Tender Tales from the Far East

Notes on Life as an American Teaching English in China

Volume 1

Thomas Kenning

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Transmissions from the Emperor’s Heavenly Ford:
Notes on Life as an American Teaching English in China: Volume 1

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At twenty-six, I'm curious, and I have a question – what does life look like outside of the comfortable suburban existence I've known all of my life? And how do I measure up to it?

Sure, I've traveled, but what I'm talking about is the kind of tangible, taste-it-on-your-tongue view that you can only get from living aboard. I want to live the things that most people don't bother to write down in travel guides. I want to be in a place as foreign and far away from my Styrofoam-packaged, child-proofed, Republican-approved Midwestern life as I can get.

In that spirit:

Not one to do things in half measures – and still drunk on the abiding sense of freedom gained from leaving my first grown-up job as a high school history teacher (a little over a year ago) – I've decided to go big.

I'll be teaching English in Tianjin, China, at a private school called Tianshi College. Tianjin means “heavenly ford” as in, the place where the divine emperor of yore once crossed the Yellow River in battle. It is the third largest city in China. It is one of those Chinese cities with twelve million residents that you've never heard of. Maybe it's so overlooked because it's dwarfed by neighboring Beijing's hot twenty million.

This whole thing is particularly crazy, even compared to other recent exploits. I know nothing about China. I mean, I don't know anything. I don't know the language. I don't know anyone there. And I don't know much about their history or culture, beyond a few fragments I've picked up here and there in textbook sidebars and news stories about their Miracle-Gro economy.

I'd be lying if I said this wasn't the scariest thing I've ever done.

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I purposely haven't read much about China since deciding to move there. In this case, I don't want the facts to spoil a good story. I'd rather learn by doing and seeing and eating. Even if I may regret some of it later, while on the toilet.

I can read about places I'm *not* going to go.

In my imagination, China seems like the Wild West. Not the romanticized West of heroic cowboys and noble savages filtered through the lens of my parents' television youth. But something more resembling the rapidly industrializing free-for-all of the real West, where cowboys were not mavericks, but working stiffs, part of a corporate chain of supply. Things were under regulated, where they were regulated at all. A guy in the Wild West didn't really need "qualifications" to make it – just his youth, his wits, and his health, while they lasted.

I don't know how much of that China really exists.

But that's more or less how I got my job there.

An online headhunter arranged the whole thing. The phone interview took five minutes and went something like this:

Michael, Dean of the English Department: "Have you been to China before?"

Me: "No."

Michael: "Do you want to teach English?"

Me: "Yes."

Apparently I answered correctly, though I suspect only one of those answers counted toward my score.

That's the China I want to see, if it exists at all.
This will be the document of my experiences in Tianjin and elsewhere, China. My preconceived notions about the place are hazy, as you can tell, so it's hard to say exactly what this journal will cover. Except, ideally, my honest reactions to what I do, see, eat, and poop.

Humbly, I'm beginning one of the most intense adventures I've undertaken to date, and I hope everyone at home will read along. Feel free to email me questions, comments, or challenges. I like a challenge from the crowd.

I could very well end up overwhelmed, untethered, somewhat bent and beaten by this headfirst dive into the unknown. I think there's value in that once in a while, though, so it won't be for nothing.

When this journal is complete, my goal is to say with some conviction — “This is what it looks like from over there.”

And, “This is how I measured up.”

*Maybe near Alpha Centauri, and maybe somewhere even farther from home.* → August 28, 2010

Your plane takes a polar route. You rocket in a hermetically-sealed missile from Chicago over Canada, the Arctic Ocean, Russia, Mongolia, and finally over the northern Chinese countryside before you land in Beijing. Somewhere between Alaska and Siberia you cross the International Dateline, meaning time becomes distended – you just said goodbye to your loved ones this afternoon, a few hours ago, but suddenly, somehow, though you haven't slept, you haven't spoken to them in well over a day.

But all of that, mind-bending and unsettling as it is, was expected. The Beijing International Airport – at 11pm on a Saturday night –
is entirely empty and asleep except for you and your fellow passengers on that 777, and hundreds upon hundreds of courteous Chinese workers, eager to help you. The structure of the airport itself is all sweeping, arcing ceilings – dozens of meters high, rippling and waving after some complex architectural algorithm. Uncanny points of light help provide a sense that space itself has warped around you.

You, sir, are small and simple – pause in awe of the majesty of our great nation, China. Admire our wealth and grandeur. Your country undervalues just how impressive architecture can be. You don't know it yet, but even our toll booths are going to intimidate you with sweeping, organic curves that make you think we grow our buildings effortlessly from robot coral reefs.

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China knows how to spend its public funds for maximum psychological impact – it's hard to imagine anyone building anything so beautiful or awe-inspiring with public funds in the States. There, anything more than utilitarian would be blasted as fiscally irresponsible waste. But being here, looking at what the Chinese have built, I feel exactly how they want me to feel... I feel so impressed, like their country is great, and mine is middling... Or at least, it makes me feel like an astronaut in some 1950s vintage short story -

Entering the Beijing International Airport after a 13 hour flight is like landing your primitive American spacecraft in the vestibule of some advanced alien outpost. Maybe near Alpha Centari, and maybe somewhere even farther from home.

The Airport says, “We Chinese are not foreign for our backwardness, we are an advanced civilization, capable of feats you can only imagine.”
I'm greeted at the airport by Ween and Mr. Hu, two teachers from Tianshi College who have been sent at this ungodly hour to retrieve me. Mr. Hu is trim, in his fifties, seems to speak no English, and keeps barking impatiently at Ween. Ween is my age, cheerful and very friendly, with designer frames for his glasses and the most over-the-top fake Rolex I have ever seen. It tries so hard to be expensive that it must have cost no more than five bucks. But there doesn't seem to be anything pretentious about Ween himself. What kind of name is Ween? It's his English name. He tells me his Chinese name quickly, but also tells me not to worry about learning it. Ween it is.

They navigate the airport, its pedways, its parking garage, and the roads leading away from it like a floppy, bickering vaudeville comedy duo – Ween and Mr. Hu! Never sure where to go or what to do!

But we finally find our way.

The highways are all six lanes wide, but deserted at this time of night. They look brand new – fresh concrete and paint, and not a pothole in sight. Not much else in sight, either – we're outside of the fifth ring road in Beijing. Nothing out here but trees and a few factories that are already asleep for the night.

Tianshi College is just as dark when we arrive, but two guards open the gate for us. There's a teenage girl sitting in the darkened lobby of my apartment building. When we pull up, she turns on all the lights. Every worker I have seen so far, from the toll booth operators to her, wears a quasi-military uniform, with epaulets and lots of shiny buttons.

She hurries off to the refrigerator and grabs the KFC that has been purchased as my welcome dinner. It's not like the KFC we

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have at home – I won’t get into it now, but imagine if McDonald’s specialized in chicken instead of beef, and you’ll get some vague idea of what the KFC here is like.

I’m not hungry, but Ween and I eat anyway.

After that, he takes me upstairs to my second floor room. The hallway is completely dark – they do not waste energy here on lighting streets or buildings or hallways frivolously. Find your own way, even if you’re blind.

And tomorrow, after I get Friday and Saturday night’s sleep over in one bargain deal, I’ll get right on that.

Zzzzzz.

Wayne is my guide, fixer, my consigliore, my best friend for life in Tianjin → August 29, 2010

Here for nearly twelve hours, and this is already the biggest exercise in humility that I have ever undertaken. Moving to a place like this without language – or cognates – or even a familiar alphabet on your side is putting yourself completely at the mercy of those around you.

I’m lucky to have Ween – who, after I ask him to spell his name – is actually called Wayne, so-named by classmates when he studied in Britain.

Wayne is my guide, fixer, my consigliore, my best friend for life in Tianjin. Aside from picking me up from the airport yesterday, he’s fed me in the school canteen. He’s given me a perfunctory tour of campus and of the billion dollar headquarters of the Tiens corporation of which Tianshi College is a subsidiary. He’s negotiated with the bung bung cart operators – these are cabbies who drive little three-wheeled electric go-carts that definitely
move only slightly faster than a cyclist might, but with none of the grace or ease and while bobbing recklessly through even more reckless automobile traffic. They are the main form of transportation out here on the outskirts of Tianjin.

Wayne took me to the grocery store to get some between meal snacks, some clothes hangers, and a towel so I don't have to rely solely on my little travel chamois. Later on, he took me to a little black market to buy grapes and apples. I can pick out the Chinese-language numbers as he negotiates with all of these cabbies and vendors, so I feel pretty good about that.

I can't understand anything else he says in Chinese, but he seems good at making people laugh. At times, I've asked him to translate the joke for me – like when he leaned forward to our bung-bung driver and asked if the power had gone out, because we were riding so slowly. The driver laughed, too.

Wayne's an old student of Tianshi, just recently back from Britain where he studied on scholarship from Tiens. He's a poor kid from the south, and clearly feels a debt to this school for the opportunities he's had in life.

And I have to say, right now, I feel a kind of life-debt toward him.

You'd better bring some DVDs to kill your time because most of the tv set here are chinese, it may make you boring. → August 30, 2010

All summer long, ever since I took the job with Tianshi College, I've been asking the folks at there questions. Nothing outrageous or overly fussy. Things like, "What should I bring?"

Answer:

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Hi,
You'd better bring some DVDs to kill your time because most of the tv set here are chinese, it may make you boring.
Look forward to working with you
Good luck
Tracy

Or, “What classes will I be teaching?”

Answer:

The arrangement of the class in next term has not been done until now and if i get the last arrangement, I will tell you immediately.

Forthcoming, they are not. But all of my questions are getting answered in due time.

On Monday morning, I am taken to meet with “Michael,” the dean of the English department. He’s a slight man in his sixties maybe, who spent most of his career working as an interpreter in for business. He chuckles a lot, like when he asks me about the schlocky American blockbusters he and every other Chinese I have met seem to love. 2012 with John Cusack was a big hit with them this year, because in it, China saves the day.

Or like when he says that Tibet is not a safe place to go. He throws in that poor Tibetans are far better off today than they were in the past – the only people upset about the new Tibet are the elite masters who fled into India. Aka, the Dali Lama, that dastardly monarchist. This is all unsolicited “small talk.” He offers it up off-handedly, and while it’s a fascinating window into the psyche of a man who seems to be trying to preemptively address some of the international criticisms leveled at China, it’s not what I really want to know at a quarter past eight in the morning.
Today is my first day teaching.

What I really want to know is, “What class am I supposed to be teaching at 8:30... fifteen minutes from now?”

Michael isn’t sure. His assistant plies some textbooks on me (I’d previously been told that Tianshi doesn’t have standard texts, so this is a surprise.)

“Which one is for this class I have to teach at 8:30?”

Oh. Hm? Uh. Uh.

8:29. I’m led from Michael’s office into the hallway.

“And this upcoming class... which text should I use? What is the title of the class I am teaching at 8:30?”

Two assistants have now joined Michael in trying to interpret a schedule.

As I’m rushed to the door of my classroom, finally Michael’s assistant “Jessica” has settled it in her mind – “This is speech and listening. Use this green text. You will also be teaching speech class, oral English class, and culture at other times.”

Glad to have that settled, at least in theory... (what’s the difference between “speech” and “oral,” or, for that matter, “speech and listening?” Less listening in “speech,” then?)

I guess those are questions for five minutes before another class...

They think I know enough to get me through the morning.

And why would I want to know more?
What kind of Americans are out here, working in Chinese schools or walking the streets of Cairo, swaggering about as foreign kings? → August 31, 2010

Thus far, life in China is surreal. I haven't seen too much beyond the immediate few blocks outside of my college. But what a few blocks they are - Tianshi College is a small campus situated in the middle of one of those sprawling Chinese industrial parks that you hear about. The city-sized ones. Nothing in this area is more than ten years old. It's full of factories that make your electronics or jet engines for the Chinese military or car parts or you name it.

This is broken up by the occasional multibillion dollar corporate campuses or the odd government retreat. It's futuristic grandeur and developing world at the same time, because we're connected to all of this by bung-bung carts, those little red three-wheeled electric go-carts that dart through traffic and serve as taxis.

Life within the school is equally surreal. I am treated much better than anyone else here. My apartment is bigger, air conditioned, and has a private bathroom, a flat screen TV, and kitchen. Other teachers and students get none of those things. I am not exactly sure what Chinese teachers are paid, either, but I know that I get considerably more on that front, too. They get at least three or four roommates, so I guess they're ahead in that sense.

Like during my trip to the Middle East earlier this summer, American privilege is alive and well in the world.

Case in point:

All teachers and staff at Tianshi eat all three meals of the day in a big room called (in English) the canteen. It's a militaristic description for a utilitarian space that really isn't big enough to seat everyone. You approach a small window. The food is arranged behind it, and you tell the lady in a surgical mask which
dishes you would like. She holds a single big serving spoon and uses it indiscriminately. Or that’s how it’s supposed to work – I am reduced to pointing. She’s good, though, and the transaction is fluid, whether Wayne is guiding me or not.

She’s very generous when it comes to portions, as well, so I always leave full, despite my lack of dexterity with chopsticks.

Yesterday I was still full from breakfast when lunch time rolled around a mere three hours later. Accordingly, I skipped lunch – to the great concern of Tracy, my other staff liaison, and Wayne’s colleague. She interpreted this as my disgust for the length of the serving line, and reminded me of my priority to bypass the line, to be served ahead of all of the other teachers and staff.

I think she also said something to Michael, the dean of the English department about me not eating – he offered to talk to the cooks so that they would start cooking American food for me, if I decide I don’t like the Chinese food.

I declined both of these offers profusely, but it seemed to defy both Tracy and Michael’s expectations. Apparently the last guy took them up on these offers. What kind of Americans are out here, working in Chinese schools or walking the streets of Cairo, swaggering about as foreign kings?

Less patter, more clatter. → September 2, 2010

It feels good to be back at teaching after a year off while serving in AmeriCorps.

Right now, I’m teaching eight 90 minute classes a week. Subjects range from “speech” to “oral,” from “listening and speaking” to “culture.”
The week started off about as rough as it could. First day teaching, no prep time, not even sure what class I'm teaching until I'm shoved through the doorway. Learning to navigate the do's and don'ts of a Chinese classroom with the added burden of a language barrier.

I didn't really expect it that I'd travel halfway around the world only to meet myself again.

But here we are.

I'm a teacher, and I really missed it.

China or the United States, history or English, whatever you have, I'll take it.

It's good to be back in the saddle.

And other such clichés.

It's taken me most of the week, but I feel like I'm in step and in charge. I'm connecting and commanding. In case any of my former students out there were concerned:

My humor is overcoming the language barrier; less patter, more clatter. Leaping around, waving my arms, and so on. I've discovered a new skill for slapstick, and I've added pantomime to my repertoire.

So far, the kids have added the words “awesome” and “slacker” to theirs.

Mao is cool like that. → September 3, 2010, Beijing

As I write these words:
Mao is in the background on the hotel TV. An actor playing him, anyway. The Japanese are on the offensive. Chaing Kai-shek is being a total pa-toot again, and winter has come early this year.

Things look hopeless, as they always do so late at night. But Mao orders his senior staff to rest – no good having an army that’s sleep-deprived and depressed on top of being frozen when the enemy finally attacks.

To clear his head, Mao alone steps into the snowy night. There’s a young soldier on watch. He’s numbed from the cold, and startled by Mao’s approach in the dark. He tries to fire his weapon, but he fumbles, his rifle falling harmlessly into the snow.

And that’s when the soldier recognizes Mao.

Talk about embarrassing.

But Mao smiles warmly, despite the chill night air. He asks the soldier – just a boy, really – if he’s cold.

The boy can’t lie, not even to put on a brave face for his commanding officer – it’s so damn cold out here, that’s why he just dropped his weapon.

Mao takes the boy’s hands and warms them against his own breast. They speak of their hometowns. Both come from poor, backwater villages. Mao likes the boy’s will, his sense of duty in sticking to his post, even on this bleak, snowy night.

Mao tells the boy to run a few laps to warm himself.

The boy protests – he is the guard on duty!

But no, Mao himself will take watch in the boy’s stead. Mao is cool like that.
Full House-style incidental music swells as Mao grips the rifle, striking a heroic pose that surely appeared on the promotional posters for this film. The melody is sappy and saccharine with strings and brass as the boy makes slow-motion laps in the snow.

How can you not be moved to patriotic chills by this?

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I take the high-speed train from the Wuqing District of Tianjin, where I live, to Beijing – about forty miles in 23 minutes, on the nose. We top out around 320 kilometers per. So fast you can feel the speed on your skin, heavy, even though the ride is smoother than the music in most dentist’s offices. The color scheme of the carpet and upholstery has the same hygenic dental look, too.

I feel like I'm in a foreign country for the first time today. The school is like a protective little cocoon where everyone says, “Hi, Thomas!” and I am the mascot – the blond boy in a sea of Chinese. Out here, I am still in an extreme minority, but out here I am faceless and nameless.

A mark. Or so I feel, even though I'm unhassled as of yet. I don't belong here, and it's apparent.

I negotiate the subway, finding my way to the Beijing Central City Youth Hostel. Not a bad place for 280 RMB. That's about $25 a night, and I get my own room with a TV that shows Mao movies.

I got a late start today, so there's not much to do before dark. I decide to hoof it a couple of miles to check out Tiananmen Square at dusk.

It's this massive open space, designed to impress and to intimidate, depending on who issued you your passport – several Chinese I meet claim this is the biggest open space in the world,
but I don't really know what that means. There's imposing 1950s and 60s Soviet era architecture to the east and west and a 40ft obelisk, the Memorial to the People's Heroes to the south, behind which lies Mao's four or five story tall mausoleum. The real eye-catcher from this vantage point, though, is the gate to the Forbidden City in the north. You know it. You've seen it – the ancient symbol of Chinese imperial authority one with the two story portrait of Mao on it.

I arrive just in time for the evening show.

Dozens of soldiers storm up out of nowhere, marching in tight formation (and, really, is there any other kind of formation in China?) I'm one of the few westerners in a sea of Chinese tourists who have turned up for this.

The soldiers begin to lower the Chinese flag from its 50ft staff. A reverent hush falls over the crowd. It wouldn't be China, though, if someone wasn't working just as hard to spoil this solemn moment – before the flag is even halfway down, guys with brooms and clanging metal dust pans are already cleaning up the day's litter.

At precisely sunset, the flag is down, the soldiers are sprinting off, and the dramatic golden lighting pops to life on all of the memorials, giving Mao's portrait a distinctly Vegas-y feel. Sinatra can eat it, because Mao's on the marquee, and thanks to sanitizing propaganda like the move in my hotel room, he still packs 'em in even three and a half decades after he kicked the bucket.

As a lone white guy in Tiananmen, I'm a prime mark for the girls that my Lonely Planet guide warned about. They chat young men up using the kind of English I teach at college, and then they invite them for tea – sticking the poor, horny chumps with the equivalent of a $200 tab. Pretty sure they're on the payroll of
some crooked teahouses, otherwise they must just really have expensive personal tastes in tea, and no other way to fund their habit.

I ask a random European guy, also alone, to take my photo in front of Mao's portrait, and he warms me about the girls, too. I jokingly say, "You sound like a man who learned about them the hard way."

"I read about them in my guidebook, too," he says, before suddenly, he hangs his head in shame. "They were just so nice, and they talked to me for so long, I figured they had to be for real interested in me."

Ain't that how it always goes?

The Beijing night has settled in, and I wander into an upscale pedestrian shopping district – Wangfujing. It's full of designer stores, and it's as ritzy as anything you'd see in the trendiest neighborhood of a major American city. For the first time in China since getting off of that 777, I see a significant number of whites around. Most look like middle-aged guys here on business, huddled somewhat pathetically in packs, sipping beer, protected from any direct mingling with the Chinese by a velvet rope enclosing their sidewalk beer garden.

Way to soak up the local flavor, dudes – and I bet you'll go back and tell everyone in the office what a great city Beijing is.

Someone who I am pretty sure is a hooker tries to pick me up. She's a hard forty years old, but trying not to look like it. I barely make eye contact, but it's enough – her patter is quick as I walk on past – "Hello! Hello! We speak in English? Not selling, just want to speak! Hey! Hey! Yeah, keep going! FUCK YOU MAN!"

Eep.
But still I’m not retreating behind that velvet rope.

I have dinner on the street. Some kind of fried onions and carrots in a fajita type of shell. The girl spreads chili paste on it. It’s really good. Some jasmine-flavored soft serve is not as good, but you roll the dice.

I stay away from the tawny, taloned fried chicken feet for tonight, though.

I wash it all down with a peach-flavored Fanta and head back to the hotel.

That’s where I learn about Mao’s literal warm heart. Hell of a guy. No wonder they hung up such a nice picture of him on the gate in Tiananmen, like he’s the manager of the biggest Denny’s on the planet.


“Enough is enough – all of these photos are going to end up looking the same on your computer screen.” → September 4, 2010, Beijing and Hebei Province

If you come to China, you’ve got to see the Great Wall. Every kid knows that. It’s what’s pictured next to the panda bear in every kiddie atlas. So I want to get this out of the way, because it’s not going to feel like I actually live in China until I do.

There are closer, more convenient places to access the wall than Jinshanling. Other sections of the wall are better maintained and better restored. But probably more crowded. Jinshanling is out in

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the mountains of Hebei province, about three hours of rural driving from Beijing.

A white passenger van picks me up from my hotel – along with a solo Japanese tourist from Kyoto – at 6am. We wind through a genuine Beijing hutong to a couple of more expensive hostels to pick up some better funded backpackers, and then we're dropped off at the mustering point for the main bus that will take us to Jinshanling.

For the record, the hutong visit is quaint. It fits your stereotypical vision of old China – houses and courtyards, crammed close together, constructed in the style of a long-past feudal China. These hutongs are being knocked down furiously to clear the way for the wealthy new modern Beijing I glimpsed last night. To fetishize these neighborhoods too excessively seems to be fetishizing China's waning poverty.

Would we feel a similar romanticism if suddenly all of America's trailer parks were being demolished to make way for better living quarters – into which all of the trailer park's current residents would be moved on the government's dime? I'm not so sure about that...

Hebei province is noticeably poorer than the capital. But it's also lush and green – absolutely gorgeous. Jinshanling itself is a park situated in steep foothills with picturesque snowcapped peaks in the distance. Stalls of vendors solicit tourists with cold water, beer, and Snickers bars.

The wall is staggering from your first glimpse, as you come through a mountain pass. Everyone on the bus is straining to see it, afraid they'll miss it. And then it's there, and you realize there was never any chance that you could. Like the Grand Canyon or the Pyramids, it is something that has to be seen and touched to
be understood. The wall runs along the spine of the mountains here.

A cable car takes you to the top, saving climbing time that could be better spent traversing the wall itself. I feel like it's cheating, at first, but I realize that I'll be doing plenty of climbing and scrambling. Some of the wall has been restored and some is crumbling gracefully with the weight of age. Local farmers have helped this process along, too, by recycling some of the ancient bricks into their homes.

Every time I crest a ridge or come to one of the periodically spaced guard towers, I'm snapping another photo. Or asking my new friend Kyoto to snap one with me posing in the foreground.

I keep saying to myself, “Enough is enough – all of these photos are going to end up looking the same on your computer screen.” But I just can't stop.

And that's really all there is to say.

Look at the pictures and marvel in their pixilated testament to the glory of man that is the Great Wall.

And think about the fact that some poor suckers were given the unholy task of lugging all of these bricks up here in the first place.

I was raised Catholic, so I know that it's not easy to forget a prayer that you've been reciting since before you understood the words... → September 5, 2010, Beijing

I don't know for sure, but I doubt Mao was a late sleeper.

And these days, if you want to see him, you can't be either.

I get to Tiananmen Square before 7:30. The guys who work the
metal detectors at the gates aren't even here yet.

This decadent capitalist has gotten out of bed before the communists.

Well, not all of the communists. A few thousand Chinese citizens are already here, queuing and eager to pay their respects to the Chairman. His mausoleum is only open for business between the hours of 8-12, so if you want to say hi, now is the time to do it.

I check my camera and bag at a stand across the square - neither is allowed inside Mao's mausoleum - and join the surprisingly orderly mass of Mao-philes. This is the neatest line I have encountered in China – normally people just push and shove their way ahead of you, no matter where you are. Admittedly, soldiers on special Mao crowd control duty definitely help with this problem.

Pale and blond, I stand out everywhere I go in China, but never more so than now, I realize. Literally, every other person in this line – all several thousand of them – is Chinese.

I feel not just self-conscious, but downright uncomfortable. People are looking at me. Staring at me. Chinese have no compunctions about this, it seems. They're eyeing me openly. I'm sweating, and the sun is barely even up yet.

Finally, a middle-aged guy in a pink polo shirt sidles up next to me in line. He asks the question that's on everyone's mind.

"You? Where are you from?"

I'm currently living in nearby Tianjin. It's a city of ten million that most westerners have never heard of. I think about simply
answering “Tianjin” and smiling rakishly, but I know from teaching English to my Chinese classes that my sometimes puckish sense of humor is lost to the language barrier or the Chinese temperament. Or both. “Chicago, USA,” I answer instead.

“If you are from the USA, why do you want see Chairman Mao?”

They have a way of being direct here that can be a little disarming in the sense that it cuts through all subtext leaving you as an outsider with no clue where a Chinese might be heading with his line of questioning. For many Chinese, visiting Mao is a quasi-religious experience, a chance to pay homage and prostrate oneself before greatness. His cult of personality still runs strong thirty-five years after his death. Many Chinese are sensitive about outsiders who come to this place with their minds made up that Mao is a megalomaniacal despot, as we’re often taught in the west.

But I thought about this in advance, and I’m ready with a sincere answer. “I’m very interested in China and its leaders. I want to learn.” This has the virtue of being both a nice value-neutral statement and true.

“Ah, yes!” He is pleased with this answer, and he decides in this moment that I am alright. He is going to be my new best friend until we get through this line. He turns to the crowd which is still staring shamelessly at me and offers a translation of our exchange. Smiles and waves all around. And I rejoice, not only because I am no longer quite so isolated in this sea of humanity, but because seeing Mao is only half of the experience – it’s not complete without the interactive and earnest reactions from a real Chinese.

According to my new friend – a former teacher, and now a “boss” from Dalian – “Mao was a great man. In the U.S., the only thing

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close is your Washington. Mao did not just change China, he changed the world.”

I can't argue with this, whatever the human cost of Mao's reign may have been. Without Mao, there would be no People's Republic, and it's hard to imagine a modern world economy without it. Even though Mao favored a collectivized, socialist paradise, his more economically liberal successors in the 80s, 90s, and 00s benefited immeasurably from the authoritarian political framework that Mao was instrumental in laying down. The Chinese economic miracle is carefully managed by fiat from the top down, and the power to do this is built in the shadow of Mao and his cult of personality.

We talk about all of this, too, more or less, as much as his limited English allows. He wouldn't say it the way I say it either – his take is much more reverential, of course. Maybe it's the fact that we're smack in Tiananmen Square - symbolic in the west for the draconian suppression of the Chinese regime, but in China as the home of Mao, the People's Congress, and the National Day military review - but this man from Dalian is brimming with visible pride. Literally - his voice quivers, and I swear he's near tears at one point.

During the whole conversation, he is especially keen to point out China's wealth. How Americans may earn more, but their cost of living is much higher – so the average Chinese does nearly as well in the end. Of course, some of his questions of me are telling as to how big that gap still is... For example, when he's asking about my life as a teacher in Tianjin, he asks, "How many people do you share a bedroom with?" He's floored that I answer with "None."

We draw near the door, through several layers of security, and Dalian wants to buy a yellow carnation to leave as an offering to
Mao. But he misses the flower stand in the heat of our conversation, and the soldiers won't let him go back for one. Despite his pleading. Here's where he comes closest to tears. But the line toward the inner chamber of Mao's Mausoleum is ever-moving and inexorable.

I feel kind of bad. Even though he says he has been to pay his respects to Mao so many times that he can't count them, this ritual clearly means a lot to him. It is a secular religion here, and I have brought a modicum of shame upon him before his Lord. He tells me that having the chance to guide an American through this experience is honor enough.

Everyone's hushed and reverent as we finally enter the chamber that houses Mao's crystal casket. Dark marble and high ceilings, lots of red velvet. The man himself has aged well, considering he has been dead for almost four decades. He truly looks like he's just sleeping peacefully.

Dalian is genuflecting and his hands are pressed together like a devout Christian in prayer. This is as intense and as sincere as anyone having a moment in Jerusalem. Except, in the presence of Mao, your feet are not allowed to stop their shuffle.

But just like that, our audience with Mao is over, and we're stewarded back into the heat of the noonday sun. Stalls full of officially licensed Mao memorabilia do a brisk business among the faithful, and I don't want to be left out. Dalian is really impressed when I purchase a framed red ink lithograph of Mao in profile at the official state-run souvenir stand outside of the mausoleum. For him, this is a sacred icon. For me, it's pure, unholy kitsch.

My feelings about such reverence for Mao are ambivalent at best.
It means a lot to this guy and to many others. It is genuinely spiritual, if not religious. But what is the moral code that that spirituality animates? I’ve been told several times by several Chinese that politics is the concern of the party, not something for the people to worry about. That is the first line in the profession of faith of the state religion of China.

I was raised Catholic, so I know that it’s not easy to forget a prayer that you’ve been reciting since before you understood the words...

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After all of that, how can the Forbidden City compare?

Sure, it’s massive and beautiful and I relish every moment of it. But I have an automated earphone guide activated by proximity to specific structures and artifacts.

I’m impressed. I really am. That’s where the emperor sat on his birthday. That’s where the empress sat on hers. This is where the concubines lived, each in their own little chamber.

But where’s the drama? Mao is larger than life, but he engenders real emotional responses in people. The Forbidden City is architecturally astounding, but like with a big budget Hollywood blockbuster, there’s just none of the heart that you get from a good character piece.

It does seem ironic that there is more life in Mao’s tomb than in the living quarters of 500 years worth of Chinese emperors. I guess I’ve always been partial to modern history, so maybe I’m not a reliable witness. Or maybe it’s the deliberate result of 60 years of propaganda aimed at rewriting Chinese history with communists as the stars?
In any event, I'm spent. I'd wanted to visit the Lama Temple, but I'm just not feeling it. With the fast train, I effectively live in Beijing now – I can leave my bedroom and be standing in Tiananmen Square in about 45 minutes. So I have plenty more opportunities for exploration.

It's time to go home and take a nap.

its strength is greatly infinite big overwhelming power. → September 8, 2010

Ernie's the other foreign teacher here at Tianshi College. He's in his 60s. Canadian. A retired cop, living large in China, and he's good at what he does. He has high standards, and the kids love him. He's gregarious and crude in the best ways.

Today, he wants to pick up some new shirts from the open air market. We take a bung-bung cart downtown after classes wrap for the day.

As we shop, some random people ask Ernie and I to stop and take photos with them. This is actually preferable to the usual silent stares, in my opinion. Ernie hams it up with goofy smiles, his red-dyed mustache an extra novelty in a country where few men wear facial hair.

I buy my first Chinese bootleg DVDs. They each have about twelve movies on them. One is a collection of primate-themed movies featuring all of the *Planet of the Apes* movies (six of 'em!), *King Kong*, *MVP* (Most Valuable Primate), and others that have even more monkeys. No *Every Which Way But Loose*, though. The other DVD has all three *Robocop* films, plus a bunch of real trash like *Terminator* and *Armageddon*.
Chinese are walking up to me to see which DVDs I'm buying. They see Robocop and start giving the thumbs up. They know what's good.

The cover to the sci fi collection features Robocop and Ghost Rider and reads: "the hollywood super science fiction machinery fights the police"

The cover to the monkey collection has King Kong and seems to be an erotic poem of some kind...

"its strength is greatly infinite
big overwhelming power. she petite
beautiful, sex appeal
to extremely.
it is the beast, she is the
human. how unthinkable
love story between them has ......"

Something to think about.

For dinner, Ernie and I eat at KFC, or as the Chinese call it “Kendudgy.” I have a "New Orleans Chicken Sandwich." I'm not really sure what is “New Orleans” about it. It has some kind of sauce on it that is a little tangy. But it's good. I order the value meal. It comes with a small cup of cold slaw and a cup of peach juice. The Chinese seem to love anything that's flavored peach. I have a hot fudge sundae for dessert, which is made from some of the densest soft serve I've ever had. The fudge is real hot fudge, too – not that cheap caramelized corn syrup goo they serve in the States.

Who would have thought - KFC here is actually good.
They're very dense little cakes filled with an even more densely packed center of sweet goodness. → September 12, 2010

It's mooncake season in China. They're fresh, they're delicious, and they're here for a limited time only. These little hockey pucks are the traditional snack cake of the Autumn Festival, a celebration of lunar worship, hence the name.

Moon cakes are baked fresh or sold prepackaged at this time of year. They're very dense little cakes filled with an even more densely packed center of sweet goodness.

I can't read Chinese, and I think there are a lot of variations, but I'm pretty sure the particular morsel I just ate contained: brown sugar, predominantly, with a touch of nutmeg, peanuts, and poppy seeds. And there has to be some kind of oil acting as a fixative for that delicious cement.

I'm no food critic, but I know what I like.

Yum.

It's not my job to help you, actually. But when I went abroad, people were kind to me, and I know how much this means. → September 15, 2010

Wayne was the first person I met in China. As “Ween,” he picked me up from the airport. He had the sign that said “Thomas Kenning.” So we go way back.

He's taken care of me since then, too, but most of our conversation has been polite and reserved. Limited to the kinds of things you learn in your first year of foreign language — “How do you like the food?” “What do you do in your free time?” and so forth.

Thomas Kenning
But last night, Wayne and I had a heart-to-heart. We had dinner together, as we sometimes do when we find ourselves in the canteen at the same time. I'm usually with Ernie at dinner, but tonight he's gone off to meet up with one of his Chinese girlfriends. The way Ernie talks, he has three or four in every city.

So Wayne and I start talking at dinner. The National Day holiday is coming up – a week off – and he asks what I will do with my time. I'm planning a trip to Tibet. Most Chinese who have heard this think it is an odd choice. But not Wayne – his eyes light up.

"Tibet is so mysterious!" he says. "If I had the money, I would love to go with you!"

Wayne studied abroad in the UK. His major was finance, and he's clearly more tuned into the outside world than the average Chinese.

We talk some more, and I mention that plan to do some reading later. He wants to know if I've gotten my books from the school library. I ask if he remembers the elephantine duffel from the airport on my first night here. He had gallantly offered to carry it for me. He took it from my shoulder, and it nearly pulled his small frame right to the ground. After that, he carried one handle, and I, the other.

He definitely remembers. And when I tell him that most of that weight came from books, he's thrilled. I tell him he can borrow whatever he likes – and by this I mean, when I leave China, I'll leave most of my books behind for him. No sense in carrying them back to the U.S. when I can fill my bag with cheap Chinese souvenirs.

Dinner ends, and Wayne mentions that he will be in his office later on. I should stop by if I am not busy.
So I do.

We have a far reaching conversation about trade deficits and the unsettling parallels between the US and Chinese housing markets. Wayne asks the usual question Chinese have about the U.S. – isn’t it terrifying to live there with all of those guns everywhere? I assure him it’s not… that as sad as it is, the worst gun problems in the country are in the poorest areas, and anyone who has the money to do so usually stays way the hell away from such places.

Wayne tells me that the Chinese media is full of stories about American gun violence. He says it’s a concerted effort by the state media to scare the Chinese people into not wanting to travel abroad. Since he’s been abroad, he knows that these stories and others are misleading – but most Chinese don’t, and they’re terrified of the idea of travel abroad. Think of the way many of my friends and family were scared for my safety when I travelled to the Middle East earlier this year.

Wayne talks about the poor quality of news in China. We are alone in his office late at night, otherwise he wouldn’t be talking like this. His voice starts to get shakier, much more strained – more indignant, I realize – as he talks about the lack of free speech in China. “If you have a different opinion, you cannot say it,” he says. “You will be in trouble. They will take you away.”

He’s not crying, but I swear there are tears in his eyes as his voice quivers. “This is very painful. Many Chinese who go abroad and return can see this problem. But we cannot speak of it, either, even to each other.”

I feel like these are thoughts that Wayne has been carrying inside since he came back to China in January. Maybe I’m the first person he’s felt safe sharing them with.
One day he hopes China will open. He notes that even now the leaders of his country have opened small reforms – people can speak out on trivial matters, and in his mind, this is a first step. You can’t open up completely to free speech overnight, because the people have been so sheltered and so censored that they wouldn’t know what to believe anymore. It would be a shock.

But the First Amendment? “This is something I admire about the United States, this openness. This is why so many people want to go there.”

Wayne hopes to come to the U.S. one day, too, if he can save the money. He wants to study finance and maybe one day live there, but for now, he reflects in a somewhat rueful tone, a contract holds him here. And so do his parents.

To thank him for all of the help he’s given me since I got here, I give Wayne a pen and ink drawing I did of a bung bung cart.

“I know it’s your job to help me, but thank you anyway,” I say.

There’s that quiver in his voice again. “It’s not my job to help you, actually. But when I went abroad, people were kind to me, and I know how much it means.”

The one that even Terry Gilliam rejected as too dystopian – too wretchedly Orwellian – to include in Brazil → September 17, 2010

This would be dark comedy if Terry Gilliam was directing. But I’m not that lucky.

Setting the scene:

Half a dozen paper pushers, all in their 30s, not so far past the prime of their life to forget hope, but too old, or maybe too broken to actually feel it, clad in the dark blues of the Public
Security Bureau. Several hard wood office doors, stained dark with brass number plates on them. 105 and 107. I never do find 106, and water closet is stylized “W.C” I never find that errant period either. The paper pushers are rushing back and forth between these doors, going in and out, their hands always empty. They are in plain sight, but rarely deign to move the line forward. They are perfectly willing to make eye contact – I speak only a little Chinese, but even I can understand this to mean, “Fuck you.”

In China, there are all of these government offices here where at least hundreds of people have to go on any given day - and each of them has exactly one window open to serve those people. So I wait in line for nearly three hours today in total. Most of it in the one line I just described.

As a new visitor to China, I have meet one-on-one with a representative of the PSB before I can even get into the hell line. The PSB are the police force tasked with caring for and monitoring foreigners. They wear no uniform and they are slouched behind their desks, having given up on not looking bored, now they’re just going for “awake.” They don’t bother to actually tell me anything either – since as I come into the room, they are telling an Australian guy not to propagate his religion and to obey all local Chinese laws. Technically, there should be quote marks around that last sentence, because that is all they say to him. Just that succinctly. They ask if I heard what they had told him. I say, “Most of it,” and they wave me on.

I’m not complaining about the briskness with which I am dispatched – I’m happy to be moving along. Just pointing out how even for the Chinese, this is a bureaucratic farce.

I’m in good spirits. Until I hit the Line. The one that even Terry Gilliam rejected as too dystopian – too wretchedly Orwellian – to include in Brazil.

Thomas Kenning
The line moves at a rate of approximately one person every nine minutes. I wait for well over ninety minutes to see the paper pusher at the counter in front of rooms 105 and 107. This broken, hate-filled man goes through all of the other paperwork generated by this country – the medical exams, the work permit, the visa, the foreign experts license, my contract in English and Chinese, and a receipt from the PSB whose job it was to “go over the laws with me.”

This guy scours the paperwork line by line to make sure it’s all in order. This is it, I think. After three weeks here, I’m finally legally living and working in China.

Satisfied, he takes the paperwork and my passport along with it. "Processing" will take five days. At which time I get to go back and retrieve the passport and paperwork again. After waiting in an adjacent line, of course.

It’d be funny if it wasn’t true.

Typos corrected while mostly sober. → September 21, 2010

It’s variably infuriating and charming to live in China. That’s true of most places, I suppose. But the contrast for a newcomer who doesn’t speak the language seems greater, the peaks and valleys more distinct.

I just spent the last two weeks trying to organize an affordable trip to Tibet, but due to travel restrictions on Westerners, that’s basically impossible. In order to receive a travel permit, an American has to contract a guide. You cannot come to Tibet a day before your tour starts or stay a day after it ends. In order to do this affordably, a single traveler like me has to join an existing, prescheduled tour. A lot of people do this. Meaning that the flights to Lhasa on days that tours begin and end are overbooked. If there are any tickets left at this stage in game, they’re first
class, and well over six hundred bucks one way. (I'm trying to put all of this together at the last minute because my school was slow in deciding when to actually have our holiday break. They actually decide these things on the fly here, it seems)

For perspective, I could fly home to the USA for approximately that amount. And believe me, during this process, that seemed tempting.

Needless to say, this is out of my modest price range, especially when you factor in an additional six hundred dollars for the tour.

I am disappointed. At first, I think I can afford a trip to Seoul and Manila for less than the cost to Tibet. So that's what I decide to do. Except when I find actually try to purchase the tickets, I find out that the Chinese attach so many taxes and hidden fees that it doubles the price of each international ticket, making a two hundred mile flight to Seoul again nearly as expensive as a flight to Chicago. Bastards.

All of these not-so-subtle monetary disincentives to do things that the government doesn't approve of – like visiting Tibet or leaving the country for a few days – seem like a strikingly capitalist solution in a supposedly communist country. I think this is ironic until I realize it's probably progress over strict prohibitions or the draconian torture and reeducation of the past. The Chinese masses are still manipulated into staying in their place – figuratively and literally – and the government can couch this as reform. But the end result is the same. Control.

It's just as authoritarian as ever. That's my story anyway, because it pisses me off.

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Thomas Kenning
But at the same time, tonight, some of my coworkers hold a feast in honor of Mid-Autumn Festival, which is tomorrow. In contrast to their government, the Chinese people that you interact with personally are kind and generous to a fault. To the point where I would hope most Americans would be embarrassed by their kindness. I'm embarrassed.

The meal is green beans, eggplant, pig hooves, and duck necks.
You can probably guess what constituted the bulk of my meal, though I was obliged to try everything. Pig hooves are fatty and sinewy and boney and they look exactly like you'd imagine them to. I managed to nibble on a knuckle for a little bit, then just rearrange the leftovers on my plate like a little kid. The duck neck was just as bony, but far less fatty. If you've ever seen a duck's neck the fact that it's less fatty than a pig should not come as a surprise. One eats a duck neck like it's corn on the cob. Nibbling laterally. Spicy. Not bad, if you stay away from vertebrae.

The game for the evening is toast the American - and by Chinese rules, every toast means draining your glass of Chinese beer. So, to recap, I am drinking against seven Chinese. You can guess my mental state right as I make the notes for this entry.

(Typographical errors corrected while mostly sober.)

I'm not even in the race for style and status here, I'm above it because of my blond hair and fair skin. No matter what I wear, heads turn → September 22, 2010

Wayne is turning out to be my best friend here.

No offense to Ernie. He's great. But he's an old man, and his interests lie mostly in recent American action movies.
Wayne suggests that on Mid-Autumn Festival, we go shopping. I say sure, noting that otherwise I'd just be sitting in my room the better part of the day. His face lights up – maybe there will be “discounts” on some of his favorite brands! He wants to know my favorite brands, and I'm stumped.

"Cheap? Anything without a label?"

These concepts don't register here. I guess I have the luxury – I'm not even in the race for style and status here, I'm above it because of my blond hair and fair skin. No matter what I wear, heads turn. But for the Chinese, conspicuous consumption is a full contact sport.

Wayne mentions to our boss Jessica that we're going to downtown Tianjin to shop in the upscale district. She graciously diverts school funds to paying our taxi and subway fare into the city. Don't ask me how this is justified – Wayne just explains it is a Mid-Autumn gift.

Jessica is the sort of woman who doesn't want anyone to see what's going on behind the curtain. She had to have been that girl in school who got straight A's and tried so hard to make it look effortless – but in actuality, she spent lots of late nights getting it just right.

She wants my experience at Tianshi to be smooth and seamless in the worst possible way, so instead of seeming cool and collected, she comes off as slightly frantic with a wild look in her eye. I might enter a room casually to chat, and her face will flash panic – "Is everything ok?" But she's very sincere, and I don't mean to sound ungrateful in any way. Really.

In any event, Wayne and I spend the better part of the day wandering in and out of stores. There's this one – Zara – which Wayne loves. We may or may not have it in the U.S. I don't
know when he asks, because it's definitely too upscale for me to pay any attention to in the States. Wayne really wants this grey button down shirt, I can tell. He tries it on and asks my opinion. I tell him it looks good, but he puts it back on the rack. It's too expensive. We walk on.

I pick up a jacket. That didn't fit in the one duffel bag of stuff that I arbitrarily allowed myself on flight here. But with fall and winter coming, I'll need one. It's not cold yet – in the 60s at night – but all of the Chinese are already wearing jackets and are very concerned that I haven't been wearing one. Wayne has been mentioning it to me two or three times a day.

Right after this, Wayne brings up that grey shirt again. I ask if he wants to go back to Zara, and he jumps at the chance, speaking of regret and hesitation and things lost. Even when we're talking about shirts, his words sound so much more substantial through that accent.

When we get back to the store, I tell Wayne to take all the time he needs to decide. He laughs in relief and suggests I shop around myself. I do, and find some killer plaid trousers. They're around forty dollars U.S., even in this really high end store, so I figure what the hell. They're pretty damn cool.

Wayne seems liberated by the fact that I'm making a purchase, too. He picks up both the shirt and this pair of designer high tops that seem vaguely like they have wings. You know, Hermes-style.

We grab lunch at one of the three McDonalds in this area – Wayne orders. I say I want a burger, and I end up with a chicken sandwich. That's what Chinese mean when they say burger.

It's good, and it's good to make a real Chinese friend.
I'm a reasonably healthy guy when it comes to eating. But in the States, if I don't eat pizza once a week or so, I don't feel like a living, breathing human. It's my single, solitary weakness. Along with cheeseburgers. And chocolate. And ice cream. And I'm partial to really rich vegetable korma. Cookies. Cake. Brownies with frosting. Brownies without frosting. A good beef burrito. French fries drenched in ketchup. Mmm.

Ok. I actually eat a preponderance of crap. But bear with me, please, and have a little mercy. After a couple of weeks in the canteen, I really want some pizza.

It's that point, for me – the point that everyone hits when they're traveling in a strange land. When the food from home subtly starts to dominate your thoughts, taking over your internal monolog and many of your external dialogs in a primal, animalistic, subconscious way – your preoccupation with food begins writhing its way up from the depths of your inner chimp, leaving you sweating and simultaneously unable to focus on anything else, but also utterly unconscious of the fact that you've just written sixty-five words without a full stop. It's that desperate point where you start journal entries with delicious digressions into daydreamed diets like that opening paragraph. When only alliterative phrases like that can begin to capture the frenzy at work deep within the dark pit of your stomach in which your very soul resides. When rational thought ends and all perspective is lost and you think to yourself, “I'm going to read that opening paragraph one more time – just because it felt so good the first time. No one can take that away from me! Not even a country where they eat pigs' feet and ducks' necks and live frogs are kept in boxes outside of restaurants to demonstrate the freshness of their fare!”
The Chinese food is taking its toll. There's no cheese to be found. I've been getting my refined sugar fix through ice cream and Oreos, which are both plentiful on campus and just as sweet as they are at home. But there's no cheese, which is a problem for a red-blooded Midwestern boy like me. It's been a month since I've had pizza, or really any cheese at all.

So tonight, with a little help from Wayne, I ordered from the local joint: Gold Pizza. Delivered by a rakish teenager on a motorbike, cigarette in hand, clad in black, hair swept to one side, ear pierced with a fake diamond stud. His cool, indifferent stare is enough to bring girls to the brink of desperation. I myself want to date the guy.

But wait, no! It's not his rebel cool that's winning me over – sweet dairy queen, it's the smell of melted cheese!

When you order Gold Pizza, they ask if you want sweet or spicy pizza. I've never been asked this about pizza before, so I blindly choose spicy.

What arrives is nine inches of cheese, sausage (both chunks and links, forming an inner ring near the crust), green peppers, pineapples, and corn. No tomato sauce is included, but you do get a side of pickles and a packet of ketchup.

I think I'll save the ketchup for the next time I go to KFC.

The overall effect isn't quite American, but I'd eat it again in a pinch.

I will survive the night.

Did I mention democracy to the wrong person? Are the cops here to escort me to the airport? → September 27, 2010

It's about twenty after eleven. Class is going great – I'm on a roll and in the zone. The kids are engaged. We're learning about how to talk about free time activities in English, and they're both listening and speaking, which is appropriate, since this is Listening and Speaking class.

Jack, an administrative assistant from the English department practically kicks the classroom door in. He's in a rush, sweaty and gasping for breath. With Jack, it's always a scramble. “You are done with class today!”

The kids stare blankly. I do, too, for some time. “Class is over in half an hour...” I offer somewhat dumbly. I'm racking my brain, confused. Did I mention democracy to the wrong person? Are the cops here to escort me to the airport?

“You have something else to do. They can go.” Jack gestures to the kids, who turn to me for direction.

I shrug at them. “See you guys later, I guess...”

I can barely pack up my things before Jack is whisking me to the elevator, out the door, across the red tile courtyard, into the B building, up three flights of stairs, and into a large classroom. He offers no explanation during this whole mad dash.

In a large classroom wait three eager women with a pile of nice black knockoff Italian suits. They're tailors. And I'm to be fitted.

“What is the suit for?” I ask Jack.

“To wear!” He's grinning, which is reliably what he's doing if he isn't rushing.

Thomas Kenning
Apparently this is a gift from the school in honor of Teacher's Day, which was two weeks ago now. It's what couldn't wait until class ended. It's what demanded the mad scramble across campus.

They may do things in the most bizarre, backward way sometimes – though it's hard to complain when they are so consistently kind. But I will continue to note that bizarre backwardness – because it makes things interesting.

I have to imagine they're laughing at a real waiguoren amidst the wax ones... An infestation indeed. → October 1, 2010, Shanghai

I don't really know what one does in Shanghai.

Because I wanted to go to Tibet. But since that didn't work out, I'm spending two and a half days in Shanghai, and three in Manila.

And I'm basically making it up as I go along.

I flew in last night. It was one of the busiest travel days of the Chinese year – the day before National Day, which commemorates the day that the People's Republic was born in 1949. This date also kicks off Golden Week, a week when most Chinese are off work and most shops have big sales. Between relying on public transportation in Beijing and delays at the airport, I travel for nearly nine hours before I crawl into my purple sleep sack at Le Tour, my Shanghai hostel.

Today, as I say, I'm winging it. I catch the metro downtown to the Bund, a collection of colonial era buildings that runs for about a mile along the Huangpu River. My guidebook provides some context, but I'm really hopeless when it comes to appreciating the nuances of architecture. Plus, while these western-style buildings may look exotic here, to me it just looks like the older parts of
Chicago... If this is going to comprise my visit to Shanghai, it's not looking good...

Pretty quickly, I'm looking for something a little sexier... And bam – right there in my *Lonely Planet* – the China Sex Culture Museum. Featuring copulating turtle statues and a knife used to castrate eunuchs. And it's right on the other side of the river!

*My Lonely Planet* also refers to something called the Bund Sightseeing Tunnel, which will convey me to the other side in "mind-bending" style.

It seems like a win-win.

I buy a roundtrip ticket for the Bund Sightseeing Tunnel. An escalator descends through trellises of random fake ivy to a level well below the river. I am ushered into a sort of glass carrying case. It's not quite a train car, and it's not quite a bubble, but it rides a track and it's mostly clear. You stand inside with a half dozen Chinese – who all have their video cameras running for the whole five minute trip.

During that time, cheap light patterns flash on and off around you. Various sounds play – I hesitate to call it music, as they're mostly sound effects like you would have heard on *Star Trek* in the 60s. Every hundred feet or so, the lights change colors, and a voice announces in Chinese and English what impressionistic tableau you are supposed to be looking at. It's very melodramatic – "Stars shimmer." "Magma flows." "Inferno and paradise." At this point, some recorded voices laugh manically, and a few scream.

My personal favorite is when some of those weird inflatable people with streamers for arms – you know, the ones you see in front of really classy car dealerships by the interstate – inflate on the track directly in front of us. The narrator tells us it's a "Majestic carnival." The cart then proceeds to run them over to
the gleeful tune of a demented synthesized calliope playing in cut time.

It is all so ridiculous and random. I laugh out loud both times I ride it. I just can't help it. If Disney ever options Jesus on a Rug! (a dreamlike musical I once wrote and produced on a lark) and wants to make a ride out of it – it’s too late. The Chinese have already built it underneath the Huangpu River.

One on the other side, I fail to locate and enter the sex museum in five hours of on-and-off searching. Insert cheap joke about my impotence here.

I do find – a Burger King. I eat Chinese food day in and day out – visiting a big city makes me so excited for a cheeseburger that they’re hard to pass up. Judge me if you want – I get enough looks from the Chinese for fulfilling their stereotypes. Here’s an American chowing down on a Whopper. They look at me and say “waiguoren” which means foreigner, so they’re definitely talking about me. But it’s ok. I’ve been living outside of the U.S. for a month now, and there are certain things I’m willing to appreciate unapologetically about America. Cheeseburgers are one of them.

I also find a bookstore with a reasonable selection of English language books. I’m plowing through the library I brought along with me from the States, so I pick up a few more Penguin Classics. These have saved me in Europe, Israel, and now China – cheap and ubiquitous. Thank you, Penguin. On an ironic note – 1984 and Animal Farm are both sold in China, at least in English. But you can’t get on Facebook or Youtube...

I also visit the Shanghai History Museum, which is in the basement of the Oriental Pearl Tower. This is mostly wax figures of Chinese peasants living in squalor under European oppression. There are few displays in whole museum that don't mention the
national shame of European concessions in Shanghai, in fact. Exhibit copy refers to the “infestation of foreign adventurers” and the “abyss of European domination” in the same breath that it concedes that during that abyss, Shanghai prospered in ways that no other Chinese city did, gaining massive infrastructure improvements, technological knowledge, and global investments that turned Shanghai into the prosperous city it is today... So I guess there's an upshot to everything, even the abyss...

I sit down on a bench at one point to rest my aching feet. Again, people point at me while laughing and making “waiguoren” comments. This time, I have to imagine they're laughing at a real waiguoren amidst the wax ones... An infestation of foreign adventurers, indeed.

I spend the rest of the day in and out of shops, browsing, people-watching, and watching the famous skyline of modern Pudong light up at dusk. It's not an original observation by any stretch, but I'm struck by the irony of National Day in its modern form. While the cadres and military celebrate with elaborately choreographed displays in Tiananmen Square that would make you think hardly a thing about Chinese Communism has changed since the days of Mao, the people are pawing voraciously through discount bins at their favorite American and European designer outlets.

Some final insights on this topic from the Shanghai History Museum:

One exhibit talked about how the Europeans started a horse racing track and thousands of Chinese gambled their entire lives' earnings away to the capitalist colonial rulers – until 1943, when, according the exhibit, the Europeans spontaneously left of their own accord and the race track was given over to the Chinese people. At one point, another exhibit strongly implied that

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European economic domination was the equivalent of the literal prostitution of the Chinese people.

What with all these foreign designer outlets, things sure have changed.

**And across the street you can buy real Lee jeans. → October 2, 2010, Shanghai**

I didn't expect to find a socialist paradise when I came to China. But the Chinese appetite for consumption puts the American one to shame. Today I visit the site of the creation of the Chinese Communist Party. It's a museum now, nestled into the old French Concession. It insists quite emphatically that the Communist takeover was inevitable – that economic domination by foreign powers was a blight on China that only the Communists could rectify.

But today even the Communists have tacitly admitted that deep down most of the people in the world – including the Chinese world – are content not to be revolutionaries but consumers. The French were kicked out of their concession, and today they have been replaced with upscale retail outlets from America and Europe's hottest labels.

There's a Starbucks on the same block that Mao began his quest to eliminate capitalism from China once and for all.

I don't bring this up to laugh at the Communists so close to their birthday and so close to their birthplace. In a way, I wish they had succeeded – they got the dictatorship of the proletariat part right, but it seems like something else got lost along the way. I came to China looking for something – anything – different, and so far what I've seen in its biggest cities is America, double-distilled, 120 proof, with the Chinese slurping it down. They're obsessed.
I'm happy for them and their prosperity.

But this sucks.

Especially after I visit the Shanghai Museum, which is full of all of these artifacts from ancient China – pottery, sculpture, pen and ink drawings on silk, and so on... Truly incredible things. Generally, I have limited interest beyond a passing intellectual appreciation for antiquities from most cultures, but this stuff is amazing – bright and colorful and stylized. So interesting and so distinct from anything the West had to offer during similar time periods. I'm really excited – here was a culture offering a truly alternative perspective on the world from the European dominated in which I was raised. It looks different from anything I've ever seen, literally and figuratively. I mean, lions keep cropping up in this artwork, only they don't look like lions in Western artwork. Not at all. They look like creatures from Mars. And I keep wondering how the ancient Chinese even knew of lions.

I can't stop wondering about it, but none of the captions or plaques in the museum are any help. They're mostly propaganda or platitudes.

This museum is not nearly as crowded as the mall across the street where you can buy real Lee jeans.

So in the clash of cultures, who really gives a shit, anyway?

(A little research later tells me that there is a now endangered Asian breed of lion. Who knew?)

And as I stand in the street until well into the early am, watching the hookers parade past, my hands still ripe with the smell of hardboiled duck fetus, I think to myself – I'm
living in the wrong country. → October 3, 2010, Shanghai and Manila

I have another go at looking for that sex museum on my way out of town. But striking out means I'm back on the street, trying my luck to find something original in Shanghai's counterfeit impersonation of America.

I don't, so I settle for Pizza Hut. Then I get the hell out of town.

How low can I can go? I can go to Manila, due Southeast, below the Tropic of Cancer – it is, in fact, the farthest south I've ever been in my life.

I have a lot of apprehension about going to Manila. It's something like I felt when I went to Cairo, where the reputation of the city looms so large as to paint a grotesque and all-encompassing caricature in one's mind – a crime-ridden den of thieves, replete with knife-point robberies and incredible exploding tourist buses. This image is corroborated by most people I talk to – who then concede that they've never actually been to Manila themselves... but they hear bad things! Ernie says his buddy got knifed in a hold up on the street. *Knifed*, for Pete's sake! In Cairo, I could cling to my friend and fellow traveler Assy's sleeve for comfort. This time, I'm a solo adventurer, so I turn to advice from my Filipino friends. One says I should try the spaghetti at Jollibee's, a Filipino fast food chain. Another says she got her wallet stolen in Manila when we was ten. And the other says, "I've never been to the Philippines either. Manila has a bad reputation?" Ok... Not exactly a reassuring chorus. But all of them have moms from the Philippines who are real sweet ladies... That has to count for something, right?

On the taxi ride from the airport, I'm whisked through the seediest, most explicit red light district I have ever seen in my life.
It has honest-to-God red lights, to start with. Advertising dances and massage parlors open during the hours of 10pm to 4am...
Right when you need a massage the most... Real life hookers prowl, sometimes leading western men by the hand off toward taxis. A sign advertising midget oil-wrestling is somewhat of a non sequitor, but when midget oil-wrestling is setting the standard for wholesome entertainment in your neighborhood, you can safely say this is the wrong side of the tracks.

I pray to god that my hostel is nowhere near here, just as the cab stops. Shit.

But the building is a swank 28 floor high-rise, budding out the surrounding dirt. It's guarded by doormen and electronic surveillance. It's as nice as anything you'd see in Shanghai, which, I have to admit, isn't sounding like a terrible city to pass a few days in right about now...

I'm buzzed up to my hostel. Inside, Chato, a middle-aged Filipino woman, greets me warmly, after asking me to take off my shoes. This is great news – I have a certain charm with middle aged Filipino women. One of the few demographics I consistently win. And the shoe thing - this place is homey... It's actually a large condo that has been converted into a hostel. There's a living room, a kitchen, a regular bathroom, and several bedrooms with multiple bunks each.

Chato sits down with me, immediately getting personal. I tell her that I have no plans for my few days here, and she's excited. Immediately, she's planning an itinerary for me – one that's way more interesting than I could have planned myself.

My bunkmate Mikel is hanging out in the living room when I arrive. He's a long-haired Filipino, quick with a smile and a laugh that make you feel like you've been friends for years. He's
working in Singapore and back in Manila for a few days seeing friends and family. He's going outside for a walk and wants to know if I'd like to come along.

Walking these streets alone? Not likely. But with a local as my companion? Hell yes. I cannot pass up this chance to get within sales-pitch distance of the street-walkers below.

Mikel is 29, but like all Filipinos under the age of fifty or so, looks not a day over 25. He procures my first Filipino delicacy from a street vendor – embryonic duck, hardboiled in the egg and called balut. He himself won't eat it, and he doesn't pressure me to either – he just wants me to crack it open and have a look. It is like a large chicken egg, but where the yolk would be, there really is a duck embryo, downy feathers and all. Holy shit. He encourages me to drink some of the juice and nibble on some of the egg white. I do. It's surprisingly flavorful. Other Filipinos gather around to watch – will the white guy eat the duck? They laugh good naturedly when I toss the egg into some nearby shrubs.

Mikel and I rebuff the girls offering “services” in their silky sweet tones. We go the 7-11 and buy Filipino beer – it's dark, called Red Horse, and it's good. We knock a few of these back, and commiserate about what it's like to live in a country that is not your home.

And as I stand in the street well into the early am, watching the hookers parade past, my hands still ripe with the smell of hardboiled duck fetus, I think to myself – I'm in living in the wrong country. China is tame in a truly unsettling way. The Philippines is weird in a way that both scares and exhilarates the hell out of me, and I like it.

They are for sale, laying in a giant bowl, torso, appendages, head and all, beaks agape in a final shrill bawl of horror,
crispy-fried like so many unripe victims of some Kentucky Fried Holocaust. → October 4, 2010, Manila

Mikel and I hit it off reasonably well last night. We talked about even though he's Filipino, born, bred, and raised, he's never seen the culturally-important sights in his own city, like the Intramuros and Joseph Rizal Park, for example. It's his last day in Manila before going back to Singapore, and he blows off whatever other plans he may or may not have had – he's decided to play tourist (and guide) with me.

Which is great, because he helps me do all kinds of things I'd love to do, but wouldn't otherwise have the nerve to try on my first day in this city.

Like right away, we take a Jeepney across town instead of a cab. Jeepneys are these extended-length Jeeps unique to the Philippines that serve a function somewhere in between taxi and bus. They run a standard route like a bus, but they hit smaller side streets where city buses can't or won't go. They can stop wherever you want them to within their designated route. They're privately operated, and each owner details his Jeepney in a unique way. It's really a folk art form all its own – extra chrome, vivid decals, bright paint, and so on. They're ostentatious, but add the kind of raucous visual flare to the streets that's missing in the U.S. or even China. Only the Filipinos would come up with something like this.

The modified, covered bed is two long bench seats that face each other laterally along the length of the Jeepney. You pile in, hip to hip, tight, sweating, and pass your fare along the row of passengers to the driver, who passes your change back along the same row. There's a kind of camaraderie back here – people help us out more than once, telling us when we should leap out of the open back of the Jeepney because our destination is close by.

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Mikel and I wander through the streets and up onto the walls of the Intramuros, the old Spanish fortification that has also played home over the years to the occupying American and the Japanese militaries. It's been allowed to age more or less naturally, so it's about two steps away from ruin. And all the more impressive for it, in my opinion, as tropical grasses and weeds sprout out between crumbling masonry. The city seems to take the same lackidasical approach to tourism in general, since there are no signs or maps or welcome centers to demarcate the Intramuros. We find it by asking locals to point, and finally because we spot its walls. Without Mikel, I would have been a bewildered American in a bustling, unfamiliar Asian sea, unsure if I should just call it quits and go back to my hostel to ride out the remaining days until my plane departs...

Lunch is at Jollibee's, the Filipino answer to McDonald's. I try out the spaghetti, which is served Filipino-style – thick, sweet sauce with spicy little slices of sausage as meatballs. It's like if Chef Boyardee and Sara Lee hooked up. Good stuff! As is the bibingka, which is a kind of banana-flavored rice cake which we buy on the street. Likewise, the ensaymada, a sweet, chewy bread infused with cheese. I take a pass on the not-so-appealingly-named one day-old chicks. They are for sale, laying in a giant bowl, torso, appendages, head and all, beaks agape in a final shrill bawl of horror, crispy and battered, like so many unripe victims of some Kentucky Fried Holocaust.

For reprieve from the heat, we hit the air-conditioned Mall of Asia, supposedly the biggest mall in all of Asia, built on prime real estate next to Manila Bay. Yes, yes. Another mall. But the tropic heat is getting to both of us today, even though we're drinking as much water as we can. I mention this visit to the mall only to bring up a larger quirk in Filipino culture – right now, at the beginning of October, while you are maybe just beginning to
contemplate your Halloween costume, the Filipinos are listening to Christmas music, selling Christmas trees, and are otherwise gearing up for a three month marathon of Yule.

I’m not judging – it’s impressive, in fact. Whereas Americans must invent successive unlikely conceits to drive the engine of consumption from Constitution Day to Halloween to Thanksgiving and finally to Christmas, the Filipinos manage to sustain enthusiasm enough for one consumer holiday over the same period of time. Are the Filipinos more single-minded, or is this just another example of America’s ADHD cutting into our competitive edge?

I’m too exhausted from the heat to research a decisive answer. A ride in two Jeepney s and on the train later, and we are back in our own seedy little corner of Metro Manila.

I’ve been in a daze ever since, but I have to reassert my observation from yesterday, this time in more plain terms – I love the Philippines.

I take my time on the way down, sharing the path with a number of Korean tourists in surgical masks, riding donkeys, their Filipino child-guides riding the same donkey, creating one sweaty Asian mass. → October 5, 2010, Taal Volcano, Batangas

I’m continuing with Chato’s suggested itinerary, and that means today I’m headed for Tagaytay in Batangas Province. It’s about thirty miles outside of Metro Manila, and home to Taal Volcano, a unique and active volcano. As Chato describes it, “It’s a lake within a volcano within a lake.”

Originally, I’m set to brave the vagaries of the Filipino transit system by myself, transferring from Jeepney to bus and back several times before finding my way to the shores of Lake Taal,
where I'm looking for a dude named JoJo who has promised me a fair price on a boat ride out to the volcano. I'm a little nervous about this whole proposition, because there are a lot of steps that need to go right for me to make it there.

Luckily, Lisa, one of the owners of the hostel, has business in the area, and she agrees to give me a lift for a very modest price. She shows up at the hostel to pick me up almost two hours after she said she would, and I want to be peeved about this – but I just can't be.

As soon as I get in her car, she is completely apologetic. And completely charming, telling me about the construction business that she started under a mango tree in her backyard, about her sweet daughter and her adoring boyfriend, about her own travels through Asia and how they inspired her to start this hostel, and about how hard her father worked to provide for her family, fabricating useful household items out of trash. It takes about an hour and half to get to Lake Taal, and by the time we arrive, I feel like we're old friends. Just like yesterday's adventure with the now-departed Mikel, I have learned what makes the Philippines special from an actual Filipino – because of these kind people, this has turned out to be one of the finest trips I've ever taken anywhere.

JoJo's boys take me across the lake in a little speed boat with outriggers on either side for stability. There's a lot of spray flying in my face, and when I put the thought of tropical waterborne disease out of my mind, it is pretty refreshing on this 90 degree plus day.

We reach the base of the volcano, and I begin my trek by walking through the "streets" (really just dirt footpaths) of the poorest village I have ever seen in my life. Corrugated metal shacks, some concrete and plywood here and there. The people who live
at the foot of this volcano operate donkey rides to the top, primarily, and they do a little farming. They are friendly enough, but as someone who is frivolously throwing money away to travel thousands of miles around the world and then walk up a hill, I can't help feel a little uncomfortable walking through their abject poverty ...

The hike to the top is unbelievably hot. I've lathered myself in sunscreen. I've got a full pack of Oreos (my snack of choice these days, since they sell them in canteen at Tianshi), and two bottles of water. But I'm still drenched and sweat and exhausted by the time I reach the cusp of the volcano. The good thing is that I'm still sweating, I guess – I haven't gone dry during the early stages of heat stroke or something. I seek some shade before I even check out the view. I pant for a while.

Then I finally do get around to checking that view out – and it's incredible. Like CGI out of the wildest fantasy movie you could imagine – lush, verdant, and green foliage abounds. A lake sitting in the basin of the volcano, bubbling here and there with the venting of hot gases below the surface. The sun shining down on it all, making every color ten times more vivid than it ever is in the Midwest. My photos don't do it justice – the lake inside the volcano is so large, I can't manage to get it all in one shot, for example!

I soak in the view for a while, and then hike back down. On the way, I notice small fractures where gas is leaking out of the rock. I put my hand against the rock – but I can't keep it there for long, because of the heat radiating from below. I take my time on the way down, sharing the path with a number of Korean tourists in surgical masks, riding donkeys, their Filipino child-guides riding the same donkey, creating one sweaty Asian mass. I bet these apparently hygiene-obsessed Koreans love that.

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Lisa is waiting for me at the end of my return boat trip. The original plan was just to find street food in the market, but now that we've bonded, she's feeling something more friendly. She picks her favorite restaurant on a ridge overlooking Lake Taal and the volcano. The restaurant blasts American music, but serves Filipino food.

Dinner is deep-fried tawalis, the world's only freshwater sardine – which live only in the lake below us. You eat them whole – bones, organs, and all – by dipping them in a little vinegar. They are a lot more like French fries than fish sticks, thank god. I clear my portion eagerly.

Along with this, we have a traditional Filipino soup – Bulalo. It's hunks of beef, cabbage, corn on the cob, and the cow's bones (with marrow still in place) all boiled together. You take spoonfuls of it, and eat it over rice. And you make a point of sucking the marrow – this is considered a treat. It's not the first time I've ever lived a cliché, but it's the first time I've lived this one. Marrow is something like warm, unsalted butter. Very fatty. You can tell it's not good for you. I can't say I like the marrow much, but the rest of the soup is great, especially when you add fish sauce and hot peppers to the equation.

We have a long night drive back to Manila after dinner, negotiating rush hour traffic that is insane well after 7pm. We converse more, about many things, but we also talk about the Filipinas' ideal of beauty – which is light skin. The radio advertises skin-lightening cream, and cream that will help to make your underarms even lighter still.

I wonder if the same companies who make those products also make spray-on tans for white folks?
Corregidor gets a lot of attention by American World War II buffs – and rightfully so. An island fortress in Manila Bay, its American and Filipino defenders held out against a sustained Japanese barrage from December 8, 1941, to April 9, 1942, all without resupply or reinforcement from the outside. Commanding General Douglas MacArthur was recalled as things began to turn grim in the American defense of the Philippines. After being evacuated from Corregidor and smuggled to Australia, MacArthur made his famous promise to the American servicemen and to the Filipino people in general – “I shall return.”

It’s dramatic stuff. And if American war buffs make a big deal of it, they’ve got a friend in the Filipinos who have built Corregidor tourism into a prosperous trade. But if these entrepreneurs tend to overstate the importance of Corregidor in the grander scheme of the war, it doesn’t seem to be for the purposes of building hype around their tours, which are first class and filled with a lot of historical and technical facts – it’s because there is a sincere sense of national pride amongst the Filipinos. I’ve encountered it again and again in my days here – they are the first to point out their government’s corruption, but this doesn’t seem to dim the enthusiasm they have for their history and their tropical paradise of a home.

The island of Corregidor was essentially abandoned after World War II, and with the exception of some road improvements, a couple of memorials, a new hotel, and some renovation to the famous Malinta Tunnel (which was severely damaged in a Japanese suicide attack anyway), the current caretakers have left this island mercifully to nature and time. Ruins stand in much the same condition that Japanese bombs left them in seventy years.
ago. Jungle growth has reclaimed much of the island. It's a powerful effect in stark contrast to the usual urge to polish and Disney-fy that many historical sites succumb to.

Ok, so they did Disney-fy the Malinta Tunnel with a sound and light show. And the actors who recreate the tale of Corregidor therein are just plain awful. The guy playing MacArthur's second-in-command is so bad that he sounds downright sarcastic when informed that MacArthur has been ordered to withdraw to safety against his own personal wishes to stay and face almost certain peril and defeat with the men.

MacArthur: “The only reason I'm going is because the President has ordered me repeatedly to. I don't want to.”

Second-in-Command (with all of the interest and sincerity of Garfield after the lasagna is gone): “And no one doubts that...”

But the whole effect is kind of charming. They even simulate the attack with lights and noise – and they set off a few small pyrotechnic flash pots just to get the smell of smoke in the air. It's that attention to detail, which carries over into the well-trained guides, that make this whole tour one of the most outstanding historical presentations I've experienced anywhere, head and shoulders above anything else I've seen in China, Israel, Jordan, or Egypt this year.

At the tour's outset, they also offer an extended, very comprehensive prayer, asking God for favorable conditions that we might better appreciate the ravages brought by war on this sunny day, imploring the Lord: “In the heat of the noonday sun, be our shade” and “On shipwreck, be our saving harbor.” Anyhow, this prayer gets your attention when it comes right after the recitation of safety procedures on a 150 passenger ferry heading into deep water...
All that, plus they inexplicably blast a DVD of a 2003 Eagles reunion concert on the ferry ride back. What the hell do Jesus and Joe Walsh have in common? Long hair and Corregidor.

After the tour is complete, I catch a cab over to the Mall of Asia. After another spaghetti dinner at Jollibee, I take up a perch on the mall's upscale seaside promenade, just a few dozen yards from where they're setting up the giant Christmas tree.

Manila Bay has the most remarkable sunset I have ever seen in my life. That's pretty breathless praise, but then again, the city's smog and pollution contribute to its powerful effect. Bad word play is courtesy of me, but I'm sitting here amidst hundreds of canoodling couples – if I don't busy myself with inventing puns, I'm going to start feeling lonely...

Which isn't really allowed in the Manila I've experienced these last few days. I'm not talking about the prostitutes, though I'm sure they'd be happy to keep me company, too. What I mean is that the folks who run Our Melting Pot hostel as well as the tremendously cool Filipinos like Mikel that I met there have made me feel more at home than I have since I left my own home over a month ago. The Chinese are a much more taciturn, reserved people. Hospitable, but distant.

I go back to China tomorrow with somewhat mixed feelings... The Philippines have been so much fun. I have made new friends and seen such vivid, interesting things, and the food is so much more diverse and than what's offered at work... And ah, work, there's the rub – I have been on vacation in the Philippines, not working as I often am in China...
My adventures in China continue in
*Transmissions from the Emperor's Heavenly Ford: Volume 2*

Check it out and see as I:

- Travel to Xian, home of the terracotta warriors
- Attempt to find the sea
- Make some new Chinese friends
- Frequent karaoke bars
- Become an unlikely rock star.