The Return of the Monkey King

Adventures of a Solo Journey through
China in the Year 1983

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Cover: Mask of the Monkey King, Guilin 1983

For photographs from this trip to China and a second one in 1987 with Barbara click on the link

1.

THE TALE OF THE MONKEY KING

Many hundreds of years ago a Chinese monk by the name of Faxian traveled westwards from the Middle Kingdom to search for the Buddhist Dharma in India. He was a frail man from the low-altitude rice paddies of China, and when he came to the high mountains on the western border of the empire he was in great fear. Only his determined spirit commanded him to go on, climb the snow covered passes, walk on rickety rope bridges across the deep gorges in those never ending mountains and brave the wild animals that beset him.
One day he collapsed exhausted in the thin air of the approach to a high pass. He thought his life would end. Just before he passed out he heard the snow leopards stalking him and saw the vultures overhead who would hack him to pieces.

Miraculously, when he awoke and found himself still alive, a strange creature was sitting next to him. It looked like a monkey, but the animal could talk: "I am Hanuman the Monkey King," it said, "I speak the languages of all the people in these parts and know their grammars by heart. The Buddha has sent me to guide you safely to Pearl Land, where he will initiate you into the esoteric mysteries of the Dharma himself." At this he jumped into the air thirty feet high and let out a mocking laughter: "Hee, hee! Wake up Chinaman! Lets get going!"

Trembling from cold, fear, and exhaustion the monk rubbed his eyes in disbelief, but the strange monkey was still there. He had landed next to him and under more obscene laughter he performed three somersaults before him and then pulled him up by his beard.
Faxian stumbled along with his new exotic companion, who kept on pinching and slapping him, pulling his beard, telling him dirty stories and singing ditties, all to keep the poor pilgrim awake.
They had many terrible adventures on their way to Pear Land. Faxian saw feitians, beautiful young women in flowing dresses fly through the air, who tried to lure him over the edge of the precipices to a certain fall into the depths of the canyons. At night voluptuous Djinas with big breasts and curvaceous bodies would creep under his blanket promising to warm his cold feet and share his companionship. And he met fierce mountain gods in Xizhang who frightened him with human sculls filled with blood and amazing magic. He braved them all with the help of the ever jesting, cajoling Monkey King who would destroy all these apparitions and show Faxian that they were only *maya,* projections of his exhausted mind.

Faxian under the Monkey King's tutelage spend many years in India, collecting sutras from the sages and learning Sanskrit. The Buddha appeared to him and initiated him into the knowledge of the unity of all polarities and the insight that all things are only phantoms of our mind.

They made their way back to the Middle Kingdom carrying loads of Sanskrit sutras containing the teachings of the Buddha in thousands of words. Faxian translated all those sutras and became famous, but the Monkey King vanished and was never seen again. He would only be remembered as the jester of tales and operas. The Chinese believed he had gone back to India. Eventually the Buddha's message that everything was *maya* was lost in the Middle Kingdom However, the Monkey King did not disappear behind the Western mountains, but instead flew east across the Tai Ping Yang, The Great Pacific Ocean, where he happily continued living in Jing Gou, the Gold Land of California.

Hundreds of years later once again throngs of students from the Middle Kingdom journeyed to the West to bring home the great Dharma of the twentieth century, Physics. So when the sage and serious Academy Sinica invited some foreign physicists to their land to teach them the new wisdom, they were shocked to find a descendant of the Monkey King among them. The stuffed old academics did not know what to think of him: Instead of deadly serious science this strange man with a white beard told them the old wisdom that all is *maya*, illusions of our minds: foremost - and most disturbing himself, but also sacred Marxism, their hallowed Party, their Great Gods, and Physics of course! The Monkey King had returned in the guise of a physicist!
The younger people found him entertaining, but because he did not wear the yellow monkey mask of their operas, they did not recognize him, and thought he was - a horse! For seven weeks he flew, pedaled, and walked all over the great Middle Kingdom, creating Havoc in Heaven wherever he went

All this and how it happened that in the end this monkey man returned to his home land changed, sobered, and wiser is describes in this travelog.

2.

GUILO-GUILO, A ZOO WITHOUT BARS

The meeting of physicists I had been invited to, took place at the "White Celestial Goose Hotel", which translates to White Swan in English. It was one of the newest and most modern hotels in China. Fully air-conditioned, sparkling clean, immaculate service, it was so anonymous that it could have been anywhere in America or Europe - had it not been run by children. The oldest could not have been older than 23! Most of them charming girls. They tried hard to be serious but could hardly hold back their giggles. When the workload was not too heavy they would play hide and seek behind the columns of the dining room . . .
As expected, many old acquaintances from all over the world were attending the meeting: Several of my friends from Munich, the director of an institute in East Berlin whom I had visited two years earlier, and even two old friends from the

Soviet Union. But it was to see China that I had come. I began asking the various Chinese scientists how one could see their country by oneself, unaccompanied by any guide. Some said that was impossible, others suggested that I should find an institute at each major city that would sponsor my visit and help me to get to the next station. It was not encouraging. However, I began looking for scientists living in strategic places along my planned route. One man was recommended to me by the director of the Dalian Institute of Chemical Physics. His name was Zhu, and he lived in Xining, the capital of remote Qinghai.
I attended the talk given by Zhu and found a tall, self-sure physicist of about 35 who freely spoke in English. In the true sense of the word, I accosted him after the lecture, telling him that I would like to come and visit him in Xining in October, if that was possible. If he was surprised, he did not show it. We had an animated conversation during which I discovered that he had just returned from a two-years stay at MIT in Cambridge working with Jeff, another friend of mine. The friendship between Zhu and me was sealed two days later, when Zhu, Jeff, and I spent a magnificent evening at the Guangzhou Snake Restaurant gorging ourselves on exotic delicacies. Jeff spiced the dinner with his description of a visit to the "Lama-temple" of Taersi outside of Xining, where he and Zhu had just returned from. Taersi turned out to be the fabled Kumbum, the Tibetan monastery where the crazy Belgian opera singer Alexandra David-Neel had spent 5 years in preparation for her legendary trip to Lhasa in 1924. My interest was sparked.
Otherwise, the conference held few surprises and did not demand much of me. I was free to go wherever I wanted. Wandering through the city for days, I spent most of my time in the markets.
In many ways I came to China not from America but from my last visit to the USSR. In 1980 I had spent almost 2 months in Tbilisi in Georgia, the agriculturally richest republic, and had found that food could only be bought in the open markets and then for an exorbitant price, and meat, other than chicken, only through connections. The stores were practically empty and consumer goods nonexistent.

How different Guangzhou was, food and goods were literally flooding the streets. Everybody in Guangzhou seemed to sell something: clothing, bicycles, motorcycles, stereo equipment made in China, industrial goods manufactured in small machine shops, knickknacks, and above all food in open markets that covered the streets of ten city blocks. Before coming to Guangzhou I had no idea of what can be eaten: frogs, snakes, cats, dogs, even a monkey or two, eels, crabs, dozens of different varieties of fish, fowl, chicken, and pigs, - most sold live. And a selection of vegetables, fruits, mushrooms, and spices that I had never seen before.
The human press in the markets together with the humid heat were unimaginable, thousands of people, bicycles constantly ringing their bells, carts pushed and pulled by young women, cars and trucks trying to plow through the human sea, an inferno of noises, sweat, and smells. Most surprising was the ease and civility of everybody, no angry shouting, few arguments, no violent

pushing. Despite the density of people there seemed to be much less body contact here than in Russia, where I would sometimes amuse myself by counting the number of collisions between people.
Walking through the narrow back alleys at night allowed a look into the overcrowded houses where entire family clans could be seen living in one room, illuminated by a single 40-Watt bulb. Words cannot describe these scenes.

It was here that I first found the children running and hiding, shouting "*gui-lo, gui-lo*" when they caught sight of me. The almost honorable name for "foreign devils". Their parents, however, were not amused by this game and embarrassed, would scold them and shoo them away, - all the better to be able to take themselves a good look at the curious stranger with his white beard. At one point a man came up to me and tried to pull my beard. - Chinese men have little body hair. This one, however, sported a few hairs growing from a wart on his chin. So I grabbed his meager pride, and there we were standing at arm's length with each other's "beards" in our hands! The general mirth around us broke up the delicate "confrontation."- A marvelous "zoo" with rare specimens on both sides and no bars...

The day after the conference an excursion to Guilin had been arranged. Guilin is a town about 800 km west of Guangzhou in an area famous for its curious karst formations: thousands of conical mountains that look like hairy dragons' teeth. Between them runs the river Li, a shallow, picturesque stream, with many small villages along its course. The scenery is famous since antiquity for its beauty, and has been described by many of the greatest Chinese poets and painted in uncounted scrolls. It has also become the most crowded tourist attraction in China, visited by all and every China traveler. For this reason I had sworn not go to Guilin, yet here was this exceedingly reasonable opportunity, and that on the day of my birthday.

It was a true tourist tour: we were flown to Guilin, there loaded into buses that took us to a small village on the Li river where three boats were already waiting for us. Three hours on the river, including lunch and an English speaking guide. In Yangshou, the end of the river trip, 30 minutes for shopping, then back into a bus, a visit of "Reed Flute" cave, dinner in Guilin, and the flight back to Guangzhou with an 11 p.m. arrival at the hotel.
Just about the last excursion I would normally have joined. But something happened on this trip: I was struck by the beauty of the Chinese people. A beauty that, it seemed to me, radiated from the inside, a joy, a glow of innocence, the absence of greed, and a great inner quietude. The young and the old showed it most strongly.
I had come in search of the beauty of China and found it not in its art, nor in its architecture, but in its people!
During the week-end after the Guilin excursion, I continued walking through Guangzhou in wider and wider circles pursuing this new challenge. Slowly I became aware that there, too, people were charged with an excitement and an exhilaration, which I had not experienced elsewhere before. I felt sparks jump

from my fingertips when walking among the crowds in the streets. The laughter, the agility, the bodily freedom, the open and ready smiles, the frivolous self-assurance of the young women, the bantering in the market, all contributed to this feeling. My excitement was growing from day to day.
I then noticed that I too had got affected by the general exhilaration. I had actually become a participant in this immense happening. Everything seemed possible now, no obstacles too high. Throughout the ups and downs of my long trip, the feeling of being able to walk two-feet off the ground, carried by the excitement of the people around me, never completely left me.

Two days later I flew to Shanghai, and there successfully passed my first test of fending for myself. The plane arrived late at night, and the fellow from the institute who was to receive me was nowhere in sight. The airport was emptying. I knew that I had to act fast. There was a last taxi, I jumped in and said to the driver "Jingjiang", the name of the only hotel in town I knew of. When we reached the hotel after an hour's ride, they had no more rooms. Meanwhile it was 10 p.m. The polite clerk was willing to find me a place to stay, and after some telephone calls instructed the taxi driver where to take me. We drove around for another 15 minutes and ended in front of an iron gate in a high wall. It opened and we entered a beautifully kept, large park surrounding two villas. One was lit and two attendants were already waiting for us. They ushered me and my suitcase into a huge formal room with green velvet curtains, French doors, refrigerator, a heavy oak desk with a pen and an ink well, two overstuffed, antique chairs protected by doilies, and two immense beds. There was also an equally large, adjacent bathroom. I was told that the room would be "very expensive". How much they would not say. "You see," they explained, "this is the garden annex of the State Guest House and the President of the Republic slept in this room on his last visit!" After a hot bath, I slept well - in Zhou Enlai's bed.

At six o'clock next morning I was awakened by my "hosts" from the Academy who had worried themselves silly by the disappearance of their foreign guest. I paid 120 yuan (US$ 60) to the guesthouse, - the monthly salary of a Chinese professor - and was moved to a lousy place 1-1/2 hours out of town. For all purposes I never saw Shanghai again.
However, I met several interesting people there. The Academy had rented a number of small cottages on the grounds of a large hotel to house all the various foreign guests. The houses were half wood, half plastic, prefabricated in Japan, with a living room and a kitchen. It was hot and rained most of the time, and to make things worse there were mosquitoes in abundance, and no air-conditioning or mosquito nets. The food in the hotel was poor, and there was absolutely no place to go.
So we met again and again at the three rigorously fixed meals: breakfast 7-8, lunch 12-13, and dinner 18-19. Anybody coming later was simply out of luck. In addition to the two Soviet physicists, and professor from East Berlin I found a German physicist from Darmstadt with his wife who had spent 3 weeks helping the Chinese design an accelerator in Lanzhou, and a VIP, a retired American

chemistry professor, who had at one time been the teacher of the reigning president of the Chinese Academy of Sciences. 68 years old, he was on a honeymoon trip with his second wife... Very touching, very conservative, and very American. They were in tow of Miss Ling, who had been provided by the Academia Sinica to act as their private interpreter and guide to take them through China.

Miss Ling turned out to be my first real challenge. Relentlessly curious and unsparing, she interrogated me for hours at night on the state of affairs in the US. Why are there so many divorces? Is it true that young people live together with the consent of their parents and without being married? How much adultery was there, and so on. In turn I found out that divorces in China are usually prevented by the combined pressures of the two concerned family clans. Hence, very often couples just lived estranged, the woman being the outcast. There was, especially in the cities, a fairly large number of adulteries. No, young people did not live together unmarried, and young women over 30, - like herself, found it difficult to attract a man for a husband,- and usually panicked and became nagging old maids. The State rule of one child per couple was disastrous, especially in the villages. - Yes, it was true that the peasants in remote parts of the country still killed newborn girls. They had done this from times immemorial and the pressure of the new population control laws had only added to their numbers. But somewhere she lost her patience with my questions, and when I tried to dig deeper and closer to contemporary questions she burst out: "It seems that you are still living in the Cultural Revolution, which we have long since left behind! Look, now it is possible for a Chinese citizen to marry a foreigner!"
I spent two rainy days talking to Miss Ling until the wife of the American professor, annoyed by our "loose" talk, told me in no uncertain terms that Miss Ling was their guide, and that I had no business to occupy so much of her time with my inappropriate questions.
Visits to Chinese research laboratories in Shanghai took up two days, an excursion under Miss Ling's guidance to a nearby commune another.

The flight to Beijing came close to a disaster: the old Boeing 707 lost one engine during take-off, and fifteen minutes later we landed again in Shanghai. We then sat in the airport for 10 hours until a Russian Ilyushin 62 came to our rescue late in the evening.

3.

FIGHTING THE DOGS THAT THREATEN TO DEVOUR THE MOON

My hosts in Beijing had spent as many hours waiting: There were three, a Professor from an institute of the Academia Sinica and two women from another institute. Despite their long wait they were cheerful and obviously curious. In their custody I was driven through the night to the You Yi Hotel, Friendship

Hotel, a complex of about 10 houses built for Soviet specialists during the fifties.

As the guest of two institutes I now became a VIP of sorts. During my entire stay in Beijing I was surrounded by at least three people, two women, one held the purse, the other spoke English as guides and a male interpreter, not to mention the chauffeur, two professors, and 35 loving students.
My guiding trio was most charming, and I was certainly a difficult guest, who constantly tried to do the unusual things. The first two days we spent on excursions: Saturday I was taken to the Great Wall and the Ming Tombs and Sunday to Xiang Shan, the Fragrant Hills. I did not have any particular wishes to visit any special tourist sights in and around Beijing, and so I let them take me wherever they thought I ought to be taken.

My only specific wish was to see the new Xiang Shan Hotel built by I. M. Pei in Xian Shan. So we went there on a slightly rainy Sunday afternoon, and to everyone's embarrassment I went all over the building inspecting the detailing. It is a beautifully situated complex of buildings, and its garden architecture is undoubtedly its most beautiful aspect. The details of the inside have been given every consideration possible. The great disappointment is the emotionally cold central lobby. To check my feelings against those of my Chinese friends I invited all of us for coffee in this lobby, and sure enough, everyone huddled along the walls or involuntarily put on jackets to protect themselves.

I tried my best to entertain my three guides in exchange for their troubles, and slowly we warmed to one another. Still, when I indicated that I really would prefer to walk through the narrow streets of Beijing "where ordinary people live" instead of being whisked from one tourist sight to another, I was told that this was impossible. I asked why. "You don't speak Chinese." I agreed that I did not speak much but certainly enough to get around. "You might get lost." I told them that I had been to stranger places than Beijing. "You might have an accident." Yes, I said, a stone could fall on my head. "You don't know the rules of the government." I asked whether it was forbidden for foreigners to go there, and was told that that was not the case. So I told them, "Look, tomorrow we meet at ten, don't we. I will get up at six and will have my walk through the old part of the city. Neither you nor the government need to know anything about this excursion." I thought Weiyi was going to die of fright on the spot, she begged me to please spare her and not do any such rash thing. "You see," she said, "if a hair is missing on your head while you are in my responsibility, my head is going to come off. It would be most horrible." I finally promised not to get her into trouble. "Oh, " she said, "you can do all the things you like, when you come back to Beijing alone and are no longer my guest."
Weiyi, who spoke English quite well, was about 32, and a rather pretty girl, but she looked ill. Teasing her a little, I tried to find out what was wrong with her. She burst into tears, and then nearly shouted at me, "I am old. Can't you see, I am old." I did not understand, I at least thought that she was witty, charming, and if somewhat pale, pretty. I told her so, which did not help at all, I am afraid she thought that I was trying to tease her even more cruelly. "I am too old to

ever find a husband," she told me swallowing her tears. Next day she did not appear, and I was told that she was in bed with liver trouble.

These first two days were hectic but charming. I was not shown exactly the part of Beijing I would have explored, but my conversations with my three companions made up for this. Soon, however, I had to learn that there are no free, spontaneous gifts in China and that the "guest" is, for our taste, liable to be mercilessly exploited by his hosts, who at the same time try with all their charm to uphold the semblance of a royal reception.
Late at night on the second day I was visited at my hotel by a group of dignitaries from both institutes. They presented me with a schedule for my visit: I was going to lecture every morning from 8 to 11:30 for the next 5 days, and on Friday I was going to give a last, grand final lecture, of another three hours in the afternoon. During the remaining afternoons Weiyi and Xiuming, the two women, and the interpreter would take me to the tourist sights of Beijing. Did I have any other wishes?

Now I have to add that in my correspondence with the Academy I thought we had reached an agreement, that I was to deliver two two-hour lectures, that I would pay for my expenses myself, and that as a form of remuneration for my personal troubles, they would get me a single travel permit from the government to visit a long list of places in China by myself. This tour was to be entirely on my own expense, my vacation for the year. I was, therefore, rather taken by surprise by the outrageous work schedule the delegation presented, and felt my blood rise to my head. I also had an additional problem in that I did not have official permission from the US government to deliver such a long lecture series.
Fortunately I kept my cool by telling myself that it was bad form in China to show anger - and I have to admit, I was also goaded by the impression that I needed the help of these people to get permission to travel alone. Still, when the director of one institute demanded that I give him a detailed description of my lectures for the week, I dared to demur and adamantly refused. I told him that I would prefer to lecture "by ear", that is, to make up my words during the lecture depending on what my students wanted to know or needed to understand. He remained equally adamantly dissatisfied.
We briefly discussed my travel plans. Without enthusiasm they promised to study the matter, however, the project looked difficult indeed. I felt cheated for the second time. Had I not made it abundantly clear in my correspondence with them, that this was my only condition for agreeing to the lectures? They shook their heads in disapproval: Why did I want to go to these places anyway? It was such a long list. None of them had ever traveled so much in China. I did not speak Chinese, and had no idea of the primitive conditions in the North-West of the country. There were no hotels and no reservations could be made, and last not least, such an extended journey would be horribly expensive. Did I have enough money to pay for such a tour?
I was not certain that I had positive answers to these questions. Did I really have enough money? How much did they think it would cost? Nobody knew the

answer. - But I felt too strongly that they were stalling to keep me and my lectures on a short leash. I was not going to give up yet. - Only much later did I come to the conclusion that this whole drama was probably honest. They really did not know how to get the permit or how much it would cost, and above all they were certainly not going to stick their necks out for me.

This evening ended with much headache on both sides. I at least spent a troubled night trying to figure out my course between their demands, my restrictions, and my wish to see China. I finally decided to do exactly what I had told them, to play the entire affair by ear on a day-by-day basis, and to be flexible but not to give up my travel plans.

So, I started teaching to a room full of 35 engineers from a military institution early next morning. Unfortunately, I was almost voiceless with a pernicious laryngitis that I had acquired in the humidity of Shanghai. My girls, their worries written on their faces, took me to a local doctor, who prescribed a whole battery of Eastern and Western medicines. I was pronounced "very weak," and given little pills the size of pin heads, 5 three times a day, to strengthen my constitution. Their main ingredients turned out to be ground pearls and rhinoceros horn! But there was also some regular penicillin. From now on my women watched anxiously that I took all the prescribed pills at the right time of day. And slowly my voice came back.
I lectured in English and the interpreter translated sentence by sentence, a torturous procedure that I had, however, got used to in Tbilisi years earlier. In a way, the slowness was my saving, it gave me time to collect my next sentence, and it did not exhaust my material too fast. I also succeeded in making my students ask questions on topics they had not understood, something I was never able to teach my Georgian students. After the second day we had a slow but reasonable seminar going, in which both sides were involved.

At the end of the first lecture the director declared that next morning we were going to meet at seven o'clock. Incredulous, I asked whether we were then going to end the lectures at 10:30. As an answer I got a sheepish no, and for a few seconds I lost my temper. I told him that three hours were enough, that I exerted my voice more than was reasonable, and that I would simply be in the lecture hall at 8 and that that was that. He grinned uneasily faced with so much emotion, but the issue was settled and never taken up again until Thursday, when the interpreter approached me about the planned Friday afternoon lecture. I smiled and told him that I had said all I had been authorized to say, that I had worked my keep, and that instead I expected to go to the travel office to settle my tour.

Meanwhile my women and the interpreter took me all over town. Every afternoon we visited another sight: the Lama Temple, the Forbidden City, the Summer Palace, and the Temple of Heaven. Sometimes one or the other of my students would come along as an expert on art or literature.
I remember a charming afternoon with Mr. Fan in the Summer Palace. Fan, a lively, lanky gasdynamics engineer of about 35, did indeed have a larger

knowledge of the classics than anybody else I met in China. He had studied classical literature before the Cultural Revolution, during which he had been sent to do more useful work. Climbing through the pavilions dedicated to the various aspects of love on the Mountain of Eternal Bliss the conversation turned to the famous classical novel of "Jing Ping Mei", Plums in the Golden Chalice. I own a relatively unexpurgated German translation, a fact that aroused a good deal of envy, because after 300 years this book was still on the index of pornographic works. Fan assured me that, nevertheless, it was one of the truly great, classical books.
Fan also knew a great deal about Buddhism, and it became a common joke during the lectures, that I would appeal to his higher insights whenever we came to a question that could really be answered only by intuition.
By the end of the week my students had warmed to the unusual style of this exchange to such an extent that they invited me to an Autumn Moon Viewing Party. The delight was complete when we found a roof garden on top of the main building of my hotel. There we spent the evening under the full moon eating Moon Cakes to scare off the dogs that were about to devour the moon. I hoped that this evening would exert a positive influence on my fate too.

But, despite this charmed fraternization and contrary to the assurances of my students, the pressing question of my travel through China showed no progress. I was kept in total suspense, and soon found out that the "authorities" had done absolutely nothing to secure the necessary papers. However, slowly I began to gain some understanding of official China.
Foreigners in China live in "boxes" with certain labels on them. There is a box called "VIP Guests", another is "Tourists Traveling in Groups", a third one is "Enemies of the People." Each one of these boxes is under the auspices of a different government organization, the Academia Sinica, the China International Travel Service (CITS or Lüxingshe), or the Security Police. Because none of these organizations has connections to any of the others, a transfer from one box into another is exceedingly difficult and requires higher political manipulations. That appears to be especially true for the third category: a foreign tourist can do almost anything, to make him into an enemy of the people is nearly impossible.
Finally, when my girls and the interpreter went to CITS trying to negotiate my travel arrangements, I found a new group living in yet another box that was called something like "Foreign Students Studying in China Traveling Alone." Amazingly, this box did not appear to have a sponsor. Every time we visited CITS there were large numbers of hapless young people with immense backpacks crowding the office trying to find a bed in town. Most of them traveled on a shoe string, some looked rugged indeed, a few were bona fide students, most of them just drifters: The European "Kinder-Crusade" had arrived in China! I guess, my hosts did never, and I only much later, completely understand that I was about to disappear in this motley crowd...

Our first visit to Lüxinshe was a brief but complete disaster. A second interpreter from the ministry responsible for the institutes was delegated to reinforce my

entourage for this purpose. The ladies at CITS just shrugged their shoulders: before they could book a flight or train for me, I had to have a paper from the security police, and besides, towns like Xian and Luoyang were so overcrowded that they would not accept any reservations anyway. These two cities had been the first two stations on my itinerary.
So we journeyd to the police station. On the way I had an idea. The institutes had offered to buy me a train ticket to my first stopover, which had been Luoyang, some 300 km by train south-west of Beijing. Now that it appeared that I could not visit Luoyang nor Xian, my next city, why not fly to Lanzhou in far-away Gansu, and get this long distance flight paid for by my friends!
Surprisingly they were more than happy about this proposal, I guess, because of overcrowding it would have been difficult to obtain a ticket for a train out of Beijing. The police was, however, totally uncooperative, in order to release the institutes of the burden of responsibility for me, a letter from the ministry would be required. Everyone was quite upset about this demand, and a long, excited debate in Chinese ensued between my troops and the police.
During all of this, I sat on a comfortable couch in the background and had a talk with a young German woman trying to have her visa extended. She had come with her boyfriend by way of Hong Kong. There they had obtained single travel permits for Guangzhou from a travel office, which had been a mere kiosk in the street served by two people. In Guangzhou they had not been able to find a hotel room, and in addition after a big argument, she had left her boyfriend. Separated, she had simply bought a train ticket at the station and traveled to Beijing. After two nights and days here she was determined to continue her journey alone. No, she did not speak any Chinese, and that did not bother her at all, but in the South everybody had been so friendly, and here people were so uptight. She wanted to go on as fast as possible.
My friends were demoralized, they had been entirely unable to obtain the necessary papers for me; still they tried to console me by telling me that the required letter would surely be produced in a few days. Since I was scheduled to go to Dalian next morning to visit another institute, this meant that I was to remain suspended for another three days. My nerves were getting strained, and I began to have rather restless nights while trying to remain cool and collected during the day in front of my hosts.

This was Friday afternoon. At night a delegation from my "Work Unit", several of my best students, appeared at the hotel and presented me with a farewell gift, a two feet high porcelain replica of a tri-colored Tang-dynasty horse. It came in a box the size of a small suitcase with its price, 50 yuan, clearly marked on it in large letters. In a short speech I was told that they chose the horse for two reasons: first, they understood that I liked antiques, second, they were impressed by my inexhaustible energy, "You run like a horse." My feelings hovered between being honored and the horror of how to carry that horse home

4.

MARX IN CHINA

Saturday morning my little private army escorted me to the airport. The plane was to leave around noon, so I was deposited in the dining room for foreigners, and after having paid for my meal, my friends disappeared. They were not allowed to eat in the foreigners' dining room. I ladled my soup in lonely anger.

The plane, an old twin-engine Soviet turboprop, was filled with Japanese businessmen who were trying to sell the Chinese anything from machinery to insurance. We flew over enormous, multi-colored salt-works limning the murky China Sea, then over the open sea, and finally the hilly and wooded Loud Peninsula.

Dalian, alias Fort McArthur, founded by the Russians in the 1860s, appeared and already from the air made an impression different from Beijing. One could make out older, multi-storied apartment houses and large industrial areas. The short ride through the city to the hotel left the strange, still unclear impression that this was a European city, and the hotel at last, a vast domed structure from the turn of the century, could have been in Vienna, - or in Moscow.
Later that afternoon my new local hosts took me on a walk through town, and it finally became clear what was so strange about this city. It still looked entirely Russian, - pompous Jugendstil buildings, an opera, a bank, the hotel,- surrounding a modest size square, and small, three-storied Russian houses in the back streets, complete with Russian-style windows and yellow paint. I discovered a monument commemorating the liberation from the Japanese by "our victorious friends, the Soviet Army," crowned by a statue of - Josip Stalin. Its inscriptions were in Russian and Chinese. The funniest thing, however, were the bed covers in the hotel. They had the large, central, oval hole in the big linen bag into which a woolen blanket was stuffed - which one only finds in Russia.

On the following morning I gave a seminar at the Dalian Institute of Physical Chemistry. It was a difficult day. I had worked hard at presenting my story. Because of various classification restrictions, I had been subjected to by the US government, my talk was not exciting, and for the same reason I could not answer many of the questions I was asked. My apologies and explanations only evoked derisive smiles and catcalls of "Chauvinist American Imperialist". In the end, after I had finished, I was informed that the Chinese Academy of Sciences had issued orders that I was not to be shown any of the work in my field at the institute. Instead of visiting the laboratories, I had come to see, I was subjected to another grilling session by a group of scientists in my field. Exhausted I wanted nothing more than go to my hotel and sleep, but a formal dinner had been scheduled for the evening, and there was no possible way to escape it without being exceedingly rude. I spent a brief half-hour in my room in

meditation before I was picked up and driven to the old Russian Grand Hotel.

My host, the director of the institute, turned out to be an exceptionally warm and kind man during this evening. As a surprise he produced, with something like a conjurer's trick, my new friend Zhu, who was also visiting Dalian on that day. The two tried their best during dinner to make me forget the disappointment and anger of the morning. I was given a detailed history of the town and the hotel in particular, which until the fifties had been run by the last White Russians, a place of excellent food and entertainment. The "Opera" next door had even boasted its own local ballet troupe. All had disappeared when the last Russians had been "invited" back to their motherland in the late fifties. Their presence lingered on in the furnishings, the architecture of the great dome under which we were eating, and the blind mirrors on the walls.
The conversation then turned to more contemporary problems, and I sprang one of the questions most puzzling to me: How did Marx ever gain a hold in China? Whatever I had learned about China from a year's study of her history, had convinced me, that the Chinese have only a remote interest in ideologies whether religious or political. Systems like Buddhism had enjoyed only a comparatively short bloom in China's history and then vanished almost completely. Buddhism had even gone through a period of frenzied fanaticism not unlike the more recent Cultural Revolution. Like the Cultural Revolution this religious madness had, however, lasted only a mere two hundred years - and had ended in a series of vicious persecutions of the adherents of all, then extant, organized religions - perhaps, by analogy, a hint of events as yet to come in the wake of the present Communist interlude.
My host started to laugh behind his hand. With faked annoyance I asked: "Please don't laugh, the question is a perfectly serious one for me. Marxism is a 19th century, German philosophical system, a pinnacle of German romantic thinking, which has proven inefficient, unworkable, and impractical. How did the practical Chinese ever espouse such a useless philosophy?" He laughed even harder and then asked: "Who told you that there was Marxism in this country?" I argued that his and our newspapers claimed that China had a Marxist society. "I know," he said, "there may be ten specialists in Beijing who understand Marx. But rest assured, there is no Marxism in this country."
The baffling impression from this conversation was not the obvious fact that the vast majority of people in this enormous country did not understand the complicated dialectics of Marx, but the disarming way in which my friend explained it to me. By contrast, I was reminded of a similar discussion about the tenets of Marxism with a Russian scientist, who became embarrassed and said, "I am sorry Rolf, but I have forgotten the answer to your question. It has been such a long time, since I learned such things."
My Chinese friend continued to point out that, however short the interaction between China and Buddhism had been, China had changed Buddhism radically and had contributed several completely new and Chinese versions to this religion, most importantly Chan-Zen and Pure Land Buddhism. Maybe, he suggested, a similar transformation will eventually happen to Marxism. "You see," he said, "there is only one really important question, and that is how to

motivate people to live together, work together, and share their common resources. This is your problem in the West and our problem here. You have not found a solution despite a thousand years of philosophical speculation. For us a solution of this problem is, however, much more pressing than for you. Look at the number of people in this country! We are not given to speculation, you are perfectly right there, but we are practical. We will find the solution, and we will have to find it fast." And pensively he finished his thoughts by saying: "Perhaps we shall then have to teach the West how to do it." I nodded and asked, how he proposed to solve the Chinese dilemma. He said, "don't tell any of my acquaintances, but we shall simply 'muddle through'." I have never heard a more honest or better answer to this existental question.
Five years later I would find out that this man had been the head of the Communist Party Organization at the Dalian Instititute!

5.

XIUMING AND THE HAIR ON MY CHEST

Next day the noisy Antonov 44 reached Beijing shortly before noon, and behind the gate waited my smiling trio. By now it was almost a homecoming. First the guest had to be fed, and off we went to the airport dining room. This time I refused to eat there alone again, without my Chinese friends, but no pleading or arguing could change the rules. After a long debate it was decided that we would drive into town and find a restaurant where all of us could eat together.
It was the first time that I ate in an ordinary Chinese restaurant. A huge hall at street level with numerous, small, square tables and wooden stools, crowded with people. Some were eating while sitting down, others standing up, many waiting behind a sitting group to snatch a stool or a corner at the table. The dark and run-down place was filled with an indescribable din and commotion, waitresses with white caps running between the guests carrying plates of food and pitchers of beer from the open kitchen in the background. On the wall a huge blackboard with the daily menu. My hosts at once split up, one was posting herself behind an eating party that seemed to be finishing their meal, the other went to copy down a menu selection from the blackboard, and the interpreter was sent out to take me for a walk in the meantime. It took a good hour before a table was found, and a waitress had come to wipe off the food scraps left behind on the plastic table cloth by the last diners.
Sitting down I realized that I had been in such a place before: the Hofbrauhaus in Munich, downstairs in the "Schwemme," the "Watering Hole." The same crowds, the noise, the beer-carrying waitresses, and an "upstairs" for the "feine Herrschaften," the better clientele, and here as there eating is serious business. The food was absolutely superb. Xiuming had selected a short cross-section through China from Sichuan to Shanghai, and I had the feeling that I had finally been officially admitted to the inner parts of China.

And maybe it is true that the best way to get to know China, her people, her mentality, her regional diversity, history, and philosophy is to eat one's way through this land. There is only one better way and that is to cook one's way through the Chinese kitchen.

After lunch we went back to our interrupted pursuit of my travel visa at Lüxingshe and the Security Police. All I remember of that afternoon is, that still another piece of paper, another letter was required, and another day of waiting was necessary. But in the hotel lobby, Xiuming pulled a familiar blue air ticket out of her bag, to Lanzhou, for me with the compliments of the institute.
I was happy but exhausted and wished for nothing more than a short nap. Xiuming needed to make an urgent telephone call, so she asked to come to my room to use the phone. While she called I fell asleep in the bedroom. I woke an hour later, and dressed but for a shirt, walked back into the living room to find my Chinese friend still sitting there. I had assumed that she had left after finishing her call. - With a smile and shaking her head incredulously she got up, walked towards me, and started to inspect the hair on my chest. Very carefully, very gently with three fingers. - I guess, Chinese men do not have any chest hair. - This touching, silent event did not leave me unaffected - after all I quite liked this woman.

Next morning she appeared alone. The interpreter was needed for a more important task, besides, so I was told, now that I had finished my lectures, I was no longer a guest of the institutes. Still she offered to help me through my visa problems and see me off. I was skeptical, until I was on the airplane I was not going to believe that I was really on my way. And at times I despaired and wondered whether it was not crazy to go by myself into that adventure. Maybe I was at 53 too old for such a trip, and in any case it would be so much more comfortable to just give up and go back home on the next Japan Airlines Flight.

Without the institute's car, we had to take the bus from the Friendship Hotel to the center of town. First to the Security Police. That ride took about one hour. Xiuming did not speak much English and understood even less, until then this had not been apparent, we always had had an interpreter around, but now I had to muster all my cleverness to converse with her.
Surprise, at the police the much longed-for, little, yellow booklet was in fact waiting for us, and with this document Lüxingshe was now quite willing and able to make reservations for me in Lanzhou. All further arrangements, I would have to make by myself at each new stopover. It was quite simple: All I had to do, was to pay 10 yuan, $5, for the telegram to Lanzhou and 2 yuan for their service, all the rest would be billed to me in Lanzhou.

So, all of a sudden I was standing in the white September light, in the middle of Beijing, with all the papers I had fought for for almost a year. I gave my silent friend a great hug and a kiss right in the street, and then we went back to the marvelous Chinese Hofbrauhaus around the corner and had lunch.
But she would not let me invite her, and I felt that she really deserved something special for her troubles. Several attempts on my part at finding what

she liked were unsuccessful. Finally in my despair I stopped a young, intelligent looking man on the street and asked him whether he spoke English and could translate between me and my guide. That worked, she took me by the hand and smiling, pulled me along Beijing's main shopping street into an "Italian" shoe store. With raised eyebrows I wondered what was going to happen next. She steered me straight to a counter in the back of the store, where she selected a blue plastic shoulder bag for herself and with anxious eyes inquired whether that wouldn't be too expensive. I bought her the bag, and she appeared happy. On the way to the hotel by bus, an ordeal that took almost two hours, she bought me an ice-cream.

When we finally arrived at my hotel, - my charming friend proceeded to walk with me right to my room. This time I was not at all sure what was expected of me. Everyone in the lobby had seen her, which in effect indicated that her visit was harmless. On the other hand she was not at all ignorant of my affection for her... So here she was, and there was no way for me to ask what was on her mind. I kissed her. At that moment she said in perfect English: "You must tell me if I should go, you are the host." -- I nearly fell out of my shoes, but when I told her that it would be better if she went now, she did not understand... She did eventually leave, and I was left behind in a most uncertain state. I had been told that the fastest way out of China was to proposition to a Chinese girl. And now, on the day when I was closer to my goal than I had ever been, I experimented with my fate.- I banged my head, called myself all sorts of names, and generally expected the security police to appear early next morning. It was a bad night. I rehearsed a number of answers, like "well gentlemen, there is no question of having propositioned to the young lady, I do not speak enough Chinese for that, and she doesn't understand English." But I was doubtful whether this would make any impression on my morally indignant interrogators.

Next morning, I was due to leave in the afternoon, I woke up at six from my nightmares, and spent the early morning hours restlessly pacing my room and the park around the hotel. No police turned up. Around eleven, my charming friend appeared, smiles all over, raised herself to her toes, and gave me a most affectionate kiss.
An immense weight fell off my chest. I called Barbara in Los Angeles to tell her that I was finally on my way and flew from Beijing late in the afternoon.

6.

MARCO POLO AND THE NOODLE MAN

The flight reached Lanzhou at night in total darkness. The travel service in Beijing had made reservations for a hotel, an English speaking guide, and a taxi to pick me up at the airport. I was relieved to find all of that in the darkness of the Lanzhou airport, which turned out to be 75 km from the center of town. At

the hotel I was given a comfortable suite with bath. Then the guide presented me with the bill: 60 yuan for the taxi ride, 36 yuan for the hotel, and 5 for herself, all to be paid on the spot! I wrote it off as the price for learning how to take care of things by myself and never made another advance reservation.

With great curiosity I woke in the morning. What was this first city on my way going to look like? I had some idea from maps and the descriptions of the German physicist couple, I had met in Shanghai.
A thin, cold, white light revealed a city as drab and poor as any in Central Asia, gray-brown dust everywhere, completely bare, yellow hills encroaching from all sides. One-story houses hidden behind high adobe walls, a courtyard in the middle, one large gate to the outside world. No relief in sight.
Lanzhou had been an unimportant town at the Yellow River crossing of the trade routes from the Hexi Corridor and Qinghai to Shaanxi. Nobody stayed here, they came only to move on. During the 50s it had been made into an enormous "industrial complex" by the discovery of oil in Qinghai. Its population had swollen to over 2 million people. Most of the large petrochemical plants, huge, antique looking mazes of pipes, buildings with broken windows among metal scrap lie outside the city on the road to the airport.
On the positive side was the Gansu Historical Museum, which I discovered across the street from the hotel. It boasts an exciting collection of archeological artifacts dating from prehistorical times to the Tang period. Here rests the Flying Horse of Gansu together with a whole horse-drawn imperial entourage, table-sized bronze sculptures from the Eastern Han period (3rd century AD). Then there is also a full size replica of a Tang tomb complete with murals and the original painted clay plaques depicting farming scenes. Most interesting but fully unexplained is a remarkable collection of prehistoric pottery (Ma-chia-yao Culture, 2000 BC) found in recent years.

The German physicist couple had raved about the Hui quarters on the left bank of the Yellow River. The Hui speak Chinese but are not of Han origin, they are Moslem. Islam is the largest organized religious group in China. Moslems make up the major part of the populations of Gansu, Xinjiang, and the cities of Qinghai. Over half of the people in Lanzhou and nearly all in Xining must be Moslem, and their numbers are growing fast. My first excursion was, therefore, to the left bank. I hitched a ride to the old iron bridge across the Huang Ho in the microbus of a young Chinese entrepreneur and then walked for hours.
My Chinese friends had warned me that this was the worst part of the country, backwards, uneducated, and poor, yet the Hui turned out to be very friendly. In part their sympathy had to do with my beard again. In contrast to their Han neighbors the older Hui men sport long, beautiful, white beards, and they would often stop me on the street to praise my beard and shake my hand.
The poorest Hui quarters recalled the Anatolia 30 of years ago, or Samarkand, without the splendor of Samarkand's Timurid architecture. It was all more familiar than Shanghai or Guangzhou. A narrow dirt road wound its way through the low houses overhanging the river, an unpretentious, modern mosque, children, goats, hawkers peddling hot condiments or vegetables from pushcarts,

two-wheeled tractors, and overcrowded buses milling their way through the potholes. A lot of dust, trees without leaves, and the primeval, yellow floods of the fully untamed river in the early morning light. And then, at first almost impossible to make out, a wildly dancing speck drifting down-river that eventually revealed itself as a sheep-skin raft with four old men on it. Turning and tossing they disappeared into the reflection of the sun: truly Central Asia.

I bought myself a melon for lunch and sat on a low bridge, the local dump below me, and for a long time watched the passing people. A cart approached from the distance pushed by two women, several children and a woman with a white cap walking beside it. On it lay a young girl, stretched out, motionless. I took a fast photo from far away and the group froze, aghast at the bad omen. They were hurrying to the hospital. I left the area quietly and quickly.
The central part of town consists of three loosely connected parts, stretching along the river for, maybe, ten kilometers. They have more of a Chinese flavor with several, now unused pagodas in between courtyards, wooden houses behind adobe walls, and stores along the main street. The abundance in the stores of everything, goods as well as food, was impressive in this relatively remote town.
For the first time I met pedicabs, three-wheeled bicycles with an old couch between the rear wheels. During the day the drivers could be found asleep in them in the hazy sunlight.
There are several markets, unexciting by comparison to those in eastern China except for their stands with hotly spiced foods: sausages, lamb kebab, and noodles.

Hunger finally overcame my fear of dysentery and I bought a bowl of noodle soup in one open booth. The noodle-man took a half-pound roll of dough, stretched it to twice its length, connected the long sausage into a loop, and then began stretching the loop eight or ten times, winding the thinner and thinner noodle - one single noodle indeed - over his arm. All of this took only a minute or two. By the time I had recovered from my surprise, the noodle cooked already in a huge cauldron of boiling broth.
Meanwhile a large crowd had gathered waiting to watch the foreigner eat. The noodle was eventually fished out of the broth and piled into a china bowl together with some of the broth. Then testing me with sideways glances after each spoon, he dropped a tablespoon each of three different condiments into the soup, topping it off with one, then another spoonful of some unidentifiable, powdery, brown substance. The whole affair came with two chopsticks, no spoon. I expected the worst.
We used to laugh at the old joke on how the Chinese eat soup. Well, they do not make waves as one friend in Cambridge suggested, they drink it. Everyone was watching. But the real question was how to eat a noodle of several meters' length with chopsticks. I simply took the two sticks in parallel, stuck them into the slippery knot and started turning. This gave me a huge noodle ball in absolutely no time. But it is not the way one eats noodles in civilized China, there you handle the sticks as usual and bite off those noodles that hang out of

your mouth. One by-stander discovered his English and tried to give me instructions, the others were nearing the height of their amusement. Then an idea occurred to me, I asked my English-speaking friend whether he had heard of Marco Polo. Yes, of course, he had. So I told him that, while Marco Polo had brought the noodles to Europe, it had been up to the Europeans to develop an efficient technique for eating them. I had come back to where the noodles came from to teach the Marco Polo Noodle Eating Technique to all Chinese, and immediately challenged one local noodle eater to a speed contest. - I won. They loved it. But finally came the moment of truth: the broth. Everyone held his breath, whilst I took a deep draught - my head was nearly blown off from the fiery hot pepper soup. My audience clapped with delight, and I left with a red face and sky high blood pressure.

From this first morning in Lanzhou developed a pattern for my days: I walked the streets following no particular course, plan, or goal, slowly, not looking at anything but seeing everything, completely relaxed but always ready to act with lightning speed. Besides people, there was little else that proved worth photographing, and except for a few days, it was always overcast, resulting in a wonderfully even light for this purpose.
In my mind Lanzhou had never been more than a convenient way station to get near the treasures of Gansu. I was also only a passing visitor. The real lures were the Buddhist cave paintings of Dunhuang at the edge of the Taklamakan, the caves in the strange formations at Maiji Shan halfway between Lanzhou and Xian, Bilingsi another Buddhist cave complex on the banks of the Huang Ho west of Lanzhou, and the great Lamaseries of Labrang in southern Gansu and Kumbum near Xining on the Tibetan Plateau. Dunhuang, I knew could now be reached by plane, and Xining had just been opened to foreigners two months earlier, I had even been given special visas for both places, but the other sites were uncertain. And back of all of this lurked my age-old dream of going to Tibet. But how? From Xining, from Dunhuang?

The second morning I set out to explore these possibilities. At the local CITS I quickly found that Maiji Shan had again been closed to visitors for safety reasons and Labrang was not in Gansu but in an Autonomous Region off limits to all foreigners, but Xining, Kumbum, and Dunhuang were open. If I wanted to go to Bilingsi, that could be arranged: I would have to rent a taxi to go to a place along the river about 80 km west of Lanzhou and then take a boat across a reservoir to the caves. The price? Oh, for one person by himself it would be expensive, of course, but perhaps I could find some group to join. The taxi cost about 0.80 yuan per kilometer, so its price would be 130 yuan plus incidental charges. Was there a local bus? No, I could not take the local bus. The explanation of the reasons were lost in the language difficulties between me and the two girls at the office.
This conversation had been going on for several hours, using three different languages but under much laughing by everybody and a good deal of histrionics on my part, because their command of English approximately matched mine of Chinese. I made some mental calculations on time and money, and decided to

forget the visit to Bilingsi because of the expense and the trip to Labrang for reasons of its difficulty. Instead I would go to Xining. This decision was made easier by the prospect of seeing Zhu again in Xining, and of visiting Taersi-Kumbum with him. I pulled out my diary and laid out a schedule: first a train trip to Xining, then a flight to Dunhuang, and finally a flight to Chengdu in Sichuan, and could they get me the necessary tickets every time I would come back to Lanzhou.
At this point the negotiations broke down completely. The bewildering array of dates, times, and destinations was beyond the comprehension of this office. In a last attempt to understand my wishes they took me to the China Airline office where there was a man who spoke marginally better English, but all I found out was that there were flights to Dunhuang only three times a week and none to Chengdu at all.
I had spent four hours talking. However, I had gained a clearer understanding of how to travel in China: all reservations had to be made two days before every departure and could not be made earlier. I had found out the plane and train numbers and schedules to Xining, Dunhuang, and Chengdu, and it was now up to me to come back between each trip and the next and order the tickets. I came back the following day and without any further problem bought a "soft seat" on the afternoon train to Xining two days hence. The feeling of success compensated for the trouble.

7.

CHRIST, THE BUDDHA OF LIGHT

One day at noon I found a single European traveler sitting forlorn at a table in the empty dining room of the hotel. So far away from the formalities of Europe it was not difficult to strike up a conversation with him. We started in English, but it quickly turned out that he was Professor Klimkeit from the Institute of Comparative Religion at the University of Bonn, travelling in Gansu in search of manuscripts in the old languages of Central Asia, which the Chinese had recently excavated but could not read. A Chinese turkologist - he was a member of the Turkish-speaking minority called "Tu" - accompanied him. They hoped to shed new light on the bewildering confusion of religions that had lived side-by-side in this area until the 14-th century.
It had been a difficult search. The Chinese had allowed them a tantalizing look at a large cache of scrolls from the 9th century recently found in the Turfan depression, but would not allow the foreigner to read them. So on the day of our first meeting the Tu colleague, heavily guarded by two members of the museum's institute, was allowed to copy out by hand several texts in Sogdian - which he could not read - and Klimkeit had to read and translate in the evening at the hotel.
When I realized whom I had found by accident, I told him excitedly that he was

the person I had been looking for for years. This made him suspicious, and it took me two days to disperse his fears that I was a competitor out to steal from him. On the third evening over endless cups of green tea in his hotel room he finally opened up and shared his knowledge of Central Asia with me.
His main interest was in the interactions between Christians, Buddhists, Manicheans and Taoist in the cities and monasteries along the silk road, before these communities were wiped out by the Turkish migrations and advancing Islam in the 13th and 14th century.
Before going to China I had spent months to work out a history of central Asia from the Chinese point of view, collecting dates and material from a large number of dispersed sources. I showed him these tables and he smiled and looking up from his reading he asked "Did you know that Genghis Khan and his successors were baptized Christians?" I did know that Kublai Khan had converted to Buddhism in order to also be king of Tibet when he became emperor of China in 1280, but that he and his immediate predecessors as Mongol Khans and especially the notorious Genghis had all been Christians was startling news indeed. "Maybe this is a bit of a strong statement," Klimkeit continued, "but his mother and he too were baptized Christians, and he went into his many wars with a whole entourage of Christian priests in tow."
I shook my head: "You don't mean to say, that Christ on his visit to Hemis in Ladakh left a Christian community behind? Or did he start one in Kashmir before he died there?" "No, no these were Syrian Nestorians," he said, now laughing aloud. "But my God, from whom did you hear the rumor of Christ in Shrinagar and Hemis?" I told him that I had read an "apocryphal" book defending this theory quite recently. "You know, these are wishful, theosophical speculations from the end of the last century," he continued. "There is no tangible basis to this. I have a graduate student looking into this question, and I will send you his material." He pointed at an entry in my chronology and said, "Now, I see, that you know that the Nestorians had reached Changan by the 8th century and founded a church there." Yes indeed, there is a stele in a Xian Museum that records the deed of that church in Syrian, Sogdian and Chinese. "Well," he said, "these Nestorian Christians baptized several of the most influential Mongol khans by the 10th century. We also found texts from the 9th century in the Turfan Depression. Apparently there was a Nestorian community in Turfan living for some hundred years side by side with Buddhists and Manicheans."

The Nestorians had been a Christian sect founded by a Bishop Nestor in Constantinople, who taught that Christ had only two natures, divine and human. They denied the doctrin of the Holy Spirit. The imperial Othodox Church considered them heretics and excommunicated them at the Council of Chalcedon in the fifth century. Persecuted with the sword by the Byzantine emperors, they retreated into the remote mountains of Syria and Southern Turkey. Their saving was, that they were overrun by the Islamic expansions in the eighth century, and because they were peaceful and enemies of the Byzantine emperors and possessed a "book", they, like the Armenian Christians, were spared Islamisation. In the subsequent centuries they wandered East with the Syrian caravans along the Silk Road. Their spreading was helped by the fact

that Syriac was the *linqua franca* throughout Central Asia.

"You see,"said Klimkeit, "this is what I am looking for, manuscripts that show the symbiosis between Christianity, Manicheism, and Buddhism. You will be surprised by the extent to which this exchange of ideas went. Christ appears as the 'Buddha of Light' in several Mongolian manuscripts, and you find the typical Nestorian crosses as 'light-crosses' in the Buddhist murals of Alchi in the Upper Ladakh and even earlier hewn into rock formations in the valleys of Lower Ladakh."

I let my imagination free reign that night. There are many strange things in the religions of this area: the appearance of the five Dyani Buddhas and eventually a sixth one which has almost the functions of a monotheist supreme god, where original Buddhism is completely free of any "god" concepts.
"Where does the 'Western Paradise' of the Buddha of Love and Compassion, Amitabha, and the Buddha of the Future, Maitreya (Messiah?), who stands or sits on a 'Byzantine' imperial throne, come from?" asked Klimkeit, "and the similarities between the stories of Christ's life and that of the historical Buddha-Gautama? Were they invented in the West or in the East as the Theosophists like to speculate? I have a graduate student look into this question. We seem to be able to show that the story of Christ walking on water derives from an earlier one in the Pali canon. But for all the other New Testament stories you cannot prove anything. Are they projections of our 'communal subconscious', universal archetypes as Jung wants us to believe?"
I ask him, "what about the similarities between the concepts and methods of the Sufiya and Zen? Do they have common roots in Central Asia?"
Klimkeit admits,"As you know the Sufiya started in Samarkand between the 9th and the 12th century, they are definitely Central Asian, but Zen, I don't know, that is a purely Chinese idea."

It is after midnight before we go to bed. Kept awake by a high from drinking too much green tea I could not sleep for another hour.

After my return home a lively correspondece with Prof. Klimkeit began, in the course of which he taught me many more unexpected things about Central Asia.

8.

CYNTHIA AND THE GOLOGS

My mind was still preoccupied with Klimkeit's stories, when Cynthia burst into my circles on several levels at once. British, tall, statuesque, a little older than I with white hair, a prominent profile, and laughing, provocative eyes. She appeared on the train to Xining. She was not alone. With her traveled a young English couple, a Chinese girl, and two middle-aged Chinese men, obviously their host-guide-guardians. But these I really noticed only much later, when one

of them offered Cynthia and me a cup of unusually good black tea.

Cynthia was in a highly excited state. At first, I was simply amused by her splendid, European appearance, but soon we were engrossed in an intense conversation about China, its North-West, Buddhism, the Manicheans, and the history of Central Asia.

In between we watched an increasingly wild country move by. The untamed river bed of the Huang Ho, the Yellow River and the bare mountains of a more and more desert-like Löss-landscape. Walled villages on top of hills, people in the fields, and numerous troglodyte "houses" along the tracks. Later we left the Huang Ho valley and followed a tributary into mountains of red and dark-brown ochre. We were climbing rapidly. Slowly the light became warmer and then faded.

Suddenly, to my surprise, Cynthia rose, shook herself, and walked away demanding a release from the intensity of our conversation. I was left suspended in the middle of an unfinished sentence.

She stayed apart from me, and so I talked to Marjorie and Richard. The three were teaching an intensive English language course at a Lanzhou teacher's college for three months. Marjorie and Richard were married. Normally they taught English in Trento in Italy. All of them worked occasionally for a private English organization providing English courses as a foreign language all over the world. I was introduced to dean Yü, his daughter Irina, and Mr. Huang who were on the faculty of the Lanzhou Teachers College where they taught. Mr. Yü, a small, witty, and agile man, spoke fluently English. He was married to a White Russian woman who had remained in China after World War II, hence the unusual name of his daughter. Mr. Huang, who had contributed the excellent "fu cha", black caravan tea, was the "organizer"of their tour. In retrospect I see that he was the only well-fed man I met in China. He considered himself the rooster of the coop, and for the next few days he remained more annoyed than amused by my uninvited appearance. However, with his good Chinese manners he never said so.

When we arrived in Xining it was completely dark. I found Zhu waiting in the commotion of the station. He had organized a taxi for me to take us to the hotel, a three-minute ride for 8 yuan. He was surprised that I chose the cheapest room with bath they had to offer. We agreed to meet two days later and go to Taersi together. He helped me to get a visa extension for Taersi and the Qinghai Hu area from the local CITS on the spot.

While waiting for the visa stamp to be affixed, we were approached by a shriveled sixty-year old woman who asked Zhu to help her get a visa for Lhasa. She spoke strongly Bavarian-flavored English, and told us on the side that she had struck a deal with a Chinese military convoy to take her along on the eight-day ride to the forbidden city. She came from Munich. So close to Kumbum, she appeared like the specter of Alexandra David-Neel, the French opera singer who

in the beginning of the century lived for four years at Kumbum, became a Buddhist nun, and later, posing as a beggar nun, was the first European woman to reach Lhasa. The Bavarian woman did not get a visa, but she was determined to slip out of Xining on the military convoy - without official permission.

The first morning in Xining arrived with fog and a drizzle. On the way downstairs I ran into Cynthia and her friends, and it seemed natural to join them for breakfast. It was then that I learned that they were going to Qinghai Hu that day, and nobody objected when I invited myself.

Two hours later a motley crowd of a Canadian with a Chinese girl as interpreter, two different Japanese couples with a total of four children between them, and our party of seven rattled out of town westwards into a cold drizzle in an old Chinese bus. Somehow everyone but I was associated with the ministry of education.

We drove for several hours. Nobody knew exactly where we were. Someone distributed postcards showing an island full of gulls in a glorious blue lake: Kokonor or Qing Hai Hu, the mythical Tibetan Salt Sea. The lake had been discovered by the Russian explorer, Prince Przevalsky, late in the 19th century, but few Westerns ever reached it after him. The barren East-Tibetan Plateau surrounding its shores is inhabited by Gologs, the fiercest of the Tibetan tribes, who successfully massacred or frightened away outsiders, until they were forcefully pacified by the Chinese in the sixties.

Walled adobe villages passed, where peasants spread their grain on the road to be "threshed" by the passing cars. A seemingly endless military convoy, did the Bavarian witch ride in one of these cars? - Slowly we climbed through a long valley. And then there appeared the first Tibetan prayer flags on the hills. Rain, fog, later flurries of snow and no heat in the old bus. None of us was properly dressed for this climate. A sign proclaimed 3800 m altitude, a shallow pass, after which the brooks flowed in a westerly direction towards the desert. We had almost imperceptibly reached the Tibetan Plateau. Slowly the landscape turned into something resembling the backside of the moon. There still was some low tundra-like vegetation - and people: a wild looking man on a horse, a gun slung over his shoulder, riding into the nowhere, a cart on the road coming from nowhere. No lake in sight.

Later it became apparent that the driver had lost his way. At a road house they discovered that we were heading for Lhasa. We turned back and it took two hours to reach the missed junction to the south shore of the lake. It was four o'clock, and gray darkness was inexorably descending upon us. We had not eaten anything since seven that morning. Our leaders decided that we would drive to a commune near the south shore, where we would try to obtain lunch, tea, and supper in one. A large shallow lake appeared and everybody spilled out of the bus to run to its shore. It was saline alright, but the driver assured us that it was not Qinghai Hu.

Somewhere in the distance one could now see a low ridge of snow-covered mountains, 5000 meters high. Black specks on the grassland turned, when we came closer, into yaks, and all of a sudden life returned to the half frozen party in the bus. What magnificently primeval animals, with the funniest calves. To my surprise there were not only black, but also white yaks and some were mottled. Two giggling girls peeking from under an umbrella at the strangers were guarding the herd. A few miles further we reached the commune, a large number of new, low houses surrounded by a wall. Tea was served in the overheated community room. I fled and went to explore the village.

The main street was empty. Halfway down the road I came upon the communal store and a group of women filling flour into bags. A single man was watching from the door frame. Here they were, the women with their turquoise sashes over their back embellished with hammered silver cups, the Andean hats, the earrings, the sheepskin coats with the red, green, white embroidered borders, the man with one sleeve hanging loose, one arm under his coat - the Chinese suspected him of holding a gun - the other hand stuck in his jacket, the original Napoleonic stance.

The scene was such a surprise that I did not realize that I was face to face with the dreaded Gologs. And when I did, it was too late to run: All of a sudden a woman with splendid white teeth, laughing hysterically, came running from the darkness of the store and aggressively started to feel me all over. The beard was inspected for its authenticity by merciless pulling, then my hair, my ears and nose, finally she put her hands between my legs. . . Startled, I was not sure what to do. Finally I began to laugh, and soon everybody around us laughed. At this moment Cynthia appeared on the scene and saved me from further harassment: the attention of the women simply turned to her, her earrings, her hairdo - I escaped.

Later I found a family living in a black tent outside the commune compound, two women, a man, and several children. After an exchange of smiles and some debate among themselves, they invited me in, made me sit down, and offered me tea in a bowl that the younger woman had carefully cleaned with a blackish rag. I swallowed my revulsion together with the tea. The older woman, holding a two-year-old infant in her lap, appeared to be the grandmother, until she suddenly unbuttoned her sheepskin coat, pulled out one of her drooping breasts and began to nurse the child. . .

We were offered dinner by the commune, several regular Chinese dishes, rice, and a very original mutton soup. Mutton, after this experience, remained the only dish in China that I could not bring myself to eat.

The ride back to Xining through the night was endless and cold. We huddled as well as we could and kept the driver awake by a singing contest with the four Japanese children on the bus. For several hours they out-sang the English speaking adults. After exhausting their Japanese repertory they sang German children songs - in Japanese. But finally this diversion also died down. Shortly

before midnight we tumbled out of the bus dead tired.

Mr. Huang waited at the entrance to the hotel, with a barely embarrassed smile he demanded that I surrender 15 yuan to him for the bus ride, the entertainment, and the dinner.

9.

KUMBUM - SPECTERS OF ALEXANDRA DAVID-NEEL

Zhu joined us on the following morning for the expedition to Kumbum-Taersi. We took the local bus in the company of a selection of colorful native characters, Moslems, Tibetans, and a few of Chinese. We started out in a foggy haze, but when we crossed the low pass just before Taersi, the sun broke through, and for the first time the snow-covered mountains of the Anyemaqin Range became visible.

At first the village of Taersi was a disappointment. I had expected a Tibetan village, but it turned out to be Moslem. It distinguished itself in nothing from Xining. Along the road to the Lamasery, which nestles in a shallow bowl above the village, we passed a long row of shops catering to the pilgrims, and there they were, whole clans of Tibetans and Gologs from the remote mountain valleys: men, women and children in their sheep coats and felt hats, some in their Sunday best, colorful embroidered coats and shirts, the women bedecked with the family's silver treasures. We were lucky, they had come down for the national October holiday. Usually, we were told, they preferred to stay in the mountains, only very few settled permanently in the cities.
The small shops along the road offered not only the usual religious articles sold at places of pilgrimage like rosaries, tinny jewelry, prayer wheels, butter lamps, and wheels of the Dharma, but also such practical things as rugs, water-kettles, and the ubiquitous Tibetan hats that are so similar to those worn by the Peruvian Indians. In between the shops worked a number of coppersmiths manufacturing butter lamps and prayer wheels. Several craftsmen were hammering repousse ornaments into brass sheets that others subsequently rolled into cylinders for prayer wheels. One made knives, another big copper kettles. New shops were being built in several places.

At the end of the road, a row of twelve, white stupas or chörten crowned by the gilded symbols of the Buddhist cosmos marked the entry to the sacred district of the monastery. Chörten and houses for the monks climbed the sides of a natural amphitheater formed by the valley. The focal point of this *"topos hieros"* was occupied by a large "Buddha Hall", its gilded roof shining in the morning sun, the sacred deer, the wheel of the Dharma, and the cosmic symbols crowning its crest. The monastery in its entirety was not walled, rather each of the many

ancillary temples and buildings had their own walls, forming a number of separate, rectangular precincts.
Monks in flowing red tunics sat besides the gates and collected entry fees from the visitors. Two mothers, their infants on their arms, watched over and cheered their young, barefoot daughters in the ordeal of kneeling, prostrating, walking the length of the body, and then again, kneeling and prostrating - through ankle-deep mud, across the parking lot, a mile up into the inner sanctuary.

In a daze I slowly follow the pilgrims through the mysterious darkness of the temples, mandalas and frightful murals in vivid colors. Hidden behind curtains or shrouded by cloth, sculptures celebrating the sacred union of the Buddhas with their female opposites, gigantic prayer wheels, the mammalian smell of a hundred butter lamps, clouds of incense wafting from large cauldrons. Several women walked the way prostrating themselves before every sacred image. Soldiers in the sloppy khaki uniforms of the Liberation Army turned prayer wheels. Pilgrims repeating the words of the holy mantra under their breath: Om Mani Padme Hum. A red-robed monk read a sutra to the insistent rhythm of a drum, at noon time.

Zhu meanwhile sat outside impatiently awaiting my return. He had accompanied me through the first temple and had then asked to be excused, he was not feeling well. When I found him, he was desperately trying to revive Mr. Huang, who had passed out. Cynthia and Marjorie finally used eau-de-cologne, which promptly brought the strong man back to life again.
Mystified, I asked Zhu what had happened. He complained that I was taking such an enormously long time inside this place. A few weeks ago he had taken Jeff from MIT around, who had run through the monastery in less than two hours. "But you want to look at everything in such detail that you spent that much time alone in the first temple." I shook my head and explained to him, that I had wanted to see this monastery for a long time, and how intrigued I was by the colors, the smells, and the atmosphere. That this was in fact the first sacred place in China where I felt an immediate relationship to the art, the beauty, the symbols, and the religiosity of the people. He was aghast, raised his hands and said, "but look at these people, how they throw themselves into the mud! Their emotional ecstasy, their fervor, these frightening images, the stench in the temples. They are disgusting. This is completely un-Chinese."
Yet faithfully he stayed with me for another two hours after our English friends had returned to Xining to catch the evening train. I was tempted to get a bed in the monastery's dormitory and spend the night there in the company of several young students from Europe. But preferring the comfort of a hot bath, I returned with Zhu to Xining.

Two days of cold rain and fog made a dreamed of second visit to Kumbum impossible. Besides how could I hope to recreate the experience of that Sunday? My English friends had left, the hotel became yawningly empty. I wandered alone through Xining and became increasingly more depressed. The only cheer was a discussion with Zhu on a long walk through the dark city one night.

It started with my question about the meaning of beauty in China. The cities of China, the appearance of people, hotel rooms, everything was so exceedingly drab, devoid of any artistic spark that I had got the idea that there existed only a negligible sense and need for beauty in China. If one adds the garish artistic products of the last 100 years, the mindless copying of forms of long since dead periods that dominated the visual arts in China for centuries, the western eye cries for relief. - Or is beauty, like the expression of emotions in China, simply hidden from Western eyes?
Zhu offered the explanation that China was too poor to afford beauty, that the cities were so drab, because there was not enough money to spend on beautifying them. He pointed to the old imperial Peking as an example of beautiful architecture.
I told him that I did not mean imperial, representative beauty, but wanted to understand, what he, for instance, considered beautiful: "You must have tried to beautify your home." I told him. "If you had the means and the space to surround yourself with something beautiful, what would it be?" He considered this question quietly for a while, and then asked: "Have you been to Suzhou? Have you seen the gardens there?" I told him I had not, but that I had seen pictures of the Suzhou gardens and had an idea what they looked like. "It is a pity, that you did not go there." He said. "This is where you find the best expression of what we consider beautiful in your sense. If I had enough money and the time for it, I would create an interior garden in my house." And after some further though he continued: "You see, beautiful to us is the harmonious blending of man and nature. Not raw nature - it is merely barbaric - but nature modified to show the civilized order of the hand of man."

I was happy about this insight, and it was one of the special gifts of my visit to China that I continued to meet this sensitive and intelligent man again and again along my way.

Zhu also had a question: Why did China not produce the equivalent of the Renaissance in Europe, after she had been leading the world in technology and the sciences for a thousand years before the 16th century? - I smiled to myself. I had spent much time speculating and reading about this very puzzle, and offered him several theories.
There was Joseph Needham's "Marxist" conjecture that the driving force behind the Renaissance in Europe had been the rich merchants of Florence and Brabant, and that such a group as a social class never existed in China. Zhu was not much impressed by this theory.
At another place Needham argues that the very backbone of Chinese social stability, the imperial bureaucracy, stifled the individual development of the arts. But Zhu was not interested in the development of the arts - which, at least to me, is the most important expression of the Renaissance - but simply and alone in modern technology. "You have a point there," he said, "the imperial bureaucracy fostered primarily the literary arts. Literary proficiency was the basis of the entrance examinations for the civil service until the end of the 19th century. Engineers and scientists, by contrast, had a very low social status to

the end of the Qing dynasty."

He became excited, however, about my own "hypothesis" that it can all be blamed on the "I Ging", the Book of Changes, which influenced Chinese thinking of nature most profoundly. The I Ging is probably one of the most "anthropos-centered" systems ever devised: Man and nature are one and influence each other in infinitely many, subtle, qualitative ways. No philosophical school in China has put man in *opposition* to nature, or proposed to quantitatively observe and control nature independently of himself.- Zhu's explanation of beauty is a perfect example of the Chinese view. - How, I asked him, could men like Galileo, Copernicus, or Newton, who established experimental observations as the ultimate test of our understanding of nature, have grown in the presence of the I Ging? The I Ging is a profound collection of "psychological" insights, and much can be learned from it, but it is certainly not the book to guide - modern physics!
Or was I wrong? - There is an aspect of the I Ging that has, ironically, fascinated a number of the greatest theoretical physicists of our own time like Bohr, Heisenberg, and the contemporary Berkeleyan School. The I Ging uses a system of complementary opposites to explain man's nature, and precisely such complementary processes, like that of wave and particle, energy and mass, have been found necessary to explain the experiments of modern, 20th-century physics. There is even a more extreme school in contemporary physics - although they truly form the outer fringe of thinking - which believes that modern physics will remain incomplete until we can integrate man into our laws of nature! - Maybe, after all, C.G. Jung had a point, when he speculated in his last years, that whenever man is driven to the edge of his understanding of the world, he populates nature with his own archetypal images. - For a long time we continued these speculations during that night, and Zhu came back to them again and again.

I arrived back in Lanzhou by train shortly before midnight. Determined to avoid being taken for my money, I set out for the nearest hotel on foot, but succumbed to the decadence of a tricycle rickshaw after half a mile. I discovered that it was a wonderful feeling to sit on the old couch and drift noiselessly through the empty streets. the close view of the muscular legs of the driver right before my eyes. I had no difficulty in finding a room, but it was my first taste of a real Chinese bed: a solid board with a mattress, two fingers thick, filled with compressed cotton wool. The idea, that Chairman Mao had preferred this kind of Chinese bed to Western comforts throughout his life, offered little consolation.

Half a day I spent buying a ticket for a flight to Dunhuang and making reservations for the train to go to Chengdu, one day I walked in the rain through courtyards and back-streets of the old city, and one day I met with Cynthia.
I visited her at the college where they worked. It was located in the north-western part of town, and I had to find my way there by bus and on foot asking at every corner. By the time I reached the gates of the school I had collected

two guides and a group of curious. I was delivered to the head of the English department who knew immediately who I was. Much talk must have taken place among the faculty about this stranger. At this moment, like a *deus-ex-machina*, Mr. Huang appeared on a bicycle and offered to take me to Cynthia's apartment. Despite our shouts and knocking, she did not open. Huang eventually produced a key, but to his consternation his protege was simply not there, nor could she be found at Marjorie's and Richard's, who in fact were not there either. Great excitement and much worrying ensued. Where in the world could they all have vanished to? They had not left any message with anybody, just disappeared. I was finally put into Cynthia's apartment, under "guard", and studying the photographs of her family and friends in England on the walls, waited there for almost an hour.
When she appeared, she nonchalantly explained her "unauthorized" absence with a shopping trip in Marjorie's company. Actually, as I found out later, they had tried to deliver a note to my hotel. Mr. Huang, silently disapproving of her action, never let us completely out of his eyes during the next hour. He came bungling into her room unannounced half a dozen times with various excuses. I felt like the knight trying to steal the princess from under the fiery breath of the dragon.- But Chinese dragons are supposedly benevolent and good omens, and so, in true keeping, Mr. Huang eventually grumbled his approval to my staying for dinner with the three.

Now I discovered the "luxuries" of working in China. The three English teachers had their own cook plus attendant, who came to Cynthia's apartment three times a day to prepare the meals. And what wonderful food he prepared. The evening turned into one of my fondest memories. Around 9 o'clock all three of them escorted me to the bus, just before the gates of the school were closed for the night.

After I returned from Dunhuang, I saw Cynthia one more time. She was in custody of two female dragons, who were accompanying her to have her hair cut in the hotel I was staying in. The haircut had been Cynthia's ruse to escape her prison. This time a hug and kiss to the younger of the two "guardians" brought about their flustered demise. We spent an hour sitting on the cold steps of an abandoned tea pavilion in an apple orchard behind the hotel.

10.

THE RETURN OF THE MONKEY KING

The flight to Dunhuang, 1100 km to the north-west, left Lanzhou airport in the gray morning light. To be in time, I had taken the airport bus the night before. There I had pushed my way into the Chinese hotel over the protests of its female attendants by simply refusing to understand that this hotel was reserved

for Chinese travelers. I found a comfortable room with clean sheets on the now familiar Spartan bed, and the smiling company of my Chinese fellow travelers in the communal lavatory.

The old Antonov 44 turboprop had the advantage of flying low enough so that I had an excellent view of the vast, wild desert landscapes below. Unfortunately we avoided the high mountains of the Qinghai Plateau to the south and made a large circle following the Hexi Corridor. For a while, north of Lanzhou, we passed over vast badlands with many curious black holes in the flat areas: abandoned troglodític dwellings, entire villages in some places, that had now collapsed. Then appeared the railroad to Xinjiang surrounded by new towns and irrigated areas, beyond them the Tengger Desert, and at the northern horizon, as far as the eye could see, the western reaches of the Gobi.
At Jiuquan we made a refueling stop on a desert landing strip. Here ends the Great Wall, this is the western-most defense of China proper, the boundary of her culture and civilization. Beyond live the Barbarians, and lie the terrifying stretches of the Taklamakan, the mythical range of the Monkey King. But through the Great Gate at Jiuquan have also wandered for millennia the caravans from the West, Marco Polo, Fa Xian and the monks of India, Persia, and Syria bringing Christianity, the Buddhist Dharma, Manichean skepticism, and the Western Paradise to the Middle Kingdom, and taking in return silk, noodles, the Black Plague, and fantastic tales.

To arrive in Dunhuang by airplane is truly unfair. How wonderful this oasis must have appeared to the weary traveler who reached this spot after months on the back of a camel, or on foot, having narrowly escaped robbers, deprivations, or even death. Now it appears as a dreary and dusty town, bare of any charm, in the middle of a gray desert. Stones as far as one can see. A couple of garage-like shacks at the airport, a group of Japanese tourists welling out of one of them. Power lines fringe the road to town.

Or - were there flying carpets before our time? Still in the air, descending slowly over the row of low hills from the north, I examine every feature, memorized from Aurel Stein's maps, from my vantage point. There is the wash, the bend where the caves of Yülin must be, north-east of Dunhuang. Then appear the ruins of the Wall to the west that protected the Chinese outpost during the Han and again during the middle Tang dynasties from the merciless desert and the raiding Huing-nu. Very dim, snow covered, one can see the mountains at the edge of the Tibetan plateau in the south-east. And there, in the low pass between a huge dune and a bony rib of mountains, there are the Caves of the Thousand Buddhas. And I imagine that this must have been the view that Faxian, the pilgrim-monk returning from India, must have had when the Monkey King, with the stolen Iron Fan from the Fairy Queen, flew him through the air across the heat of the Flaming Mountains.

The tourist hotel was completely filled with Japanese, French, and German tour groups, and I was sent to the Dunhuang County Hotel on the other side of town,

a walk of ten minutes. The "town" consisted of a dusty intersection with a statue of a "feitian", a flying Apsara replacing Chairman Mao, a few department stores, a movie theater, a tiny museum, a cotton mill, and several hundred one-story houses. All of this was surrounded by a ring of irrigated cotton fields and abruptly, the great, gray desert.

At the county hotel, catering to Chinese military officers, nobody spoke English, but the girl at the check-in immediately sent me upstairs to room 222. The price for the night would be 3 yuan. Full of expectations I carried my bag upstairs - and found a dormitory with ten Chinese beds. In one slept a man with a felt hat pulled over his face, covered by three sets of blankets. On the next bed sat a girl of about 28 with a head of feminist curls and a distinct New York accent. Two more guys with immense backpacks were having lunch. - I had finally arrived at my place!

One of the two munching characters had an enormous black hillbilly beard that nearly hid his gnome-like features. I detected a strong German accent. He was from Augsburg, and yes, his name was Sepp - in unadulterated Bavarian. The two were "Bademeeschter", "bath-masters", or life guards, at a public swimming pool and temporarily unemployed. They had been traveling in China for the past two months. I persuaded them to share lunch with me and had a good talk with them. They had seen most the places worth seeing, and had seen them well. I was quite impressed.
Andy - she came after all from California - on the other hand was the prototype of a drifter. She had been on the road for most of the past five years, in South America at first, then in Taiwan, and now in South-East Asia and China. Oh, occasionally she made a little money by writing an article or two, "I am a journalist, you know." But she had learned Chinese in Taiwan, and then she told me that she had been initiated into Tantric Buddhism in South America of all places. At this time she was traveling with a friend, the man with the hat in bed. They had met a few weeks ago. For over a year, he had been collecting material on the urbanization of Inner Mongolia for a thesis at Berkeley and was now just touring the sights. He was down with a bad virus and a high temperature, and was sweating it out. No, thank you, he would not take any aspirin. I lay down to sleep an hour to make up for the lost night.

I was awakened by loudspeakers blaring the "The East is Red" into a fading sunset. After that a female voice spoke for more than half an hour. I imagined political propaganda, but Andy enlightened me, it was only the news, there was no more propaganda. The crowd in the dormitory had grown larger by another girl from California and two Japanese "revolutionaries" with fierce Manchu mustaches and hair to their navels.

Originally I had had in mind to rent a bike and pedal the ten miles to the caves in reverence of the hallowed place. Surrounded by so many "children" I thought it childish now, and hitch-hiked a ride with a French tour group from the foreigner's hotel instead.
The morning had been sunny, but when we reached the caves it had become

overcast, gray, windy, and very cold. I quickly found that all caves were locked, that there was no photographing, and that the only way to see them was as part of a guided tour.

Jean-Claude, the leader of the French group, was gracious enough to invite me to join them for the day over the grumblings of his Alsacian tourists. Shivering with cold, we were herded around by a female student from the Dunhuang Institute. There was no lingering or straying from the group. The treasured frescoes resided in total darkness, illuminated only by the erratic flashlight of the girl-guide, who rattled off trite stories about monks who had fought the evil landlords and about Chinese troops that had defended the caves against invading Tibetan barbarians: converting the Jataka stories on the walls into socialist-nationalist propaganda.
We were shown 40 caves selected by the institute as suitable for public consumption. Caves that Jean-Claude and I knew were of artistic and historical importance could not be opened. When I angrily (sic!) argued that I was a "specialist" - a ploy that had never failed in the USSR in such situations - I was told by the girl that Western specialists were not wanted in Dunhuang, and that I could leave. I imagined having flown to Paris to see the Louvre, and having arrived there, to find that the French government had ordered the lights to be turned off, so that one had to walk through the rooms with a guide and a flashlight. In addition certain paintings had been veiled, because they showed scenes offensive to present-day, official morality... I told the girl that I would send a letter to my government to close the National Gallery to visitors from the People's Republic of China except to show them forty paintings - of my selection - with a flashlight at night. Now it was her turn, and she heatedly told me that the French and English had stolen the Dunhuang manuscripts, the Germans had cut out the frescoes from Turfan and Kucha, and some American couple had come and taken unauthorized photographs of the Dunhuang murals!
I was angry with the Chinese for their ignorant arrogance and with myself for having come so far and then spoiling my day by getting upset. But five days on the hard Chinese beds, a week without a bath, the drab Northern Chinese cities, the lousy food since Beijing, and the cold had taken their toll.
Depressed I wandered through town that night questioning my crazy trip, its worth, and my reason for being in China in the first place. Perhaps, it would be better to fly to Japan and spend four weeks roaming through its southern islands.

The two Bavarians had left and the girls had been moved to another room. Determined to improve my lot, I tried all the empty beds and found one that had some kind of expansion mattress instead of the usual boards.
A red-orange-yellow light woke me at six next morning. I ran up to the roof just in time to see the sun rise from behind the mountains. The houses, the chimney of the cotton factory, and the many poplars stood in black silhouettes before a clear, cold desert sky. A row of pastel-colored silk banners, last vestiges of the prayer flags of long ago, were flapping in the fresh breeze. At this moment the loudspeakers started blaring again "The East is Red". In the distance a donkey

brayed his sad cadence.

I had no plans, my ambitions had been fulfilled. Time fell away. I found myself in the middle of the old caravansary now taken over by the long-distance bus station. Andy and her friend had taken me there. On the way she had described in trite details her "initiation" into Esoteric Buddhism by an old guru in Rio de Janeiro.
It was still cold. I had the feeling that I was slipping into a happening, that events started to move of their own volition. Amid the confusion of a large, colorful crowd of people we climbed into a bus to the caves. But I needed to be alone. I got off the bus at the entrance to the wash that led to the caves and walked.

All of a sudden, the transparent quiet of a completely still desert morning surrounded me. I walked along the wash towards the caves. As the river bed, cut into the gray desert by centuries of flash floods deepened, yellow-ochre sandstone appeared. A steep bank grew on the right. On the left, softly undulating hills stretched to the foot of barren, dark-brown, wildly eroded mountains. Violet shadows reflected the deep blue of the sky.
The caves appeared unexpectedly behind a bend of the western bank, which had risen to the height of three or four stories. Hundreds of black holes in the brilliantly lit, yellow rock wall, two three and four tiers high, facing the morning sun. This wall continued for two kilometers as the wash opened into a wide valley before disappearing into the black throat of a deep canyon in the mountains to the north. Above the caves hovered a huge sand dune.
At the bottom of this wasteland, trees - gold-colored, long-stemmed poplars and cottonwoods - covered with the white floss of their seeds. Between the trees water, carefully retained by dikes and channels, on which float among hundreds of sunspots, the reflections of the sky and the mountains. Uncontained water trickled away into the desert sand forming a shallow lake. In it rested the sun, below and above the jagged line that marks the edge of the earth.
One of the power spots on this earth. Here at the crossroads between India, Tibet, Persia, the Hellenistic world, and China, the people, the mysteries, the tales and colors of east and west commingled. It has lost none of its magic.

A footpath angles up the cliff above the caves leading to a half-ruined chörten. Climbing it I trigger avalanches of sand that slip over the edge. A vast land of sand hills and valleys slowly opens, rising towards another mountain-high dune in the far distance. How liberating it is to come here from the overcrowded cities.
I seem completely alone. And then, across a new ridge, in a semi-lunar valley lies a young woman. Black Chinese cloth shoes, jeans, a blue European trench coat, a red kerchief over black hair. She has a pretty face, Chinese. She is sleeping. - I must not disturb her.

A few valleys further I find my place. There is nothing that distinguishes it to the naked eye, a spiral of undisturbed sand drawn upon the waves by the wind of another night. Secret shadows and the caves of the millennia deep in the earth

below me.
I sit down in the timeless posture of the Buddhas and close my eyes, and as my mind grows quiet, a great clarity arrives. It is as if all surrounding space becomes transparent and is contained inside my mind. Yet with over-sharpened senses I can touch all things outside myself. Time has contracted into an infinitesimally thin present, a circle on which the world inverts. Such are the moments when the imaginary force lines of this world become passable. They span the dizzying abysses below like high-wires, and as I cross them they produce the pure tones of taut strings.
As I listen to the clear sounds coming from the valley below me, the monks once more welcome the travelers from afar: Nestorian Syrians bringing the Christian Cross from the shores of the Mediterranean, Indians, who have crossed the Himalayan snows on bare feet, rich Sogdians from Samarkand, Syriac speaking Manichean merchants, and Jewish Rhadanites from the Rhone in search of pearls and silk, Mongols on horses from the steppes of the Gobi, precious Chinese women captured by fur-clad Tibetan barbarians, Tokharians from the center of the Taklamakan, looking like Gothic knights, and wandering Taoist monks from China with inkstones and paper and the first printing press with movable types.
At night, they light great fires in the valley below the caves and tell each other stories and fairy-tales, and the clear desert sky, the stars, and the power of the place erase the Babylonian confusion of languages and scripts. They all copy each others holy books: Old Testament stories in Chinese, Manichean prayer books in Turkish, Nestorian credos in Sogdian. Christ becomes the Manichean Buddha of Light, the Manichean apocalypse merges with the fearful visions of the Tibetan Bön, the Buddha Maitreya becomes the Messiah who carries a Nestorian-Christian cross into the future, and secret Taoist sexual practices, promising to procure eternal life right here on earth, mix with Bön, Chinese Taoist, and Indian concepts to form Esoteric Buddhism. The constructs of Indo-European religious thought are stripped bare by Chinese practicality to the very bones of Chan-Zen and Sufiya. - Every once in a while one of the travelers stays behind to join the hermits of the desert and search for his enlightenment.

When Aurel Stein, Sven Hedin, and the White Russians, who after the Russian Revolution hid in the caves, threaten to enter my vision, I shake them off and open my eyes. The sun has climbed into the zenith and burns down mercilessly. A dry wind has sprung up and drives a sand devil down the slopes of the great dune. The intensity of the desert light has become unbearable.
Once more I empty my thoughts, and out of the dark of the caves, slowly, appear the forms and colors of their frescoes before my inner eye. The great Buddha standing four stories high in the pagoda, his feet the size of a man, his head disappearing in the dim height under the lotus roof radiating quiet. A large Tang-Buddha lying in paranirvana, on his right side, one arm angled under his head, the other stretched on the side of his body. On the walls behind him his disciples from all the lands that knew him, grimacing in exaggerated distress and fear. Only one, Ananda, near the Buddha's head, is quiet and with his hand cupped behind his right ear strenuously listens to the last words of the master.

Deeper into time and space. Rows and rows of Buddhas covering whole walls on a dark red-brown background echoing the color of the desert rocks. Meditating in a hundred different positions, standing, teaching with overlong hands and fingers in sacred mudras. The once-white haloes surrounding their bodies have become black with age. Jatakas telling the legendary stories of the life of the Buddha Gautama and the miracles of the Bodhisattvas after him. Azure mountains, deer grazing between them. Turquoise and dark-brown colors, light blues surrounding figures in excited movement. The Buddha of the future standing in a great oval mandorla or sitting in Western fashion on an imperial throne. Apsaras, flying heavenly maidens with long colorful garments, everywhere, dancing between the meditating Bodhisattvas, or making music on Persian instruments. The Western Paradise of Amitabha: great geometrical palaces crowded with people and musicians.

The wind has become stronger. The dune is singing. I sit at the center of a spiral of flying sand and sound. Above me appears the ceiling of the most incredible cave. Colors of bright reds, greens, deep blue, purple, yellows. Dark-skinned Apsaras with lazuli-blue haloes and flowing white gowns, holding emerald banners, float in wild movements on red streams of color through a blue-green sea. In between fearful disembodied monsters, fantastic birds, wheels, griffins, flowers, men wrestling. In the center, inside squares inside other squares - the Lotus. And then the entire ceiling begins to rotate, everything moves, unbearable sounds fill my head, and in a white flash the whole cave explodes in brilliant light.
I open my eyes and see the desert around me burning, clouds of sand fly like great flames over the mountains. - Far in the distance recedes the Monkey King in his yellow mask accompanied by a black-haired woman with a red kerchief and a blue coat.

That night Andy volunteers to introduce me to the secrets of eating in a hole-in-the-wall restaurant. In a side street we find a small place run by a friendly family. Andy eats only vegetarian, I get a beef dish. We share the vegetables. The door opens and in walks the Woman from the Dunes. Two tall young men are with her. Andy asks them over and share our table. They speak only Chinese. Andy makes the conversation. Hong, "Rainbow", is an actress in one of the Beijing Theatre companies, her friends are a painter and a gay stage designer. They have toured Xinjiang with the company and are on their way home. They ask about Arthur Miller's "Death of a Salesman", which played to record audiences in Beijing. After supper we walk through town to have a beer at the tourist hotel. The moon is full and clear. Hong animatedly talks of her roles in Western plays, describes the cod pieces the male actors have to wear to hide their bare chests. Later, in his tiny hotel room, in the light of a single bulb, the painter shows us sketches he made in the dunes this morning and others of the Moslem markets of Xinjiang.

11.

HARD IS THE ROAD TO SHU

Alas! Behold! How Steep! How High!
The road to Shu is hard, harder than climbing heaven...
The Great White Peaks block the west approach. A bird track,
Just wide enough to be laid across the top of Omei Shan.
Earth tottered, mountain crumbled, brave men perished,
And then came the stone hanging-bridges, the stairs leading to the sky...

Peak upon peak, less than a foot from the sky,
Where cataracts and roaring torrents make noisy clamor,
Dashing upon rocks, a thunderclap from ten thousand glens.
An impregnable place like this -
I sigh and ask why should anyone come here from far away?...

Groaned the poet Li Bai twelve hundred years ago on his way to the Kingdom of Shu. The road to Shu is still hard, and the mountains and torrents have lost none of their fierceness. For a night and a day already I am lying on a "hard sleeper" on the train to Chengdu and no end is in sight. We are more often in dark tunnels than out in the open, pass bridges that are mere tracks on a trellis, over dizzying gorges, in which wild torrents roar from the mountains. Occasionally a bridge has been washed away by the last rain, and then the train is forced to creep along at a walking pace. Or we wait for hours at a tiny station to let a train from the opposite direction pass. The line has only a single-track. The mountains are towering into the clouds. No sun. Hardly a village. Few people.

During the night we climbed across the pass at the border from Shaansi to Sichuan, 3000-m high. It was cold, and the bed was hard. Now, since the gray morning, we follow a river down-hill that grows wider and wilder from hour to hour. My Chinese map hardly makes note of it, although it appears bigger than the Rhine.
I am the only Westerner on this crowded train, one among two thousand Chinese. At the last stop an old Chinese man approached me in English, he is from Oakland, travelling in search of his roots and relatives. His fellow travelers had told him about me, and he had gone all through the train to have a look.

The "hard sleeper" cars are like caves on wheels. From a passage on one side of the car extend open compartments, each with six beds, three on top of each other on either side. I have a coveted "zhong", a middle-berth. Below and across the isle lives an officer with his family, and above me a woman doctor, who in the comany of several other doctors travels to a congress of physicians in Chengdu. Amazing are the immaculate, white linens. But in this confined space it is hard to get used to the incessant spitting of everybody onto the floor.

Every couple of hours the train attendant comes with a wet mop to clean up.

The cleaning woman brought me a cup with lid for my tea and hot water from her thermos, courtesy of China Railways. I learn new words: "yo mei-yo" and "kai shui", boiled water. How meaningful these first words of a new language can be. Have you or not? to which the lapidary answer is "yo", I have, or "mei-yo" I have not, a room, tickets, or food, as the case may be.
My provisions are a few dry crackers, some apples, and "fu-cha", hard, compressed brick-tea from Lanzhou. I am offered cigarettes and things to eat. Someone sees my "horrible" tea and gives me of his own leaves. He puts them into my cup and pours kai-shui over them. My teeth replace the strainer. It is green tea, and whenever I have finished, new water appears and my cup is refilled. The leaves last for a whole day.

Walking through the carriages hungry I found a "dining car" last night. It was empty. I decided to just sit down. Soon a belligerent-looking conductor appeared and started to shout at me. Naturally I understood nothing. I smiled and put two fingers into my open mouth to indicate my interest in eating. After more shouting on his and smiles on my part he walked away shaking his head. And then out of nowhere appeared a bowl of rice and an omelet. Later the conductor reappeared and brought me a bottle of beer. His mien had changed, he had accepted me as just another curiosity. - Of course, I paid.
Everybody is burning with curiosity. Smiles, gestures, pantomimes, and little drawings have to substitute for my insufficient vocabulary. Whenever I am at a loss, I pull out my tiny Pinyin-English dictionary that I had put together on my computer at home and try a new word. Everyone attempts to understand my strange sounds, and invariably someone pulls out a paper and pen and tries to enlighten me by scribbling the word down - in Chinese characters. So convinced is everyone of the power of the written word. There still is no unified Chinese language, only the characters are universally understood. They are disheartened by this stranger who cannot even read. Sadly, my dictionary is not of much use; apparently Chinese has so little redundancy that a word pronounced poorly and out of context is unintelligible.

Most persistent is a broad-shouldered, muscular man of forty. He knows as much English as I know Chinese. It turns out that he is Manchu, from the far north-eastern corner of China, and a surgeon. His directness and inquisitiveness is most impolite by Chinese standards, but so refreshing by mine. He is a member of the group of physicians travelling to Chengdu. Then there is a quiet, frail woman doctor of the same age with a narrow, elegant face tempered by the knowledge of her profession. She is beautiful, but she disappears when I say so to her Manchu colleague.
In the evening one woman complains of nausea caused by the long train ride. I offer to "cure" her with the old Shiazu-acupressure trick of pressing two points on her ear lobes. After some debate my experiment is tried, and sure enough her nausea vanishes almost instantly. A great commotion ensues among the physicians, and all want to find out what I know about acupressure, and so I sit

there in the dark train to Chengdu trying to teach Chinese doctors Shiazu.

In the afternoon a high-strung woman appears and in a peculiar, educated English invites me to her compartment. Delighted, I join her. She tells me that she is a professor of botany from Xining. She must be 40 and has three children. The youngest lives with her parents south of Chengdu she confesses, because she does not like to cook and besides, there is not enough room and time for the child. She is writing the definitive monograph on the gentians of the Qinghai Plateau, the work of her life time. While talking to me, her hands incessantly knit a large sweater for this child, whom she is going to see for the first time in years.
How familiar she sounds, and I become aware that these people are not at all exotic. Their thoughts, their worries, their concerns, and ideals are so entirely contemporary, and despite the obvious differences in environment are closer to ours than those of my Russian friends. Where is the Oriental Mystique, the impenetrable Chinese mind?
I look around and realize that during all the trying confinement in this train, the discomfort, the oppressive crowding I have not heard an angry word or seen an argument. Nobody defends "his" seat or bed, one sits and talks with whatever kindred soul one finds. There is an emotional detachment, a clear-headedness that is perplexing and - infectious. For a while I soar on a feeling of a lucidity of mind, which I had never experienced before, incredible really, in the middle of this most human press.
But carried away by the candidness of the conversation with my new botanist friend, the passionate Westerner takes over again and overwhelms the good woman with all his burning questions: What are the intellectuals of China doing in this most singular hour of their history? Are they aware of how singular this moment is? Where is this country going? Up? Down? Will the new-found freedom continue? What are you doing to understand all this? Her face goes blank in painful, tired distaste over such a raw, barbaric outbreak of uncivilized emotions. "I work," she says simply.

Only much later did I understand that during these two days on the train I got as close to the "Chinese people" as I ever would during my journey, and that I had been given an experience of applied Confucianism that no philosophical textbook could have provided. There is a Chinese character that describes my state of exhilaration: "ping". It means plain and level, but also clear-headed and emotionally controlled.

12.

THE GOOD PEOPLE OF SICHUAN

The train attendant with her mop mercilessly chased everybody out of bed at two in the morning. The train had been rolling along at an unaccustomed speed for hours without stopping, and I had been deeply asleep. Now the lights of

stations and cities pass in the darkness of the night; we have reached the plains of Sichuan, one of the most densely populated places in the world.
All my friends were sleepily hanging around or sitting on their beds. Someone lit a first cigarette. Kai-shui from the hot water boiler at the end of the next car was poured one last time over the old leaves. My Manchu friend brought me an apple for breakfast, and the botanist was frantically searching all along the train for the Oakland Chinese, who, she insisted, would help me find a hotel in Chengdu. In the end, another two hours passed before we reached Chengdu - 36 hours from Lanzhou.

The pandemonium in the darkness of Chengdu Station was overwhelming. All the hundreds of people were running for the only exit gate in near complete darkness. Motorized pedicabs plowed through the crowd, hawking taxi services, the only transportation, since the buses were not running yet. Friends and relatives were searching for their kin. Yet despite the confusion there was little pushing, shoving, or shouting.
I was physically pinned down by my botanist who all of a sudden, in addition to her other baggage, carried a violin case under her arm, the amazing woman. She insisted that I had to wait for the appearance of the man from Oakland, who, of course, was not overly enthusiastic when he finally arrived and was being obliged to take the stranger into his CITS taxi. I offered to pay for a share of the ride, and not surprisingly, was charged the entire fare when we reached the hotel. There was nobody at the desk. I politely declined the offer to share the room of my new benefactor, and went to sleep on a leather sofa in the lobby.

A large room, a real bed, a steaming hot bath, and a breakfast of scrambled eggs, toast, and coffee at seven thirty in the morning gave the world a different appearance. Armed with a map of town, I set out to explore Chengdu.
The map showed the tourist sights in small pictures: temples, parks, and above all "Du Fu's Hut", the place where the famous Chinese poet is supposed to have lived in the 8th century.

First of all, however, I had to chart my continuing journey. Originally I had had in mind to go to Chungking and from there take a boat down the Jangtse River to Wuhan, the classical escape route from Sichuan. Wuhan, I had learned, had become the Pittsburgh of China and offered little to recommend itself. The river trip and Chungking, an industrial mountain city overlooking the Jangtse, still held some fascination. The two lifeguards from Augsburg, who had come this way, had, however, shrugged their shoulders and declared, "We don't know why everybody is so excited about the Jangtse River Gorges, der Rhein ist schöner!" I believed them, since I was all too aware that one had to know much more about the history of China and the river than I did to fully appreciate the significance of all the names of hills, rapids, and sights. I had been undecided.

How would it be if I went south instead to Kunming and then treated myself to a final bicycle trip through the hills of Guilin before returning to Beijing? Beauty, I was hungry for beauty, my kind of beauty - colors, sun, and blue skies - and

they would be found "South-of-the-Clouds" in Yunnan! But before that I must go to Mount Omei Shan in southern Sichuan. Ever since I had first read about this mountain sacred to Buddhism for fifteen hundred years, it had exerted a magnetic attraction, and I had to find out why. Going south from there would be logical, but how? by train? by plane? and what would the cost of this excursion be?
So with my map in my hand I tried to steer straight across town to the office of China Airlines. On the way my worries together with all my intentions of visiting the historical sights of Chengdu were wiped out by the excitement of simply watching the Good People of Sichuan.
The straightest line to CAAC led me down a narrow lane right across from the hotel, and within a few blocks I was engulfed by the life of ancient China. Rows of low, two-story wooden houses lined the street with large doors closed by boards that would open into the workshops of craftsmen, a store, or a kitchen-restaurant. Upstairs were the living quarters, with windows often hiding behind flower boxes full of geraniums. No more walls as in northern China, all life was freely exposed to the street. A barber was shaving his customers on reclining chairs across from a dentist who was fitting a set of false teeth into grand-uncle's mouth, all in full view of the passers-by.

Nowhere in eastern or northern China had I seen so many craftsmen. One made bamboo sieves for steamed bread, big ones and small ones that would fit a regular home wok. I watched him and his deft hands several times as I walked the same way in the coming days. Next to his shop a retired grandfather sat in a low bamboo chair reading a book watching his son's precious only child. Two days later he was still there. He had laid his book aside and was holding the child over the gutter, with the child's behind protruding from his split Chinese pants. I never ceased to admire this most ingenious invention. Children of either sex up to four years of age wear split pants over their bare bottoms: no diapers needed, lots of air, no rash either.
Another man made huge circular hoops from bamboo, big wheels with spokes radiating from the center. For a long time their use remained a mystery to me. After he had finished, two women would fasten dozens of white paper flowers to the bamboo frames. These would then be propped up for sale leaning to the wall of the house. I tried to take a photograph and made the women unexpectedly angry at me. One morning I found the answer to the puzzle, these were funeral "wheels", to be placed on the graves. The strange ways of China: after the Buddhist craze was over, certain practical aspects of Buddhism remained. Buddhism had promised a life after death. By contrat the Taoists were searching for an elixir of eternal life on earth, and Confucius refused to discuss death all together. And so, despite the fact that nobody really understood why or what they were doing, safe was safe, the Buddhist priests remained in control of the business of burying the dead. The big white flower-wreaths are the Wheels of the Dharma, white being the color of mourning, and they are symbols of a safe transcendence, - where to, nobody remembers.

Meanwhile, long live the living, and ah! for the kitchens of Sichuan! Bare holes

in the wall, an open hearth, the fire under the woks fanned by an electric table ventilator, a few tables on the street or in the back of the kitchen, excellent beer and fiery hot food!
The CAAC office had gone for lunch at eleven thirty I hadn't eaten yet, there was nothing better to do but find something to eat. I had been watching a cook, who was skinning what I thought were live snakes in front of his kitchen. Before I knew, his energetic wife had put me behind a table, and a dish of "si yü", which I translated into garden snakes, was before me. They were excellent and hot, hot! Only a month later, in Japan did I find out that they had been eels. This experience broke down my last reservations, and in the days to come I ate my way once through the Sichuan kitchen: Hot, fried tofu looking like strange mushrooms, hot and sour tripe cut into thin strips, a rousing but unidentifiable mixture of innards, wonderful soups, and on Sunday chicken with peanuts in a fancy restaurant for an even fancier price.

And the markets were again crowding the streets! One whole block was taken up by tailors. They were cutting the patterns free-hand on a large table under a canvas awning. Next to their tables their wives were pedaling the sewing machines, and almost before one's eyes a ladies' gray silk suit would emerge. - Many of the young women wear these gray silk suits, elegantly cut pants and a narrow-waist jacket. Generally I do not like pant suits on women, but the lithe, feminine Chinese look devastatingly good in them. - Between the tailors a bird man exhibited dozens of bamboo cages with singing birds for sale, a bourgeois luxury forbidden during the Cultural Revolution.
Other streets were occupied by fruit vendors with the most beautiful apples, the first mandarin oranges, green on the outside, but excellent inside, and persimmons, conjuring up memories of another autumn, in Georgia, three years earlier. A lane of tofu vendors, home-made in dozens of different styles, smoked, in sheets, in water, and next to them the meat markets.
A young girl sold whole rabbits, neatly skinned except for their long ears and little white fur boots on their feet - to show that they were truly rabbits. They were draped next to each other over the rim of a basket on the back of her bicycle. Another girl carried a basket full of carefully arranged dahlias on her bike, appearing like blazing stars in this world of subdued colors.

After three days of walking in silence through the foggy and often smoggy town I longed for someone to talk to. I had hoped to be able to contact Zhu, who was in town with his wife and had promised that he would find me through the Lüxinshe office. I left my room number there, but there were no messages and no calls. I got sufficiently lonely to find myself sitting in the lobby of the hotel one afternoon watching ugly Japanese and Americans stream by, hoping to meet somebody. A hungry-looking, middle-aged American woman sidled up to me and started a conversation. I woke up, ashamed of myself for not being able to hide my loneliness. I left her in the middle of her preamble slightly shocked. A day later, while not looking for anybody in particular, in the dark corridor of my hotel floor I bumped into a bearded, tall American with two huge backpacks slung over his shoulder. I knew at once that he was the man I had been waiting

for, and spent a most intense afternoon with him and his British wife. A molecular biologist from Dartmouth, he had been teaching in Beijing, and was now being escorted on a tour of a few select places. They had just returned from a visit to Omei Shan, one day only, driven halfway up the mountain by car. But he could answer many of my questions about the route that nobody else had been able to. He proudly showed me a simple, time-worn wooden carrying beam that he had bought from a farmer in Omei. His wife laughed, "He has collected such a number of peasant tools from all over the world, that I don't know where to put this one." And he defends his love for beautiful, used objects of vanishing cultures. We became so engrossed on that night in the hotel dining room that I walked out without paying for my supper....

Sunday I got up early and wandered through the poor parts of town that had been the Tartar quarter fifty years ago and watched the morning life. Grandmothers tending their grandchildren while their young mothers did the laundry. A student father reading a book while pushing the perambulator, a combination of playpen and four-wheeled cart made of bamboo. In a flood of bicyclists an amazing sight, a man, his wife sitting sideways on the frame before him, and on a small wooden stool on the rear carrier, standing, their brightly-dressed daughter with outstretched arms, as if flying in a circus act. As they drove past me, I saw that the little girl was tied with a wide scarf to her father's back. And then there were armies of young girls pulling long wooden barrels on two wheels, scooping the "night-soil" from the public latrines to take it to the fields. Nothing is wasted in this land.

No sign of Zhu though. I had found an intriguing fantasy map of Omei Shan, a drawing of wild mountains and clouds with the monateries marked in Chinese. On the left was a ruler in meters giving the altitude of each. Divided by 300 would give one the hours it would take to hike between them! - So I finally decided that I would go by train to Omei Shan, see what would happen to me there, and then continue, whenever the spirit moved me, to Kunming.

13.

THE WOMAN IN THE CLOUDS

At the crack of dawn, the mercury streetlamps still fighting with the evil, gray night-fog, I board the crowded bus to the railway station. Hemmed in among silent shadows I feel as if going to the underworld. At a street stand, illuminated by a bare light bulb, I buy a steamed bun for sustenance on the way before being carried along by a stream of thousands of half-asleep people into the darkness of a waiting train. There is hardly a seat left, people without seat assignments are standing in the isles. I find my seat across from a man who is trying to stop the crying of a baby in his lap.

A new wave of people presses in, among them a young woman in baggy pants, a blue sweater, wearing owlish glasses - and short, thin, blond hair. She looks out of place among all the dark figures with her small, blue rucksack. The baby is beginning to cry again most pitifully. His mother has found a seat far away at the end of the car. I offer to change seats with her, and somebody suggests that I should really sit next to the blond foreigner. After all, two strange birds belong together.
My new neighbor is German, a sociologist, "with a job," she assures me. She has visited friends in Hong Kong and from there ventured into China. "Only for three weeks, and mainly to see the Holy Mountain." About which she had first heard from her Hong Kong friends. I suggest that we could explore the Omei Shan together.
Across from us sits a young, ravishingly beautiful Chinese girl. I cannot remove my eyes from her quiet, oval face that, with a pair of unusually large eyes and supported by a prominent, long neck, reminds me of a Rafael Madonna. If I could only speak as much Chinese as German...
The train clatters through a green-gray landscape of rice fields, villages, and rows of trees that have had all their lower branches cut off for fire wood. Wild rivers pass, the upper reaches of the Chiang Jiang, the Jangtse River. Through the open rear door - ours is the last car of the train - the tracks are running away to infinity. By noon the day is still gray, overcast, and foggy. I have not seen the sun for weeks.

A surprising number of people get off at Omei station, and we all pile into an already full bus. Standing, my German companion and I hang on for dear life as the bus races through villages and up an unimproved mountain road in endless turns. All I can see are the lower reaches of the mountains, gorges, waterfalls, people bent to the ground toiling in the fields.
After an hour this journey comes to an end in the middle of muddy puddles, on a level place surrounded by open vendor stands and low shacks. Behind them rises the mountain, veiled in fog and drifting clouds, more imagined than visible. I find something to eat for us in an open kitchen - a bowl of rice and shredded pork. I even discover an office of sorts where I leave my heavy travel bag in exchange for a dubious chit of paper. In silent agreement we set out together on the path that leads uphill.

It has become afternoon. A road winds at first through fields dotted with trees and single, wooden farm houses. A lovely, slowly rising, green country crisscrossed by rivulets of clear, cold water. Here and there farmers are working in the fields. We cross the playground of a school full of children. They laugh and wave at us. Abruptly the path becomes steeper, and we find ourselves in dense, deciduous forest, interrupted here and there by a smattering of pines and bamboo groves. A porter comes downhill carrying an old man on his back doubled up in a wooden crate, a pilgrim returning from a visit to the mountain. The first stairs appear. Whenever the path leads uphill there are stairs, big stone slabs, carefully stacked for small Chinese feet. Along the path stand wooden shacks where wisend old men sell gnarled walking sticks, woven

bamboo sandals to protect the shoes of pilgrims, roots, herbs, and medicinal plants among bottles of chi-shui, lemon soda and Chinese cola. Christine buys one of the pairs of woven straw sandals to take home. As the light wanes the clouds descend and shroud us in a wet, gray stillness. We have yet to reach the first monastery.

Wan Nian Si, the Monastery of a Hundred Years, where time stands still, appears suddenly from the fog at the end of another, sheer endless flight of steps. A garden, tea bushes, fog dripping from their polished leaves, the bright autumn colors of dahlias muted by the mist, black water in a lotus pond, a Buddha riding on a life-size, white elephant. Successive tiers of broad, dark, wooden buildings climb the hillside. Steps lead through three courtyards to an upper sanctuary where another, smaller and lovelier Buddha sits meditating on a lotus flower.

It is too late to go on. A young girl takes us upstairs over a wooden gallery to a room at the corner of the upper sanctuary. Two separated four-poster beds with gauze curtains, a table, two chairs, and a washstand. The walls are bare wood, there are small, paneled windows on two sides, a wooden latch closes the door. My heart misses a beat, but without hesitation Christine agrees that we should take the room.
We have supper together with several other wanderers by the light of three flickering oil lamps. The food arrives through two holes in the wall that are illuminated from the kitchen behind them by candles. A bowl of steaming rice appears first, then two vegetables. Through the holes I see the great cauldron of rice, baskets, the fire flaring under a wok, and people performing an immense shadow play on the opposite wall.

When we return to our room, a candle has been lit for us. I slip into my bed, and after modestly blowing out the candle Christine disappears behind the curtains of hers. The beds are hard as expected, the sheets are clean but damp, and the blanket weighs a nightmare.
I must have fallen asleep quickly, because I wake up with a start. The windows rattle and the entire room is filled with an incredible noise. It starts very low, slowly builds to a great crescendo, and then stops. I sit bolt upright and cannot tell whether I am dreaming or in an earthquake. It is pitch dark, and again the same low sound, like a huge insect. It stops abruptly, and I hear voices, then singing in the distance, cymbals, the sound of a drum. My senses are at a fever pitch, and suddenly I feel my blanket being blown away, and a woman slips into my bed. Languidly she takes my hand and guides it across the mountains and valleys of her body to a hidden river of hot cream.

I wake up next morning alone, no signs of the night. Her bed is empty. A handful of monks chant in the upper sanctuary. I find Christine. at the entrance to the temple. It is still dark. Hidden by the shadow of an enormous wooden column we watch the morning service. An age-old monk in a dark-red robe leads the proceedings before the Buddha image, several younger monks sit on the side. The service is chanted to the accompaniment of cymbals and two large

drums. There are endless repetitions of the same phrase. Every now and then all rise, circumambulate the Buddha, kneel, prostrate themselves, and return again to their places. Two young Chinese men, voyeurs like us, stand near the door watching in a state of obvious agitation, chain-smoking cigarettes.

We share a few cookies, some tea, and a handful of badly mangled kiwis that I had bought from a farmer's woman the day before. Soon we are on our way again.
Stairs - long stairs, short stairs. Climbing the steps to heaven. Always, it seems, they lead straight up the steepest side, over the very tops of the mountains. The fog has become a thin drizzle. From sweat and rain my shirt is completely wet. We reach the Place Where The Heart Is Quiet. A cranky, old monk sells us hot water. For minutes the clouds break open, and we can see the Sichuan plain below and rocks and ever higher ridges above us. I tie my wet shirt to my bag and wear a thin wool pullover on my bare skin.

And then out of nowhere appear the monkeys. They sit at the top of a particularly steep flight of steps, waiting for us. They eye us with triumphant self-assurance: we are their prey. Small monkeys and bigger ones. Whole families of them. And as we approach, more come out of the underbrush. They beg, pull at my jacket. I show them my empty hands, turn my pockets inside out, they do not move. I clap my hands to shoo them away. They move to the side of the path and angrily hiss and snarl at me. Exasperated and a little scared - we are surrounded by them now - I get on all fours and attack them. They retreat finally, and when I grab a stone, they vanish like a bad spook. From the safety of the bamboo thicket I can feel their eyes on us. Followed by their laughter we climb another flight of stairs.

At noon we arrive at the Magnificent Monastery of the Strict Order, two thousand meters above the plains. It crowns an excruciatingly steep, bald peak. The view must be magnificent indeed, but we are in drifting clouds, and it is cold. We try to hide inside. A minute, yellow-clad monk of undefinable age sells us a thermos of kai-shui. We warm ourselves with the hot tea. Later he brings us a bowl of hot rice with a scoop of vegetables on top. All windows are open, and the clouds roll right through the room. Sometimes we see each other and then again not.

Exhausted we collapse at Nine Hills Stone. The rain has become denser, our few clothes are all wet. To go on, offers no incentives, more rain, thicker clouds, no view, and the prospect of more steeper stairs. In addition the day is once more waning. We turn downhill towards the roofs of a large monastery barely visible across several deep gorges in the far distance.
For the first time we are walking more or less on level ground and are able to talk to each other about our friends and families, about Germany, and our interests and experiences. Not for a long time have I had the opportunity of such an extended discussion on modern German literature and philosophy, from Fontane and Thomas Mann to Christa Wolf and Arno Schmidt's "Zettelroman", and from Carl Friedrich v. Weizsaecker's unsatisfying Naturphilosophie back to

Frege and Wittgenstein and Leibniz's relationship with China. An intellectual arc, and we find more, a common interest in yoga and the psychology of religious experiences.
As we walk through a stand of huge, old camphor trees on slowly rising ground, the conversation dies down again, quieted by the subdued beauty of the place. I think of my friend Zhu and our discussion on beauty in Xining. This is his kind of beauty, the big flagstones of the path meandering through clusters of ferns, bamboo, and rhododendrons in the shelter of immense trees. Here and there a dripping spring surrounded by moss or a stone bridge over a fast running brook. Another, subtler state of "ping" returns induced by the weariness of ten hours of hiking.

In a clearing overlooking a long valley we come upon Ping Chun Hong Si, the Monastery of the Flat Among the Trees of Heaven.
It is larger and not as idyllic as Wan Nian Si, it is also closer to civilization and a number of Chinese are staying overnight. The sleeping quarters are run like a youth hostel in Europe, the girl who assigns the rooms even speaks passable English. There is electricity and a light bulb in each room. Somewhere someone is trying to play an accordion.
Supper is served in a large cave-like refectory, and we are soon surrounded by a mixed group of young actors who are on their way uphill, and who are trying their best to find out whether we are married or not. This charade continues with much clowning for an hour. Christine has to sing a German song, revealing her beautiful voice. Both of us are being fed piles of fried tofu with preserved, hot cabbage. After supper the group moves to the next courtyard where under much teasing and laughter a great wash-feast gets under way around a huge wooden tub of steaming water. The sharp light from a single lamp throws long, black shadows on the old buildings. A truly Breughelian scene.
That evening the mysterious metamorphosis is revealed. As the fog drifts through the room, the shells of her disguise fall away. The Woman in the Clouds. Aphrodite emerges, or is she one of the five Tibetan Taras who has come down from the snow-covered mountains over the horizon? She has the profile of a Rhenish Madonna, but her body belongs to an Indian Apsara. Is she a temptation - Maya: All things are only the mirage of our senses - or does she offer the shortest way to enlightenment? My senses are reeling. I am in no state to judge.
Visions of Indian sculptures of couples, fierce images of Tibetan gods embracing their consorts run through my mind. Give pleasure to woman, they proclaim, and thou shall inherit the kingdom of heaven on earth.
OM, Mani Padme, HUM
The bed and blanket have proven too narrow for two and a whole night. Very early in the gray morning I slip back next to the Goddess' still sleeping body, and very gently send my hand on yet another pilgrimage across its sacred topology. Very slowly life returns. A mere shiver grows into a chain of earthquakes as the shadows of the first pilgrims walk past the windows.

The way down turns out to be more difficult, wilder, and more beautiful than

expected. We descend through two steep gorges with roaring brooks and waterfalls. The wet stairs are dizzyingly steep, and we have to remind each other that one missed step could send us sliding downhill. A venerable stone bridge arches across the water. Christine climbs down and washes her face in a circular pool between huge boulders. If it were summer it would be a real temptation to climb upstream, and hidden out of sight take a bath. Finally, we have to pass through a real "Klamm", a deep canyon, only a few meters wide, cut by the water through sheer rock. At its end sits a last monastery, ornate, crowded with souvenir stands and people - miles from the hermitages in the clouds.

We catch a bus uphill from the first houses, and later follow a young man on foot to the place where we had started from, to retrieve my bag. It is dark before we reach Omei village and find the only hotel. After an hour of begging and talking we are given a room with a huge bathtub.

Christine decides to come with me to Kunming, but before we can leave, she has to go back to Chengdu to pick up her luggage that she has stored at the Chengdu Hotel. A pedicab takes us through the countryside to the railroad station next morning, where I succeed in negotiating tickets for a "soft sleeper" for both of us for the following day. She leaves, and I wander through Omei alone.

14.

YUNNAN - SOUTH OF THE CLOUDS

Christine arrived on the same train we had come five days earlier, but this time she traveled in style. She had already been given a first-class seat in a compartment together with an old Singapore-Chinese gentleman and his two elderly daughters. Both of us were a little taken by the surprise of seeing each other again - or was it only that we were at a loss on how to transport our experiences from the mountain to the flatlands of another week, that made us bashful?
We stood at a window at the end of the car and watched the country roll by. Vegetable fields and rice paddies were slowly giving way to an increasingly wild mountain terrain. Soon the sequence of alternating dark tunnels and open views of deeply eroded river valleys, that I had become so familiar with on my ride to Chengdu, took over again. We were leaving the cloud covered, smoggy Sichuan basin. How incredibly difficult travel must have been in old China! This engineering feat of a mountain railroad was opened only a few years ago. How did people reach Sichuan before that time? Twelve hundred kilometers to Kunming, it must have been a journey of two weeks not even ten years ago. Probably this is the first time ever that an ordinary foreigner can travel in China

at will, without hiring or joining a caravan of porters and pack animals.

Christine tells me of her friend R.. She is thirty-two and tired of her freedom, of the strain of ever changing relationships that promise no stability. She wants children. R. has been in and out of her life for a while. Two years ago he was made professor of mathematics at one of the new German universities. He is intelligent, artistic, and shares her interests in literature and music, but above all he is stable, quiet, and reliable. I smile, and she lowers her eyes and blushes. A small black-and-white photo shows R. as a slim, tall man, who looks much younger than I had imagined. "You see, this is my last trip alone. In three months I am going to get married," says Christine. Later we find that some envious soul has pushed an empty service cart into the space by that window. By the time we reached the high mountains, dusk had set in. On a forgotten station a large number of tribal mountain people boarded the train. The men wore rough sheep coats, the women colorful dresses, black scarves, long elaborate braids, and a blue and red, bonnet-like head gear. I tried to photograph one beautiful young girl leaning on the deep ochre wall of the station building from the inside of our compartment. She vanished before I could even focus my camera. The Singapore gentleman explained that they belong to the Yi-tribe that has been living isolated in these mountains since time immemorial. The last descendants of a once-powerful kingdom.

We let ourselves be lured into a conversation with our new travel companions. A small table lamp with a colorful shade gives the compartment an unexpectedly warm atmosphere. Mr. Liu chain-smokes English cigarettes, which the younger of his daughters constantly tries to hide from him. He is in his late sixties and dressed in a well-tailored light-gray silk suit. In one ear he wears a powerful hearing aid. "A Japanese, many years ago, slapped my ear. My ear drum burst, and since then I have not been able to hear." He winks at me, "I am getting old. I cannot see well any longer, and I need a cane to walk. That is the reason why I travel with my two daughters. They make all the arrangements and see to it that I am fed well." He asks in Chinese for another cigarette, lights it and puffs at it with visible enjoyment. He offers me one too, and when I decline, his smoking already makes breathing difficult enough, he waves his cigarette at me, and with a smile towards Christine advises me, "enjoy the good life when it comes, young man."
Despite his ailments he loves to talk and little he cares that my shouted questions do not always reach him. "What did you say? Oh yes, we come here every year, after all this is my home country. Last year we traveled all over the eastern parts of China. But you know in Peking, you would think in Peking they should have the best duck, this used to be the specialty there. I don't know what happened to Peking cooking. Now you have to go to Hong Kong to find a decent duck. It's a disgrace."
I ask him what he does. "Oh, rubber," he answers, and when I do not understand, explains, "I am retired now, but before the Japanese came I used to own a large plantation." I raise my eyebrows and feign surprise. "Rich, you said? No, no, no, not rich, who is ever rich enough for a comfortable life." His

watchful daughters only smile all the time visibly relieved that their father has found someone to talk to. Sometimes they throw furtive glances at us and talk to each other behind their hands, but only a few unavoidable words ever with us.

We are the only foreigners in the first class, not counting Mr. Liu and his daughters. There are a number of Chinese traveling in first class. From the special attention given them by the train personnel we gather that they are important cadres. But we never find out who they are, no one ever talks to us. Christine and I eat in the dining car with the other first-class passengers on the train and get excellent service and quite tolerable food. For a total of twelve yuan we have lunch and supper at a reserved table for two. Christine always insists upon paying her own bill.

The night was bad. We both slept in upper berths, the two Chinese gentlemen in the lower berths talked and smoked until past midnight, when I protested, and even then the light was never turned off. The compartment with its closed door became a hot, suffocating trap. I missed the camaraderie of the "second-class" people on the hard sleeper to Chengdu.
We woke up to see the sun rise from behind the clouds over the receding mountains. We had reached the gently rolling hills and rice paddies of Yunnan, the land South of the Clouds. The eastern sky reflected in a hundred water pools in hues of gray, pink, and blue. Patches of fog still hung between rows of poplars. The harvest was almost in, and the remaining stubble and shocks of rice threw dark patterns over the silvery surface of the water in the fields. When the sun broke through, it lit up a profusion of wild flowers along the tracks and the deep sienna of the soil of the bare hills.

15.

GREEN LAKE HOTEL

Where did I get the courage from to hire a motorcycle rickshaw without another thought? Was it the relief to have escaped the train, was it the sunshine, or simply the pleasure of being alive? The ride on the two hard benches under the square canvas tent seemed endless. We drove right across town, and the houses became prettier and more stately all the way. Finally our driver turned off the main boulevard into a narrow street lined with big old pine trees. A lake full of lotus appeared on the left nestled in a park with bridges and islands and people taking walks. Past an iron gate and up a feudal ramp we came to a stop among potted blooming flowers and bonsai in front of charming Green Lake Hotel. One of the Liu sisters had written down this suggestion in the last minute before we got off the train.

Slightly unsure of what we were getting into and self-conscious of our incongruous appearance, we carried our shabby baggage into the lobby. A handsome and equally charming young desk clerk smiled at us, yes, he had a room for us. And then Christine surprised us with the wish for a room of her own. "Yo, ho!" he said, "Two rooms!?" After some search two rooms were found for us on the same floor, but they had still to be cleaned. We dropped off our bags and after a late European breakfast went for a walk in the park across the street. "Forgive me, I have thought about it all these past two days," Christine explains now, "I do need to be by myself sometimes. Can you understand that?" The rooms were light and airy, with pleasant furniture, a tiled bath with shower, and two real beds each, but above all each had a different and beautiful view. My windows overlooked the hilly part of the city with the courtyards, inner gardens, and roof tops of old, traditional Chinese houses close by, and new high-rise apartment buildings beginning to grow on the hill top in the distance. A maze of narrow lanes ran down the hill where I watched the local people in their daily chores. Christine's room faced the park, the lake, and the mountains in the distance, and the morning sun. Everywhere trees, the sun in a clear, blue sky, strong colors, and on the horizon billowing white cumulus clouds over the mountains. A quite unexpected spring in late October.

Time had been suspended. The days went by, was it two or four that we spent in this most pleasant place? Every morning in the gray dawn Green Lake Park was filled with hundreds of men and women doing their exercises, running, breathing, and Tai Chi in various forms. Few were really good at it. But I remember an old man, who always at the same time and the same spot, totally oblivious to all the frantic jumping, running, flailing, and heavy breathing around him, excruciatingly slowly moved the imaginary bubble of chi suspended between his hands around, up, down, turning, caressing it gently, very careful not to lose or break it.

We walked, in the mornings through the markets of the old town behind the canal. Mist mixed with smoke from the fires on which people were cooking their breakfast soups or boiled their daily kai-shui, hung over the water until a fresh breeze after sunrise blew away this reminder of the night and autumn.
The markets were full of colorful tribal people from the villages, Yi, Miao, Thai, and Vietnamese. Here we found the tea houses still in full operation, crowded with men at all times of the day. Many smoked water pipes made of big bamboo tubes used like "bongs".
The houses lining the narrow lanes gave the town a distinct southern flavor. White-washed walls at street level and dark, wooden second stories with balconies and windows protected by wooden grates from which women watched the bustle in the market place. Chains of red, hot peppers hanging from the sun-drenched walls to dry, and everywhere boxes on the balconies filled with flowers. A delicate, old woman wearing a black velvet cap embellished with two beautiful antique jade pieces walked by on most absurdly small lily-feet. A well from which water was still being scooped with a bucket on a long rope reminded me of Maxine Hong-Kingston's "Woman Warrior" and her story of the black

sheep in her family, who pregnant and unmarried had taken the ultimate revenge on the merciless villagers by drowning herself in the communal well.

One morning we explored some of the interior courtyards of the houses of the old town and came upon a Moslem funeral in a mosque occupying an old Buddhist temple. We hid among a group of women and other onlookers in the farthest corner of the courtyard. The casket, covered with the green flag of the prophet was propped up on the broad stairs of the sanctuary. The deceased must have been a highly honored member of the community. The ritual was performed by two old bearded hodjas wearing long robes and turbans, surrounded by a large number of men in white scull caps. They offered several prayers and in the end a wrapped-up parcel was kissed and handed from man to man. Finally four of the men shouldered the casket and at a fast trott carried it from the mosque, through the streets to the cemetery followed by a long train of mourners. For a while we ran after them, but we soon got lost in the bustle of the market streets.
A sudden shower drove us into the shelter of a small shop where we huddled with the locals, watching the rain come down in sheets. A small child on the arm of her mother started to cry bitterly, frightened by the foreigners. Around the corner a large painted banner and blaring music advertised the incomparable feats of a muscle man and snake charmer hidden in a canvas tent.
An old but agile man with a shaggy, long beard addressed us in fluent English and took us to the Vietnamese coffee house. A long dark cave where three smiling women served excellent, very black Yunnan coffee in tall white mugs. The benches and tables were crowded with men among whom four blond Danish girls appeared like ghosts from another world. Christine recognized them, she had met them before on the train to Chengdu. We sat down with our guide, who turned out to be a veterinarian of Vietnamese origin. He had come here during the time when Kunming was the trailhead of the Burma Road.

The hotel kitchen, geared to the indiscriminate taste of tour groups, was only good enough for lazy occasions of a Western breakfast of scrambled eggs, toast, and coffee in the morning. We seem to have always shared the table there with a lonely but excruciatingly polite Australian gentleman, who treated us with great civility and made us feel as if we had been married for years.
We ate at a different restaurant every night. One was the Kunming Cooking School, which had become famous among the travelling student crowd. Apart from the kind and charming people who ran it and a menu handwritten in approximate English, it did not quite live up to our expectations. I offered to give a cooking demonstration some night, but was rejected out of hand. However right next to the school we found a restaurant with the improbable name of Olympic Cafe that turned out to be the "in"-place of town with a much better fare. After these outings we walked home through the night, trying to catch a glimpses of the domestic life behind the lit windows of the houses. It was then that we discovered a storyteller in a tea house, who held a large audience of men spell-bound for hours.

One glorious day we spent on Mount Xi Shan on the shore of Lake Dianchi, Azure Lake, half an hour south of Kunming. An old bus, crowded with villagers, took us there early in the morning. In the pine woods of the mountain are hidden a number of Daoist temples and monasteries that have been famous for centuries, but it was the beauty of the view that took us by surprise. From the last bus stop we walked along the narrow winding road to the southern-most monastery with ever-changing views of the lake below us. Cclouds sailed across the blue sky towards the horizon trailing shadows of all colors, from violet and lavender on the surface of the lake to shades of green, blue and pink on the distant land. A boat with a red-brown, square-rigged sail slowly made its way across the water. At the foot of the mountain the sun's reflection was broken into a thousand pieces by the exact patterns of the rice fields.
Christine found a rock between the fragrant shrubs where we lay in the warm sun watching the hours of the day pass on the huge sun dial to our feet. I tried to make Christine swear that she would not fall in love with me. "Don't worry," she laughed quite unmoved, "that will not happen. - But I have already got so used to you!"
When the shadow of the mountain finally caught up with us, we climbed the winding stairs to the southern monastery that hung, suspended between heaven and earth, high up on a nearly vertical rock wall. It was Sunday and a large crowd of people had gathered there drinking tea on the veranda below the temple. Tired but happy we reached the bus stop again in the light of the late afternoon. That night, when we walked home to our hotel, large loads of Chinese cabbage had arrived in the markets of the town. It reminded me of the Chinese saying, that the appearance of the cabbage in the market heralds the beginning of winter. Our blissful days in Kunming were coming to an end.

At the office of China Airlines Christine had discovered a flight directly to Hong Kong three times a week, and bound by the date of her flight home, had booked the next one. So at the crack of dawn next morning we walked for the last time through the tai-chi crowd. Green Lake was just awakening in a flush of pink and blue and green hues. We nearly missed her bus to the airport, because we could not find anyone who could tell us exactly where it departed from. When we finally found it, she had to jump on in a hurry, and before I realized it she was gone.
Lonely and pensive I walked through the now familiar streets of town trying to catch some of our shared memories with my camera. In the late afternoon I followed her to the airport for my flight to Guilin.

16.

FLYING INTO FAIRY LAND

Deep in absentminded musings of, however, the happiest nature, I walked into the airport building, when someone behind me called my name. It was Zhu. After I had been looking for him in vain all over Chengdu, here he was where I

had least expected him. He was waiting for the same flight to Guilin as I. The surprise and delight was mutual, especially since I had told him that I was going to go to Chungking from Chengdu. It turned out that he had called Lüxingshe in Chengdu many times in search of me. When they denied any knowledge of my whereabouts, he had concluded that I wished to be left alone.
Zhu had spent a week in Kunming on a physics conference and was now going to another one on laser chemistry in Guilin. "You see," he confided, "I learned one thing at MIT, you have to tell people that you are smart, how else can they ever find out. And so I set myself the task to present a paper on every Chinese conference in my field this year." And then he smiled, "this will give me the opportunity to show you my beauty, my Guilin. Let's rent bicycles and ride together through this most beautiful countryside in China. And you have to come with me on a trip down the Li river. You have done this? Then you will have to go a second time!"

We were waiting in line at the baggage check-in. Before us stood a young Chinese man burdened with a collection of odd parcels in addition to a huge suitcase and an umbrella. When his turn came, it became apparent that he spoke very little Chinese, but a fluent though affected American English. The girl at the counter was going to charge him a steep fee for overweight. Zhu immediately went to his help and persuaded the girl to allow him to check only the monstrous suitcase and take all the other parcels with him into the cabin, without weighing them. The negotiations were made trying by the vacillations of the young man and his being fussy about every piece of his luggage. I did not like the clown and walked away. Later when Zhu joined me in the waiting room the young man would not move a step from our side and even insisted on buying us a coke in overwrought gratitude. He introduced himself as Donald from Daly City, California.
We flew into the beautiful light of a late afternoon, the town, the lake, the hills of Yunnan below us sliding into the shadow of the coming night.

It was completely dark when we reached Guilin. Having by now learned to be still and patient all day and let things happen their own way but to act fast when necessary, I had cornered a seat in the crowded bus to town long before Zhu and his helpless dependent had found their luggage. Eventually we took off. Zhu was to stay at a guest house operated by the military, and we agreed that he would try to find me at the Rong Hu Binguan, the hotel where I had had dinner on my first visit to Guilin in September. Zhu got off the bus on some dark corner before we reached town, and now I found myself trailed by Donald, the Golden Goose from Daly City.

It was obvious that finding a hotel room in this tourist Mecca of China at ten o'clock at night would not be easy, and this insight softened my dislike. After all, Don looked Chinese and spoke the language better than I did. We set off together into the deserted town. Don's suitcase had wheels but also the tendency to tip over at the slightest provocation, in addition, his many parcels were a true handicap. Our progress was slow, and I still did not feel entirely

happy with the prospect of sharing my jealously guarded privacy with him. With the aid of a haphazard map that Christine had left me, I was steering us along Rong Hu Lake, on the end of which I hoped to find the familiar guest house. Don was worrying and fussing. We passed a Chinese hotel, which I knew was off limits to me, but Zhu must have mentioned its name to Don. Halfway along the lake Don went on strike and insisted that we return to try the just passed hotel. The girl behind the desk, who spoke only Chinese, had, of course, no rooms and especially none for foreigners. My companion did all the talking, while I tried to look as relaxed as possible. The good girl started to call every tourist hotel in town, but all where filled by this time. An hour later we were still standing at the desk, smiling a little desperately, while all alternatives were rapidly vanishing. Later an older woman appeared whose motherly sympathies for us - or was she simply the local "group leader" - broke the impasse, and we were given a room, with a bath. By now I was even willing to share it with my rare bird.

When they found out that we had not eaten, the two women turned positively solicitous and urged us to have dinner at a nearby restaurant. I could not imagine that at ten o'clock anyone in China would still serve us anything to eat. Yet we found the place, a large dining room that during the day, to judge from an English menu, catered to tourists. It was completely empty now. Within fifteen minutes we had been served a three-course dinner of absolutely excellent food, hot from the wok.

When we returned to our room, I felt very much like having a cigarette to cap off this finally so successful evening. "You are not going to smoke in here! I cannot stand smoke," Don began to wail. I had anticipated this not unreasonable outcry and offered to go for a walk around the lake, and because I foresaw that there would also be a problem in sharing the bathroom, suggested that he go and have a bath meanwhile.

I walked for half an hour under the blooming Gui trees (*cassia osmanthus*), their pervasive orange blossom smell reminding me of California. Uncounted affectionate couples sitting in the grass along the shore made me feel like a voyeur in the park. Nearly every friend returning from China in the past years had described the absence of any display of affection between young men and women. Now it seemed to be the latest "thing" to hold hands with one's girl, and take her for a ride on the bike at night.

When I returned, Don was sitting unselfconsciously on his bed in the middle of a vast mess of parcels and wrappings. He had not taken his shower, but had got completely lost in unpacking all of his various purchases, enamel bowls, little porcelain trinkets, and various pieces of jewelry. To my increasing amusement I was, in this shabby hotel room, treated to a fashion show of necklaces and rings, until I made an end to it by shooing him off into the bathroom. Meanwhile I sat on my bed reading an overbearingly sentimental Chinese novel, which I had found among the plunder on his bed.

The shower had been gushing for some time when cries came from the bathroom: "Rolf, please help me, please. I am all wet in here, and I do not have any shampoo. Please, could you lend me some of yours." The door was opened a mere crack, and carefully concealing its owner from my eyes, a begging hand reached out to accept my last thimble of hair-wash. Later I heard him dry his

locks with an electric hairdryer. It took ages.
After I thundered at him that I also wanted to get washed up, he emerged from the bathroom in a neat, two-piece pajama carefully walking backwards so that I would not see him from the front. He slid under his sheets and read aloud to me from a book of Chinese poetry. When I found all the hot water gone, he apologetically confided that he had not had any either. "You have to sort of dive in like into a cold swimming pool." He advised me. At that point I gave up and resigned myself to go to bed unwashed.
I fell asleep bemused by the freakiness of my fate: from the bed of a Goddess into that of a Fairy.
He was civilized enough and nobody suffered any harm that night. In the morning, after much fussing and regrets that I did not want to join him, Don left to go on the Li River boat ride, and I went down the road to Rong Hu Binguan and found myself a room of my own.

The day clouded over fast. It became cold and the afternoon started with sprinkles of rain. Someone said that another taifun was heading inland from the coast. Returning from the office of China Airlines where in Chinese I had booked my flight to Beijing, I ran into a tight-lipped young American with a military haircut who had already caught my interest on the bus from the airport. Curious about his incongruous appearance among all the long-haired drifters of the Kinder-Crusade, I invited him for lunch to the restaurant of the previous night. He surprised me by speaking rather fluent Chinese. Over another, different selection of excellent morsels I quickly learned his story. His Chinese was the product of the Navy Language School in Monterey, California. He was now living in Okinawa. It took only a little more work to find out that he was a member of the intelligence branch of one of the services, specializing in China. He had come on a "student visa" from Hong Kong, his last chance of seeing China before going on to Harvard in the coming fall...
Two local girls, guides of a Japanese group of tourists started a conversation with us. They were so charmed by my Chinese speaking intelligence man that on leaving they presented us with two mandarin oranges. One of the few times that a truly spontaneous gift, one which did not calculate a return, was made to me by a Chinese. And an incident in Greece several years earlier came to my mind, where Barbara and I had been waiting in a small village for the local bus. Quite suddenly a young woman, holding a beautiful bunch of wildflowers, had walked across the street and presented us with half her bunch, saying, "These are for you. You look so happy."
During the night it began to pour. It continued to rain with interruptions for the next two days. Zhu called one night and suggested a bicycle tour around Guilin next day in the afternoon, should the rain let up.

17.

SHANSHUI - MOUNTAINS AND WATER

It was a gray and colorless afternoon, but it did not rain. We rented two bikes on Zhongshan Lu, Middle Mountain street and pedaled east, across the bridge over the river Li, past wooly Seven Stars Hill, along a narrow path south through the farmlands bordering the river. Clusters of a few houses alternated with vegetable plots, on which whole families were tending with individual attention plants that glowed unnaturally green in the gray light. A young man with two wooden watering-cans on a carrying beam over his shoulder went from lettuce to lettuce dousing each with a carefully measured quantity of water. A girl on another plot distributed with equal care the precious night-soil from the holding tank of the village latrine. A grandmother was deftly spading her land while telling her two grandsons, sitting in the newly opened black furrows, age-old stories. The space between the bright green bamboo groves and the blue dragon-tooth mountains in the distance was filled with the heavy smell of wet earth.
Zhu was genuinely worried that I might have an accident with my unfamiliar vehicle. He would try to ride on my left side to protect me from the traffic, putting both of us into constant jeopardy of a collision with each other. He could not explain where he was taking me, but it was obvious that he was heading for a place along the river of great meaning to him.
Finally the path came to an end between the river and the foot of another towering mountain cone, Chuan Shan, the Hill with a Hole Through. The river had split to enclose a shallow island, a dilapidated wooden bridge, a girl with long braids and two buckets on a carrying beam wading the shallow water, a row of big, old trees along the opposite bank, and in the close distance, on top of a seemingly inaccessible rock, the eight tiers of an ancient pagoda. The atmospheric haze muted details and colors to mere hues of gray and green against a white sky. So subtle, so sensually tempered was this view that I did not realize that we had arrived, nor did I notice Zhu's excitement until he quietly asked, "Have you ever seen a more beautiful place in this world?"

He sat down on a stone inside a clump of bamboo and with his chin in his hand contemplated his kind of beauty, while I tried to see this landscape through his eyes. Eventually I found a bush with large pink and white flowers. Very distant, very muted, still they lit up the picture for me. I showed them to Zhu, and he grumbled reprovingly, "Something I never got used to in the West is the lack of subtlety and your preference for strong colors." I understood then that this ride was really Zhu's celebration of his return to his native land after two years in exile. It moved me that I had been invited.

The next two days it rained and except for an occasional walk in the evening I was confined to my room reading and writing letters. Occasionally I would run over to the wonderful restaurant on Zhongshan Lu to have a meal different from

the monotony of the hotel kitchen.
Then Zhu called again, he had been busy, but tomorrow very early they were going to go on the river ride, and I absolutely had to come along. There would be so many Chinese physicists on the boat who knew me, and besides they had obtained a special price of 10 yuan for the boat ride, lunch, and the bus from Yangshuo back home. So I agreed. Maybe this decision would bring an end to my solitary confinement and the miserable weather.

I arrived at the agreed boat-landing at seven without having had breakfast and long before anybody else. The morning over the river was as gray as ever. Fishermen standing on their bamboo rafts with nets like huge conical hats were noiselessly gliding across the water's surface like large insects searching for their prey. On the stern of a junk moored close to shore a man was cooking breakfast over an open fire. His wife held their toddler by her bottomless pants overboard. A group of women clanking their metal buckets were scrubbing the excursion boats that were going to take the day's tourists down-river.

Zhu appeared alone, and at first I thought that the trip had been shelved. But he was merely concerned that I might not have had any breakfast before leaving. We went a few blocks into town and at an open street stand were served a bowl of noodle soup and steamed bread by a motherly, solicitous woman. An hour later, the bus arrived loaded with physicists. We boarded, walking gingerly on long, narrow planks across the water, to the two small boats I had watched earlier.

I had come full circle or, looking at a map, I had described a huge spiral across China that ended almost symbolically in her southern heartland. There were indeed many familiar faces, the irrepressible Prof. Ma - his name means "Horse" - from Anhui, the two women from Shanghai Higher Teacher's University, and Hou Mei-Ying from the Institute of Physics in Beijing, whose obviously Western freedom had fascinated me already in Guangzhou. Zhu introduced me to her. She was born in Taiwan, had been educated in the States and married a Canadian born Chinese physicist. In a wave of enthusiasm for the New China they had moved to Beijing two years ago. She said, that this had been her husband's greatest wish, but much of that first love had been worn down by the everyday drudgery of living in Beijing. I had to describe to her all the details of my travels, and as a final gesture she invited me for supper at their apartment in Beijing.

Eventually three women pushing with huge bamboo poles freed our boat from the shallow shore, and soon, helped by a sputtering diesel engine, the swift current carried us downstream. In the fall the river is low and everywhere rocks and shoals where threatening the boat. In several tight places the women had to take up their poles again.

Through fields and meadows we quickly drifted into the hill country. These hills are among the most curious formations of the world, limestone-karst washed by the millennia into hundreds of odd-shaped cones. Looking like dragon teeth, the

highest are two hundred meters high, they cover an area of a hundred by sixty kilometers. There are bald rocks but most hills are covered with low shrubs that give the impression of having grown hair or wool. Through the center of this fairy-land snakes the Li Jiang, the river Li. For more than two thousand years this landscape has inspired Chinese poetry and scrolls. Shan-shui, mountains and water, the quintessential Chinese landscape, of human size, never dramatic, but fantastic,-mysterious, shrouded in mist, with an almost monochrome color scale of atmospherically muted hues between green and blue. It evokes textural rather than painterly comparisons. "The river flows like a band of green silk-brocade, and the hills resemble turquoise hairpieces of jade," writes the enigmatic Han Yü in the ninth century, three hundred years before the Renaissance poets discovered the landscape in Europe.

Everywhere there are reflections. We are surrounded by, we drift through reflections. The waves made by the boat fold, distort, disassemble, and recreate reflections. Reflections of hills, villages, bamboo woods, a fisherman on his boat, and of ourselves, unseen, glide swiftly over the dark surface of the river. Symbols of the transience of life.

Zhu sits completely absentminded on the roof of the pilot house, while everybody else constantly takes snapshots of each other. In a highly improvised kitchen at the stern of the boat the crew cooks our lunch: a huge bowl of rice and a scoop of pork and vegetable. Over lunch Zhu challenges me to describe my ideas about the relationship between the I Ging and physics to his colleagues. The women are skeptical and argumentative, the men smile tacidly. It all happens a little too unexpectedly and my hastily improvised logic is not very convincing. "You mean that there are experiments that do not have a unique explanation?" asks one woman. I get caught in the web of my own constructions, and the women are not willing to let me get away with hunches as my Russian friends would have. Why do the men say nothing? I come away with the uncertain feeling that I have lost my touch, that I have become deeply "orientalized" myself. What is the use of the great speculative powers of western philosophy?

After eight hours we land in Yangshuo, the ancient village where I had first fallen in love with the beauty of the Chinese people. I am anxiously aware of testing this heightened first impression so soon again. And of course the mercantile atmosphere of the place is crassly visible now. But then, at the last moment before we are to leave, walking down a narrow street where I had not been before, in an open shop stands a very old woman, very erect, with an almost transparent face of such a serene otherworldliness that I am mesmerized. For a few moments I consider staying, but in the end follow Zhu to the bus to Guilin.

The clouds have vanished and the sun sets in a most magnificent glow behind the hills and Rong Hu Lake when I reach home that night.

Zhu has left. The sun falling into my room wakes me. Before the stores open I

am already looking for the man who rents the bicycles. I find him in the house in back of the shop having breakfast among his family. Half an hour later I ride through the northern outskirts of Guilin towards the hills around Reed Flute Cave.
In the morning light the hills float blue on a yellow-green sea of ripe rice. Everywhere families are working ankle-deep in the water of the fields bringing in the harvest after the long rain. The rice is cut with a sickle by hand, bundled into shocks, and then taken to a "threshing machine" the size of a large chest. It can be carried on long handles by two people. A foot pedal below turns a wooden drum, spiked with nails, that rips the grain from the stalks into a bag tied to the box. I have seen these machines illustrated in Chinese block prints of the twelfth century.

For a while the road winds along a meandering tributary of the Li river, then makes a sharp turn across a bridge to climb a low pass between two hills. To the right is the entrance to Reed Flute Cave, which we had visited at the end of the excursion in September. The walk among the subterraneous stalactites had turned into an unexpected adventure when in the middle of it the lights went out. I found myself next to a French physicist whom I had last seen in the cathedral of Mtskheta in Georgia. He had a flashlight, and to the horror of our guide the two of us disappeared into the cavernous maze on our own. When we reemerged it rained, and I longingly looked into the valley across the pass that I was now coasting down into a long tree-lined alley that leads across the valley to a group of houses surrounded by orchards. When I arrive there I find a local market in front of a large entry gate into what appears to be a commune. I have no choice and ride without hesitation through the gate and up a long street between two-story tenement houses. For a little distance I try to ignore the two gesticulating women running after me, then I give up. Laughing, they show me a sign by the entrance: "No Visitors". I retreat and sit for a while with my camera among the peasants in front of the gate watching the market. Nobody pays any further attention to me.

I have no detailed map, and my route is strictly a matter of guessing. A short distance back I had seen a road branch off. I continue this way and across another pass find myself on a ghostly karst plain littered with white rocks and smoking mounds of earth between the gaping wounds of open quarries. The place is as desolate as a graveyard. Dim memories come to my mind. Back in my Silesian childhood we used to pass just such a place where the local stone was "burned" in big kilns to make lime. The idea that perfectly solid rock could be burned to "smoke" and a white powder was highly disconcerting then, and I discover that deep down this fascination still lingers. By a method that has not changed for thousands of years, rocks of dolomite are stacked inside a circular kiln in layers interspersed with coal and wood. The kiln is covered with a mound of earth and the load set on fire. For several days the fire smolders, steam seeping through the earthen cover. In the end the hot kiln is knocked apart to reveal its perfectly white but dangerously corrosive contents of lime, waiting to be transformed by yet another, equally mysterious transformation back to stone

again.

A wood of pines beckons in the distance. The road has dwindled to a mere path strewn with so many rocks that I have to walk my bike. On a slight hill under a sparse cover of grass I find another assembly of low mounds with an occasional stone inscription imbedded in them - graves. I wander among them trying to decipher some of the weathered characters. The neglect and desolation that hovers over the place at first disturbs my sense of the propriety of death, until I realize that here man is reunited with the earth without pretense, between the rice fields or in a wild place so that new life may grow from his ashes.
In a clearing among the pines I come upon cows grazing in the dry grass, and a few houses. Survivors from an earlier time, they are built from crumbling brown, sun-dried bricks. The women are working in carefully fenced gardens behind the houses watering vegetables and bright flowers. A toothless grandfather watches over a dozen small children playing in the dirt. The news of my arrival leaps across the fields.
It is becoming more difficult to ride my bike. The path now straddles a narrow dam separating rice paddies. Another older and more elaborate grave stele stands at the roadside and behind it. Hidden by hazelnut bushes, suddenly reappears the river. There is a dam of boulders and stepping stones but the center pieces are missing, and I dare not carry my heavy bike through the rushing river as a young man does who comes my way. For a while I sit on a stone with my feet in the water and watch a lonely bather swim in the backed up river, then I turn back the way I had come.

The afternoon sun is still warm. Tired and overcome by hunger I fall asleep in the dry grass on the pass behind the lime kilns. When I wake up a young couple has settled a few hundred feet from me on the other side of the road their bikes scattered next to them. He has his head in her lap, and they are full of tenderness for each other.
Many buses are now parked in front of Reed Flute Cave. A young woman with a baby bundled on her back sells mandarin oranges. She smiles at me charmingly, and I buy a dozen of her oranges and eat them all on the spot. They are so good that I fill my bag with more for my flight to Beijing tomorrow.

18.

BUT YOUR NOSE IS NOT CHINESE

Days of parting have a special flavor in China. I had only stayed five days in Guilin and already felt sad to leave. Or is this feeling of nostalgia caused by being finally fully at ease with the surroundings, part of another level of "ping", a further step towards understanding China? I begin to hear her poets, who like none other sing of the sadness brought on by departing from a beloved place.

My flight for Beijing leaves in the late afternoon. One last time I wander through

Guilin, climb Silk Floss Hill for a view from the top, and have sweet and sour eggs for lunch at the restaurant on Zhong Shan Lu. I had to vacate my room at noon and so I sleep for an hour surrounded by all my possessions under an apple tree in the grass on the shore of Rong Hu Lake. Later the plane takes off, describing a steep arc over the city. The strange hills, the villages, and the river disappear like toys under the thick blanket of dusk. In a few moments everything is gone.

Beijing airport at eight in the night. I had telegraphed Gao, the professor from the Academia Sinica who had originally invited me, and expected him to meet me at my arrival with the car of the institute. More importantly, however, I had hoped that he would have a hotel reserved for me somewhere in town. But Gao is nowhere in sight. For half an hour I search for him and then decide that I must act. A burly man who speaks a smattering of English sells me a ticket for the bus to town and draws a map on the tickete describing how to reach a hotel I might try. By the time we arrive at the CAAC terminal in the center of Beijing it is half past nine. It is quite cold, and the streets are unfamiliar, dark, and empty. My co-passengers, who a few hours earlier had seemed friendly, have disappeared into the night without as much as a good-bye, as if further contact with this homeless stranger might bring ill luck. For a moment I am visited by a faint attack of despair, but then decide to walk until I come upon a hotel. After all, this is the first of November and the tourist invasion must surely be over.

From the entrance of the first hotel I am shooed away by the women in the guard shack, but the next one, around the corner has so many buses parked in front of it that it is obviously a bona fide tourist hotel. I walk into its empty lobby. A young man behind the telephone switchboard inquires about my wishes. I tell him that I am looking for a room and get the usual answer "mei yo," we have none, but then he adds in English, "and besides this is the Overseas Chinese Hotel and you are not Chinese." So there is some hope. I smile at him and tell him that I don't believe him. Unruffled but not unfriendly he sends me to a young woman, who is responsible for renting the rooms. She takes one look at me, and asks: "Can you help me?" I don't see why not, if this would lead to a room for me. She disregards the last half of my comment and produces a long English letter she has been writing, trying to recover money from some American-Chinese who left without paying.
The letter is complicated. As it turns out there is only the merest suspicion that the guests have actually defrauded the hotel. It takes an hour to rewrite most of it and explain why. When we are done I stick my hand out and ask for a payment of 40 yuan or a room for the night. She appears unmoved: "You cannot have a room in this hotel." But then, almost as an aside, she says: "You are very funny. Keep on talking and a room will materialize." I cannot figure out what is going on. So I continue the charade by suggesting that the easiest thing to do with those dishonest American guests would be to forget the whole issue. I ask her how many rooms there are in the hotel and their average price, and then show her by a simple calculation that the money lost amounts to less than 5 percent of a daily intake. No western hotel would bother with that. She

confesses that she could not agree less, but that she had been told by her "leader" to write the letter.
By now I am entertaining the entire nightshift of the hotel. Under much giggling we pass another hour. I discover a couple of teacups next to the telephone clerk, take one and in mock hurt tell them that I had by now given a two-hour one-man show, and they had not even thought of offering me a cup of tea, not to mention that I was tired and really deserved a room now. "I told you that you cannot have a room in this hotel because you are not Chinese." She reiterates. I pull my eye-lids into slits and cry out: "How can you tell, my mother was Chinese." Without a trace of a smile she answers: "But your nose is not Chinese." This was the last answer I had expected, and in German mutter: "Sigmund Freud and God Father in heaven have just had a private joke." "What did you say?" she demands. Trying to avoid an explanation I say: "You are right, my mother was German," and she comes back in rather fluent German: " Really, I did not know. Now you can teach me German, I have forgotten it all."

I am near despair, this must surely be the worst test of my newly acquired Chinese composure. I cannot figure out what game she is playing with me, there are no outward signs I can decipher. While I muse about my lot, she has gone to her office, and I see her making a tense telephone call. When she returns she announces, "I talked to my leader. You can stay in the dormitory, but it is a terrible place, noisy, and full of strange men from Hong Kong. You do not want to sleep there." So, she had been playing for time until it would be too late to send me away. I mount a last attack, pointing out that she was quite right, I deserved a room, after all I was a teacher not a student. But her defense remains unbreachable, and much commiserated by everyone I take the elevator upstairs to the dormitory crowded by a dozen talking, smoking, and snoring Hong Kong men. However, it is not as bad as I had feared, overtired I fall asleep after a few minutes.

First of November, like in the Soviet Union the central heating has been turned on overnight, and I wake with a headache from the sudden heat in the room. I am determined to find a better room elsewhere. I stick out the six yuan for the bed and demand my passport. My friend from last night is there again, she shows great dismay over my departure: "You said your plane is leaving in four days, I have booked you for three nights. I thought you would be my German teacher." But my patience and humor have run out. I also begin to recognize the unpleasant Chinese penchant for ruthlessly exploiting the goodwill of their non-Chinese "friends", and react unnecessarily strongly. I get my passport and walk out into the cold morning in a huff. Little did I know that there was no hotel room to be found anywhere in Beijing.

I walked around for three hours with my bag in my hand asking at all the large hotels in the area. Everywhere I got the same answer, mei yo. I began to realize what luck I had had the night before. Eventually I made my way to Lüxingshi. The same ladies whom we had negotiated with five weeks earlier are still there. A crowd of more than twenty "students", some with children were piled into the

tiny office waiting to put their names on the list for tonight's empty rooms. There was no sense in trying to find anything in this way. I pushed through the crowd and asked one of the ladies to call Gao, the professor for me. The poor man was at the phone at once, he had been worrying about my disappearance since the night before. He claimed to have been at the airport by public bus and had been unable to find me. Yes, he had a room at Beijing Daxue, in the dormitories for foreign students of Beijing University. I was going to take the public bus and we agreed to meet at the south gate of the campus an hour hence.

It took an hour and a half to thread my way through town on three successive buses. Once again Gao was nowhere in sight. An American graduate student parlayed me past the guard shack and even spotted my papers in the housing office, where a formidable old lady denied any knowledge of me or of Gao . Gao appeared an hour later, claiming to have stood at the bus stop for over two hours, when I had just taken my shoes off to have a rest. However, I was most grateful for this small but wonderful room that even had a gleaming new bath.

19.

DIGGING UP THE LOTUS

Two days remained for me in Beijing. Gao had promised to bring my suitcase to the dormitory in the evening. With the help of the ladies in the housing office I was able to resolve all responsibilities by telephone. I called Japan Airlines to confirm my flight to Los Angeles (what a feat after the endless negotiations necessary to make travel arrangements during the last five weeks). I invited myself at Hou Mei-Ying's, the Canadian-Chinese physicist woman for supper on the last evening, and I got the address of "Aunt" Mary from the American Embassy. Aunt Mary was a family friend living in Beijing, whom I had promised to see and not visited earlier, because I had forgotten to take along her telephone number. Now there was no more time, and all I could do was write her a farewell postcard. - And for the first time I am free to explore Beijing on my own.

In the civilized environment of the capital I feel like having returned from an expedition to far-away barbaric places, a seasoned traveler for whom the two-hour bus ride from the university into the center of town is but a short trip. The people in the bus even understand my Chinese.
It is cold and overcast in the morning. I pursue visions remembered, seen for seconds while being driven through town in September: a row of tiny houses glued to the huge wall of the Forbidden City, seeking refuge like ducklings on the inside of its moat. Jing Shan, Coal Mountain, an artificial hill from which the last, half-crazed empress gazed down on her palatial prison. Beihai, the

Northern Sea, a beautiful lake in the center of town and the Great White Dagoba, a huge Tibetan chörten, floating on an island in its middle.
In front of the Northern Gate, the back door of the Forbidden City and the entry to its garden and its intimate quarters, a woman sells candied mandarin oranges strung together with tiny crabapples on a bamboo stick. The hard crystal shell of sugar encloses a near-liquid orange in its center. In their simplicity, they appear like another paraphrase of China.

The view from Coal Mountain is monotonous and gray. Only the abstract variations of the roof lines of the Forbidden City create a visual excitement. From this vantage point Beijing with its vast, disciplined layout, huge squares, and parade-size avenues reminds me of a Roman military camp. Only the buildings demonstrating the feudal might of her emperors, old and new, rise above the sea of humanity. The Sparrow Hills overlooking a seemingly similar, gray, despotic Moscow come to my mind. But then, in the temple on-top of the hill, I notice the children climbing over the ancient altar, studded with Buddhist symbols of life, and I see the signs of great change on their alert faces.
I climb down from the hill into the maelstrom of Wangfujing Street, the main shopping center of modern Beijing, and I am carried away again by the same excitement that I had first experienced in Guangzhou in September. The palpable exhilaration, the curiosity and hope, the feeling that everyone is fully awake, the laughter of the young women, once more captivate me. However, I have in vain searched for anyone who was willing to predict the future of this country, this question is still begging for an answer. At noon I remember that someone has recommended the Sichuan Restaurant as one of the best in China. I ask my way to the colorful lane where it is hidden, completely inconspicuous from the outside. I find myself in an array of courtyards, gardens, and pavilions covering half a block. While still debating with myself which of the many houses to choose, a young American arrives on a bicycle. We agree to eat together. He is employed by the Chinese Ministry of Education to coordinate and organize all English instruction at Beijing University. He has been in the country for two years. Over two fiery Sichuan dishes we compare our Chinese experiences.

The long-missed sun has come out, and with it the city has all of a sudden taken on a beautiful, autumnal appearance. I take a bus to Beihai and slowly drift across the bridge and into the park. The Great Dagoba, pure white, seems ready to rise into the deep blue sky. The shallow arm of the lake before the island ha been drained and is filled with a bizarre jungle of lotus stems carrying their wilted, brown leaves like folded memories of a summer past. A line of men and women in blue work clothes and red kerchiefs slowly advance across the empty lake digging up the lotus before the winter comes.

With the help of an English-speaking student I buy a slim volume of poems by Li Bai in Chinese as a token of this morning and in memory of Omei Shan.

20.

THE TANG HORSE, AUNT MARY, THE WOMAN FROM THE DUNES, AND IN THE END A PATCH OF CASTOR BEANS

Gao had missed me once more. He had come earlier than agreed upon and had been waiting for an hour in my room guarding my heavy suitcase. He had lugged it to the university on his bike and up the stairs, all by himself. I felt sorry for him, because he seemed to feel really depressed by his continuing inability to connect with me, but we were simply on totally different wavelengths.
Together with the suitcase returned the huge box with the multi-colored Tang Horse. I had hoped that this problem would disappear somehow in the interim, but no, Gao had paid special attention to it. In large red characters it said "Ma", horse on it and the price, 50 yuan. My heart sank. What to do with a Tang Horse? Maybe I could take it back to the friendship store and exchange it against some less heavy souvenir or a book. The hope of being able to take home one of the expensive art books cheered me up.
Then the telephone rang in the hall outside my room, and a young Chinese gentleman came to knock on my door: The call was for me. It was Aunt Mary! She had received my card, a mere six hours after I had dropped it into the mailbox, and would I be available for dinner tomorrow night at her apartment. She was disappointed that I already had an invitation for that evening, and we finally settled to meet in the afternoon in the tea room of the Beijing Hotel.

Early next morning I took the Horse under my arm and made my way to the friendship store at the You Yi Hotel. They had just opened. In passing the book section I saw a splendid volume of reproductions of the frescoes of Dunhuang and already saw myself in its possession. The first girl I approached did not speak any English. Another girl appeared who seemed sympathetic to my proposal. I opened the box and for the first time had a close look at the splendid animal. One could certainly sell it for three times its price in the States. Now the girl became doubtful and eventually declared that, unless I could produce an original receipt from this particular store, she could not exchange the horse. I pleaded, I argued all to no avail, the longer I talked the firmer grew her resolution not to exchange the horse. "The rules are..."
I finally gave up. Maybe I could ship the beast by mail. The woman at the post office was much friendlier, she even found me an additional box and wrapping material to protect the precious gift from damage. But when she weighed the parcel and calculated the price for me, I despaired: 75 yuan by surface mail! Defeated I departed - with the horse still in my hand. What in the world can I do with this thing? If I leave it behind in my room or elsewhere, I am sure it will be carried after me by the service personnel, if necessary to the airport. It is much too expensive a gift to be given to any local friend. I finally decide to abandon it in the check-room of the hotel. The attendant eyes the box suspiciously, what is it? Couldn't he read, I tell him, it says "Ma" on it in big letters! A Tang Ma! He

gives me a slip. When will I come back to pick it up, he asks with, what seems to me, a knowing smile. "Tomorrow morning," I boldly declare. - I finally gave the deposit slip to an American student at the university cafeteria.

I need to exchange a few more dollars for the ride to the airport and the airport tax. At the bank counter a well-suited, elder American businessman charges a rather large sum of money to his credit card. I smile at him and tease him about his "capitalist" charge account. He looks over my shoulder into my check book and remarks that Wells Fargo Bank was not so bad either and hands me a business card: John Wiley, President, John Wiley, Inc., Publishers, New York. "Well," I exclaim, "how could I know, then you are my publisher and ultimately the reason for my being in China!" Embarrassingly, I cannot remember the name of his editor who handled my book on lasers eight years ago. We shake hands and he introduces me to his vice-president and his personal secretary. I have no card to offer, and my name is carefully committed to his notebook. After Mr. Wiley has left, the thought occurs to me that I could make a present of the horse to my publishing house - "from a grateful author". I have to get his room number from the bank clerk. Wiley laughs: "Please, we cannot carry our own luggage! Many thanks for the thoughtful trinket and good luck!" Months later I should receive a handwritten Christmas card "from your publisher with all the best wishes to you and your Tang Horse!"

An hour early I arrive at the tea room of the Peking Hotel to meet Aunt Mary. The place is like the waiting room of an old-fashioned railroad station. I sit down with a cup of coffee and a cigarette, - and in walks the man with the beard and the hat who had lain in bed at the dormitory in Dunhuang! His girl friend is gone, and he is in sheer despair, his visa is running out and PANAM claims to be unable to find him a seat on the plane to San Francisco. "I have been two years in this place. I want to get home. I am sick and tired of this country!" He cries. In the middle of my trying to advise and encourage him to go back to the airline office and insist on some positive help, Aunt Mary sails into the hall.

Younger than I had remembered her, dressed in a beautiful, expensive woolen skirt and a warm burgundy and brown-striped pullover, not tall, with quick and determined movements she walks, oblivious to the motley crowd, straight towards me. "Hi, there you are. Do you want to stay here? I really wanted to take you out, and then I have to show you our apartment. Wouldn't you enjoy eating a piece of Schwarzwälder Kirschtorte? Yes, such things do exist in Peking. We are no barbarians here. And you must tell my relatives back home, that we have enough room to put up anybody who wants to come and visit us. Come on, let me show you my car. It must be the only privately owned car in Peking." I am barely able to squeeze in the greetings of her friends in Los Angeles and explain why I contacted her so late, before I find myself sitting in the elegant leather seats of a brand-new, sparkling Jaguar-J6. It is all so unreal. Aunt Mary starts the engine purring and nonchalantly backs out of the narrow parking slot - into the side of a parked tourist bus. A voluminous argument in Chinese ensues with the driver and several bystanders. Fortunately the dent in the bus is

only minor. Eventually we motor down Changan Avenue. I am more convinced than ever that I would not want to drive my own car in China.

Aunt Mary takes me to the "Patisserie and Conditorei" of the Jianguo Hotel, and we enter even deeper into surrealist unreality: An ultramodern, Swiss-Italian espresso-bar with black and white tiles on the floor, stainless-and-glass fixtures, chic bent-wood chairs, and neat, colorful table cloths under warm lamp shades. Incongruously, Zürich comes to mind! In the middle of China?! And as promised, I get a huge piece of Schwarzwälder Kirschtorte that isn't even so bad and excellent Swiss filter coffee, and a second piece of Käsekuchen appears a little later, and more coffee. Since the days of my childhood have I not been so extravagantly spoiled - or been so dominated!
Aunt Mary talks, telling me old and new stories from her life. Her husband had been an executive at the Owens-Illinois Glass-Works for many years. In his late fifties he had looked at the retired life before him and decided that he was not going to join the country-club crowd of Ohio and be bored stiff. On a visit to his native China he found that the new Chinese government was more than willing to have him help them organize the manufacture of glass in the PRC. In 1981 he quit his job at Owens-Illinois and moved to Beijing. Mary, who has studied art history and loves to travel, must have been unhappy at first, but her husband had found the job of his lifetime. He helped build several glass factories, one produces coke bottles for export, and has been travelling constantly. Mary finally found her profession in guiding art historical tours for government-invited foreign VIPs.
Their highly educated, rich and successful families, dispersed throughout Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the United States, were furious over what they viewed as a sell-out to the hated communist regime on the Mainland. Only recently had a rapprochement taken place. Now, innocent I was being made into an other pawn in the propaganda war with her family clan, and that for the price of two pieces of German cake! I tell her so, and she laughs heartily: "Yes, go and spread the word. Peking and this country is becoming such an exciting place. There are so many things happening here and the speed of change! Tell them, they are conservative and boring and both are inexcusable vices!" After two hours I am floating on a coffee-high. As we leave, Aunt Mary notices in passing a lonely piece of imported French Brie in a showcase near the door and compulsively buys it - 125 gram for 18 yuan - 9 dollars! "Oh, you do know that you cannot get cheese in China," she shrugs. "One has to buy it where one finds it."

Dusk has descended when we reach the gray, Soviet-style, prefabricated apartment house where they live. The house is reserved for high-ranking cadres. Two elevator ladies watch over the coming and going of visitors. They stare at me but say nothing. The elevator services, just like in Russia, only every second floor, so we have to walk down one flight of stairs. The stairs and halls are very poorly maintained, but all the greater is the surprise upon entering their apartment. Mary is proud of the place, and she must have invested a large amount of work and money to make these originally bare

concrete walls into what they are now, white, light, and airy. The furniture is modern polished steel and white wool, the floor is covered with large black and white vinyl tiles. The kitchen appliances she had to import from Hong Kong. Like in American homes all doors are open: there are three bedrooms and a livingroom-diningroom combination. One room contains a computer and a teletype, it serves as the office of their daughter who has joined them as the Peking representative for Owens-Illinois. On a large sofa lie two cushions with stenciled pictures of Marx and Engels, a bookshelf lines one wall. I guess, one could live here very well.

Mary shows me a book on the German excavations in Xinjiang that has recently appeared, but I am in a hurry to get to my dinner invitation at Mei-Ying's apartment, which is over an hour by bus from where I am. Mary does not offer to drive me there. So I take the bus. The bus stop right across from their apartment is easy to find, but the girl in the bus cannot understand my pronunciation of "Zoo", where I have to change to another bus. An older officer of the Liberation Army comes to my rescue. His excellent English betrays an educated man despite his sloppy khaki-brown uniform. On finding out that I am German, he tells me that he has been twice to West Germany to select and buy military equipment. Considering the briefness of our encounter and the fact that we are in China, our parting is unusually cordial.

The Mei-Ying lives on the 12th floor of one of four towers reserved for university employees. These buildings are new and still in good repair, but my physicist friend's apartment is a mess of boxes, books, and incongruous objects. I meet her father-in-law who is visiting from Vancouver. Mei-Ying's husband is travelling somewhere in the US, their child remains invisible. An older friend has prepared an excellent dinner of four or five generous courses. Mei-Ying confesses that she is not a passionate housewife or mother.
While we were still eating, I had after all been rather late, the bell rings, and in walks - Hong, the Woman from the Dunes and her painter friend! - Mei-Yi, to whom I had told part of my Dunhuang adventures, had found her and invited her. The surprise was complete and the reunion a great success, transcending all language barriers.
After dinner we all move to the living room, and I am being pressed to tell the adventures of my travels. During my many lonely hours I had amused myself by composing the "Story of Christine" in various literary genres, and I offer to tell them a fairy-tale of a pilgrim from a far-away country, who came to visit the Buddhist shrines of China... Never have I had a more enthusiastic translator than in Mei-Ying's father-in-law - who positively relished the ambiguities of my tale - and rarely a more rapt audience than on that last evening in Beijing.

Gao had promised to take me to the airport in the institute's car. I was relieved by this offer, since it appeared that the two-hour taxi ride was going to cost me some 26 yuan. It would also be so much more comfortable to be taken there by private car. We had agreed to meet at the university dormitory at ten in the morning to have enough time to reach the plane, which was scheduled to fly at

two in the afternoon.
At 10:30 there was still no Gao and no car. "The superior man does nothing, but when his time comes he acts with lightening speed". At 11:30 that time had come once more. I found myself a foreign student who spoke Chinese, and we were just trying to impress upon the taxi dispatcher that mine was an urgent case, when a green taxi cab pulled up in front of the dormitory entrance. I decided that this was going to be my taxi. I never have been quite so rude, the girl who had ordered the car was left standing at the curbside.
At this moment Gao appeared on a bicycle. He was so out of breath that he could speak neither English nor Chinese. I pulled him into the backseat with me, and off we went. Slowly he recovered. I tried to put him at ease. He had been at the dormitory I had stayed in, with the car and at the agreed-upon time, but the girls there had told him that I had already left. I had been waiting for him around the corner, at the main entrance. Without looking for me, they had gone home again!
The driver was circling the city by winding his way through the villages on the periphery of Beijing. We finally settled into a conversation on the personal problems of life in Beijing. Gao had planned to invite me to his house, but his father-in-law had suddenly fallen seriously ill, and his wife had spent the past days and nights at his side in the hospital. Without his wife Gao had found the task of such an invitation overwhelming. "You don't know how difficult it is to prepare a dinner in China," he said. "There is no gas or electricity like in your country. Before you can cook, you have to first light a fire in the kitchen."

We had not paid much attention to where the driver was going, until I suddenly noticed that he was turning off the asphalted road, first into a dirt road and then onto a track right across the fields. I tried to make Gao ask the driver where he was taking us, but Gao paralyzed, was staring ahead into the approaching ultimate disaster of our disaster-ridden relationship. The car skidded to a stop in a patch of castor beans. We were facing a water-filled ditch of considerable width.
The car had stalled. Despite the driver's frantic attempts at restarting it, the engine remained silent. Gao stumbled out of the car, tongue-tied, his arms hanging at his side. I looked at my watch, there was still time, but not much. At last I understood what had happened. The driver had tried to reach the limited-access road to the airport - dimly visible in the hazy distance beyond the trench - by cutting straight across the fields! - I decided to first go and to relieve myself among the castor beans.
When I came back the driver was lying under the engine fumbling at some screw with a wrench. I looked under the hood, and with combined efforts we found the cause of the trouble: a linkage to the gear shift had jumped out of its support and blocked the transmission in third gear. After all not a fatal problem. In another twenty minutes we had fixed the linkage with the help of a piece of wire.
The car started beautifully, and the driver backed us out of the castor beans. But now he started to race along the track through the fields. This time I shook Gao out of his nightmare to shout at the driver to slow down. We made it back

to the county road, but once there we were still faced with the problem of how to get to the airport.

For another precious half-hour the meanwhile completely nervous driver erred through the villages. We lost and fixed the gear one more time. - Eventually we made it to the airport, half an hour before departure time! I asked the driver what I owed him. With a quick look at his odometer and a furtive glance at me, he asked for 36 yuan, ten yuan more than the regular fare from the university to the airport!
I paid him with only the slightest hesitation, realizing in a flash that he had calculated the fare on the miles we had driven and that neither his nor Gao's salary were large enough to pay even for the surcharge. Gao was as surprised as I was by my level-headedness. He kept on mumbling: "I have never met a foreigner like you."
An hour later I was flying over the China Sea to Japan.

21.

NARITA SHAN

I awoke in a doll house: a tiny room with tiny furniture, a desk in front of the window, a triangular-shaped chair to save space, a prefabricated plastic bathroom occupying one corner, but a bed comfortably large enough for a tall Westerner. Everything was thoughtfully proportioned and arranged within a minimum of space, for a maximum of comfort and the most tasteful appearance: Hotel Niko in Narita. The hotel is owned by Japan Airlines, and because my connecting flight to Los Angeles leaves twenty hours after my arrival, I was given this room, dinner, and breakfast, compliments of JAL. A small note says: Check-out time is two hours before your plane's departure. Nobody disturbed me, there wa heavenly quiet.
A most luxurious buffet breakfast with orange juice, scrambled eggs, several kinds of bread, incredibly strong coffee, milk, jams, all most abundantly available, awaited me downstairs. The breakfast room was crowded with guests from four continents. A tribe of Indian Sikhs, the bearded men in turbans, the women in saris, three generations, argued undecided, torn between their vegetarian habits and the lure of western plenty. Two elderly ladies from the Midwestern US on their first Great Tour of the Orient shared my table.

A nearly empty bus takes me into the center of cluttered Narita. There is little beauty, the narrow and crooked streets snake through an incongruous visual jungle of houses, telephone wires, materials, colors, and advertisements. A political candidate, gesticulating with a microphone out of the open sliding-roof of a tiny Toyota, is blaring his message to an invisible audience in the as yet empty streets.
I walk in search of Narita Shan, a famous Buddhist shrine on the edge of town. It is surrounded by a park of magnificent trees, lakes and streams. From the air

the sixty-feet high, gilded stupa on top of the hill appeared to dominate the entire town. Now, inside the jumble of houses, I cannot see it anywhere. But the shrine is not far. A friendly young man tries to describe the way, which is later confirmed in English by a blond Swedish stewardess.

Around a bend in the street, passing underneath a huge banner with the characters for Narita and Shan, I suddenly stand in front of the entry to the park. Out of the lowlands of the market place - a forest of red-painted booths where all kinds of worldly and unworldly trinkets are being sold - the way leads up a short, but exceedingly steep staircase to this "Holy Mountain". As I climb "the path to heaven", the world changes, imperceptibly, magically.
I cross the bridge between two sacred ponds teeming with goldfish. A small island in one is inhabited by turtles. On the surface of the dark water are floating - like specks of gold - innumerable pipa leaves from the trees that surround in a tight spiral a reflection of the gray sky. A miniature waterfall on the far side of the pond sends ripples of waves that quietly rock leaves and reflections. Nestling under the trees stand tilted steles and stone lanterns covered with moss.

At the top of the stairs I unexpectedly face an enormous cauldron from which rises the smoke of hundreds of incense sticks half-veiling the shape of a huge temple of steel, glass, and aluminum. An old man stands, lost in prayer, before the imposing facade. Despite its modern materials, the building is entirely in the traditional Buddhist style.
I sit on a stone trying to recover my senses, when out of the central gate of the shrine emerges a procession of monks in bright green and white kimonos. They are led by a high-priest clad in a precious, antique, crimson kimono. An attendant holds a paper umbrella of the same color over his head as he walks towards me. Then, with near military precision, they make an abrupt left-turn and disappear, single-file down another staircase.
A sign in polite but faulty English welcomes foreign guest to the interior of the temple, but requests that they remove their shoes. A little lost, I wander around the vast, sobering, stainless-steel hall trying to peer into the dark recess behind a contemporary metal sculpture of gilded stars cascading from the ceiling, in search of the venerable, old Buddha image that is supposed to be kept here. Outside, behind a smoked-glass window pilgrims burn incense sticks and paper money on a stainless-steel rack running the length of the building. A single monk in the familiar, traditional Buddhist habit sits in a corner reading a sutra. A sign proclaims that he sells paper money to the pilgrims, to be burned to ease the passage of their loved ones to the Western Paradise. I never find the Buddha.

Further up the hill, I later discover the gilded stupa I had seen from the air and next to it the beautifully weathered, original wood shrine of the 9th century. Except for certain high holidays it is closed to visitors. The famous Buddha remains hidden to this far-traveled pilgrim.
Bewildered by this mixture of the old and the new, the sacred and the profane,

in search of a quiet place "where the heart can rest", I wander into the park on the far side of the hill. An elaborate, formal flight of stairs and a lifeless fountain have to be passed before I find the quiet, winding path leading to a lake visible between the autumnal trees.

Finally I am alone. The colors are still predominantly shades of green, muted by the haze of the sunless day. A few early orange, yellow-green, or dark red-brown trees are reflected in the opalescent waters of the lake. Their subdued colors - distant, detached - match my pensive mood. Stepping stones cross the lake at a narrow waist. As I jump from stone to stone the reflection of the golden stupa follows me across the water. Deep within a stand of old spruces, a gorge full of dripping moss evokes memories of another place, another time. At its end, above a waterfall, precariously hanging on to the wet rocks, stands a single tree, brightly yellow among the dark conifers.

My thoughts wander to the delicate, intelligent Lady Murasaki for whom Genji, towards the end of his life, planted an autumn garden to reflect her beauty and his love.

Late in the afternoon I fly towards Los Angeles and into the arms of Barbara.