Stand and Deliver: Wuhan, 26th May 2008. rain.

Saturday the 24th was my final day in Shijiazhuang. I had low expectations since I've found social planning to be difficult. After my morning coffee and study session, I cabbed it home to pack, and chill for a while. Go to another park? Try the busses? Blog more? I asked the cab driver about bathhouses, as I'd yet to see a big one like I'd been to in Shanghai. He gave me the address of the Swan Lake, which turned out to be not far at all from school, just the other way down a major street. After a slow afternoon I stepped outside and waved my hand sideways, palm down, to flag a cab in a Chinese stylee. In moments I was inside a multi-story temple of pleasures. Liveried attendants in the shimmering marble lobby walked men to the left side, women to the right across the purple Rococo carpet. The lower floors are segregated for bathing, swimming, whirlpools, steam and saunas. Mid-levels are for eating and drinking, where men and women guests in bathrobes re-unite to sample the buffet, drink tea, play cards or mah jongg, or watch the ubiquitous high-def TV's. As to the upper levels, you, dear readers, must only speculate, as did I. Remember, gambling is illegal in China. The bathing area has a twenty-foot ceiling is done in marble and has a thirty-foot fish tank full of fish and turtles, and Roman style columns and tile mosaics did not look goofy in the slightest. Attendants in gaudy uniforms with squeegees keep the place immaculate at all times: roll over Babylon! After bathing and sauna-ing, I had a thorough milk-and-honey body scrub in the common area on the bathing level. This procedure is an interesting blend of pleasure and fear, since it's kind of a massage, and a thorough cleaning, but the vigorous scrubbing of my most intimate areas, by a strange man at that, is still startling and a bit painful. Acculturation, acculturation, breathe, breathe, I tell myself. It's just a body, it's just a body. OK. This was the fifteen-dollar version of the 75-cent neighborhood shower I'd been to the prior week. I left with a spring in my step and my bodily functions intact.

As dinner drew near I still didn't really have plans. At 6 pm, just in case, I went down the street and had some garlic vegetables and a small donkey-burger to tide me over until whatever dinner awaited. Then, as I was swapping messages with some of the other students to see about getting together, somewhere, umm, sometime, ah I'll get back to ya, Leo texted me; KTV was on, now! Seven pm and I jumped in the nearest cab and was soon on the corner, watching them set up an old 27" CRT, karaoke DVD box, 8 channel PA mixer and wireless mics. En route I messaged my fellow students not to expect me for a while. An incomplete plan may be canceled in favor of a definite, and the more in-country option always trumps the expat option, which usually trumps the tour group option, which generally trumps staying in. To quest is the law, quest under will. Later for the rest. The party was about to start. Young mothers and kids, shirtless men with cards and cigarettes, sat under the scrawny trees as dust faded to dusk. Fruit vendors sold pineapple slices, and the VJ ground out recorded Cantopop songs since no one had yet stepped up to sing. Leo said he'd be a little late as he was straightening his apartment, and I dashed across to the other corner to have a few squid chuan'r (grilled skewers). I got back in plenty of time. Leo showed up and we went up to his apartment, which he described as "practical". I appreciated his wit as well as his willingness to share his unspectacular digs. As in other countries with cramped housing, Chinese don't do a lot of home entertainment. We got a perfunctory hello from the pregnant wife, who went back to sulking, or was that reading. He offered me a frozen fruit pop, we played chess. Then we went back downstairs to the party. It was now thoroughly nighttime. A couple guys were monopolizing the KTV, belting out duets. They were good singers, too. Leo asked me, did I have butterflies. No, I replied. I know I stink as a singer but that's not really what this is about, is it?

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After waiting 45 minutes or so, it was time for me to get up and to my thing. Instead of a count, a cursor, and I was on my way. My song, "Wang Qing Shui", was a hit for Hong Kong actor/singer Liu De Hua (aka Andy Lau) a few years ago, and I'd found it recommended on a Beijing expat blog site Shakily at first, but with increasing confidence, I delivered all the lyrics with only a glance or two at the screen. I got applause for standing up at all, but when I got to the first chorus people applauded, and joined in. The rest of the song just got better. Somewhere along the way my hand stopped shaking, and I found my voice. It just isn't a singing voice, but it was enough. As we went to leave a few minutes later, a clump of men came up to talk to me and asked me to do another song. My Mandarin gave out and Leo explained on my behalf but I knew only this one song. Soon, he had to go home, and I jumped in another cab, off to expat-land with my cred duly burnished. The street re-purposes technology as it always will.
This streetside karaoke is apparently unknown in uptight Beijing but can flourish in the margins where a small bribe can still buy a favor. It may lead to new subgenres being created to meet a new subculture. Or not. But for right now, I felt like I was at Upsetter's sound system in Kingston in the 1960's, or better yet, that I was rockin' the mike with Cool Herc in the South Bronx in 1978 at the wellspring of hip hop. And you don't stop …..

The lads were across town eating mutton chuan'r and drinking lots of beer. I found them, a la mode Chinoise: get in the cab, call friend, friend hands phone to guy at restaurant, I hand phone to cabbie. Klaar? Klaar. I had four companions here. Gary, above mentioned, again violating the rules of his home stay by coming out and staying out late. Milo, young, British, and with the best Mandarin of the group. Dave, British/American, fearless rugby player and bon vivant, made noisily squeamish by my tales of public bathing. I gently switched the topic of conversation to the many meanings of the word "putong", which can be crudely translated as "standard" but carries connotations of excellence through conformity, while for Americans, "standard" suggests "not premium". The group kept shouting about who should or should not scrub whose nuts. Josh, the only student to join the dance class, speaks two kinds of Arabic and has been a BPM consultant (!). All of them were in a sense typical, but Josh was the one I'd most like to have gotten to know better. Did he have some wound that drove him into volunteered exile? Or is he really the budding diplomat he claims to be?

The next morning, Sunday May 25, I rose plenty early, packed and walked down the block to the Hebei World hotel and enjoyed their breakfast buffet, with coffee. James and Ivy came early to pick me up for my train so I had at last a chance to talk to him a little bit. His background as an anthropology major, including some years in Zanzibar, gives him quite a negative view of many Western travelers. To his perspective, backpackers, with their tendency to scrounge and desire for "authentic" travel experiences, are the most toxic and pernicious aspect of tourism, since at least big tourism brings in money to local economies. He reinforced what was obvious to me, that a social gulf between the largely female teachers and the largely male students was inevitable and necessary. Our one dinner after the salsa was about as close as one could reasonably get. He warned me not to drift into the English teaching lifestyle, for re-entry to one's home country grows ever more difficult. Don't wind up with the "L" stamp on your visa. "L"? Means "loser".

The train ride to Wuhan was smooth and sleek, very "putong". The train is remarkably like the Japanese Shinkansen and it averaged 160 hm/h, hitting shink-like speeds of 250 on the better track. I had an Australian Chinese seatmate, Bill, who was good company and did me the favor of conversing with me in Chinese when his English would have been easier for us both. For space and duration, it was about like Boston to San Francisco flight, in a middle seat at the back of the plane. I plugged into my iPod for a while and created some personal space: Mic Cite, a

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French African hip hop outfit, then Wang Qing Shui of course, Slim Shady, Donkey Nap by EPROM, Bass Phenomenon by Krafty Kuts, "Acabo de Llegar" which is my personal salsa anthem, assorted Tango Nuevo, and Brian Eno's "Taking Tiger Mountain". I reflected on the passing landscape. As we passed some huge cooling towers I found myself hoping it was a nuke, for this land and this world are all facing trouble. As the land began to fold into hills, and we came to see trees that were not just plantations of saplings. We passed streams, and finally began to see birds, flooded fields, and water birds. South China never looked so good to me. I'd been feeling a sheer hunger for beauty, satisfied by first by the sight green hills, and soon, by the rich urbanity of Hankou.

I've now been enjoying two nights of bland international comfort alongside the Yangtze River in Hankou, the entertainment and business heart of Wuhan. I got a heavily discounted room at the nicest place in town, the Oriental Pearl Plaza, whose 37th through 40th floors consist of a golden ball with a revolving restaurant and a bar. Unfortunately the lighting and décor pretty much mask the nighttime view with needless glare. I had a six-dollar beer up there Sunday night, cocooning, as I promised myself. I had a Thai buffet dinner on Floor 41 and limited my nighttime wander to a one-hour walk along the riverfront. Tonight, Monday, is a bit different. I'm about to go off to Café Brussels, a Belgian restaurant an brew pub which inhabits an imposing building that must have been somebody's consulate back when Wuhan was a treaty port. It's owned by a bearded Belgian expat and has all-you-can-eat mussels nights. If was here much longer I'd be at least a semi-regular.

Today I did some moderate touring and several hours of tedious preparation for my class, including multiple failed downloads and fractured installs of the software I thought I would demo. It's finally working, and I ran through the demo. I've earned the beer. The touring was pretty nice, though. I swam laps this morning and then reviewed and edited my lecture materials over the breakfast buffet. After that I took a city bus down to the Yangtze bridge and walked across. Until this bridge was built back in 1957 all north-south traffic in China had to cross the world's biggest river by ferry. No wonder there's still such a fuss made over the difference between "bei fang ren" (northerners) and "nan fang ren" (southerners). The temp rose, my mood dropped. The haze got denser. Me too. Wuchang, on the other side of the river, is the provincial capital and is academic and administrative. It does not have the commercial vibrancy or bustling nightlife of my hotel's neighborhood in Hankou. Wuchang, plus Hankou, equals Wuhan, which is a somewhat artificial agglomeration of three cities. The third one is industrial Hanyang, famous for munitions, a Citroen plant, historic mutinies, and not much else. Strategic place, this. I wandered the quiet streets for a while wondering if I'd be able to find a cab or a bathroom, and eventually made it to a commercial area, Shouyi Square. There were musical instrument and appliance stores, entertainment arcades, and a western oriented coffee shop where I took refuge for an hour. It took them thirty minutes to make me a cup of "Ba Si", meaning Brazilian coffee. I was the only customer and I chatted a bit and browsed the Net. Got a cab back to the hotel just as some rain began pattering down. Wednesday is supposed to be a downpour. The afternoon passed slowly, with work and a brief nap, before I again roamed the streets. The moisture here after Shijiazhuang is metaphoric as well as real. I really need a town where I can browse for restaurants by walking. Dinner was nameless meat strips on top of a huge bowl of enoki mushrooms, with greens and more mushrooms on the side. Followed by a foot massage with the earthquake rescue on the HDTV. I could get used to this.

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