

**Ready for Launch?** May 24, Hebei, Shijiazhuang. Hazy

If any of y'all dear readers happened to look at my series of reports with a literary eye, you may have noticed the lack of a plot arc, even a lack of tension. Life really isn't guaranteed to imitate art, now is it? Friday the 23<sup>rd</sup> my luck and mood changed. I went downstairs to go to class, blog freshly blogged, sentences memorized, and ... no bike! While I'd parked it anywhere and anytime for two weeks, somehow it was carried off during the night. Has someone been watching? I got yelled at a bit by our non-English speaking admin / housemother, Anna, who reminded me that she'd shown the (rusty, dusty, unspeakable) shed where I was supposed to put stuff. OK, OK. Mea culpa. We went out, I say "we" because the school likes to send students out with a spare teacher, or in this case, admin, to take care of errands, OK we went out to buy a new bike. The bike I'd been using was the personal property of Nathan, brother of the school director. I got a similar, but new, replacement bike for 270 kuai, with perhaps 40 kuai worth of bargaining help from Anna. Not a biggie, but now I don't want to leave the bike any and everywhere at night with no time to do another replacement, so I'm cabbing it everywhere. That's no bad thing since I have to talk to the drivers, about half of whom make a point of being helpful.

And I need the help. My language skill remains minimal. I can read more hanzi (characters) than before, which counts for little outside of my textbook. I am pretty confident approaching people, and my tones are better. But have a very hard time recalling the sentence patterns I drilled on so much. What did I expect? This. Kind of. I did very well at the lessons, though I was pushed through too quickly out of my teacher's desire to make the numbers. I'm a rank beginner with just enough Hanyu (spoken Chinese) to make simple purchases, find the bathroom, and engage naturally helpful people.

Not that it mattered last night. Once again, a planned dinner with James didn't happen, so I wasted some prime evening time looking for a public shower (xi zao) that I never did find. I did get a refreshing shampoo with head and neck massage while still waiting for the call from James. Meanwhile my friend Gary had become unavailable. He was booted by his first host family for coming home at -gasp- 10 pm, thanks to me. He's been relocated to an new family way outside of town and will be unavailable until he gets a scooter on Monday. So much for companionship. By the time I decided to find my own dinner, the hot water was on and I shaved and showered. I brush my teeth with the stuff when it's not brown from rust, but it's salty and reminds me of that fragile salt-dome aquifer beneath us and of the salty quality of Hebei cuisine. There aren't a lot of restaurants in this town, there are hotels and banquet halls but the mid-range small-group market is not well served. That's because said market consists entirely of yours truly, and it only exists when I walk down the street. I wound up back that the place where I'd had Yangtze fish last week. They remembered me, helped me select a different type fish, and cooked it in a fabulous ginger and garlic slurry. I brushed my teeth a zillion times at the dirty sink in the restaurant hallway (at least they have passable running water), then went across the street for one last stab at nightclubbing. The "other" place to go is Mazzo's. The name gives me pause. Mazzo's is the name of a nightlife fixture in Amsterdam and was the scene of my late friend Michael Gold's happiest times as an expat in the 1980's. See also: <http://www.channels.nl/pages/68.html> I went in, hoping for some random conversation like last week. But I didn't last three full minutes. There was no unclaimed space and just standing in the aisle I felt like I got some fairly aggressive elbow-grazing from passing young men who didn't want me having any space. When I took a seat at the bar, I was told it was 100 kuai for a beer (or bucket thereof, I couldn't

tell). The music was OK, the reggae hiphop mélange which is truly the “world beat” of the wide world of westernized youth night life. But I felt like there was no point in remaining, and I walked and cabbied home to drink leftover soju in front of my flat panel TV. I flipped between earthquake rescue coverage in English, and a learned lecture on the history of Chinese language which I couldn’t follow at all.

Now it’s Saturday, an unscheduled day in China. My only such, in fact. I slept in until 9, went to the one coffee shop and had two coffees and a fruit salad. I brought my teaching materials and went over my upcoming class for CUG in Wuhan. It’s OK, I feel like the man who wrote the materials last month did a good enough job. I then wandered the crowded proletarian market area and took a couple pictures, and got a cab home. I’ve been in touch with James and sounds like we’re on for something tonight, and if not, I will try for the outdoor inexpensive karaoke on my own. I’m bound to have some kind of encounters there.

I am eager to get to Wuhan, it’s supposed nightlife, and new professional colleagues.