

Welcome to Panda City

I'd been in China for over a week when the fully touristic part of the trip began. I visited my friend Sven in Shanghai and spent a couple days touring that city. Thanks to the newly opened bullet train line, I squeezed a one-day visit to Nanjing in before arriving in Wuhan for the Eight Annual International Conference on eBusiness, hosted at China University of Geosciences. On June 1 I left Wuhan and flew to Chengdu. The Wuhan conference (see www.whiceb.com) was successful for me: I was there to make a presentation on systems for disaster management, a topic about which I am not especially expert. Our team filled an unexpectedly long time slot and even got some questions from our audience. I renewed contacts, and began to negotiate for a one week teaching slot for next year. As in other years I spent lots of time “off the reservation”. The paper sessions really don't offer me much, so I wandered the grimy hillside across the main avenue from our ornate hotel. It didn't take long to find a place to get laundry done cheaply. And once again, I capped the visit with a place of *long xia* (“dragon shrimp”), a pile of spicy crayfish best eaten with plastic gloves and cold watery local beer.

I'm in Chengdu just for fun. Mary is joining me tomorrow, and I've had two days to do reconnaissance and planning. My neighbor on the flight from Wuhan was a 3rd year undergrad at Sichuan University. She engaged me in conversation in both Chinese and English. That's the same year as the undergrads I taught at C.U.G. In Wuhan last year. She offered to show me around town between her 2 pm and 7 pm classes, then the plan evolved into me sharing a cab into town, buying us both a fantastic lunch (*ma po tofu* and some river fish), and her helping me negotiate our upcoming 3 day bus tour to Mt. Emei. Then she was off to her early class and I was free for the day. Net-net, we had fine exchange of food for tuition, without any potentially awkward man/woman evening alone time. Nico is bright, blunt and almost arrogant. She's flown around the country to visit friends and would like to live abroad but wants to return to her country. Her patriotism is refreshing and un-ironic. I showed her my pictures of the Nanjing memorial, she said “that's why we have to be strong”. When I hear my progressive friends in California imagining that China's rising educated generation is somehow seething at the yoke of oppression and aching for their own version of France's 1968 May days, I will see Nico's calm nod when I told her how moved I was by the mass grave in the Nanjing memorial. After we parted I got a cab to my 3-star business hotel, and then flagged a scooter ride over to Qintai tourist street. There I booked our hotel for the two days after Mary's arrival. After a short walk, I found “Sakura”, a beautiful 24 hour bath house that serves both men and women. Got the details I needed for the mountain tour: the price is right but even the clerk who books the tours warned me that the food will be terrible. I will only love Chengdu the more, since dinner was a huge bowl of spicy broth with four fish and a bunch of bland cabbage-y vegetables. I asked the server for middle-spicy and that's what I got. Interesting language note: people really do call out “*fuwuyuan*”, which is a respectful and gender-less word for server in many types of business. This is maybe a beneficial leftover from the days of Mao, although I've read that women's position in society has become less equal in the last two decades. The rest of the afternoon was spent wandering. I went to a city park and sat with a one-dollar warmish beer. Eventually I succumbed to the sales pitch of an itinerant acupuncturist/masseur. For \$4 US, I got an intensive 20 minutes chair massage including neck cracking and armpit and elbow point work. No acupuncture, though, please. The guy had two bandages on his face and smelled like tobacco. As he rolled my head into his paunch to crack my neck, I thought, yes, this really is my idea of fun.

Women had a powerful but traditional role in the opera that I saw. Armed only with an address from a badly written brochure, I had found myself in front of a theater just a few blocks from the hotel. The clerk just gave me a ticket, even though it said “120 RMB” on it (\$18 US). I sat down and watched

some early groups filing in, then summoned my courage and asked the middle aged woman next to me “what is this?”. Thus began a lengthy conversation in which she told me it was an opera about the big quake. I correctly guessed she was not from Sichuan and was a member of the Wei minority people from Anhui province. We of course swapped numbers; that's just what folks do when they meet. The opera was, well, lengthy and bombastic, but had great production values. The the lighting and the group dancing was superb, though the (recorded) music was way too loud. I reveled in the supertitles since I could follow many of the characters for the lyrics. 50% of them, anyway, but it was a great language exercise. There were eight scenes portraying grief, loss, heroic rescue efforts, the strength of parents love for their kids, and so on. Each scene was introduced by a tallish woman whose costume changed each time. She was the lead singer, in the roles of mother, military officer, rescue worker, doctor, and so on. I teared up at the close of one scene where dozens of kids backpacks rose to the heavens. Was this kitch, or unvarnished emotion?