

To the Sacred Mountain: Chengdu, Leshan and Emei

June 2 and 3 were easy days. On the 2nd I took a bus out to Jinsha archaeological site. Where I'd imagined a wooded foothill, I instead found a spanking new park with newly-planted saplings, bilingual signage, two large museums, and a stage. I lucked into the opening ceremony of the “2nd International Conference on Intangible Cultural Resources”, which consists largely of ethnic dance and music performances at Jinsha park. Nico texted me to ask how my day was going and invited me to join her for Sichuan “xiao chi”; so after 4 we spent four hours or so wandering downtown, stopping in three different places for snacks. Next day, I got my self over to the Botanical Gardens by city bus and scooter, without speaking a word of English. The scooter ride was a lot longer, and faster, than I expected. Weaving among smoke-belching trucks and bounding over traffic dividers was terrifying, but I think I'll swear off this particular adrenaline source for now. Not because I didn't like it, but because I really, really, did. The gardens were extensive, if kind of dusty. I enjoyed the groups of older people playing mahjong in the tea houses and ran into some of them again on the bus back to the city. The bus gives one an hour of cultural immersion for just about 30 cents, U.S.

Mary arrived on the evening of June 3rd. On the 4th, we had an easy day of touring the city the next morning. This time, Tian Fu Square had platoons of militia patrolling among the citizens; it was our only visible reminder of the 20th anniversary of Tiananmen Square. We did a little shopping among the endless malls on the East side of downtown, then to the Wohouci Temple, whose beautifully groomed gardens went on for several city blocks. Right on time, we showed up at Sakura bathhouse for separate showers and scrubdowns. After that we sat side-by-side in recliner chairs and got foot and body massages, done in recliner chairs in front of a yammering TV that seemed to be locked to the China shopping channel. As usual in these situations, my abundant body hair was the subject of amusement, with any disgust or derision held in check by innocent curiosity. Afterward, we had a hot pot dinner just around the corner from the hotel: You get a bubbling cauldron of oily broth with peppers, and then cook stuff, fish it out, then dip in in a mix of oil, cilantro, and garlic. This is the South Beach approach to nutrition, taken to a whole new level. Unfortunately the evening continued with a 90-minute virus panic involving Mary's computer and her remarkably cranky spouse.

On Friday the 5th began the centerpiece of this trip, a three-day, all-Chinese bus tour to the giant Buddha (“Dafo”) at Leshan and the sacred Mount Emei. I never made it up Mt. Fuji, after all. My intention was to experience a different sort of tourism and to practice my language skills. The same itinerary could have been arranged on our own or with English-speaking guides, as I'd done in Nanjing. But I chose to book in in Chengdu not from the net. More than most tourism, this journey truly was a destination. I can fill in the architectural and archaeological facts back home via Google or Baidu, but the interactions, and occasional lack thereof, were priceless. We had only a sketchy itinerary and contact to go on. I didn't even know the name of the company we were contracted with, just that a bus would, and did, pick us up at the 6:45 am. There were about thirty travelers from all parts of China, a Swedish family with their English speaking Chinese guide, and ourselves. After an hour of hotel pickups around the city, we finally headed south on the six-lane tollway to Leshan. Peace and quiet are not the operating principle on a Chinese tour bus. Our guide gave us what I think was a fairly humorous intro to Sichuan and to the Sichuan dialect, but I could not make out any details. Then assorted pop tunes played on the PA system. We stopped once at a dusty convenience store and a second time at a “tea

museum” where we bought way too many tea-candied tomatoes because they were, um, cheap.

Lunch came early. We helped the Swedes a bit with the food, and they caught on quickly. They impressed me as experienced travelers, just not experienced in this part of the world. Despite the warnings from Nico and from our hotel clerk that the food would be lousy, it was actually tasty and abundant, just a little monotonous by the time the third 8-dishes-for-8-people meal came around. The giant Buddha did not disappoint. We ascended a series of stone paths and stairways until we came to a rest (and shopping) area in front of a large temple. Off to the side was the Nine-Turn Path, which zigzags down the cliff alongside the 200-foot high carving, then back up through some tunnels, to a refreshment zone. It was about 31 (88 Fahrenheit) so we drank lots of bottled green tea, but were not uncomfortable in the somewhat pushy but never hostile crowd, which consisted mostly of tour groups like ourselves. We squeezed down the trail and up the other side, constantly taking pictures, some of friendly strangers and some of the Buddha. Our group assembled for “*xiuxi*” or break time, in a pricey tea house, but only two people ordered anything. The rest of us just enjoyed the shade. Eventually we made our way through a “Spiritual Goods” shop and into the cave galleries filled with 20 and 30 foot high replicas of Buddhist sculptures from nearby areas of Sichuan and Yunnan. We assembled with our group at the bottom of a gigantic staircase, turned around, and everyone was gone. For some reason no one told us they were off to the next attraction. We caught up, then got on the bus again. The next stop was an ebony museum with an 80 元 (\$12) entry fee, no doubt deductible in the museum shoppe. We, and half the others, passed. Mary and I, alone of the group, went off the reservation, walking down the road to buy a 3 元 (45 cent) beer and walk down a narrow road lined with houses under construction. We came back after 30 minutes and conversed affably with an Army engineer stationed in Lanzhou who had come to Chengdu for a month of telecommunications training. He and I spoke Mandarin and a little English, and I was getting better at translating for Mary. We got underway early, but assorted hotel drop-offs in Emei city took longer than planned. And while lunch had been prompt, dinner was slow to emerge. Apparently, special requests of any kind can completely disrupt businesses whose efficiency flows from strict adherence to routine. The other guests were anxious too, since many of us had tickets to the Sichuan opera at 8 pm and food only started appearing at 7:10. As we politely hurried through the meal, a slightly spicier version of lunch, I was pleased to see my chopsticks skills were no better or worse than anyone else's, and that we all struggle with where to hide, or otherwise abandon, the bones. Our guide raced us across town in cab to our hotel, where we were warned that there would be no water between 10 pm and 5 am due to construction. Visions of a four-star septic Armageddon danced through my head, and elsewhere, as we were rushed back across town to the Sichuan opera, which was just beginning at 8:08 pm.

I can see why Brecht had to come up with his whole new theory of “epic” theater after experiencing “Chuan Ju”. The performers are skillful acrobats, comedians, puppeteers, and singers, and tour-de-force follows tour-de-force with barely enough time for a pratfall or a fart joke between scenes. And they even serve tea. Afterwards, I bought 4 bottles of water, but the hotel had water after all. It was just their extensive and opulent bathhouse that was out of commission for the evening. We showered and slept until our 6 am wakeup.

Saturday, June 6th: A guide came in a cab to pick us up to join today's group at the city bus station, then we were off to *Jin Ding*, the Golden Summit of Emei Shan. It took about two hours, a couple of

changes of bus, and a final 2000-foot cable car ride to bring us up 10,000 feet. At every turn our guide Jenny kept urging us, and a couple of the other laggards to “*kuai idianr*”, or “go a little faster”. Not until the next day did she recall enough English to say “OK” or “thank you”. While these guides are certainly hardworking, I think this one was a little freaked out by having any English-speakers. With a rapid-fire explanation in Chinese, of which I understood not a word, she left us at the summit hotel desk with a quick “*bai-bai*”. By contrast, yesterday's guide (less makeup but more charisma IMHO) would slow down and get acknowledgment from me and I could understand, kind of. So at 9 am we were on our own, with a Spartan but functional room (thank Buddha, no Internet for a change), a bag of crackers and a can of rice porridge that had been given to us for breakfast, and a day to ourselves on top of the world. Emei is famous for sunrises and for the views of the “sea of clouds” that is the Sichuan plain seen from above on most days. In our case, though, the weather stayed cloudy, but for about 10 minutes of intermittent blue sky. We explored the temples, found that the monorail to the next peak was no longer operational, drank tea, and took naps. Mary frequently initiated photo-taking with other tourists, which resulted in some brief conversations. At one point in our wanderings, a young man from the weather station started talking with us and took us into his office. His workmates were not impressed, and he broke the conversation off in evident embarrassment after my attempt to express in Chinese the concept of humidity resulted in him guiding me down to his room and offering the use of his W.C.

The evening was more successful. The restaurant we picked for dinner had some English on the menu. To our eyes there appeared to be way too many staff members running around, but they were helpful and responsive: none of that “I'm not your waiter” one gets in finer establishments in the tip-driven USA. Most of the tables were occupied by groups of 8 or 10, who started drinking *baijouw* (distilled spirits) and toasting. We brought out the flask we'd bought for a dollar, flagged the waitress for some shot glasses, and did the same, though only once. By now it was raining hard, and still too early to go to bed. We checked out the possibility of foot massage, but while each hotel had earlier told us when their massage services were available, neither one actually were operating as promised when we showed interest. In a stroke of genius, Mary suggested the karaoke room / bar at our hotel. One couple was sitting across the way from us, singing on and off as a bunch of songs rolled by. I could read a few lyrics, but the traditional characters on the mainly HK and Taiwan videos slow me down. After we'd had half of our warm beer, I approached the other guy and asked to see if they had “*Wang Qing Shui*”. Indeed they did, so I got up, hands shaking, to do my thing again, my one Chinese song that has gained me so much. The girlfriend even backed me up. Cred established, I gave him the mic, which he accepted after much polite back-and-forth. A Latin song came up, so we got up and did some sloppy but passable salsa. Then a couple songs later, we tried for something in English. This was an esthetic disaster, as the only song we remotely knew was “My Heart Will Go On”. Our new friends were kind enough to let us off the hook by suggesting that we dance some more so they could video us. The Latino song came back on and off we went. I feared total humiliation but it was actually looked OK; those dance classes might be good for something. We traded numbers and emails and made an early night as they were closing at 10 pm.

Sunday June 7th began inauspiciously. I woke at 2:47 local time with a dry throat and a headache. Altitude and salty food had done me in. It would take 2 liters of water over the next few hours to bring me back to health. In the meantime, we'd had no word from our guide as to what the morning plan was.

We had a programmed wakeup call at 5:15, for those who want to view the sunrise. I went and asked the hotel clerk about word from our guide, but he had heard nothing. I'd texted our first day guide, who'd said I'd be contacted, but I'd neglected to the second guide (Jenny "Kuai")'s number. It was dense fog, so it was bed instead of rainbows for a couple hours. Finally I got up and called our hotel back in Chengdu. Since they'd sold us the tour, perhaps they could help us contact the tour company. As I was preparing to give them Guide One's number, Jenny texted me. She was in our lobby and would we please, um, you know, hurry up, OK? Then she came to our door, and managed to explain that we had 45 minutes. So by 9:30 we were with our group for the day, piling onto the cable car to go down the mountain. We enjoyed talking with a couple from Beijing. Later on, a woman from Wuhan started talking to me; since I knew her city we had something in common. Since this was everyone's second or third day touring, there was less shyness on all sides. Jenny relaxed a bit and even conversed with me a couple times in short sentences instead of run-on paragraphs. Having woman from Wuhan and her sisters ooh and ahh over my crappy Mandarin didn't hurt either, and made for great photos. After a quick lunch, we saw the Wannian monastery and had a lengthy walk through the woods, down a hill and through a beautiful gorge. But this was no Yosemite. We were on stone paths with stairs, at all times, and there were rows of tea and souvenir vendors, clustered every kilometer or so. We're back in Chengdu now and it's Monday morning. Today we'll be heading out to Dujiangyan to enjoy a hot spring resort and view the ancient irrigation works. But we won't be rushing to get to organized woodland tranquility. This next phase is supposed to be a rest stop. Masomenos.