

Sinkholes and Skyscrapers: May 13, Hebei, Shijiazhuang. Hazy

It's 11 pm Wednesday, my fourth night here in Shijiazhuang (石家庄) and I've settled in. I've come to this large-ish provincial city in Hubei to do two weeks of intensive Chinese language training at Konall Cultural Exchange. My package deal includes 4 lessons per day, a small apartment, and a borrowed bike. I managed to be here, and awake for the hot water, which is available only during an unspecified part of the evening. The dishes are done and I've had a real shower at last. Monday I was trying to cook until after the hot water was turned off. Tuesday night I came home mid-evening, exhausted from jet lag and did a blissful face-plant at 11. Tonight I'm stylin' at last. I got DJ EPROM on my iPod boombox/alarm clock, a big old 22-ounce, 46 cent Yanjing beer in front of me, and my staid but essential Chinese textbook waiting patiently for my fevered attentions. I'm less than brilliant in my studies. My very haphazard study patterns have left me with a large vocabulary and an extremely messed up set of non-grammar anti-patterns which I've nearly hardwired with actual use. My teacher is a daemon of patience who says I'm getting all the instruction I can handle. I've got to supplement my lessons by wandering the city and getting accosted by strangers, buying random vegetables and sampling dubious bodywork. Do I hate it here, or what?

I arrived Sunday May 11th and immediately jumped on a train to Shijiazhuang. Instruction started straightaway on Monday. The afternoon's routine was broken by a major earthquake, reportedly 900 miles away in Sichuan. We evacuated our building and heard a lot of sirens, then it was "all clear" and back to work. That night I slept just fine until the crack of 4 am, when the jet lag woke me, hard, with nausea and dehydration to boot. I made through Tuesday with lots of green tea, and succeeded in a epic set of errands, including getting my pay-as-you-go Chinese cell phone recharged. The school's teachers are available to help with errands on a standby basis, so bilingual help is at hand. Biking around with a chatty bilingual local person is always a good option. Nonetheless, the best I could do Tuesday night was get myself downtown and wander aimlessly. There were many huge department stores and hotels, but no foot massage places, and few side streets with cheap food. Eventually I found a seafood place with a few diners smoking at sidewalk tables. I got myself a fine meal of Yangtze fish and garlic spinach in my own dining room, for \$8. Private dining rooms, like private party areas in nightclubs, are big here, and mine was small and shabby, but I was happy. After some mediocre shiatsu I managed to get a proper sleep, get up at 6:30, do my homework and bike to school by nine, feeling great again.

Today after school my "assignment" was to use the vocabulary for dealing with buses. I got a bus across town to "Century Park" which appears to be totally manmade and is less than ten years old. It has gardens, winding paths, a lake for pleasure boating, and a huge television broadcast tower. It's not the 8th wonder of the world but it's big and clean and has lots of seating areas and greenery. At 5 pm on a weekday it's full of couples sitting on benches, singles texting on the grass, parents toddling their toddlers, and young people promenading for each other. No foreigners, none. Perfect place for a lonesome traveler to walk slow, dangle a camera, and see what nibbles. Soon enough I hear a "hello" from a muscular young man with a shaved head, a cigarette, and some equally robust companions. His game was to show me off to his pals, and despite his nonexistent

English he outshone those of his friends who could at least say “hello”, and I could laugh at his assurance that they weren’t out to hurt me. “Wo ye, bu shi huai ren a”, I responded (I’m not a bad guy either). We were soon sitting on a bench, clumsily exchanging pleasantries. I divided my attention, half to my host “Xiao Huo”, half to the circle of folks around us. Xiao Huo called out to some passing women, but none deigned to join us. After a bit he invited us to all walk around the park, and sidekick bought us bottles of water. Turns out two of the guys are truck drivers, two others are students. I explained that I’m learning Chinese before going to Wuhan to teach about computers. In other words I’m a harmless Martian. Twenty minutes or so passed of intermittent conversation, exchange of cell phone numbers and photos, then they had to go to work, and I continued around the park. I was soon approached by another guy who’d been at the edge of our circle earlier, though not in the clique. He is some kind of bank employee, same as me. We exchanged cards after some sincere if unproductive attempts to teach each other some English and Chinese respectively.

I started back to town, walking along a near endless mall of furniture wholesale showrooms, then crossed the boulevard into a vast market. I bought a half-pound of cherry tomatoes, but at the last second decided not to wolf them down but to take them back to the apartment and wash them. Then I found a cheap hot-pot restaurant: all you can eat for 18 yuan (under \$3). Diners line up buffet style and fill their plates with dumplings, vegetables, fried river fish, and dubious-looking, highly processed, meatballs and sausages. Skewers of mushrooms, meatballs and other stuff are handed to the cooks standing behind vats of boiling water. They cook the selections, and the waitresses bring them over. There is also a stack of large plastic kegs with all the cheap watery beer you want. This was pretty good, really; I went easy on the tasteless beer and got a lot of vegetables. Then I got a wrongish bus back to my side of town so I could land somewhere near the train station. I found myself in a side street which if not old was at least old-fashioned. People spilled out from empty storefronts and were smoking and drinking, gathered around stands with grilled meat and noodles. A man waved me over to his grill, and I haltingly explained I’d just eaten. I cruised the rest of the street and turned around. This time I stopped to talk to an older woman who’d invited me to have my hair washed. While some hair places are supposedly a front for other activities, her place was so small and so open to the street that I went in and had my hair washed and head and shoulder massaged in a tiny open room with a couple of guys lounging on a beat up sofa a few inches behind my dripping soapy head. Images of Tibet rescue teams rolled by on the flat panel TV as I had a bit of “where are you from” conversation. Thirty minutes of entertainment for 4 元. Besides, I hadn’t yet washed my hair as I hadn’t managed to be home in time for the hot water. I’m finishing this the next day (5:15 pm Thursday here), hesitating to go out in the hope that the hot water will be on and I can shave properly.

But enough about me, what about SJZ?

It’s the flat’n’dusty place your all dyin’ to see
The city park was built by the Demolition Man
The city lake is full like an aquifer can

Partyin' on and on on and on,
They tear the hutongs down in the dusty dawn.
Where the money comes from is anybody's guess
New China's got it goin' on, and later for the rest.

An earthquake in the hills? That may be far way
Here in Hebei we got sinkholes and we got 'em every day

Riding on the train the fields are all so green
But they used to be all flat without no valleys in between

Photo shoot or GPS, the future's here to see,
But the bus is air conditioned and it's got HD TV!