

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/1

Richard Moore
Navigating China

My first trip to China was in 1983. I was part of the first UN mission tasked to develop the outlines for assistance to China's family planning program, an opportunity not to be missed since China had been closed to the outside world for decades. My college studies had introduced me to the country's incredible creativity over the millennia, its inventions of gun powder, printing, and so much more. I also admired Chinese art and marveled at its influence on other countries in Asia. I had lived in Japan and Korea and worked in a number of other Asian countries, but I had never been to China. I was excited to be going there.

Our team had a stimulating time in Beijing and during the government-escorted travels all over the country. The trips were well organized, with every consideration for our comfort. Still, one did not have to be a China expert to see and feel the ongoing legacy of Communist rule: the total control and waste of people's lives and the lack of human rights. I had, of course, read about the ruthlessness of Mao's Communist regime, the millions starved, abused, and deprived of human rights, but I'd hoped things had gotten better under his successors, especially Deng Xiaoping.

Our central government hosts and local officials held a constant stream of banquets in our honor, in every town we visited. These eating marathons included something like twenty courses, punctuated by multiple toasts of sticky sorghum wine. Even if I didn't wish to drink, it was pressed upon me, as were the delicacies my official minder selected and placed lovingly on my plate. I can still picture our hosts shouting *ganbei* (bottoms up)! It didn't take long to figure out that our hosts loved banquets because it was the only way they could eat and drink so lavishly. By my third and final UN mission to China in the fall of 1984, my enthusiasm for working and traveling there had waned. For one thing, it seemed clear that the government was condoning forced abortion. Still, I was eager to take this last trip, as my wife would join me in Chengdu at the end of my mission. Korean nationals like her were normally unable to enter the country, but thanks to my UN status, they made an exception in her case. I was chafing to get away from the superficially friendly but controlling management by our government minders.

Our Chinese interpreter took me to the airport to meet her. My heart did a flip when she walked into the waiting area. I hadn't realized how much I missed her, although I had only been gone three weeks and we were used to these separations. In the backseat of the car we held hands while we caught each other up on things and home, how the mission had been. Although she looked fresh, I knew she was tired, so we had a quick meal in the hotel dining room, then went to bed early.

The next morning, my wife went off by herself to explore Chengdu while I finalized some outstanding mission issues. When we both returned to the room late that afternoon, she told me that she had been "all over the town on foot and by bus."

"How could you possibly do that?" I asked. "You don't know the cur-

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/1

rency, or the city, or the language.”

“It’s no big deal,” she said. “I can read the characters, you know. I just got on one bus, then another, and got off if something looked interesting and walked around. I had a great day.”

We (rather, she) had just enough time to primp and get dressed before we headed for the final banquet on the top floor of the hotel. On the way I warned her, *sotto voce*, “Now you’ll see how loony these official banquets are. Fortunately, this is your first one, so you will probably find it entertaining.” She just smiled and nodded. I introduced her to my Chinese hosts and UN colleagues—about fifteen of us, all male. Given her ability to charm people, and the fact that she was an “exotic” Korean, I wasn’t surprised how kind and solicitous everyone was towards her. She looked fresh and vivacious despite her twenty-four hour travel from the US, and a full day wandering around the city.

Except for my wife’s presence, the event was like every other official Chinese banquet I’d attended, the script of which I knew by heart—the number and order of dishes, the toasts, when each speech would start and end. Of course, my wife received lots of smiles and nods from our hosts, but she wasn’t pressured to drink. She performed her *ganbeis* with her teacup. Finally, we thanked our hosts and each other, said our goodbyes, and shook hands all around. On our way back to our room, she said, “Well, that was fun. I haven’t had a meal like that in a long time. Why are you so critical of such lovely hospitality?”

The next morning’s flight to Chongqing was on time and comfortable. We made a smooth landing. Entering the small nondescript terminal, I scanned the relatively modern, well-lit room and experienced a sinking feeling. I’d made arrangements for us to be met, but there was no one who looked like a tourist guide, only a few uniformed airport staff standing around.

The other passengers milled around, talking loudly. Eventually, they all collected their luggage, leaving us alone in the terminal. I approached an official and said, “Hello, the State Tourism Agency . . .” which was as far as I got. He glanced up at me with a tight face, then waved me away with a curt gesture, not responding even in Chinese. I had never been treated like this during my travels in China or anywhere else in Asia. Although my frustration flared, I guessed that the man didn’t know any English. Maybe he felt embarrassed. I repeated my efforts to seek help from others, with the same results.

What a place, I thought. First Mao and his government abuse their own people, the travel people don’t keep their promises, and now these rude airport staff.

Feeling disoriented and lost, I stood near the now silent baggage carousel, wondering what to do. I glanced at my wife, who appeared quite relaxed. I signaled to her that we needed to leave. Once outside, we looked for a taxi to take us to the State Tourism Agency office in town. There were no taxis, no cars. We spotted an unmarked old bus about a block away into which some fellow airline passengers were loading their suitcases. Seeing no other options, we scrambled aboard.

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/1

The airport sat in a flat green countryside with a low mountain range in the distance. After a long and uncomfortable ride in the standing-room-only bus across the plain, through the hills, we finally crested the mountain and saw the city of Chongqing spread out in all directions below. The tallest structures were a scattering of industrial brick chimneys. Everything was a monochrome of grays and dirty browns.

Where do we go? I thought. *What do we look for?* Anxiety radiated from me in waves. I didn't want to infect my wife, but she knew what I was feeling and I guessed she felt the same. We tried to ask the driver and some passengers for help figuring out where to get off the bus. No one spoke a word of English, and they averted their eyes from us.

"They may not be able to help us," my wife said, "but at least they aren't rude and aggressive like those men in the terminal. We should be grateful."

As the bus descended the hill, I noticed a large low building some distance off to the right with a bright-blue tile roof. In my experience, a building with this expanse of roof tiles, was probably a hotel. I pointed it out to my wife and hand-signaled to the driver to let us off. The bus stopped at a busy intersection. There were no taxis, and no one paid any attention to us. Resigned, we carried and dragged our suitcases towards the blue tile roof. This was before the days of roll-aboard suitcases.

After a number of blocks, we came to the building. As I had guessed, it was a hotel. In the large but empty reception area, we asked for a room. The man at the desk looked a bit flustered, then said, "No room."

"Could you help us find a room somewhere else?" I asked.

"No room," he repeated, this time with an edge in his voice, then turned and went about his business.

Now what? As I was wondering what to do next, my wife tapped me on the shoulder and pointed down the hall to a sign in Chinese and English: "State Tourism Agency." Inside, a travel agent got up to greet us. He was polite and seemed to want to help, but he spoke little English. The rest of our exchange was conducted in Pidgin English, gestures, guesswork, and via my wife's ability to read and write Chinese characters. The agent listened patiently without expression while we explained what we were doing in Chongqing. I mentioned that a travel agent in Chengdu had made reservations. He held up his hand, then went behind a glass partition. He came back and told us he could find no information about our request for a hotel or boat. My wife and I looked at each other with a combination of despair and panic.

I asked if he could just go ahead and make some arrangements right then. Eyes averted, he mumbled something about every hotel in town being full, and the boat as well. With growing desperation I asked whether he could just book us on the next flight to Shanghai. He went away again, I presumed to check on flight information, then came back and told us there were no airplane seats to Shanghai for at least ten days. He waggled a hand towards some chairs, then again disappeared behind the glass partition.

We sat down in the chairs to wait. My wife pulled a book from her

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/1

purse and started reading while I sat there brooding. After about thirty minutes, the agent came back. Straightfaced, he announced that he had gotten us “only hotel room Chongqing.” He also said, with the hint of a smile that he had been able to book us in a big room on the boat, which would sail tomorrow morning at five. He said he had arranged for a taxi to pick us up from our hotel at four the next morning to take us to the boat. He assured us that an agent would meet us in Wuhan, take us to a hotel, and arrange our flight to Shanghai.

What a relief! We gushed our thanks for the marvelous way he had helped us. In an access of humility I commented that while we didn’t really need one of those big cabins, we were grateful for anything—but after all, a bit of luxury *would* be very nice. The agent gave me a puzzled look and said, “Big room is dormitory with eight beds. Second class, first class not available.”

Too stunned to react, I just paid the bill he handed me. As we walked towards the exit, he said, “You tell official at boat you want first class. Maybe change. Your taxi to tonight hotel outside.” We thanked him again. He gave a thin-lipped smile and said, “Don’t worry.”

I brooded in the taxi ride to the hotel. “*Don’t worry?*” *How could I not? Here we are in the middle of China, in a town where we know no one, don’t speak the language, and have no one to contact for help if we get stuck here, or get in worse trouble.* The thought produced a wave of panic that I had never experienced before.

The taxi took us to a dilapidated industrial area forested by smoke-spewing brick chimneys. The hotel was small and old with the dark, heavy wood furniture that one encountered all over China. We were asked to pay the bill in advance and had to find our own room down a dark corridor. Cracked linoleum covered the floor of our room, and the single light bulb hanging from the ceiling illuminated stained wallpaper. The place was clean enough, though, perfectly adequate. We felt fortunate to have a place to sleep.

It was now a couple of hours before dark, so we strolled around to see what industrial Chongqing looked like. Most streets were lined with factories, one grimy corrugated-steel-walled machine or metal-working shop after another, the occasional food stall. There were few people and few cars on the street, but the air hummed with the sounds of clanging machinery and fragmented voices. The sky was gray, the city was gray, and the people were gray—drab clothes, not a smiling face, no children. My ever-optimistic wife said, “This must be just the industrial part of town. There are bound to be nice areas.”

My wife was elated to find a vendor selling a type of flat pita bread similar to one she had during her childhood in Korea. She bought some of the bread hot off the charcoal grill and eagerly took a big bite. I could tell from the face she made that she didn’t like it. She said it didn’t have melted brown sugar inside as she had expected. We later learned that many Chinese were too poor to have sugar on their bread. This is something I hadn’t been aware of during those multi-course banquets with government officials.

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/1

On another street we saw a shabbily dressed old man carrying a wooden shoulder yoke with two buckets hanging from it. I knew from my years in Japan more than twenty years ago that he was a so-called "honey bucket man," and the buckets were full of human excrement to be used for fertilizer. Even from ten feet away, the stench was suffocating. I felt like I was seeing the real China for the first time.

Back at the hotel, we ate an evening meal in our room and turned in early, concerned what the morning would bring. If the taxi was a no-show, we would miss the boat—there would be no roving taxis at four in the morning. Despite the uncertainty of our situation, I reminded myself that we had a meal and a bed for the night. Just before 4:00 AM we made our way through the hotel reception area pulling our suitcases. There was nobody around, and the front door was locked. We found an unlocked side door and left quietly. It was pitch black and cold outside; a fine rain descended like dew. Magically, a taxi was waiting.

The taxi stopped at the top of the riverbank. The boat was docked far below, lit up against the dark Yangtze. A long, disorderly line of people snaked all the way from the street to the boat—hundreds of people, all chattering at once. My wife and I glanced at each other, but said nothing. As we exited the taxi, a man dressed in rags rushed over, indistinct in the dark, and grabbed our two large suitcases. He hoisted them on top of his head and started down the steep steps towards the front of the line. We scrambled down what seemed like hundreds of poorly lit narrow stone steps, trying to keep up. The porter dropped our cases near the front of the line and disappeared into the dark as soon as I paid him.

After some minutes we noticed a burly man in dark clothing, some kind of keeper of order, walking up and down the line, shouting harshly in Chinese, making abrupt arm gestures. When he got to where we were standing, he suddenly went berserk, shouting and gesturing with both arms, signaling my wife to get back up the stairs to the end of the line.

I shouted back at him, shielding her behind me, gesturing that she was with me. I guessed that Mr. Crowd Control had spotted my wife, who could be mistaken for Chinese, and assumed she was trying to push herself towards the front of the line, not realizing that we were together. Either that, or he had assumed she was with me and a prostitute. I gestured and yelled more aggressively towards him at the thought.

The official moved on, continuing his loud harangue. I tried to swallow my annoyance, waiting in the dark as the line inched towards the boat. To my amazement my wife seemed utterly calm and unflustered.

We finally reached the bottom of the steps, walked up the ramp, and presented our boarding papers to the purser. "Hello, I am Richard Moore and this is my wife. The State Tourism Agency has reserved a second-class 'big room' for us, but . . ."

Before I could finish, the purser shook his head to register non-comprehension, annoyance, or both. He shouted over his shoulder and dismissed us with a wave of his hand in the direction of a young man. Feeling dejected, we followed him down a couple of passageways, into the eight-bed "big room."

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/1

The dorm was about fifteen feet square. Crumbling yellow paint covered the metal deck, ceiling, and bulkheads. I squinted through the glare of bright overhead lights, across the faded linoleum floor at the chipped and worn bunk beds lining the walls. The mattresses looked thin and dirty, and there were no sheets or pillows. All the lower bunks had already been claimed. An ear-splitting cacophony of Chinese voices ricocheted off the metal surfaces. The other passengers milled about, shifting bags and bundles piled so thick on the ground that only a narrow walkway remained. We breathed in the dank, close air. As far as I could see, there were no portholes.

My wife ended up in a bunk across the room from me. I despaired and showed it. She sat on her bunk, back against the steel wall, now wearing her inscrutable oriental face. I kept looking at her, seeking clues about how she was feeling.

I had to do something, try something, so I fought my way back through the crowds to the purser. "Hi, there seems to be some mistake. I asked the agent for a first-class room and have ended up in second class. Anything you can do?" The purser, now visibly annoyed amid the crush of passengers, frowned and angrily waved me away.

Fuming inside, I made my way back to the dorm. On the way, I stepped onto the open deck to find it covered—scupper to scupper, fore and aft—with people. Men, women, and children of all ages, families traveling together, and individual travelers, probably traders, had staked out their space for the three-day voyage. All wore thick monochrome gray or blue padded clothes to protect them from the cold. Bundles were piled all over. Although everyone seemed to be talking at once, none appeared bothered by their *al fresco* accommodations on a damp bare-metal deck.

I stepped gingerly over the bodies. It was still dark and cold, probably in the forties, but it had stopped drizzling. Here and there, metal cauldrons of food fired by gas burners hissed in the open air. I spotted rice in one but couldn't guess what was in the others. This outdoor kitchen setup was obviously where the second-class passengers—we—would have to buy our meals.

I peered into what I took to be the men's bathroom, but retreated quickly at the eye-burning stench and filth. Eventually, I spotted a line of passengers at the stern. They spoke Chinese but were dressed like Westerners—obviously the first-class passengers. I guessed they were overseas Chinese, maybe from Hong Kong. I got closer and peeked through a porthole of the cabin they were entering: inside was a sizable buffet restaurant.

I reported back to my wife. We sat on her bunk, hunched against the steel bulkhead. I tried to keep a stiff upper lip, and she observed that as awful as this place was, we could put up with it for three days. But I knew, from her voice and the way she slumped against the dirty yellow bulkhead, that she shared my despair. As we talked, I spotted a youngish man reading an English-language magazine in another bunk. I walked over to him.

"Hi, do you speak English? Can I ask you a question?" He nodded, so I asked him if he knew how we might access the restaurant.

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/1

He smiled and introduced himself as Chang Tu-Hu, a travel agent, leading the Hong Kong tourists I saw entering the restaurant. "Just call me Hu," he said in a friendly voice. "Since you have hard currency, I'm pretty sure you can use the first-class dining room. You just have to pay in dollars. You also might be able to use the first-class observation saloon at the front of the boat."

I quickly thanked Hu, then returned to tell my wife the good news.

We rushed aft, hearts pounding, and informed the steward that we wanted to take our meals inside and could pay in dollars. With a bored look, he waved a serving spoon towards an empty table. The room was crowded and noisy with its dozen plus Hong Kong passengers, but there were windows all around. My wife grinned and stared at the buffet offerings. "Come on, let's see what's left," I said. We popped up and headed for the buffet table. Although the Hong Kong tourists had stripped the offerings, especially prized items like fresh fruit, there was still plenty to eat. We both ended up making two trips to fill our plates.

We were the last to leave the dining room. On our way out, I mustered unfeeling sangfroid and casually asked the steward, "Oh, by the way, where is the observation saloon?" The steward pointed towards a stairway. We followed the stairs up to a passage leading to an unmarked door at the front of the boat.

We entered the observation saloon. Surrounded by a small private deck, the saloon was ringed with glass, offering an unrestricted view of the river and looming mountains. A dozen easy chairs stood empty, the room bathed in natural light from all the windows. I sank into one of the big chairs and looked out at the vista, my anxieties deflating. My wife took a chair next to mine.

We established a routine: up early to escape the dorm and beat the voracious Hong Kongers to the buffet, then up to the observation saloon, where we stayed until nine or ten every evening, gazing at the landscape, reading, reminiscing, and dozing, with time out for meals. From then on our days weren't bad at all. Our nights in the dorm were a different story. The lights were always on and people snored, spat, and chatted at all hours. The trip to the bathrooms—stepping over a solid mass of sleeping bodies on deck, the filth and stench inside—was a recurring nightmare. Fortunately, we were able to use the small but clean bathroom in the saloon. We rarely saw the deck-class passengers, except at night as we tip-toed over them.

With our living arrangements under control, we concentrated on the leisurely voyage down the Yangtze, through the Three Gorges. Massifs of solid gray rock rose nearly straight up from the river almost a thousand meters, narrowing the vastness of each gorge. Deep-green foliage covered the looming cliffs, looking more like moss than trees and bushes at their distant height. Gray and forbidding weather persisted the whole way down the river, punctuated by occasional rain and flashes of sun. We passed a number of villages and small towns on cliff sides and speculated which of them would be engulfed by the long, deep lake the new dam would create when it was finished.

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/1

Whenever the boat approached one of the gorges, an announcement was made in Chinese. We bundled up and followed the other saloon passengers onto our private deck to take it all in. Out on the windy deck I noticed for the first time how the color and texture of the roiling water mimicked the steel gray of the sky. The majestic landscape, consisting only of water, mountains, and sky brought to mind the panoramic ink paintings of the Chinese masters. Their subjects were not imaginary, as I had once believed.

I thought of the Tao-like illusory nature of things: the illusion that I had seen and understood the government's family planning program, that I could grasp what I saw of the culture and the people around me. Even in less complicated places, how could a short-term visitor have any idea what he was looking at, what values counted, what gestures and symbols meant? And that "otherness" was made worse in China by the way I had been cocooned during my missions, not to mention my ignorance about the culture and the language. Now, given the opportunity to connect with the China most of the populace experienced every day, I didn't want to.

Although my wife and I had been able to establish some predictability in our daily lives on the boat, that would change once we arrived in Wuhan. We began to share our doubts about being met there as promised. By this time, though, the days of alarm and inner turmoil had pretty much exhausted us. Since we had almost no control over what would happen, we agreed to just take it as it comes. We confined our discussions to the scenery, the other passengers, the meals, and the passing glory of the river and gorges, which seemed to be a restorative for both of us.

Once or twice, the sun came out, washing the hills and river with patches of light, deepening or lightening the color palette of the landscape. I would step out on the deck to get a better look, hoping to spot one of the rare Yangtze River Dolphins, a fool's errand since they had been declared extinct a few years earlier. As we emerged from the final gorge, we passed the site of the Three Gorges Dam, still under construction, and entered the broad, slow-flowing delta section of the river, miles across. Although I had expected to find an immense, high dam, it just seemed to sprawl off to the left as our boat took a side channel. I couldn't get a clear impression of the dam.

Shortly after sunset we spotted Wuhan, a big, well-lit town, from miles upriver. Happy to leave our "big room," we walked down the boat ramp and into the passenger terminal. I looked around, only half expecting to see our guide. Then I spotted a young woman holding up a sign with my name on it. She had organized everything for us. What a great feeling it was to take a full shower in a real bathroom and sleep under clean sheets with no snoring strangers.

Early the next evening, we landed in Shanghai, where the terminal resembled a large shed. Near the exit stood a middle-aged man, holding up yet another sign with my name on it. He took us to the hotel in an old but nice taxi. We had a simple but nice room on a high floor of the Park Hotel, with a fine view out over the city.

The next morning, we headed for the airline office to book our flight out. The agent told us that every flight to Hong Kong was full for the next

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/1

five days, but she promised to look for cancellations. By then, the mere fact of a delayed departure seemed only a minor annoyance: we were comfortable, in an interesting city, and had enough money to get by. We spent that afternoon and most of the next day wandering around Shanghai. Even in the mid-eighties, there were virtually no cars, few big buildings, and no foreigners. The streets were packed with pedestrians, busses, and bicycles.

Late that afternoon, the Cathay Pacific agent called to say that we had two seats on a flight to Hong Kong leaving the next morning. She quickly added that there were no available hotel vacancies for us in Hong Kong.

As the plane taxied out and onto the runway, my mind was filled with a jumble of feelings, fragments of things seen and people met during all my travels in China. I realized once again how superficial my contact with China had been, how very little I understood of what I had seen and heard. I felt guilty about the way I had zapped off on my own into the middle of this vast, unknown country, assuming I could just muddle through, exposing my wife to some potentially bad situations; I blamed myself for the mess. I was so eager to get off on my own that I failed to realize how fully our hosts had insulated me from the challenges of being entirely on my own in a country that, except for the health system, I knew nothing about. I forced myself to counterbalance these guilt feelings by calling up memories of wondrous scenery, and of glimpses of a great, five-thousand year old civilization. As the plane climbed out of Shanghai, the sun was just showing itself as a ribbon of red streaking eastern horizon.