

Chapter Six Excerpt

All the teachers are about to leave for Huangshan (黄山) Mountain. It seems that every year the uni shouts all the aliens, aka foreign teachers, to a weekend somewhere. "Huangshan" translates as "yellow mountain", so when they say "Huangshan mountain" they're actually saying "yellow mountain mountain". Apparently the university bunks two teachers in a room together, but I'm going to fork out for my own room, because recently me, Barry and this other ancient pisspot from downstairs had a few beers at my joint, and he said that during this trip, he'd piss up at my and Barry's room. Well look, Barry's OK, and this guy's OK, but when you put these living fossils together over a few beers, it's like Keith Richards and Mick Jagger loudly reminiscing about music that time forgot for very good reasons.

On Friday morning (the thirteenth), about forty of us piled into a coach. It was a nine-hour trip, on a bus with no toilet - thank God for the Chinese scenery and perpetually weird locals to distract one with. This two-and-a-half-day trip would take us to two provinces, the first being Anhui (安徽), the province southeast of Hubei. En route, we stopped at a couple of petrol stations/tuck shops. They're essentially the same as Australian ones, but Chinese-ised, which means squatting toilets, and duck necks, sweet sausages on sticks and weird packaged tofu stuff instead of meat pies and sangas. Potato chips are here, but no salt and vinegar.

Something that has to be mentioned, again, is how much Chinese motorists *beep*. It's nigh impossible to sleep, or even relax, on a Chinese bus, because the driver beeps *all the fuckin' time*. Drivers here swerve from lane to lane whenever they feel like it, and rarely, if ever, indicate, so when our driver was overtaking, he needed to beep his ass off, making sure that the other driver wasn't distracted/sleeping/dead. Because people here treat roads like a continent-wide game of dodgem cars, people need to continuously beep, on the assumption that the other drivers are about to do something

unexpected. This made the nine-hour trip, shall I say, idiosyncratic [*this is how they drive everywhere, from alleys to highways (they also tailgate regularly, at any speed). If this doesn't sound good to you, get a train instead*].

We got to the hotel about eleven pm. Nothing flash, but comfortable. We then went out to chow, but everywhere was shut except for the Huangshan version of snack street (ie street food). This was wonderfully surreal...a street full of seats, tables, and rows of carts and stalls selling dozens and dozens of BBQ'd skewers...being out here with a bunch of other foreigners, surrounded by loud and drunk locals who spasmodically looked, laughed and cheered at us, at nearly midnight in the Chinese version of woop woop, was just brain-alteringly weird. There's just no way to fight this level of weirdness - you have to become Zen with it.

On the way back to the hotel, the tour guide said see you all at five am. We asked her politely to fuck off, so we agreed on six-thirty instead.

Next day, we had a Chinese brekkie (boiled eggs, steamed buns, seaweed 'n' noodles. Good stuff). Something that we were warned about, but I didn't comprehend, was that there was apparently a "three hour queue" waiting for us. A three-hour queue? Codswallop, I thought. But, alas, we got to this joint around eight am to see that the majority of the universe had gotten there before us. Huangshan is not just a mountain, it's a mountain range - a hundred and fifty-four square kilometres - so the queue was for just one of the cable cars in the area, the Taiping (太平) one.

Me, Brian and Jennifer looked at the queue, about fifteen people thick and a few hundred long, and said screw that. We told our coordinators that we'd go walkies around the bush instead, and they told us to come back in three hours, they'd keep our place in line. Sweeeeeeet, we thought (also "suckers"). So we went a-wandering, and I'm infinitely glad we did.

Here's why.

The Chinese version of a holiday seems to be vastly different to the western one. When we go on holiday, we generally like less crowded places to relax and unwind – that's pretty well the point. The Chinese, in contrast, go from one place with billions of people to another place with billions of people. As an article I read recently put it, the Chinese attitude is that if there's *not* a billion people there, they don't think it's a good place to go. Whole busloads go to these places, and only differentiate from each other by holding flags and/or having the whole group wearing a brightly coloured cap.

Instead, me, Brian and Jennifer walked down a bush path, and found beautiful bush, vastly different to the bush in Australia, with almost no-one around us for nearly an hour. There was tons of bamboo, many different species of tree and shrub, and I saw and heard birds that I'd never seen or heard before. One thing we found was stunning – a Buddhist ceremony in action, the worshippers praying before a large rock with a coloured painting/engraving of Buddha. On one side of this was a green-tinted pool, and overlooking the whole scene was a small, simple pagoda sitting on a rocky outcrop. It was astonishing – pure, unrefined China, with none of the west in sight, seemingly oblivious and uncaring of the ocean of people just a hundred or so metres above them.

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Eventually, we got piled into a cable car that went straight up – and I mean, *straight up*, like, almost vertical in some places. And I must say, as ludicrous as the queue was, what they were queuing up for was *jaw dropping*.

The scale of this mountain range – even the small part of it we saw

- is eye-poppingly *massive*. I'm not scared of heights (something I'm *really* grateful for), but a couple of times on this thirteen-minute trip, even I had sweaty palms (probably because I was looking straight down, something that I love doing). The scale is just gargantuan - at a few points, it must have been around a kilometre's drop into the V-shaped valley...we were going straight up between two massive mountains, which were alien compared to anything in Australia, their grey monolithic faces blending with the currently grey, pre-drizzle sky. Two of the other foreigners sat on the floor, head between their knees, saying "tell us when we're there". The car was *clearly* crowded beyond capacity, but since it'd been going up and down the mountain non-stop since five am, statistically, I figured I was safe.

We got to the top, my eyes all but popping out from the visual excitement of the last quarter hour, and then, for an hour or so, we walked around with a view of the vast mountain range around us. Some parts were positively dangerous - in some paths, the steps were extremely steep, with only a thin, lacquered wooden handrail separating you from a sheer drop of about half a kilometre (a few foreigners chickened out). The geography is incredible...*massive* rock hillsides with almost vertical strata. Their configuration and scale seemed almost unreal - absolutely titanic, in every direction. The weather was fantastic - not sunny, and, slowly, clouds started forming. As clichéd as it might sound, Huangshan is probably one of the most amazing places I'll ever see...I wish there'd been less people there, but, well...*[remember, this was during a national holiday. This is extremely important to note, because the national holidays are when, essentially, a billion people go sightseeing at the same time]*.

Lining up for the cable car back, the amount of pushing, shoving, yelling, running and squeezing was perplexing. Although a certain amount of shoving might be necessary with a population this big, I just found their seeming approach of let's-have-one-hundred-percent-chaos-and-see-what-happens mystifying. Sometimes I just watch people here, and I can't fathom why they're doing

things in certain ways, when a better way might be staring them in the face [*this manifests in a plethora of ways – ask me over a beer*].

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The next day, we went to see an “authentic” Chinese tea ceremony. This was a great example of the Chinese holiday-making ethos of go somewhere/see something/buy a bit of it/leave. We piled into this little room, and watched two girls doing the whole tea ceremony shemozzle. It was clearly tourist-oriented, but enjoyable. Afterwards, we were persuaded to buy some tea. One of the girls was packing little metal containers of tea, and it seems that to correctly pack a container of tea, you need to smash the shit out of it on a big metal lid. So while people were translating types of tea and negotiating prices, this girl was making a massive noise that no Chinese person in the room seemed to notice.

We then went southwest, into Jiangxi (江西) province, literally “river west”. Here we went to two places, the first of which being Hongcun (宏村). It was a 300-year old Confucianism school, largely turned into a peddler’s market. This place is apparently famous now because a scene from *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* was filmed here. There’s an apparently 300-year old classroom with a drawing of Confucius on an altar in the back, which is way cool, even if it is a remake.

Back on the bus, one of our Chinese coordinators showed us that she’d bought the same thing as one of the foreign teachers. The Chinese paid ten *kuai*; the foreigner sixty. The last stop was Jingdezhen (景德镇) – reportedly, China, as in Chinese porcelain, originated, or at least flourished, here, and even today it’s obvious that this city’s economy is run by it. We wandered around, then had an early dinner at some place which had a really good fish curry. Being in central China, I generally avoid seafood, cuz eating anything from the Yangtze River doesn’t seem like a good idea. Oh, Chinese for the Yangtze is *chang jiang* (长江), which simply

translates as “long river”. “Yangtze” is a western word [*wrong. Yangtze comes from another Chinese word, yang zi (扬子). This, I heard, used to refer to just one part of the Yangtze, but somehow, the Chinese name for the whole river became chang jiang, and the western name became the old Chinese version. Etymologically interesting*]. My memories of this place was a billion cups ‘n’ plates ‘n’ mugs ‘n’ stuff with a zillion locals trying to sell us some of it.

So that was Huangshan!!!!!! It was way cool.