

Beijing was the last stop on our journey. I hadn't thought much about what to do in there, other than to see two friends: Leo, my Chinese teacher from last year's visit to Shijiazhuang, and Shujie, my seat mate from last year's westbound flight with whom I've had a dialog about balancing work and home life. The city impressed me as vast and unwieldy two years ago. We saw some major sights, and had a bike adventure, but I mostly remember rain, and heat, and traffic. I had booked an inexpensive hotel in Haidian, the side of town where both my friends live, and that was planning enough.

Leaving Chengdu was problematic. No sooner had I said to Mary that “the plot arc had been too flat, something is about to happen”, it did. Somehow Air China never got our reservations from the eLong.net travel site, and our smooth arrival at the airport turned into a quick series of hassles. In the end we had to pay full fare, and stand by for our 9 am flight. But we got to BJ right on time at 11:30 am. The sky was blue, with little white clouds! I didn't think Beijing had days like this, and certainly not with a temp of 80 F. And better yet, people spoke a range Beijing accents, and actual Putonghua, the “standard speech” taught through out the country, and to foreign language learners. I was at last comprehensible. We got to Yi Hai Business Hotel by about 1:15, and enjoyed our boxy gaudy little room with all mod cons. We were outside the 2nd ring road but not engulfed by mega-structures. Right across the street were typical storefronts and restaurants. The street in front of the hotel parking lot smelled like piss, since there's a morning vegetable market where farmers sell produce from horsedrawn carts. After lunch at a Nanjing style restaurant around the corner, we had only three hours for touring before our dinner date with Leo. No adventure to the Summer Palace, no bust ride to the Fragrant Hills. We had time to get to the Military Museum. The museum features a collection of old jet planes and officers' pistols. The photo-snapping out-of-towner's who insisted on swapping photos with us Meiguoren, made for quite a contrast with the solemnity of Nanjing's Datusha Jinnian (Massacre Memorial). Oddly, our cab driver needed his GPS to find the museum, even though it has its own Metro stop on the biggest avenue in the whole city. We were back to the hotel by 6, and Leo called us with directions to meet him at the South Gate of BLCU Campus, out between the 4th and 5th Ring Roads in Haidian.

Beijing's “Silicon Valley” has developed around a bunch of existing college campuses and is not the freeway-garlanded sterile hell that I'd imagined. It is walkable and now has a couple of new Metro lines firmly integrating it to the rest of the city.

We met up with Leo for dinner on the campus of Beijing Language and Culture University. He's been tracked into a linguistics major where he wanted to be in translation. We are going help him get online access to US journal articles to support his research. He lives in a very rundown dorm room, and his wife lives nearby, in circumstances she didn't quite share as she is very shy with her English. He gave me a Rubik's cube and attempted to teach me his foolproof solution while wife gave a look of amused endurance. After dinner, Shujie and her husband joined us at SPR Coffee place. She'd had to cancel dinner plans with us for Friday due to a 12-hour per day work crunch. Both couples have parents helping with raise their kids. Shujie's folks are in Beijing so they live with their son most days of the week. Leo's folks are back in Xingtai, Hubei, so they have to leave their bay with grandparents for weeks at a time. Xingtai is also the home town of Nico, the student who showed me around Chengdu, but if there's a lesson here I'm too dumb to see it..

After a long night's sleep we had breakfast (lamb skewers and grilled eggplant) at the neighborhood Korean place next door. Beijing may be a megalopolis, but there's a small farmer's market right on the avenue in front of the hotel, and the street stinks of animal urine from the farmer's horse-drawn carts.

In the Korean place the daughter (age 10, or 12, or 20??) passed me a note about how much she wanted to be friends while her mom scowled in the background. Her gushy text message to me later “you.have.no.idea.how.much.i.enjoyed.meeting.you” suggests that mom's concerns are justified. Next, an easy cab ride across to 798 Art Zone (see <http://www.china.org.cn/english/features/798/187853.htm>) . Once again, I had to use my map and attempt to give directions, once again, the driver had to save face by asking a local. The sky was blue, the temp around 78F, and we had nothing to prove. No need to find the hippest, the most obscure: this was vacation time. 798 had grown in two years. there are more eateries, including some with San Francisco prices, and more souvenir shops. “Soul Collection” has at least three outlets there. There's plenty of art to see. Some I found clichéd: grotesque babies, check, Mao imagery, check. Some was brilliant, like the thickly textured and grooved re-interpretation of classic shanshui (landscape). After a long stroll through 798 and the neighboring industrial-ironic expat housing estate called 751, we cabbled to the Metro stop and whooshed home on the new #10 line. No light fantastic troubled my mind, but I did want to ask, why did they not go whole hog and name “751”, “451” instead?

Back the hotel we check assorted emails and plugged in device chargers, then went down to the hotel spa to get massages. A range of services were on the menu, and we selected a 90-minute foot-and-body massage, given to us a comfy recliners, with us dressed in spa pajamas. With heated neck cushions and knee warmers, this was the most luxurious foot massage we'd ever received. Total damage, including a snack of fresh cherry tomatoes and a 20 minute extension for additional back rubs, was about \$55 US.

After a quick dinner of squid and lamb skewers and large watery Yanjing beers, we went dancing at Salsa Caribe, which is across town in the expat entertainment area on Sanlitun Road. This was a real club, not a hyper-accurate reproduction or an awkward failed imitation. It was crowded, with lots of very good, and less-good dancers, and a Venezuelan band that rocked the house; it felt a lot like Cocomo or Roccapulco but with less social dancing. We danced for a few songs and left around 12:30, just as a significant number of foreigners were trickling in.

On Saturday, the blue sky was starting to turn a more typical steely gray around the edge. A cab swung us around the northern part of the city via the third ring road and got us to the Norman Foster dragon terminal of Capital Airport in 35 minutes. Only then did I realize we hadn't been inside the 2nd ring road. Our visit was mathematically perfect, our orbit precisely matching our new, and slight, familiarity with what is surely the world's most concentric metropolis. After an on-time departure and several solid hours of sleep, we are now descending into SFO and have just been told to turn our machines off. It's time to plan next years' adventure.

