



## Not Your Grandmother's Trip

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In the polite society of yesteryear, fairly well-to-do young ladies often spoke nonchalantly about going abroad. One went, of course, to 'the continent,' to sunny Italy or regal France or even, if the lady was adventurous, to Spain. The journey stopped there. When the young lady returned home to her parents' drawing room and pianoforte, all that would remain of the trip were a few bad sketches of cypress trees, a tendency to compare everything to some street in Prague, and a few new dresses in the latest style. After some months, the subject would be tiresome, the dresses out of date, and the lady in question, probably married and settled in as mistress of a house, would stop trotting out her stories of the continent. China was not meant for such travel.

Leaving my hometown at the tender hour of 4 a.m., I was in San Francisco by noon and ready to catch the daily flight that connects San Francisco and Beijing. The rest of the group was already there, a slightly nervous bunch of 18-year-olds that laughed and chattered like dinner guests trying to keep up a conversation. We had met in Washington a month before at our China orientation and hit it off, bonding instantly over sudden rainstorms, M&Ms picked up with chopsticks, Chinese words, lectures, movies, and other such trifles. But would the connection be strong enough to last two weeks in a very foreign land? The conversation held a tinge of nervousness as well as of anticipation.

Stepping off the plane in Beijing was like landing on the threshold of another world. Everything was familiar, but subtly changed. It's hard to identify exactly what caused the Beijing airport to feel different from all others: maybe the cut of the clothes, or the feel of the building, or the sticky touch of smoke and pollution that reached us even there, at 4:20 p.m. on what had been a cool (!), 95-degree day. For three or four days, we worked to get our stomachs back and our sleep schedule under control as we tried to puzzle out exactly what this China we had landed in truly was. We walked through ancient sites, asked probing questions of our host siblings, talked with each other, walked, laughed, ate meal after humongous meal, and excitedly delved into the world around us.

I was fascinated by the ease with which I adapted to this foreign rhythm of life. The cups of tea at meetings, the Beijing subways, the early bedtimes and even earlier awakenings, the niceties, the key phrases in Chinese, the toasts, the American music we remembered from middle school— everything belonged to some alternate register, a framework of life quite different from our own. The days were a blur, but we felt secure: we had each other, and in the capable hands of National Committee staffers Jon Lowet and Margot Landman, and China Education Association for International Exchange staffer Shen Xuesong, we never felt abandoned. A certain amount of space is needed to think, as is a bit of loneliness, but there was always the chatter of the group, the jokes among friends, the bargaining in pidgin Chinese, the singing in falsetto, and a thousand other memories and stories that built off each other until the group was truly a unit, a group of friends that sticks together even now, months after returning home and beginning college.

My host sibling in Xi'an was named Gan Lu, or Honeydew, after the bowl that the Chinese god holds in his hands to cure the sick. She spoke only broken English and maintained girlish, laughing propriety at all times. We went shopping, took pictures of me in Chinese dress, and talked about my family. By day, as I visited Xi'an's Grand Mosque and terra cotta warriors, I grew even closer to my companions, building on conversations and moments shared during those first few carefree days. Gan Lu watched amusedly, laughing at us from time to time, but generally curious and sympathetic. Then, inexplicably, she would close up again, a shy, beautiful clam with dark



eye-lashes and a pearly grin. Xi'an both enthralled and terrified me, a fascinating remnant of a China that had not fully shifted to the West. I was in the first capital, home of Qin Shi Huang, source of the empire, and felt alone.

Qufu came next. Having been caught a bit off-guard by Xi'an, I refrained from making predictions and, instead, approached Qufu as a blank slate. However, it was there that the entire trip began to make sense, as I was just comfortable enough to think, but uncomfortable enough to have things to think about. After the gentle introduction of Beijing and the shock of Xi'an, Qufu was the perfect middle ground, a place filled with things I didn't understand but could accept.

Just enough things were familiar: the overly hasty tour guides, my group of friends, Xuesong and Jon, the squat toilets, the formalities, the family meals, the excursions, the idle purchases, the pictures, the jokes, and all of the other details that we would later use to remember just what China was like. My friends became my friends for life, my thoughts became meaningful, and I realized that I would not return home as the same person I was before I left.

A few hurdles still remained before testing that realization. Returning to Beijing for the final three days of the trip, there was a clear sense of looking homewards as we prepared feverishly for our appearance on CCTV-2. Debating a panel of top Chinese students on national television was exciting and nerve-wracking – especially for Americans who were about as far from home turf as an American student can get without leaving the planet – and we were glad to compare their opinions with our own. During the rest of our time in Beijing, we visited a cooking school, walked around Tian'anmen Square, watched people lined up to see Mao's tomb, and tried to accept the inevitable goodbye that was waiting just around the corner.

But the true highlight of those last rushed days was the Great Wall. Much as I had heard about the famous structure, I was unprepared for the way it rose and fell, a dragon's thin spine running along the crest of hills that separated China from the ancient outside world. Whisked upwards in a cable car, I could only grip the handles in amazement as the ground fell away and I teetered on what felt like the edge of the world.

In a sense, that was what the entire trip had been like: a glorious view that started from the safety of the valley floor but then quickly gave way to something greater, something closer to the edge, something unfamiliar and even slightly dangerous. Riding up on flimsy cables spun from our fragmented pinyin and our knowledge of tea, we were whisked away from the ground where we had stood before and glimpsed something new: the other side of the fence, the other side of the Wall, the other side of the world. Perhaps that was the purpose of the trip, and as I raced up a stretch of the Wall, I realized that, perhaps, we had seen the future.