

Sinosummer is to China
As Kindergarten is to College:
Reflections on a Cultural (or maybe not so much) Journey

Traci Nigon

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Advisor: Dr. Mark Christensen

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Prologue

There is a wonderful thing in China called “gan bei.” This is a toast, after which you down the glass of beer or whatever drink you have. Since Chinese glasses are generally smaller than American ones—a circumference of about a biscuit container or a little over a 50-cent piece and about as tall as a kiddie cup—you generally don’t feel like you’re drinking that much, so you don’t mind gan bei-ing with another friend, and another, and another.

In June of 2006, I discovered this toast and many other things while on the Bemidji State University Sinosummer Program. We spent a month in China, two weeks of which were spent at Liaoning University in Shenyang, while the rest of the time was split into three- or four-day increments in the tourist cities of Beijing, Xi’an, Guilin, and Hong Kong. It was a cultural trip, and I learned a lot about the current state of China. I still lack knowledge in its history (there are millennia that get mixed up in my brain), its economics, and pretty much any other factual information, unless I can find it in the notes I took. What I did learn about China is documented here, and “gan bei” makes a regular appearance, along with subtle (or not) dichotomies between what I thought about China and what I discovered, between the American and the Chinese ways of life, and between the general perceptions of China that Americans may have. Regular appearances are also made by Pete and Sharon, who had led the Sinosummer trip for about two decades (Pete began the program); Phil, our guide in Beijing, our first stop; Ben, one of my BSU friends, who’d talked me into going on the trip with him; and Megan, my roommate for the trip.

During the trip, I wrote in both the journal that was provided for us as an assignment—the same four questions every day—and my personal green three-subject notebook, in which I spent hours detailing all the places we'd been and all the things we'd done.

I carried this notebook in my bookbag for a couple months this year. I'd looked at it a few times since returning, but there were so many pages, so many memories. They lay there, preserved, ready for me to open the book's cover and discover its secrets, like digging beneath the ground to find the expanse of Terra Cotta Soldiers, yet I could not bring myself to do it. It was the same problem I found myself having in museums—there was too much information. What words would be enough to embody this month-long trip, chronicled by my journal entries in this decrepit-looking thought-holder?

I had to write my thesis. The three-subject notebook was filled, page after page, with my writing, and sifting through the writing to find the details, the essence of China somewhere in the pages, seemed too daunting. I had moved on from those days. I was now a senior in my final semester, president of two student organizations, working two jobs, applying and visiting a grad school in Boston. This project could wait until I finished the paper for my other class. Then until our next organization event, then for the next meeting, then the next priority. It was always number two.

The days passed, and on February 18th, 2008, I sat on the couch in the Writing Center and opened it. My ambitions were not as high as they should been—my goal was simply to read through the journal and write down options for a story.

I pulled out a scrap piece of paper—a schedule on the back—and wrote “China” at the top, underlining it firmly. I used a blue gel pen, one that was fun to write with but which ran out of ink quickly; I’d stolen it from the Writing Center, my work.

I opened the scuffed cover and to my surprise, a picture fell out. It was longer than most pictures and had Chinese writing in red at the top. It was from our closing ceremony dinner in Shenyang, the city we’d stayed in for two weeks. “This is me in China,” I said to my friend Andy, and he glanced at it and went back to his homework. I stared at it for a few more moments—was my hair really that long and light? Were my arms really that tan and toned? We’d been in China for two and a half weeks by then, and now it was two and a half years later. I gingerly set the picture on the arm of the couch, then started looking through the notebook.

The first page had a list of songs I’d wanted to download. I flipped past it. The next page was what I was looking for. “To Do in the Next Three Weeks,” it said at the top, underlined. Most of the lines were crossed out, but the very first item listed was “learn Chinese,” still written clearly. Still not done. A post-it note on the same page stated “Malarone tab” and “Ciprofloxacin HCL tab.” They were both drugs I’d been told to order; the Malarone was required, but the Cipro was the cure-all drug of choice for any ailment we could come across. I only used it once, at the first sign of diarrhea, and never had to use it again.

I removed my boots and put my foot on the couch, resting my binder on my leg as Ivory, my co-worker at the computer, played “Lucy in the Sky With Diamonds.” I wrote then, and I wrote later. I wrote in Boston; I organized in Boston. The Writing Center, the library, the Superlab, the HUPB office. There were too many stories, too many

memories, but somehow, it became easier, until I had the skeletal bones of what could be considered a viable thesis. You hold this in your hands. It is not perfect, and it is not an accurate depiction of Chinese life. It is, however, my China, though not an all-encompassing view. There are essential stories that still need to be told, but here are the beginnings. This is what I experienced, this is what I first think of when someone says "China," and this is what I will always remember when I look back to the summer of 2006.

Communist China

Teenagers wear t-shirts
with brand names
and eat at McDonald's
and KFC.

They shop at Wal-Mart
and drink Starbucks Coffee
and play video games
in Internet Cafés.

They wear red scarves
in school.

Great Wall

I kept my eyes down. Thousands of miles from home, on one of the most famous landmarks in the world, all I could do was stare at the stone beneath my feet as it moved, reminding me of how as a child I would watch the lines pass the car out of the window—line, line, line, line, perfect rhythm. I made sure my feet moved like that, too. Left, right, left, right. Just keep walking, I said to myself.

At 5'3" and around 150 pounds, I was overweight, though not obese. The constant walking on the trip eventually led to a few more pounds being lost and more toned muscles, but this was only the third day of the trip, and I had yet to become accustomed to daily exercise. Ben, who ran half-marathons and went to the Rec five out of seven days, had run (yes, run) ahead with a few of the other athletic boys. Megan, my roommate, was right in front of me, and so was Shawn, a 300-lb brick of man who spent more time drinking and stating his opinion than working out. They were both doing okay, *and so am I*, I told myself. Left, right, left.

The wall was a series of steps and slopes. It didn't continually angle upwards, but varied in rises and falls and level grounds. Every change in the movement changed my rhythm, and all I focused on was moving towards the top. At various points, there were covered areas, like little fortresses. A crowd gathered in one of them, staring out. I wondered if we'd finally done it, if we'd finally made it to the top, but when we pushed our way through the people, I saw stairs. I started partway down, then saw that the flight ended. I turned back and returned to Shawn and Megan.

"Is this the top?" they asked, and I shrugged, figuring it must be. *What a disappointment*, I thought. There wasn't even a sign to help us commemorate the

moment. I knew the wall continued for hundreds of miles, so there wasn't really a "top," but I had at least thought there would be a destination of some sort.

"Maybe this isn't the top," Megan said hopefully. "The wall split earlier, so maybe we should head back and try to find that route."

After some debate, that was what we did. Phil had tried to tell us how to get to the top; from where he left us, there were two routes, the left (a shorter, steeper route) or the right (a longer but less steep route). We'd taken the right, and he'd said that we would find another right somewhere in the trek, but the small split that we'd seen had been a mere small trail breaking away from the wide regular path. I'd assumed the "split" spoken of would have been longer.

As we went back down the hill, which began working the other sides of my thighs because of the longer downhill stretches, we met Pete on his way up. "Where's the top?" Shawn asked him, and he said, "Just keep walking along here! If you get to that fortress, you've made it to the top."

We stared at him. "So, that was it?" Megan said.

"Yep! You did it!" Pete said cheerfully. After a few moments digesting this information, we decided to take pictures in honor of making it to the top. We'd gone too far back to want to return to the fortress, so we stayed where we were, on the slanting stone.

The wind was strong. I was wearing a green t-shirt proclaiming "It's Beaver Time!" with a beaver head as a clock; one of the many free shirts I'd acquired from being on the campus programming board. My hair flew to the side, and I was squinting into the

camera with my pudgy arms resting behind me on the stone as the dark cotton sky and spattered green spread behind me. I loved that picture.

When we once again made it to the bottom, thanking my stars that the downhill had been easier than the uphill, I found Ben and Sean in the local hotel lobby that we'd gathered at. "Did you make it to the top?" Ben asked, then showed me a picture he'd gotten with all the boys who'd run ahead. Behind them was a sign, stating, "I Climbed the Great Wall of China."

"Where was that sign?" I asked. "We tried to get there, but Pete said we'd already made it to the top."

"You had to take a right," Ben said. "It's tricky."

I went outside, ready for the fresh air again. Wandering up the street, the sky was darkening. I bought some postcards and a black t-shirt that said "I climbed the Great Wall of China" in both English and Chinese characters with a drawing of the Great Wall behind it. I didn't care; as long as I'd thought I'd made it and didn't know any better, I figured it was fine. Maybe I'd just change it to "I climbed [on] the Great Wall of China" with a silver Sharpie. As I walked back, the sky parted, and let loose a short hailstorm.

Food

In the Beijing hotel,
I ate French toast
with chopsticks.

At Laioning University,
I put a spoonful of coffee
into goat milk
with a cube of sugar
every morning.
It tasted like cappuccino.
We ate fish we'd caught
at the Benxi Water Cave
tourist area.

In Ghuangzhou, our
first Cantonese dinner,
we grabbed as much
meat and
mashed potatoes
as we could
happy to have a meal
so much like home
until we found
the potatoes were fat.
Some of the boys went
to McDonald's.

In Hong Kong,
we had TGI Friday's
two nights in a row.

Let's Dance

In the Beijing disco, girls on podiums danced in manufactured fog. Their long black hair blew in the fake wind, and their short shorts and tanktops exposed small but muscular thighs and abs as the heavy beats dictated the movement of their hips.

"Conservative, huh?" Megan said, looking at the girls as we entered the dance floor. I watched the general disco populace around me. Men and women, probably in their early twenties like me, stood with their feet leadenly planted on the ground, watching the deejay and the dancing girls. Their shoulders swayed with their arms at their side, and they bounced slightly in the strobe lights and strong techno music. Compared to the sexy podium girls, these awkward and inhibited dancers seemed like children at a strip club; I wanted to run up and cover their eyes.

"Let's dance," Megan said, and as the drinks grew stronger I acted like I was on a podium myself. My hips moved freely, and I no longer worried that my spaghetti straps would be seen as risqué, as Sharon had warned.

"You want to dance?" I tried yelling at a Chinese boy over the music and people, but he couldn't understand me; he just smiled and nodded. I motioned for him to come closer. He held a beer in one hand, and his friends giggled behind him and pushed him towards me. I put one arm around him, bent my knees, and tried to synchronize his hips with mine, but he didn't quite understand how to grind. He began thrusting exuberantly.

I started laughing. "Sorry!" I said as I backed away and waved goodbye. He smiled and waved back, once again bobbing to the music. I turned around, and my friends and I danced with each other instead.

JJ's Disco: Night #2 in China

We are drunk Americans
in a Chinese bar
drinking Heineken
and vodka
bought by our host.
We grind with the conservative
college students
and sway on podiums.
When "My Heart Will Go On" begins,
we gather in a circle
and try to sing the instrumental version playing.
We laugh, tipping our heads too far back,
hugging.

The alcohol permeates
and I make my way through the flashing
lights to the dim hallway.
Megan follows, and while we wash
our hands in the sink,
the small, chubby Chinese woman
sitting next to the door
holds toilet paper
and towels.

We see her through blurred
perspectives, and try to say
that we love her country.

"China," Megan says, drawing a heart
on her chest. "We love China."
The lady stares.
I finally say, "China...hao!"
and give a thumbs up.
(Hao means good.)

She smiles and nods
actually looking pleased
and we giggle past her
to the shimmering steam
and our Heinekin bottles.

Out the Window

In our third five-star hotel, Steve and Cody's room overlooked the Guilin River. The fuchsia tulip on their table offset the aqua river below, the trimmed green shrubs surrounding it, and the nearby buildings, bars, and homes.

Megan and I's room was across the hallway, and our window, in a setup mirroring their room, looked out the back of the hotel. While their room displayed a river, ours displayed poverty. It was as if someone had constructed a building and knocked the outside wall off, like a set for a play. The structure consisted of one-room containers, stacked on each other like open mailboxes, a cross-section of sleaze. Dirty clothes draped off the floor, and in one room, a man in pants and a smudged white tanktop squatted on his heels near the wall. I ignored him and visited the boys' room, where the view was much more pleasing.

Guilin

My hair sticks to the back of my neck.
The heat presses in on me, surrounding
my entire body, and even walking
doesn't create a breeze to push
the oppressiveness away.
Steve and I
give up our waterfall search
content ourselves with buying orange juice
and looking at
the Sun and the Moon Pagodas,
one orange, one white,
standing and defending each other
as they reflect themselves on the water.

Steve crosses his long limbs
in a feminine way
as we contemplate the evening,
the darkness, the sibling pagodas.
He scratches his short, curly brown hair,
nudges his glasses over his pointy nose.
He seems not to sweat.

He directs us towards our hotel
when the river divides
as I lift my hair, twist it into a pseudo-bun
and hold it up.

Walking.

This 600,000 population village
is a City of Romance.
We pass groping couples
and hear the Carpenters
sing "Yesterday Once More."

I speak less.
He apologizes for the dead end.
He moves swiftly
as my short
and stubby legs keep up.

Watches

I hadn't planned on buying anything. We'd only been in China for a week, and I knew I should save my limited funds for gifts to people I'd left at home. We were at a cloissoné factory near Beijing, just another standard tourist stop, where we saw workers hand-make pieces, gluing little copper tendril designs onto copper objects (beads, vases, etc.). These designs were hand-painted, then walked to the large firing room. The firing made the paint shrink, so the workers painted again, fired again, and painted again, usually five or six times, until the objects were sufficiently colored. Finally, they were polished and sanded, ready to be sold in the government-owned visitors' store on the other side of the window.

I had some spare time after dinner, and browsing led me to the watch section. I glanced at the one I was wearing—it was Buzz Lightyear, faded bright green with Buzz's head surrounding the blinking digits. Andrew had let me borrow his extra one since I'd forgotten both mine and my friend Tracy's replacement one. I liked showing it to people; I thought it was funny, and I would have asked to keep it if I hadn't been so shy.

Andrew said he'd bought it at a Wal-Mart for about five dollars. I could picture the simple transaction—built in a factory somewhere (maybe even China), shipped to the store, packaged in some brightly-colored box, and purchased by Andrew with a debit or credit card in the check-out line. The band was a thin green plastic and I'd been wearing it for the whole trip, waiting to find a cheap Chinese store to buy a watch with a little more sophistication.

The one I found feigned refinement, though its plain string core and spilled paint revealed its imperfection. It was white with pink flowers and green vines creeping over

it. The cloissoné beads, each about the size of a fingertip, were edged with thin gold brocade and were held together with string, which tied together at the end in an intricately-wound lattice-like pattern. The ends had clear plastic beads on them and dangled out, and to tighten the watch you had to pull them outward, like drawstrings on sweatpants. This was hard to do with only the other hand for a resource, and eventually I became good at using my right-hand thumb to hold one string down while pulling the other with my ring and middle fingers.

I looked at it for a few minutes before attempting to buy it. I kept walking away, rounding the counter to the other watches before returning to this one. It was ¥180, roughly \$22 or \$23, which I found a bit ridiculous, especially in comparison to the \$10 watch still waiting at home. Finally, I tried to bargain, which we'd been taught to do in our pre-trip meetings. "They're going to try to get you to pay full price," Pete and Sharon had said, "so don't give in. Their culture is based on bargaining."

I attempted to say ¥80, which I estimated to be about \$10, in Chinese, and once the lady behind the counter understood that I was attempting to say numbers, she shook her head and told me she wouldn't bargain. I got offended at the audacity she had in assuming that I, a foreigner, would believe such a thing, so (again as told) I shook my head and walked away, expecting her to gesture me back to her with apologies and a sufficiently-lowered price to entice my purchase. She did not. She stood, still a few feet back from the counter, an unamused look on her face.

I wandered around the store a bit more, stealing glances back to the watch. Other students told me that they wouldn't barter because it was a government-owned store. I

didn't believe them until Sharon confirmed it, and I begrudgingly began stealing glances at the table again.

I had no reason to be intrigued by it, yet I found its simplicity rather charming. Even the paint, spilling over the designs and into the white area, held some appeal for me. I was unimpressed, but I could see the workers on the other end of the store still working away—cutting, firing, painting, firing, painting. After a few feigned attempts at interest in other items, such as the little dolls that fit inside each other or Christmas Santa ornaments, I wound my way back to the counter. In my travel pouch, I held my Chinese yuan, and I pulled out ¥180 and handed it to the woman.

The Jailed Man's City

They say he will be out in five years.
Maybe then
the canals will fill with water
flowing by the unvacant hotels,
under the bridge of tourists
past the turning windmill.
The brick, white-trimmed homes
will grow children
and gardens, and laughter.
But for now, silence,
patient waiting
for the day that buses
will carry residents and visitors
to the bustling city
with cash and cologne
instead of curious Americans
wondering how a man
sentimental enough to be inspired
by the Dutch
became corrupt
and why no one else
wanted
this lion-guarded city.

Jeffrey Two-Times

“Okay, we are now going to see the Terra Cotta Warrior Soldiers, okay? Terra Cotta Soldiers,” Jeffrey said, facing the group from the front of the bus. “Ah, so the soldiers were built for the mausoleum of Emperor Qin Shi Huang, okay, Qin Shi Huang. Ah, so back then...”

I drifted in and out. As a History Minor, I knew I should probably listen, maybe even take a few notes. It even sounded relatively interesting—peasant rebellions, ghost pottery unearthed. Somehow, though, Jeffrey’s endless repetition made me unable to remember anything long enough for the next sentence to come around. My tourist-mates and I couldn’t decide if he did this in his native Chinese tongue as well or if he was just trying to make sure that we understood what he was saying. Maybe it was both.

Jeffrey ran his hand along his brow line, above his small eyes and glasses and below his short, wiry hair. He was a slight man, wearing a dark blue polo shirt and full-length khaki pants. Even though it was over one-hundred degrees, it was not unusual to see most of the native Chinese wearing pants or a full skirt.

I stared out the window of the bus at the pale world around me. I could see the dust particles from the sandy roads floating through the air, reflecting the sunlight to my direction. I wondered how long we’d stay at the Terra Cotta Soldiers site. Though undoubtedly knowledgeable, Jeffrey had a way of being just naïve enough to think that we needed to spend two hours in places we rarely would have spent an hour. Up to this point, our trip had been relatively fast-paced. Sadly, I had even been excited to see the clay soldiers, and now was worried that I would get bored. I glanced around at the thirty other students, who all looked as uninterested as I felt.

“Uh, okay, now...” Jeffrey’s voice trailed off. Remarkably, considering his vast knowledge and the fact that it took him twice as long to relay this knowledge as it would any other guide, he seemed to have temporarily run out of things to say.

“Well, uh, today is our last full day together, yah? Last full day,” he continued. “I would like to thank you all for being so kind. So kind, yah? Okay, so as a thank-you I was wondering if I could sing for you? A song? Ah, something American, yah? Is this okay? If I sing for you?”

The bus put out a smattering of applause, and Jeffrey decided to start. “Feel free to join in, yah?” he added, then began an old Richard Marx song. “*Oceans apart, day after day...*”

I sat quietly. No matter his shortcomings as a guide, Jeffrey had a great voice. It was warm and smooth like a shallow summer spring, and his accent made the pronunciation sound surprisingly open and clear. I let myself melt into the music, a medium beyond all space and time—and judging by the hush over the next few minutes, everyone else did too. Jeffrey had almost cast a spell over everyone, and his voice was the catalyst. As his voice grew stronger, I softly began singing along, but had to stop when he got to the bridge—his tenor resounded through the bus, making any other noise superfluous.

His voice steadily held the last note, then faded off into the dusty air. A small smile appeared on my face.

“Richard Marx. Nice, yah?” Jeffrey asked. “Yah, nice.”

Drinking in Mongolia

We walked back to the yurts
carrying cases of beer
in different brands
not realizing
that beer was provided.
So we drank
and "Gan bei!"-ed
to each other;
to the bus driver;
to Ariel and Ocean and Tsui,
our guides;
to Jerry, our main guide;
to Pete and Sharon;
to the yurt workers;
to soccer, which we'd watched
at the VIP Club
with the Australians
the night before
as we drank Coronas;
to the Australians;
to the Coronas;
to the trip itself;
to the other tables;
to last year's trip
until bottles lined the wall
and we counted over 67
because the year before us
had drank 67 bottles,
and, like them, we cleaned
the yurt owners out of alcohol
before turning to our cases
for the rest of the night.

As Ben and I Sit in a Park

I picture him back home
lifting weights
and running
and running
and running faster
and harder every
day on the green tread
following the white strip
around.
He wears shorts and a cut-off
t-shirt over sinewy arms
pumps his iron
rhythmically
repetitively
swaggers home to
his protein drink.

The thin old man
in pants and a white t-shirt
shuffles quickly
in a jog-dance
walks a little
enjoys the movement
the brisk afternoon
the polluted air
getting clearer every day.

Firewater

"Look how cute these are!" I said to Megan. "They look like little shot glasses!"

The white circular tablecloths of our dining room each held eight prepared dinner settings. The usual setup was there—a set of chopsticks to the right, a small plate with a bowl on it (for rice), a glass above the plate. The standard mealtime beverages were beer, Sprite, and Coke. Maybe bottled water, too, but never a pitcher of it. In addition, however, were what looked like small ceramic chalices, only two inches high, next to our regular glasses. In the spirit of the trip, I pointed out how easily they could be used for alcohol.

"I wonder what they *are* for?" Megan replied as we sat. I pulled out my camera and took a picture.

Our first night in China, our host, Phil, had taken us to a bar, where we each got a 640 mL beer with lamb kebobs and dumplings. He then brought out some alcohol called Firewater, which had been passed around. We'd had a large dinner and I was halfway through my bottle of beer, so when the boys grimaced after their shots and said, "Wow, that's harsh," I decided to pass, thinking that puking on a full stomach wouldn't be a good ending to my first day in a foreign country.

"Yeah, you probably should," Sean said nonchalantly as he passed the bottle on. I stared at him, indignant, but I wasn't yet familiar enough with him to reproach him.

Pete and Sharon had warned us about drinking. "We're sticking our necks out for you guys," Pete had said seriously in one of our pre-trip meetings. Apparently BSU, a dry campus, wanted to make our trips dry as well, but Pete and Sharon had argued cultural estrangement if we'd had to refuse alcohol every time. Nobody would be

offended if one person denied beer—they understood that some people don't like it. The only way to offend them, Pete and Sharon said, was if you denied drinking with one person and then accepted beer from somebody else. We never had that problem, because nobody refused beer.

After eating a while, during which Megan and I continuously referenced the potential uses for the teeny glasses, Phil began to speak to everybody and proposed a toast of firewater. We grabbed the bottle and began pouring them into the shot glasses, finally toasting and downing it with rousing toasts of "Gan bei!" It tasted like vodka, which I had become well-acquainted with in my last couple semesters at BSU. I was rather unimpressed.

* * *

In a yellow room in the bottom of a hotel, I sat at Phil's table. Every meal, we split into separate tables, as 31 of us couldn't fit at one. There were always at least three large tables, sometimes more smaller ones, and they were always round with a Lazy Susan in the middle. The food was brought out on plates or in bowls and set in the middle, always with a bowl of rice. We'd take whatever looked good or, if none appeared to be so, whatever looked interesting. The Chinese custom was to pour for the person to your left so that nobody would pour their own drink.

Firewater was once again present. Phil taught us how to take a traditional Chinese shot. After pouring some firewater in, he added Sprite until the small glass was about half full. Then, he put a napkin on top of the glass and covered the top with the palm of his hand. He lifted the glass, hit it down on the table, then quickly removed the napkin and took the drink in one gulp. The slamming, he said, was to mix the liquids.

* * *

Megan and I wanted to take shots at the top of the Great Wall. We took the bottle from our table and put it in her purse, feeling sneaky and dangerous. We forgot to drink it while we were on the wall.

Found

*Split a piece of wood, and I am there.
Lift up the stone, and you will find me.*
~Stigmata

"I have a gift for you," I heard in a carefully-spoken voice. Three Chinese college students, who seemed young but were probably around my age, escorted me along the sidewalk to the building where my fellow Americans and I were going to have lunch.

While living two weeks in the city of Shenyang, we Americans spent a lot of time sightseeing and traveling to various nearby points of interest. This was a stop during one of our first few days—a college a few hours away, where we spoke English to classes. We'd been assailed by students as soon as stepping off the bus; they'd been our escorts for the day. Grabbing my arm had been two girls and a boy whose name was Tiger, all three of whom had led me to their classroom for my first teaching experience. It had been more of a conversation than anything; it was just to give those students the opportunity to practice their English while learning about life in America. I'd told them about racquetball and sang for them.

Now, my three escorts and I were exchanging last goodbyes before we left each other forever. I wrote out Minnesota postcards to each of them; I'd brought them instead of some other little trinkets that our trip leaders had suggested. I liked the ability of these to be more personal.

In return, one of the girls handed me a small skull. "It's a charm for your cellphone," she said. It was tan, with brown paint outlining the teeth and nose and filling the eye sockets, and had a thin brown string, though I had no clue how it would tie to my phone, or any other, for that matter. I was pleased with receiving my first true Chinese

gift, and the gesture was nice, though her innocent hopefulness made me smile while almost pitying her—the Chinese students seemed so excited to meet us, and I hadn't even known our schedule for the day until the night before. Plus, I'd been hoping for something more authentically Chinese, maybe with the writing characters on it—something that was blatantly Chinese to show off at home.

She said she'd had the charm since junior high, so I felt bad for not appreciating its full value, but the charm itself seemed rather creepy. I did the obligatory smile and thanks, and I wrapped the string around my finger so that I wouldn't forget it.

* * *

At breakfast the next morning, I realized that I didn't have my skull charm. In fact, I hadn't seen it since the bus the morning before. I checked my room, but to no avail.

I have an unfortunate habit of losing things out of carelessness. I remember losing a black necklace I'd loved; it was gone for days, and I'd prayed about it, and then I'd found it on my desk. It was the standard search-and-find, ask-and-you-shall-receive kind of praying that I did, and every time it happened I found myself guilty of being a hypocrite for only praying when I needed something. This situation was no different, and I again scolded myself, feeling like I was trying to use God.

Angry at both my carelessness and my lack of faith, I searched the back area of the bus. Seat number thirty-one—I'd sat there the day before, as I did most days. I glanced under the seat but saw nothing. The floor was empty in the surrounding areas, save for a few dustbunnies and some stray papers. I scoured the entire bus, crouching at the waist, holding the seats as I dropped below and submitted myself to the search.

"Anything?" Ben asked me when I was done. I shook my head.

* * *

That day, we were scheduled to visit a meteorite landing spot and a town that had previously been quite a good depiction of ancient village life but which now held mostly the dying remnants. Between the two was another bus ride, and I went to seat number thirty-one, still thinking about the wide, yellow-green view from the top of the meteor. The bus rumbled as it started up again, and in an absent-minded last-ditch effort, I glanced down. Between my feet, nonchalantly staring up at me, was the skull. Its blank brown eyes held no secret for me, no answer to where it had hidden while I'd searched.

A tingle pricked at my neck and flowed along my body. I picked it up, slowly, with great care, and put it in my pocket.

Just as I Think "What a Beautiful City"

Pete grabs
the microphone
gestures out the vibrating bus window
to the planted
flowers, workers next
to the green water,
bright Beijing grass,
and still-hazy air,
says, "This
is all
for the Olympics."

The Aftermath

1/25/07

Hi Sharon! It's Traci, from the China trip. I was just wondering if you had any info on the get-together we were supposed to have. I know everyone was really looking forward to it, and we would l-o-v-e to have a copy of the video, because it was such an amazing experience and I think it will bring back more happy memories.

If you have any idea if/when we'd all get together, could you please let me know?

Thanks so much!!

~Traci

01/29/07

Hi Traci,

I guess that maybe you haven't heard - It looks as if we won't have an official get-together. BSU made some changes in the way that Sinosummer will be running in the future, and it leaves Pete out. He was so hurt that he can't bring himself to edit the video, and he won't give it to me to do.

I feel terrible about this (I'm angry at BSU and think that Pete was treated shamefully) but there is nothing I can do.

Sharon

I am forgetting how it smelled.

I am forgetting the feel of the sand beneath my feet in the Mongolian desert as I walk beside Megan and Steve to the lone tree in this vast expanse of yellow and blue.

I cannot remember what was said to the cab driver that stopped three times on our way to the VIP Club in Shenyang as we threw him the money and leapt out without waiting for change.

What song did Jeffrey Two-Times sing to us on the bus in Xi'an? The one that made the bus hush, waiting, as his surprisingly sweet tone gently released the last note to our ears before speaking in repetition again? It was Richard Marx or Bryan Adams, and I cannot remember which.

I can see the pictures. There I am, at a crest in the Great Wall of China, with strips of hair across my face from the strong unceasing breeze—a breeze I can no longer feel.

Somewhere in this world there is documented footage of what a riverboat karaoke's participants sound like in the thick heat of afternoon as some of us are hungover from a night out eating kebobs and smoking with Chinese college students, only one of which actually spoke English and whom we named Bruce Wayne and who still emails me back and named me Yi Tian—"a better tomorrow."

Epilogue

China is where I discovered pineapple popsicles. We met Pete's "lady friend," who had loaned him an umbrella once, years ago, and who now could look forward to a yearly group of American customers at her popsicle stand. Kyle got a pea one, but the pineapple ones were actually good.

China is where I began to like beer. I'd gone from being ambivalent towards beer to slowly becoming accustomed to it and finally to drinking little else. Halfway through the trip, concerned about my weight and the fact that I hadn't lost any, I began to drink bottled water at every meal it was offered at—even if I had to pay.

China is where I discovered that China is not the secluded or radically different place that it's generally perceived as. Yes, I ate with chopsticks and squatted to pee, but there were still corporations and computers.

I became acquainted with China. We are not good friends nor have we greatly affected each other's lives, but she is someone I'd like to meet again, and again, until she slowly trusts me enough to reveal her secrets to me so I can love her for who she is.