

The Tangential Traveler

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China 3 – Chengdu 1, plus a mono-ethnic country's identity crises...

The day after our adventure on the Great Wall, we flew to Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan province. The 3 days in Beijing had flown by, thankfully without too much jet lag.

By this time, Daniel, exposed to his girlfriend Alexandra's cold, as well as mine, was sick as a dog, far from the ironman triathlon contestant of the day before, and Hannah and I were oddly fine: no real muscle aches to speak of other than a tiny, tiny bit. It didn't really feel like the Wall had been a muscular struggle at all, which reinforces my suppositions about cardio-pulmonary constitution and climate versus fitness level.

We landed into another maelstrom of crazed traffic, replete with wrong-way drivers and electric scooters (gas motorcycles and scooters are now banned in Chengdu, as its arteries approach permanent gridlock) riding over both streets and sidewalks in all directions and at high speed. In China, it's always rush hour, and you need eyes in the back of your head (or perhaps a crown-like ring of eyeballs encircling your entire skull is what you really need). I cannot adequately connote the anarchic quality of Chinese drivers. Imagine that every traffic rule: one way streets, red lights, double yellow lines etc., were merely a *suggestion* of what you, as the driver, *might* want to do. Imagine if the rules were rarely if ever enforced. Imagine if you are driving down a single lane highway only to look up to see 3 lanes of traffic headed towards you, and then to see only one, and to see a lane or two next to you, heading your way, or maybe both; maybe your single-lane highway now appears to have 5 lanes of constantly morphing, bifurcating, swerving traffic streams, looking for all the world like angry bees swarming from several hives to do battle with one another.



I will ride my bike, scooter etc on streets and sidewalks!

Entire Family on a scooter, 40 MPH, no helmets.



Yah mon!

The frenzied aspect of the traffic, and the skyscrapers and ubiquitous Chinese smog notwithstanding, Chengdu is famed for a laid-back 'tea house culture', where people hang all day in tea parlors, drinking tea, talking with friends, receiving massages and a Chengdu speciality, ear cleanings (more on that later).

Actually, the Chengduese say their town is famous for 5 things: best food, most beautiful women, most teahouses, most laid-back attitude, most Mah Jong (Chinese tile-based game superficially resembling Dominoes the same way that the game of Go superficially resembles Checkers).

I cannot attest to the mah jong players, but I will address the rest: The food is fantastic. I've never really liked spicy food, which Sichuan province is famous for, but I've discovered that Sichuan food, unlike, for example, Mexican food, uses green and red peppercorns for a numbing effect. The result is that although the chilies in the food are indeed hot, it's not painful, except for the crazy-hot stuff (when a waitress in Chengdu says a dish 'isn't spicy', that is a very relative statement!). The food is spicy but also check full of multi-layered tastes of Anise, various peppers, and other unidentifiable spices. At its best, it's nuanced to the palate and gorgeous to the eye. It is my new favorite cuisine. Funny since I've been eating it in NYC since at least the 70's, but the Sichuan food in New York is a pale shadow of this complex, robust cuisine.



Beef with tons of chili peppers, which tasted a lot like... chili!



Spice shop mortar and pestle.



Spicy peanut sauce.



Yellow fish soup that was too hot for me. Various chilis in the spice shop. The smells of the various spices as you walk down a Chengdu street is utterly intoxicating!

We ate in some 'expensive' restaurants (about \$25.00 for a full meal for the three of us), but we also had street food. We had a great breakfast of 10 hot pork dumplings and 3 hot black rice porridge drinks all for... \$1.60 – for all three of us!!!

And for lunh? 4 kuai for 12 little 'bao' (buns with meat, mushrooms, vegetables and sesame/sugar) – about fifty cents in total for the 3 of us!



Hannah and Daniel rockin' breakfast.



Bao, still in their steamer.

The women in Chengdu are indeed very pretty in general (though their fashion sense, like that throughout China, leaves a lot to be desired – but then again, the Chinese love Kenny G, whom I consider one of the Axis of Evil of Music, along with Yanni and any soul-less techno music) – modern Chinese aesthetics and mine are not even remotely compatible. But as to their looks, the locals brag about their 'spicy beauties'. I cannot attest to spiciness, but a lot of them are quite striking, and what is most interesting to me is that although most of them are Han Chinese (the Han make up 93% of China's ethnic makeup), they look *different* from the Han women in Beijing, who look different from the most beautiful women I've seen in all of China, the Han women in my ex-wife's town of Wenzhou (the cliché is that in general, as you head south in China, the women get prettier; by and large, this cliché seems borne out by my observations. But they also seem to get more meretricious.) Perhaps these differences in appearance among the Han stem from some subtle mixing with the other ethnic groups that in different provinces, or perhaps it's the impact of generations living in different climates and subtly adapting to different temperatures, diets etc.

Rant Warning (but next issue will be almost rant free and quite photo-intensive...)

On the surface, the difference in looks makes little sense to me, because China is SO ethnically monolithic – because of the scourge of slavery, and successive waves of immigration, America never was even remotely comparable in this regard – that it kind of boggles the mind. Imagine if you were / are White, and 93 out of every 100 people you ever met on the streets were White as well – and let's say more specifically White from Germany only, and the other 7 people you saw out of a hundred were a mish-mash of largely marginalized ethnicities who mostly only made their presence felt by showing up on low-denomination currency (this is a 0.5 kuai (or RMB, or Yuan) note, worth about 8 cents US):



This other 7 percent are largely segregated, often making a living playing to Han tourists in little 'cultural festivals' held in their near 'reservation' autonomous areas. Think Indians selling trinkets and doing rain dances, or Hawaiians doing the Hula and you get the idea. And remember: even the ethnicities are overwhelmingly Asiatic (there are some Turkic peoples in the far west who are less so). So in our 'White country' scenario, almost everyone non-German would be, oh, French, Dutch, Portuguese etc.; A self-referential society, the vast majority of whose population would be genetically and also culturally very closely related in terms of philosophy, concepts of personal duty, one's place in society, morality and ethics, what government's function is, etc. True, in China the Han speak many dialects, most of which are as different from each other as Italian is from Spanish is from French, perhaps even more so, perhaps even as different as Italian is from German, but unlike these languages, *the Han Chinese all read a common language with a common 'alphabet', and for virtually all of them, their basic assumptions and life philosophy spring from the same three wellsprings: Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism.* Visualize this almost perfectly racially / culturally monochromatic society, and you'll get an idea of China as a whole.

No wonder people frankly stare at me all over China – even in large cities – many have never seen a white person before. But more amazingly, it is *common* for people to point at you and say 'Lao Wai' as you pass by (this whispered or loudly ejaculated expression can actually precede you down a street, passed along from one stunned / curious native to another). 'Lao Wai' literally means 'old foreigner', but it has nothing to do with age (Daniel, at 23, is called this all the time). Rather it is a slightly derogatory expression, probably akin to a White person calling someone from here a 'Chinaman'. The even more old-fashioned expressions, which sound something like 'yan kwai tzu' – 'white ghost' and 'hey kway tzu' – 'black ghost', give you an even better impression of how the Chinese have historically viewed non-asians.

Imagine a country that is so racially homogenous that anyone different is often pointed at, gawked at, and remarked upon. This, in my opinion, is China's greatest strength, and its greatest weakness... It has a concentrated commonality of thought, which, due to the influence of Confucius, deeply discourages American-style individualism and stresses conformity. This mindset has been taken advantage of for millenia by emperors, and now by the ruling elite of the Communist party. While America self-destructs politically, on the verge of defaulting on its debt because partisanship has become more important than the common good, China moves on, spurred by the momentum of a largely-unified party within a largely unified culture, an acquiescent populace accustomed to obedience. The result is a very productive society, one that is surging forward economically, militarily and politically.

However, the Chinese are not good innovators. At all. They knock off I-Phones and jet fighters, computer chips and software, (usually resulting in less expensive but inferior results), but they never would have invented any of these things. Something of the ancient culture of China, which was so innovative, has been lost.

My ex-wife had a great story about this: A Chinese teacher who'd been to America came back to China and tried to foster independent thought among her fourth graders. She removed all books, posters etc. from the classroom and then asked her kids to draw a tree. She left the room and came back an hour later, and not a tree was evident; none of the kids could summon the individuality to 'create' a picture from memory or fantasy of any kind of tree. She tried once more, encouraging, demanding that they complete the assignment (thereby engendering an almost hysterical duty among them to do so, because of Confucian precepts already well inculcated into these little kids). She left the room again, only to return an hour later to find an entire classroom of carbon-copy tree drawings. At first she was bemused; had some unusually creative kid created a tree drawing, only to have it knocked off by all of the other kids? No. After scouring the room she found that she'd missed a tiny, postage-stamp size drawing of a tree. Her kids had scoured the room desperately in her absence and had finally found their wellspring image to copy.

This seems pretty incomprehensible to an American like me, but it's true. My son has found the same thing teaching college students here; it is very, very hard to engender any attempt at true creativity versus derivative copying with minor alterations.

This, plus the continuing cultural, technical and military dominance of the West, which has, after all, dominated militarily and created almost all of the new technology for at least the last 500 years, has led to a schizophrenic love/hate/respect/derision/envy/disdain relationship the Chinese have with Westerners, and particularly, Caucasians. Every little crappy housing block development under construction, or office tower, has these

dignified/corporate or young/hip Caucasian male model types on their billboard (though the chance of some guy who looks like the CEO of Merrill Lynch living in a concrete apartment block in a 3rd tier town like Leshan is beyond less than zero). White (never Black or Latino) folks are selling everything from cars to alcohol to cell phones to shampoo to a Chinese populace that rarely sees us in the flesh and ostensibly derides us as weak, fat, hairy, slovenly, and smelly (the last is certainly true of me at this moment, after yet another day trudging through a steambath the likes of which I've never experienced before, but I can attest to the existence of very fragrant Asians as well, having been floored by their body odor on subways and buses).



Sign on the dotted line: Billboard on the wall of a new condo complex under construction. If I buy a condo here, I get it all: a convertible, good wine, an iPhone, a guitar (hidden behind the parked car) and I get to be... White? This is in Chengdu, the bustling provincial capital of Sichuan, a city larger than New York, where we NEVER saw ANY white people except at our hostel, one temple, and at the Panda Breeding Center. But these White boys (and sometimes girls – I saw a filched Nicole Kidman once) are on almost every billboard that features a human being.



One 'Leigh Causby', a pseudo-dignified Marlon Brando clone pimping a Chinese-made Cabernet Sauvignon...

There's this sort of overt assumption among themselves that the Chinese are better, driven, of course, by a secret fear that they're not. There is a hauteur about their government, their booming economy, their rising power in the world, and of course, their exceedingly impressive and rich imperial, technical, and artistic past. But it reeks of overcompensation.

While waiting in yet another laughably uncivilized queue at the sacred mountain of Emei Shan here in Sichuan (full of noise, smoking, jostling, spitting and rampant line-cutting), I was lectured by one woman about how great their government was, and how wonderful their response to the devastating Sichuan earthquake had been. The implication was that America was much more ham-handed with our admittedly poor relief effort after Katrina (Bush had, after all, sacked Clinton's very capable FEMA director, installed an idiot, and then hollowed out the entire agency's logistical apparatus).

I was tempted to talk about the crappy "Tofu Dregs" schoolhouses, built on the look-the-other-way graft of Communist party officials who pocketed kickbacks galore. These schools, shoddily built out of inferior concrete with scanty foundations in a well-known active earthquake zone, pancaked completely during the quake, which took place while school was in session, killing thousands of little kids. I was tempted to tell her about a documentary that exposed the Chinese government's complicity in the shoddy construction and their half-assed, slow relief efforts after the quake – but that movie was banned in China. When you're dealing with a people whose access to open news is very limited (I can't even get on Facebook or my own blog, samuelclaiborne.blogspot.com, from here), who are propagandized from birth, who are culturally encouraged to *not* think independently but rather to conform to groupthink, you can't dissuade them.

Just 3 days ago, one of China's spanking new 'bullet trains', supposedly incapable of collision, collided with another, causing many casualties. The Chinese government's first reaction? Hard to believe it, but at the same time that bodies (and one lucky survivor) were being pulled from the telescoped train cars, the authorities moved in heavy equipment to *bury the cars on site to hide the evidence!* Only the fact that cell phone pictures and videos hit the internet and sparked an outcry forced a change of course. Some high mucky-mucks were fired, and so it went. China doesn't like to admit her shit stinks – even less so than the USA. Whether it's a train crash, or an entire decade-long policy-driven catastrophe like the Cultural Revolution, she erases her mistakes, saving face at all costs. And her people, haunted by a suspicion of possible inferiority, seem for the most part more than willing to go along, except when the government's actions are just too egregious.

Surely, China's achievements are amazing: The Chinese economy is booming. They own most of our debt. They are retooling their society and moving people out of the 17th century and into the 21st en masse. The (theoretically) Communist Party is probably responsible for lifting more people out of poverty more quickly than any entity in history, albeit with an iron fist, a complete disregard for human rights and the environment. They have almost cornered the world's supply of rare earth metals (and temporarily completely crippled Japan's entire electronics industry by stopping all shipments to them during a sea-border dispute). And they've totally stolen a march on the US in Africa, where they're forging important trade relationships and building African infrastructure in a way that America never has.

But as a long-term strategy, I have doubts about their groupthink mentality, their obsession with saving face and covering up mistakes, and their society's active stifling of the type of creativity that is only born of individuality. These seem like basic design flaws. Perhaps right now, at a time when American 'individuality' means a sundered, polarized society that can't enact the simplest, most logical legislation, the Chinese model is working, as it is more efficient, and more... ruthless. But in the long run, some other culture that is more flexible, more willing to acknowledge and learn from its mistakes, one which honors creativity and innovation, will eclipse it. It won't be America: we are an empire in decline, spending more than we can afford on military domination (more than all other militaries in the world put together!) while our infrastructure, health care, educational system, and culture crumble from within like a faulty old tooth. But some culture, perhaps out of Latin America, now that it is pulling its throat out from under the bootheel of United States domination, will rise to compete with China's anti-introspective monomania..

But for the time being in China, White people still have major allure. We foreigners, especially White folks, are objects of curiosity, awe, respect, derision, disgust. Our movies, music, TV all have outsized impact on Chinese culture. America (or the West in general) is like a cultural virus, and that, plus Chinese racial homogeneity makes any Westerner an object of fascination for many Chinese. The result for me is that kids are often very curious about me in a friendly way (they often want their picture taken with me), though one very small toddler boy looked at me with unbridled terror, as if an alien had landed right in front of him, and ran, pell mell and white as a sheet, eyes wide in terror, for his other's skirts. Adults are another matter. They can see me as a walking bank, ready to be taken advantage of, or a revered guest, to be treated most politely, or with sullen, smoldering rage, or disgust that most often manifests as strident rudeness. A perfect example of this also happened on Emei shan, where an old man was delighted to offer me one of his dwarf plums to taste before I bought a bag, and only a few minutes later an old woman selling some sort of baby chick on a stick was incredibly nasty and rude to me, and looked at me as if I were human sewage.



Tiny dwarf plums, complete with tiny little pits, delicious, and taste just like the big ones back home.



Chicks on sticks. Man I wish I'd bought one from that nasty old lady. She was screaming at me not to photograph them, so all I got was this shitty grab shot... And I don't have Photoshop on this little Macbook Air to touch it up. Sorry.

Where was I? Oh, dear, I was in Chengdu, wasn't I?

So, we went to a few cool places in Chengdu, but first and foremost on my list was Green Goat Temple, so named because when Lao Tze quit teaching, he said that once his students finally understood the Tao, he'd meet them at the 'green goat market' – a remark inscrutable even to the Chinese! It's the biggest Taoist site in Chengdu and oh, lordy, the energy present in that place.

Now, some of you are rolling your eyes right now about how 'woo-woo' and new-agey I've just gotten, talking about 'energy', but all of you can feel so-called 'subtle energy'. You get that feeling someone's watching you and look up, only to meet someone's stare (*especially true of you hunters if someone glances you!*) You get an odd feeling on line at the bank only to notice that someone's standing too close to you (this feeling soon gets blunted in

China, where everyone's standing too close to you). All of you can feel it somewhat, and some can feel it more than others. As for myself, I feel it a lot, and one theory I have is that since my tactile senses are really dulled (I feel about 50% numb from the shoulders down), my 'energetic sense' has compensated the way a blind person's hearing, touch and taste can all become heightened after they lose their sight.

At any rate, I was walking through the temple grounds, and found the 'Bagua temple', which I'd really come to see, as it had an eight-sided structure with a 'bagua' on the ceiling. A bagua is a yin-yang symbol, surrounded by all of the possible 'trigrams' of broken (yin) and solid (yang) lines. After the yin/yang itself, it's the most common symbol of Taoism, and one I find very resonant (possibly more on trigrams/hexagrams and the I-Ching later). It looks like this:



Unfortunately, the yin/yang is gone, and only the trigrams remain, but the most interesting thing was that I kept feeling like I was on the edge of an energy well', a sort of magnetic pull, outside this temple that I thought to be the central temple of the whole complex. I exited, and found the next building, which *was* the center of the complex – whooee! I got an anergy 'headache', it was so strong! My 'third eye' (that spot between and slightly above your eyebrows) started throbbing like mad. It was almost too much. That building was full of God-statues, and one just floored me. I came around the corner and an 'ooh' involuntarily escaped my chest, as if his visage had knocked all the air out of me. don't know if I've ever felt that much energy before. Turned out he was the 'Heavenly Lord of Dao and Virtue in Supreme Clarity Realm, or the Supreme Venerable Sovereign'. I don't know enough of Taoism (though I blithely say I am a 'Taoist Pagan Agnostic') to say who this personage represents, versus all of the other lords in this temple, but this one had it going on – energy fireworks, as palpable as a punch in the gut:



Other stuff from the Green Goat Temple:

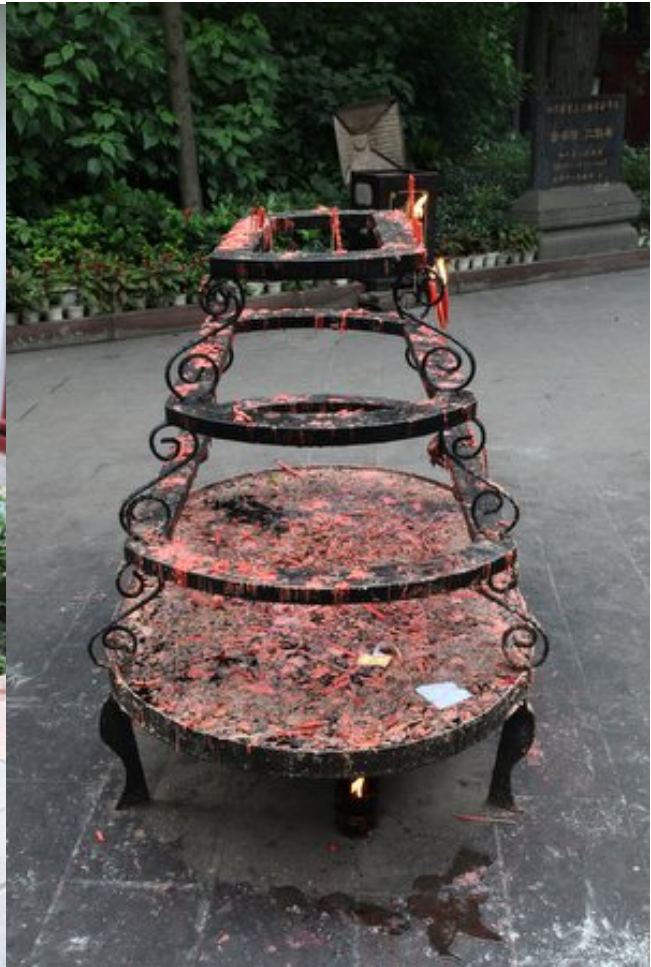


A very old form of Yin/Yang, surrounded by the Chinese 12-year Astrological symbols

An exceedingly comely Temple Lion, Incense Brazier with lots o' melted wax.

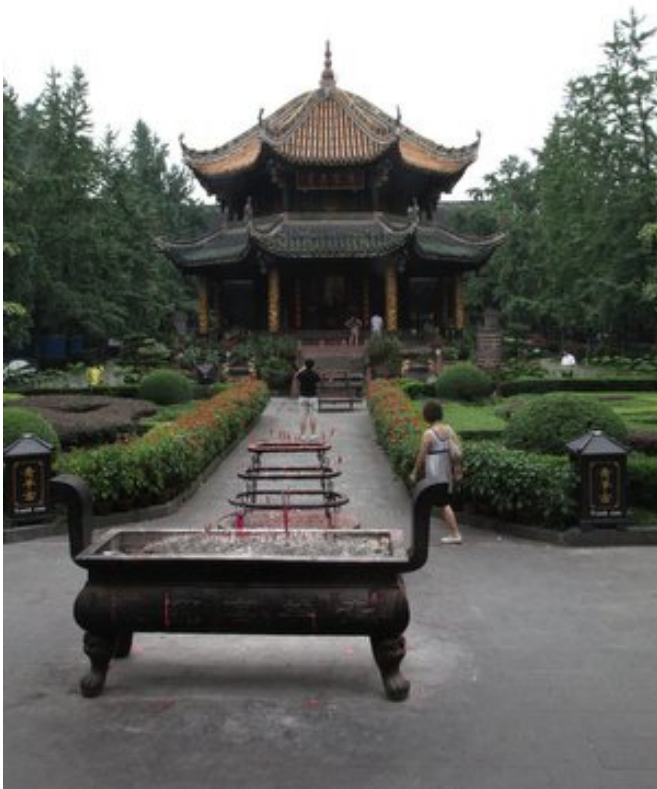


An Exceedingly Comely Temple Lion



Incense Brazier

Beyond that, the Green Goat temple was a quiet oasis in the madness of Chengdu. Yes, the city is more mellow than most Chinese cities, but that's inside a tea garden. The streets are still rush hour all the time, jammed to gridlock, and populated by maniacal drivers.



The Eight-sided Bagua Temple, Incense and Ash, damn I love Elephants!

And the Green Goat Temple was attached to (practically hidden by) a winding-pathed city park full of tea houses, trees, carp ponds, ancient sculpture and... one of the most memorable public bathrooms I've ever seen:



Yes, those are real fish, and if you've ever smelled a Chinese public squat-toilet bathroom, you'll pity the poor bastards...

Coming up next? Photo-intensive, Rant-deficient (maybe) entries on the giant carved Buddha at Leshan, and the sacred Buddhist mountain/odd theme park of Emei Shan.

See y'all soon!