Some speakers commented on the philosophical and historical aspects of preserving a nation's memory. Most, however, expressed outrage at Chinese being unable to talk about our past. An old scientist from the Beijing University told his story of being a rightist for twenty years and witnessing the deaths around him in the labor camp. He choked up and paused for many times. The

host had to cut his speech short to allow others to speak. A writer with wild hair reminded the audience that memories are forbidden not only to the rightists and the counter-revolutionaries from the Cultural Revolution, but also to the peasants. Even worse, because the peasants don't have the writing skills, they can't even write down their sufferings, publishable or not. He banged the table several times in rage. For he's a peasant's son. When the guest speakers finally finished their round, many in the audience raised their hands high up in the air for their chance to speak. A middle-aged woman humbly started her story: "Today I'm very nervous because I'm very excited from hearing all the stories. Ok (to the organizer), I know I only have three minutes. My father is in his 90s now. He was an old rightist, a historical counter-revolutionary and a current counter-revolutionary. Still today he hasn't got rid of these three hats. What I want to tell today. I'm already very moved." She started sobbing. "I want to say something about fatherly love. My father suffered so much. I want to talk about childhood memory. The clearest one I have. At that time, the rebels, the Red Guards. I was very little, just a few years old. My entire family knelt in a single file on the ground, in freezing winter. It was so cold that the ground cracked. We knelt on the ground. We were very poor then, because my father had those three hats. Then my dad said this to the head of the rebel group. He said, my youngest daughter is very young, can she be allowed to stand up instead of kneeling on the freezing ground and catching cold? He hadn't even finished… Because I was so little, I didn't see exactly how the Red Guards knocked down my father. When my

father raised his head again, I saw my father's eyes, with deep fatherly love, apologizing to his little daughter that he couldn't get her to stand up from the freezing ground. Since then, my love for my father… so deep… Have I run out the three minutes I have?" She asked the organizer while tears were streaming down her face.

Nobody had the heart to stop her so she continued. "So I've been remembering that. I can never forget that incident. My father's face full of blood. His eyes were bleeding. His mouth was bleeding. His body was shaking. And he was begging for a favor for me. All because he had those three tall hats. Today I'm so excited. I don't have much educational background. Sometimes I still ask my father, 'Old man, in 1949 the airplane was waiting for you, why didn't you go back to Taiwan? Why didn't you go back to Taiwan?' My father said, because I'm Chinese, I still love my country, love my land. So because of this single foolish thought of his, he didn't get on the airplane and suffered a lifetime. So I hope that he could write down his story." The woman continued as her voice was soaked in tears. "Many of you know how difficult our lives have been. But I don't have the skills. When I wanted to write down the story, my father was very agitated. He didn't allow any mentioning of it in the household. He only let out tiny bits of his story here and there. So I want to bring this memoir (note: the subject of the seminar) to him, to show him that the society is not as closed as he thinks, the Communist Party… Aiya, this I don't dare to comment on… In fact my father keeps on saying he's grateful for the Communist Party. But he's lying. Nobody has the heart to confront him about this lie, or know how to. But he *is* lying!"

By this point her anger had overcome her sadness. "We as his sons and daughters, we couldn't convince him to write down the sufferings of his life, for the historical record. So today I'm so moved. I don't have much education so I can't speak well. I can only speak this little bit. The three minutes are probably up already. I don't want to say anymore, because there were even more painful memories, which would sadden me further. So I could only speak for these three minutes. But if the audience wants me to, I'd like to tell you another painful story…" The host had to kindly ask her to sit down because there were many other people in the audience dying to speak.

I left the bookstore after the seminar ended, emotionally drained. I don't count myself one of those patriotic Chinese, yet I wanted to weep for my nation and my people. There are so many wounds from the past fifty years that still haven't healed. And there's no healing in sight with the system's gag order in place on our past, on our collective memory. The literary critic had said the following in his speech—"Rage and compassion alone won't save us. Sometimes we consider we stand on the side of righteousness if we are enraged by the ugliness. After our rage, however, we remain silent the next time we witness the ugliness. Sometimes we shed tears in front of sufferings. But nothing comes out of the tears. And we continue to live, to live numbly."

It's been 97 years since the May 4th Movement in 1919 yet we Chinese are still fighting against the tendency to silently suffer, fighting for a chance to express freely. I stopped short my reminiscence and ran to the Oriental Plaza to watch *King Kong* with friends at one of Beijing's finest multiplexes.

Scurrying by the Givenchy and Gucci stores in the fancy shopping mall, I felt as if walking in a completely different world, a world in which young people, dressed in designer fashions and wearing happy smiles, didn't have the burden of or care for memories.

We sat down in the theater with our $ 9 tickets. The audiences were munching on pop corn or Nestle chocolate bars. In this new China where nobody seemed to have painful memories to suffer through, I couldn't help wondering—do we have to remember if the memory only pains us? Do we have to trouble the happy youth with the past? The nation seemed to have moved on, to have made huge strides, since those memories. People are happy making their money, buying their apartment and cars; and they brush aside the memories that may slow them down. What's the point of remembering then? So we can avoid repeating past mistakes? But it surely looks certain that China will never go back to the communist ideological craze ever again.

Yet while I watched King Kong fighting with the dinosaurs, I couldn't forget the tears in the afternoon or people's desperate desire to tell their stories. I understood the futility of our painful memories competing with Hollywood blockbusters for the nation's attention. I also understood that, practically speaking, we may not need to remember to have a happy life. But we have to remember. We have to be able to remember. For otherwise the ones before us have never existed, and we will cease to exist the day our hearts stop beating. Memories are what make us exist, what give us dignity. Right next to me in the theater, a girl started crying. King Kong and Naomi Watts were

watching the sunset together. She cried for the rest of the movie. I hoped that she would forever remember, that one day in a big theater, she cried over a non-human that acted more human than us humans.

Beijing, January 26, 2006

[Below is a long comment from a Chinese blogger on my previous entry. I'm not sure being a statistic sample of one, how much of it could represent the opinions of young people born in the 80s. But I greatly appreciate its sincerity and thus translated it below for those who can't read Chinese.]

This is a warm article. I could even feel your compassion. […] Therefore, it'd be missing the point to discuss with you the meaning of learning from history. However, as part of the younger generation mentioned in your article, I'd very much like to share some of my own experience and thinking. Maybe we could see how we came to be from the history teaching we received.

When the "Scar Literature" (note: a literature movement that focused on people's suffering in the Cultural Revolution) was becoming popular in the 80s, I was often playing jumping games with my playmates in our yard. I was only six when the June 4th movement (note: in 1989) took place. I received school education in the 90s, and my brain was stuffed to the brim with the official orthodox history. (In our politics classes, some teachers required that for some concepts we should know them by heart until we could recite them backwards.)

At the time there was high political pressure right after the June 4th student movement. Our parents, out of concern and love for us, didn't mention anything related to politics; the Cultural Revolution was an even more closely guarded secret. As a result our understanding of history then was completely dominated by official propaganda. Not until the 90s, when we started high school, did some popular media, such as TV shows and magazines, start to reveal bits and pieces of the hitherto sealed history of the Cultural Revolution. Even that was limited to stealthy disclosure. In fact, any reflection on the Cultural Revolution and the June 4th movement could only be done furtively, even now.

Consequently, the educational environment that we grew up in could be regarded as "very strange", if not "deforming". For the official version (I clearly remember that in the history textbooks, the historical significance of the Cultural Revolution is that "it proved the indestructible life force of our party") is far different from that popular among the people. Even in our childish judgment, we knew the folk version was very likely true. However, the truth had to display itself in this furtive way outside of the mainstream. The untrue is strong, while the true is weak. What did it make us realize? That this is a country ruled by lies! (Although I haven't done any strict statistical polling, I'm pretty confident that the majority of those born in the 80s think immediately of "bogus" upon hearing the word "politics".)

Meanwhile, young people, especially teenagers without much power of judgment, have strong adaptability to the mainstream. We immediately learned how to deal with sham. We knew in our

hearts that the concepts from the politics and history classes were pompous, empty and false, yet at the same time we could recite them backwards and forwards. Memorization begot high grades; there's no need to think, to discern, to discover the truth—what if there were conflicts between the facts and the textbooks? As long as we memorized the textbooks we could pass the College Entrance Exams! When we received brilliant high grades from our politics and history exams, we completely adjusted to the untrue.

However, we discovered that more horrifying than our adapting was our powerlessness. One time, I asked the teacher a question about the Cultural Revolution—could one sentence from the textbook be not entirely true? The teacher said, "For what purpose do you want to get it clear?" After a brief upset, I returned to memorizing the textbook. In front of falsity the truth is powerless. In front of government's ideological control independent thinking is powerless. This made us realize from a very young age that everything in this country, we could only accept, being powerless to change; just as those obviously untrue in the history and politics textbooks, we could only accept everything.

The beginning of your article mentioned that our generation has the characteristic of being materialistic. Indeed we are. We have another characteristic—lacking social responsibility. Please don't blame us. For we subconsciously know we don't have the capability to change the defects in this society. Still one more characteristic—too much of an old head on young shoulders. (A person born in the 70s will be angry at the inequalities in our society; yet for a person born in the 80s, the attitude is: it's so very normal; isn't everything nowa-

days just like that?) Likewise, please don't blame us. For we adapted to the untrue too early. Once we got used to the opposite of "the true", it took no effort at all to adjust to the opposites of "the good" and "the beautiful". This is the after-effect of history education during social transformation. No political freedom. No free thinking. We could only pursue material freedom. What you said about "live freely" is only on the surface. From the perspective of eating well and dressing warmly, a panda bear also lives freely; but that is after all not a human way of living.

Having written this much (there's still more to write), I think you've already known what I'd like to express. What's memory good for? Haha. What if we changed it to What's *truth* good for? I understand the compassion and tenderness in your heart. But I'd like to say, that our generation has been ruthlessly deformed into panda bears. I hope the next generation will be able to openly discuss the facts, and accept the truth.

Between ideology and consumer culture

by Giorgio Mascitelli

"Between ideology and consumer culture, I'd choose the latter any day", Hao Wu writes. This statement is fascinating, since it subsists on a bizarre paradox: although it was made by someone who criticizes a certain system, it seems to be

summarizing the very direction in which that system has been moving and would probably be endorsed by the very managers who have been running it in such a way. It is a paradox which is typical of common places, truisms and both big and small hypocrisies; however, this statement is nothing like all that; on the contrary and as far as a simple statement can do, it expresses the meaning of an era and the direction in which our culture is going at the moment; or maybe, and more simply, it conveys a truth that, though partial as it may be, the current historical period has placed before us. Sure, from the point of view of humanitarian ethics, this statement carries a defensive meaning; our consumer culture is a lesser evil, since at least it does not produce the abysses of horror that ideologies usually bring with them, or the gulag, as we would say in our own terms, and it is a typical statement in a culture which has dealt with totalitarianism in a traumatic way; however, on the other hand, from the point of view of power, it sounds like a contemporary version of Chapter 9 of *The Prince*, where Machiavelli explains that the prince cannot forego popular favour (in fact, consumer culture produces far more favour than ideology does): once that is gained, all the rest, even the gulag, will be forgotten.

As a matter of fact, everybody, except for a few nay-sayers, if given the choice, would choose consumer culture both for humanitarian reasons and for obviously hedonistic reasons. The fact is that one cannot make such a choice, not only because consumer culture and ideology are two non-commensurable entities, but also because in their dominant or winning forms they cannot co-exist at the same time and in the same place; this is due

to the fact that if such a choice were possible, consumerism would undoubtedly win. Ideology (I mean winning and angry mass ideology, not those opposing choices made by small visionary or ethically-aware groups) arises only when consumerism is not at hand, because political or religious ideology easily brings some hope into a life which is otherwise avaricious with fulfilment. A proof of this is actually before our eyes: the defeat of the Soviet Union brought about the disintegration of Communism and of all related third-world ideologies, and was greeted as the end of ideologies; but ten years had not passed when in a poor troubled area of the world ideology cropped up again under the ancient guise of religious fanaticism.

Not only did people seriously believe that ideologies would have no longer played any role at all in history, but somehow they also identified them with absolute evil: that was the victory of the theory enunciated by Carl Schmitt during his conferences in Francoist Spain; according to him, total violence and war are the result of an absolute enmity between two opposing parties, which can only be produced by ideology. In such a cultural mood it becomes possible to believe that there are people who 'have chosen' ideology—just as one can decide to enlist as a volunteer in the army or leave as a missionary—thus removing the real historical experience by which taking an individual stand is usually made possible thanks to historical, social and cultural dynamics and events. This fake public awareness is very dangerous because it has made it possible to foster the illusion that an open-minded tolerant culture would have been enough to avoid the revival of forms of ideological intolerance—which many regarded as the

only existing forms of intolerance and violence—and would therefore have stopped all forms of intolerance and violence from cropping up. Though paradoxical as it may seem, the demonization of ideology blinds us in front of the real risks of ideological fanaticism, because it makes us ignore the historical and economical circumstances under which ideologies could be transformed into instruments of death. But above all, as this fake awareness prevails, what disappears is the perception that violence and injustice often are the most effective means for the resolution of conflicts of power and that this is the reason for their existence within history, regardless of ideologies. On the other hand, a culture that has experienced such an illusion is doomed to collapse under the trumpets of war that can be heard everywhere now, and remain dumb when faced with what is new, due to a mutism typical of those who realize they have bet all their few possessions on the wrong horse.

We all prefer consumerism, and for this very reason we all compete ferociously to obtain the resources required to develop it, and ideologies, which already exist or will soon crop up, are there to justify this fight or offer losers a second chance. I too prefer consumerism to ideology, and even if the contrary were true, it would not matter much, because I live in an era and a place where consumerism prevails; however, I know that the cruel ideologies of the poor will always alternate with the humanitarian wars of the rich consumers in an endless vicious circle. There is no hope in history today, nor will there be any in the future, at least until Men will not ask themselves once again if another world is possible.

Hao Wu's diary

Chengdu, Sichuan, January 29, 2006

When I was in primary and high school in the 1980s, preparation for the Chinese New Year would start one month before the holiday. My family, like every other family in the work unit, cured our own pork and made spicy sausages. I still remember watching my mom's frost-bitten fingers massaging spices and salt onto pork chunks, and my dad, with the help of chopsticks, stuffing ground pork mixed with chili sauces into intestines freshly bought at the market. My sister and I, considered too young to handle meaty tasks, would huddle nearby around a tiny coal stove in the damn cold air, dreaming of the day of the holiday feast when we could have all the meat we'd want.

In the early 1980s, most families in China, including ours, could not afford meat every day. Our work unit, a construction company for coal-based power plants migrating and polluting all over China, had just returned to Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan province in southwest China. The work unit had built walls in some single-floor warehouses, dividing the long stretched space into individual units. Each family got an unit which was in turn divided into a front and a back room with a wall half way up. In front of each unit, the work

unit helped erect a small kitchen made of bricks. That's our first kitchen where the home-made pork chunks and sausage links hung off the roof.

After cured pork and sausages, the family then started making the ingredients for rice balls. Rice balls carry a special meaning for Chinese New Year because their round shape puns on *Tuan Yuan*, the Chinese word for family getting together. […] While the ground sticky rice was being dried, my sister and I cracked open peanuts and knocked open walnuts, which always seemed to take an entire afternoon. […] Before the arrival of Coca-Cola and Maxwell Instant Coffee, home-made cured meat and rice-ball stuffing were part of the holiday gift-giving which would be repeatedly re-gifted, since every family already had so much of its own.

On New Year's Eve, our immediate family would get together for a feast. My dad usually cooked (Sichuanese men are proud of being good cooks; me no exception) for a whole day for the family of seven. Then on New Year's Day or the day after, all of us would visit my granduncle's family of four for another banquet. A couple of days later, we would invite my granduncle's family back to my grandpa's place for yet another dinner. Every day the adults played *majiang*, which we kids were forbidden to touch.

Family visits and dinners would last until the 15th day of the new year when we all went out for the lantern festival. The entire population of Chengdu would appear out checking the lanterns in the People's Park. It would be so crowded that my parents often spent most of the time nervously checking around to make sure my sister and I didn't get lost. In those days the lanterns were

elaborate and colorful; maybe people had more time then, or maybe a child's eyes expanded the vision out of proportion.

Slowly, the celebration started to change. People made more money and every family gradually bought a TV set. My parents moved three times, each time into a bigger apartment. CCTV's New Year's Eve gala show became a new holiday ritual before we figured out how to learn back the old rituals disrupted by the Cultural Revolution. There was more variety on the New Year's dinner table—more takeouts from neighborhood restaurants, including shredded pig's ear and beef tripe soaked in chili oil, roasted ducks and cakes, and fewer stir fries that would require lengthy manual preparation at home. New Year's Eve dinner had to finish by 8 pm so we could all go back to our respective homes and watch the gala show.

More people joined the family as well. My two aunts brought their dates to the family feasts. Then my two cousins from my granduncle's family did the same. They all got married and had kids. My widowed grandpa remarried. The last time I came home for the holiday in 1992, fourteen years ago, the family gathering had swelled to too big a size for the cooks to handle. […]

This year I finally made it back to my hometown for Chinese New Year. The family is scattered everywhere. My sister is traveling in the US while my brother-in-law took my niece to his family in Gansu. Aunt Rongling's family moved to Shanghai. The communication with my granduncle's family has dwindled to almost zero because his family has grown to a size of eight. There's always been squabbling through the years which we as kids were not aware of; and each family fared differ-

ently in the country's economic miracle, which makes it hard to avoid jealousy and gossip.

Gone were the home-made cured meat and sausage links. Everybody got lazy, and pickier about food. No home-made food could compete with the restaurant cooking which is getting oilier and spicier every season. Now only stores still have cured meat and sausage links hanging off their roofs. Few make rice balls anymore; there were ready-to-cook ones sold in plastic bags in the supermarkets.

We had our family get-together dinner two days before the new year so my mom could have undivided attention to the CCTV gala show on New Year's Eve. […] We went to a restaurant and had a set dinner for 500 yuan, the same food I could have in a Sichuan restaurant in Beijing. Sitting at the dinner table with the eight still left in Chengdu in our immediate family, I missed the days when we were a lot poorer, when my sister and I had to be cajoled into helping make rice ball stuffing in the cold winters with no heating in that tiny apartment of ours, when we seemed to have a lot more relatives to play with and to visit, and whenever I visited a friend, his/her family would force me to taste their own cured meat and rice balls. The country is developing, so is the distance between me and the past I remember. […]

As I was reminiscing about change, my cousin got antsy in her seat. "Can I go home to watch TV now?" she asked her mother, my aunt. Her mother was annoyed, "sit and eat some more food. Wait for the adults to finish." I paused my emoting and studied my cousin's restlessness for a beat. Alas, whom am I kidding? I didn't like the holidays that much when I was a kid—it was mostly a bore to

go through all the visits and family meals; there was always too much food that nipped the pre-holiday craving within five minutes of the first holiday dinner, too much waiting for the adults to finish their *majiang*, too many deafening fire-crackers on both sides of the narrow streets that hurt the eardrums, too many ultra-sweet rice balls for breakfast every day, and too much cured meat which the family couldn't finish until early summer. It's the memory that's playing the tricks, tricking me into thinking that I used to have Hall-mark-Classic holidays in which relatives were nicer, food was better and time was less transient. "Don't stop yet, eat some more." My mom prodded me with her elbow. My aunt asked when I would bring home a girlfriend. My grandpa asked when I could get a proper job to make some proper money. My dad looked at me earnestly over the spicy dishes, "Listen to all your relatives. You are not young anymore. Better start worrying about retirement." I smiled at my family and my memory and dug my chopsticks into the steamed fish. Memory is like family, often dysfunctional, often subjecting us to a bondage that suffocates up close, yet one misses with sweet longing once far away. Better leave it hanging off from the rooftop like the cured meat and sausage links, and let it stroke from a distance the nostalgia of make-believes. Happy New Year.

Beijing, February 15, 2006

10:30 am. I was riding in a taxi to the aptly-named Fortune Plaza for a meeting. No traffic jam on the narrow Guang Hua Road which is usually jammed

like a parking lot during rush hours. I gratefully noted my observation to the driver. The driver concurred that we should be thankful whenever traffic in downtown Beijing is bearable. Then he pointed to the right hand side of the road where CCTV (China Central Television) is building its huge ultra-modern tower, "Why the hell are they cramming into the CBD (Central Business District) as well? It'd make traffic much worse." Can't the city just broaden Guang Hua Road, like what they've been doing elsewhere in Beijing? I asked. As much as I hate the city becoming more and more like LA, I hate getting stuck in traffic more. "You kidding?" The driver mocked in a humored way. "Here in CBD, every inch of land is worth an inch of gold. None of these private enterprises would be willing to let go of any land to road construction." Why is CCTV moving from its current obscure location to CBD, one of the most expensive business districts in Beijing then? "Greed. What else?" The driver shrugged. "It's all about finding schemes to convert state-owned property into private wealth. With this huge tower, they can rent space out to other companies. Who knows who get to pocket the money? Last week I went to the Diaoyutai State Guest House and picked up a retired ex-minister." He continued as the newly built Fortune Plaza came into view. "He was on an evening out for private business, so he didn't take his own chauffeur. In my cab, he was on the phone constantly talking about land deals." Aren't there too many retired ex-ministers in Beijing for them to have much power anymore? I asked. "Not at all. On the contrary they are all out to grab whatever they can. I remember the ex-minister in my cab yelling to his phone, 'you'll die if you lose

this land deal for me'. Humph, it's worse than the Guomindang (the Nationalist party that ruled China before the communists)." Humph. I shared my brief moment of indignation with him as the cab pulled to a stop. What is there for one to do anyway beyond venting now and then with cab drivers?

Beijing, February 17, 2006

Recently I found that because I'm Chinese, living in China and speaking decent English, I've been increasingly invited by foreign media to comment on China. […] I always wondered—how the hell do I represent the "Chinese" view on anything in China? […]

Beijing, February 22, 2006

During the recent trip to Chengdu for Chinese New Year, as usual I met up with my high school friends for a drinking fest. We invited Teacher Chen, the head teacher of our class, to join us as well.

When we started our high school in 1986, Teacher Chen was given the chance for the first time to head a high school class. By today's standards, Teacher Chen might have been considered an "angry youth" then. She was idealistic, passionate, and silently angry at the establishment for giving the young teachers few opportunities to prove their capabilities.

1986 was an awkward yet exciting year for all of us. In Chengdu, jeans were still frowned upon and forbidden in school. Pop songs were being smug-

gled in from Hong Kong. Ballroom dancing was just slowly sneaking back onto university campuses. Jing Yong's martial arts fantasies, grouped together with other hand-copied fiction as corrupting and addictive, were completely off-limits to the "good students".

The school, eager to send more students to famous universities and improve its reputation, repeated the same old message of studying hard. But times were changing. At the New Year's Eve party for 1987, a few of us danced disco, a dance considered to belong only to "hooligans", on the creaky wooden floor in our classroom, under our classmates' curious stares. No one was penalized afterwards.

Teacher Chen shielded us from much of the school's criticism. Her mantra was "You have only one life. Live differently!", which was such an invigorating message to us who had been trained all our lives to study and only study. Once, unsatisfied with our formulaic writing, she told us to write whatever we wanted, about our lives, about our future, about our frustrations. To anyone who wrote about their true thoughts and feelings, she gave a perfect score.

Another time, she let us decide on an unorthodox and highly tacky class slogan—To Live, Not Simply Living. That slogan hung over the blackboard for an entire semester. It was with her encouragement that we put on plays, staged a breakdance performance for the school variety show, and sing pop (oh my) songs at the school singing competition.

We became good friends, highly inappropriate for teacher and students. A few of us close to her would sometimes study in her office, and report

to her the latest impressionist poems or Freudian theories we had just picked up on. One time we found her old love letters to the ex before her husband. When we confronted her, she blushed all over and told us we had gone too far.

Now looking back, I feel she needed us then as much as we needed her. We were all pushing along to see how far we could go. Alas, how blessed we were.

After high school, she and I continued correspondence, even after I went to America. Sometimes she would express envy at me living "freely"; sometimes she would tell me her frustration at not being able to do more, not able to win against the establishment. But in 1996 when I came out to her in a letter, she stopped writing. It was only then I knew there's a limit to everything that seemed too good to be true.

While waiting for her at the restaurant, my friends and I reminisced about the good old rebellious days in high school. When she finally arrived, it caused quite a stir. She had barely changed. After the warm greetings, she sat next to me, once her best student, at the dinner table.

We talked about our respective lives. She was now a special-grade teacher and had garnered many teaching awards. I asked about her students. The times are changing, she said; there were things off-limits to them now, but they were all doing great. I asked about her daughter who had just started a job in Singapore after graduation. The daughter missed home and wanted to move back, but Teacher Chen didn't want her to get stuck in Chengdu, the slow-paced city which she had always considered only for those lacking ambition.

She asked what I was doing. I replied filmmaking and writing. She sighed, "If you keep on switching, how can you get far?" Then we moved on to talk about her other successful students who had gotten doctor's degrees or were making lots of money.

I wanted to ask her then if she still taught her students To Live, Not Just Living. I wanted to tell her then that I'd always been true to our friendship, to her teaching that we should be living honestly and passionately. But my friends were falling off the chair from too much drinking, and Teacher Chen, with the pensive smile on her face, looked more and more distant.

On the afternoon of 22 February 2006, Hao Wu was arrested by State Security agents. No one has ever said what he was accused of. He was freed nearly five months later, on 11 July 2006.

Beijing, July 12, 2007

Yesterday afternoon I sent email and SMS messages to my friends, inviting them for a drink out at night. The excuse? "I'm finally officially free!" One friend asked, "What do you mean? Did you break up with your boyfriend?" Another wrote back also in confusion, "Didn't you just take a vacation in Yunnan from your unemployment in Beijing? How much more free do you need to be?"

The word Freedom indeed invites such easy confusion, which was probably why Friedrich Hayek carefully distinguished four common usages of

liberty, or freedom, in his monumental *The Constitution of Liberty*: 1) "personal" freedom—the state in which a man is not subject to coercion by the arbitrary will of another or others; 2) "political" freedom—the participation of men in the choice of their government, in the process of legislation, and in the control of administration; 3) "inner" freedom—the extent to which a person is guided in his action not by momentary impulse or circumstance; 4) the freedom or power to satisfy our desires.

Indeed on what ground could I be celebrating my freedom? 4) I don't have the freedom to buy all the Apple products I want; 3) I still suffer from crises which, for lack of a more elegant expression, I shall call "existential"; 2) Need I say more? 1) Need I say more???

Yet in the meantime, time has progressed. A year ago I was dazed by my sudden freedom from lack of Starbucks lattes, "New York Times" online and gym access over a long period of time. A year ago I took out the battery of my phone whenever I talked about anything "sensitive" (how could I ever have believed that powered-off phones could be used as remote listening devices!). A year ago I listened to Nina Simone singing *I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel To Be Free*, over and over. A year later, life is almost normal. The final official closure of my "case" and the full resumption of personal freedom feels actually anti-climatic, not so dissimilar from the day when I received my US "green card". I can go anywhere I want now; and, so what?

I was reminded of the unfree, in everything I read, everywhere I look. I was reminded of shackles, of the bondage even after the breaking of the

shackles. Most of all, I was reminded of my bourgeois obsession with the future and my powerlessness at changing any of the present. But I was also reminded what the cute young Kevin Bacon quoted in *Footloose*: To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven; a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance.

Yes, to dance. I'm not one of those who fight to break the shackles. But I can dance. Dance with my shackles. Dance with my bondage after the shackles. Dance to pray. Dance to hope. For in dance, in the ecstasy of dance, I find the unnameable beauty which, for lack of a more elegant expression, I shall call freedom.

Lijiang, July 25, 2007

No, I'm not talking about the Zhang Yijiang extravaganza at the foot of the Jade Dragon Mountain, which, even though I've heard many great things about, I refused to pay to watch as a matter of principle. What I'm talking about is this fantasy of Lijiang, as this tranquil backpacker heaven. At least, according to my Chinese friends, a place to rest and rejuvenate. Many amateur photographers scavenged the Old Town for a perfectly misleading photo befitting the image of Lijiang—cobble stones, deserted street, old women in minority clothes. But the truth is, the town is mobbed by tourists, most of the buildings in the town center

have been converted into guest houses and restaurants and stores, and the main street at night, full of bars and dancing Mosou women in bright costumes, is overflowing with loud disco and young people yelling their hearts out, encouraged by alcohol. The only thing that could have saved Lijiang for me, during my first day there, was the Prague Cafe. Outside of the cafe sitting on the sidewalk were a group of bohemian-looking friends who played guitar and drums and sang all afternoon. It appeared rather alternative and cool in the overcommercialized atmosphere of Lijiang.

Inside of the cafe, I struck up a conversation with two Taiwanese housewives who were traveling together. When the group took a break outside, one of the members came in to talk to the two women. They chitchat for a long time, the same cliches of how great Lijiang is, how the vibe nourishes the soul, etc. Finally, the pudgy round-faced guy sitting at the next table could not help it anymore. He said, "I just can't help jumping in. But don't you think your lifestyle can't last forever? How do you make money? I would think you should make enough money first—in fact, make a lot of money first—before you spend your days hanging around and singing. You look like a full grownup now. Aren't you worried about the future? Don't you think it's kinda irresponsible living? How much money can you collect in one afternoon anyway?" The guy was a businessman from Wenzhou, one of the most entrepreneurial area in China. He owned his own factories and he hadn't taken a vacation for years. The rest of us laughed. The singer explained—it's not about money; it's about the free-wheeling lifestyle; it's about doing things we enjoy doing; it's called real living; free living;

etc. etc. But the businessman insisted—"you have to have some economic foundation, right? How do you support yourself, rent, food, and what not?" The singer said "we don't need that much to live on; Lijiang is cheap; and we have good friends. All is fine. Don't you worry, my man. We made a choice. This is our life". The businessman was not convinced, but he gave up his Marxist lecture on superstructure and economic basis. I joked he sounded exactly like my mother. After a while the band resumed playing. The businessman went outside and from the look of it, tried very hard to fit in, to enjoy the free-wheeling music.

Back in the room, the singer started talking about his plan of building a guest house to the two Taiwanese housewives. Yes there are gazillion guest houses in Lijiang already. But this one will be different. It will be grand, immaculate, decorated in high style by his girlfriend who's studying overseas presently. It would cost a couple of million of renminbi, the whole thing, but the business will take off, for sure. The singer had a pony-tail, a healthy tan (not the peasant tan) and a handsome face. When he left to join his band, the two women whispered to me, "We come every day to see him. How handsome he is!" They asked why I was there in Lijiang. I said I was taking my last trip before going back to corporate, freedom loving and entirely anti-my-mother's-teaching as I was. I said I was going back to build some more economic basis before my next attempt at the superstructure. Lijiang has the weird capability to bring out the cliches in people. So I left the next morning, wondering at the same time if I'd fallen into the cliche of searching for that off-beaten track a la the Lonely Planet.

Lige, Yunnan, July 29, 2007

The Lugu Lake on the Sichuan and Yunnan border was a bumpy seven-hour bus ride away from Lijiang. Relatively few tourists visit there, and those who do usually take the two-day tour arriving at the lake around 4 pm and leaving the next morning back to Lijiang at 10 am. Most of these tourists stayed in Luoshui, Falling Water, the most developed village around the lake, for staged bonfire parties and a peek at the much-hyped "last surviving matriarchal culture in the world!" With the supposed promiscuity of the pretty Mosuo women, a single guy just might get lucky and receive an invitation to a private chamber for a "walking marriage" at night.

Daba, the owner of the hostel on the Lige peninsula where I stayed, said it was simply not true. "The so-called 'walking marriage' is actually serious for the Mosuos," he said. "Even though the couple in love don't own or owe each other anything, that doesn't mean they switch partners all the time. Relationships tend to be long term, and when the couple no longer love each other, they part ways." "In fact," he continued, "this system is far superior to the ones you have in Han regions. There's no haggling over child custody or finance in case of a breakup. Everything stays with the maternal family." Daba was proud of his tradition, yet he had "legally" married according to Chinese law. He had attended university in Beijing, and had his first job in the local government, so a "legal" marriage helped him appear less "minority." But he stressed he had never used his marriage certificate, and though he helped out with his

wife's family, it was his maternal family to which he held the utmost loyalty.

Daba's Inn seemed the last old structure standing in the Lige Village, the village closest to Luoshui. All around the lake, villages were undergoing intense transformation, the fierceness of which rivaled that of the Olympic-frenzied Beijing. The Mosuos live with their big extended maternal families. Now every family in Lige has a two-storey inn standing in front of the old family quarter. Most of these inns were built by Han people who migrated here and leased out land from the locals. "My people…" Daba sighed and shook his head. "They just want the 50,000 yuan a year from the Han businessman. They don't know how to protect their culture. And the county government is not providing any guidance. The Han people come over here, build an inn, and then start selling our culture like fast food. How could this be sustainable?"

To be fair, the local government had implemented strict preservation rules: every family and every inn must have a sewage line running to the nearby treatment facility, which kept the lake water crystal clear; every new building had to conform to the local architecture style (unfortunately, like construction elsewhere in China, all the new faux-traditional buildings look exactly the same). Most of all, the locals were happy. They welcomed the tourists and the Han businessmen who had a much better sense in running the inns. But Daba was most concerned with the culture itself. "There are so many beautiful aspects about our culture," he said, "but the Han tourists only knew of the walking marriage, and even that was mostly misinformed. They knew nothing about our religion or

our language. The central government itself mistakenly grouped us under the Naxis in 1950. We need to learn to show the outsiders the real Mosuo." Daba was one of the organizers of a local cultural preservation foundation; but no funding was coming in.

Unsurprisingly, few tourists seemed to care. During my three nights staying at the lake, Daba's one-hundred-year-old building had the lowest occupancy every night. The rooms were dark, the communal shower rudimentary, and there were bed bugs. And Daba was the most morose among all the inn keepers. Tourists wanted bigger rooms, hopefully with private bath. "Those tourists," Daba snickered, "they are not true travelers. True travelers, like those foreign backpackers, they love the authenticity of my place."

Authenticity was what attracted Old Wang to the lake as well. The next day I hiked along the lake towards the Grass Sea—a beautiful expansive marshland on the Sichuan side of the lake—and had lunch at Old Wang's guest inn. Old Wang and his wife had several successful businesses in Manchuria. They loved traveling, and a year ago when they traveled to the Lugu Lake, they decided to stay. The people were authentic. The natural scenery was beautiful beyond description. They asked their relatives to take over their businesses, and they built an inn and stayed. That's at least the official version of the story from Old Wang, a theme I had heard repeatedly in Yunnan—wearied Han people found inspirations from the scenery and the people in Yunnan and decided to stay.

It was right before noon. There was only me and Old Wang in the dining area which had huge windows overlooking the marshland. Old Wang

told me stories of the local Mosuos, stories he claimed that the Mosuos themselves had forgotten. The rice porridge tasted great after a good morning's hike. Flies were bombarding us despite the burning incense. It was a enchanting breezy day by the lake. Old Wang said he didn't care about money. He just loved the tranquility. I said I noticed that the Sichuan side of the lake had built nice asphalt roads—unlike the bumpy stone roads on the Yunnan side of the lake—which made me worry a bit that the Sichuan government was intent on bringing hordes of tourists in. He said that's not the end of it—an airport was being planned and supposedly would go into operation by 2010. That would be the end of the lake, I lamented. He said no worry, we'd have moved to a different tranquil place by then.

Then immediately, he started bragging about how he turned a profit after only five months. He was thinking of building a chicken pen and raise tons of chicken. He would charge tourists to shoot the chicken with real rifles and cook for them immediately afterwards. He could get the chicks for X yuan a piece, and charge XX yuan a piece to shoot them when they grew up. He would end up with XXX yuan profit with XXXX chickens in the pen. I was silent for a beat, then I asked, "Wouldn't that ruin the tranquility?" "Oh," he said, "by then I would have moved on to another place. I would let someone else manage the place and collect the money for me."

That night Daba invited his friends over for a drink. They were three young Han businessmen who were loud and friendly and loved to drink. They were building a fancy inn with bathrooms looking out at the lake in the village. Three young

Chinese tourists and I joined them. We told stories, drank barley liquor and sang songs. Daba said he had begun contemplating some renovation work, perhaps repainting the entire building and remodeling the two big rooms to add in private bathrooms. His friends all said it's about time. I concurred—after three nights, the bed bugs at Daba's place had really started bugging me. The gentle waves of the lake hit the banks as the night's merriment went on, and stars slowly came out until they filled the entire sky. I was happy being half drunk and in Yunnan. It was not my place to lament the encroachment of Chinese TV and American soap operas in the Mosuo village. It was not my place to criticize the travelers who want comfort and the innkeepers who want to make some money by catering to that comfort. It would be simple condescension if I were to note the irony of the Mosuos who had traveled far away from home wanting to preserve the tradition that the true locals seem indifferent to leave behind. The forces of the people coming and going, of them chasing the next fad destination, of locals marketing themselves to outsiders, of conservators striving to conserve and radicals fighting to shed their skins; the changes, the unstoppable changes, the scarily rapid changes sweeping everywhere—Mosuo, Yunnan, China, and everywhere else—they are beyond my comprehension and judgment. I can only observe, it seems, and appreciate the fragile scenery and people while they last.

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Marco La Rosa was born in Florence in 1947 and lives in San Miniato (Pisa, Italy). A former Chemistry teacher, he is now retired. He has published three novels. At the moment he is taking part in a project for a DVD about Italian flora. His text was translated by Brigitte Ciaramella. p. 29

Giorgio Mascitelli was born in 1966 in Milan, Italy, where he lives. He is a teacher. Apart from short stories and writings that appeared in magazines, he has published two novels. His text was translated by Brigitte Ciaramella. p. 89

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