



Going Up the River: May 25th to May 28th, Wuhan

“Tomorrow, I go up the river.” I’d boasted in an email home on my last evening in Shanghai. While I wasn’t exactly off to see Colonel Kurtz, I was heading for the key part of my trip, the [eBusiness conference](#) at China University of Geosciences in Wuhan. This is a major

technical university at the confluence of two major rivers. Think Carnegie Mellon, and Pittsburgh, but with twenty times the people. And stinkin’ hot, but no hills and hardly any trees. Chongqing, Wuhan, and Nanjing, the three largest cities on the Yangtze, are known as the “Three Ovens” for their oppressive summer heat.

I arrived not in a Swift boat, but in a spanking new China Southern Airbus 320. I was soon at over my target, and then rolling into town in a ten year old locally built Peugeot cab. The burly unshaven young driver kept trying to talk to me, and I to him, but it was nearly impossible. His Hubei accent was too much for me. Over and over again, he kept asking me something, I think permission to take a longer but less congested route, and I kept attempting to say yes. Then we’d be silent, then he would ask me something, or I would try to tell him that I’d just come from San Francisco. I felt like a delicate new part of my brain had been amputated, that my senses had been fatally scrambled while my body was left intact. Our attempts to communicate went on for 45 minutes or so, until we were well inside the sprawling nearly treeless city. At a red light, he held up his hands, thrusting his left index finger into his curled right hand, smiling and saying.... Dog knows what. I smiled, even laughed a little. Hey, we’re men and we joke about sex. Beats silence. After a couple more blocks, he suddenly swerved past a casino and into a side street. What had I consented to? Had I just hired a bevy of beauties? Bought a thousand bucks worth of gambling chips? But, no, we came to a halt not at a den of vice but at a high-tech gas station. The cab, and other transit vehicles in smoky Wuhan, runs on LPG, which requires peculiar hoses and fittings since it’s pressurized. *This* is what my driver had been gesticulating about. It was *part* of his meaning, anyway.

Arrival at the hotel was anticlimactic. There was no social event planned for this, the evening before the conference began. I was on the program as a session chair but not as a speaker, but the staffer promised to see that I got my slot. I was in my small but comfy room and on the net in minutes, but had nothing to do. I didn’t feel exactly celebrated. The student staffers had packed and left and the hotel bar was empty. I walked out of the hotel grounds and turned up the six-lane avenue we’d arrived on. On one side were storefronts, with clothing and food and dry-good stores.



On the other side, a couple restaurants, then one of many college campuses, behind a low fence. It was maybe 88 F, and humid. The heat was not crushing, but enervating nonetheless. It was still light and I wasn't hungry. What to do? Check out the sauna, of course. As you leave the

hotel grounds, there is a featureless building on the right, red like the rest of the hotel. Its entrance, with wide glass doors and red and gold neon, faces the avenue. I presented myself to the front desk. Unlike the hotel proper, the only word of English this staff seemed to know was "bath?". I nodded eagerly said "hao de" (OK), and went inside.

Eventually, I made my way back to my room and then out to the road. A long walk up the road a piece yielded me an appropriate ATM, and a cold beer sold to me for 20 cents by a sleepy child at a corner store. Closer to the hotel, I noted pedestrians going behind a store. There I found a parking lot filled with cheap plastic tables and chairs and several pushcart food sellers. The first one had a set of plastic buckets. One was full of lively eels, one was full of suspiciously sluggish fish, and a third had a couple of crayfish, the last survivors of the day. I skipped the net bag of doleful-looking frogs, and had a plate piled high with quick-wokked river eels, red peppers, and garlic, followed with a large cold watery beer, all for four bucks. Dining al fresco, bathing in fluorescent glare and the hiss of propane, daubing my burning lips with a tiny paper napkin that dissolved on my greasy fingers, I was starting to like traveling in China. Maybe just a little.

Saturday May 26th

Saturday the conference began. I joined a table of Chinese students and made bilingual small talk. There were only 10 or 12 non-Chinese at the conference, and only two non-academics, me, and a German consultant who works on Second Life. By lunchtime I'd been vigorously drawn into the expat circle. The conference sessions were packed with short presentations, some on e-commerce but many on assorted computer science topics as well. In many cases students were presenting their professor's work. In some cases, speakers didn't show up, due perhaps to embarrassment over low English skills. Here is a photo of us assembling for the official group photo shoot:

I didn't have to attend every session, so I got a cab downtown and walked around Hongshan Square in the sun for a while before taking refuge at Portugal Castle. This was a large restaurant, built to resemble the Macao cathedral, and mainly used for theme weddings. Their espresso was excellent.

That evening, all of the conferees piled onto busses and enjoyed a brief banquet followed by a cruise on the Yangtze River. The party boat boasted a picture of Chairman Mao dripping in a bathrobe after his famous swim in the river.



Sunday, May 27th

I gave my talk Sunday morning, to a reasonably full room, maybe 20 or so listeners. I got a polite question or two as well. Then at the end of the session a woman who'd been skewering me with her eyes during my talk came up to me and led me aside for a talk. In hideously limited Chinese (mine) and admittedly-accented

English (hers) we went through the standard script "how do you like China?" "Where are you from?" "My home town is very beautiful, I must show you around." Then suddenly she said, "It's OK, we can talk in English", and then started asking me about backup systems, high availability and governance. She is an IT professor at Zhejiang State University, and she really wanted to understand my talk! This was not mere politeness. I was thrilled. And I have a new respect and patience for the conversational clichés people indulge in to get across the language barrier. One talk like that made up for about thirty "Do you like China" "How many children do you have" interactions. That afternoon I chaired a session, and went out to the closing banquet. And again, beer in the hotel bar with my colleagues.

Monday, May 28th

Ralf (the German consultant), Frank (American professor and co-organizer of the conference) and I hired a cab driver and an interpreter to take us around Wuhan. Our pace was leisurely. Wuhan has few tourist attractions; anyway we were just kicking back and networking. The Hubei museum with its ancient bells was pretty interesting. Mercifully, my camera battery died and I could enjoy the rest of the day unencumbered. We had a good lunch in an air-conditioned seafood place, and some desultory shopping at the downtown pedestrian mall. We got back early evening and agreed to meet "later" for dinner. That turned out to be unexciting sandwiches and Heinekens in the hotel bar.

And again, an endless late evening walk for me. What is it with me and sitting still? This time I went back across the street, "just for a snack". This time the crayfish bucket was still full, and I asked the hostess for crayfish and beer. I watched a table full of locals

receive plate after plate while my order apparently languished, but was amused at one man's struggle to gracefully eat a crayfish with chopsticks. It can't be done. When my food arrived, I too was stumped, and tried cracking the beasts with my teeth. This only produced a ring of abrasions around my mouth, which were instantly ablaze from the pepper-garlic sauce. The cook stepped over to me, and with a conspiratorial smile, he dropped a box of plastic gloves on my table and returned to his woks without skipping a beat.

As with other gloves I could mention, the slight reduction in sensation was outweighed by practical advantages. I could now tear one apart, crack it, and extract some meat. Wasteful, slow, but tasty. Then the hostess-cashier-server came up and asked if I knew what I was doing. No, I shrugged, and she picked one up and demonstrated how to twist it apart, neatly extracting the edible tail meat. Rescued again by human kindness delivered right on the beat of the dance of commerce, I proceeded to enjoy one of the best meals of my life. Properly dismantled, the crayfish carried enough sauce along to be spicy but not overwhelming. With the aid of another beer, I rapidly demolished the pile in front of me. This was no time for subtlety; I was going for the burn, for the drip of sauce on my forearm, the sting of pepper on sunburnt lips. Not food Tantra, this was straight-ahead bangin'. Satisfied and tingly all over, I went back to the hotel, packed and got to sleep in time for my 5:30 am cab ride to the airport, and on to Beijing.