April 18 In Amsterdam

A day of little jars. The first shocks out of routine are always a sure sign I’m on the road. They always occur before my mindset catches up; so I curse my lack of flexibility even as it’s increasing back to its intercultural level of old.

The first jar comes with an overnight flight that takes off at 5 in the afternoon; no matter what tricks one plays, it’s almost impossible to sleep that early. Bleary-eyed in Zurich’s airport, I have my Euros handy and buy myself a newspaper, only to receive change in coins I don’t recognise. *Francs*. I knew the Schweitzers weren’t part of the EU or its currency market, I did: but I haven’t actually *been there* for years. So, again, mild irritation on my part, bored irritation on the part of the clerk, and a vow to find strong coffee and pay for it with a card.

After almost six hours of cooling my heels I board my Swissair flight to Amsterdam. Nothing untoward, except that when Swiss flight attendants offer you chocolate it sounds vaguely like a threat (“Chocolate!?). I navigate Schiphol with fuzzy-brained ease, and make my way down to the De Baarsjes neighbourhood to check in at the Pop-Up Hotel.

The day’s final jar. There’s no Pop-up Hotel. No sign, just a residential apartment block. And three guys lounging outside the address. I ask about the Pop-Up Hotel and the oldest, a burly South Asian, says “No Pop-up Hotel”. He goes on to say that he’s the owner of the building, that the guy who I booked with is running an illegal service, and that I should phone booking.com, because I’m not staying there tonight.

I’m nonplussed. It could be a couple of things, but I don’t have enough information to tell which. I hear the sound of a staircase being descended in a hurry behind the door. An African man opens it and introduces himself as George, my host. He tells me to ignore these guys and come with him. Who do I believe? I have the Canadian’s horror of getting mixed up in something illegal combined with my years in London and New York City, where landlords often leaned, physically and in other ways, on their renters for an extra bit of cash. The biggest guy of the three gets in George’s way as he goes back in the apartment doorway and they push and shove. He crosses his arms and looks at me.

I leave. George yells after me to come back. A quick check at a local café (Italian owner, great cortado) confirms my fears. Amsterdam is 99% booked. Although the place I stayed in December will, very helpfully, allow me to book *three separate nights* at escalating prices totaling almost 700 Euros. That’s $C1100. For three nights. I can’t seem to work the +/00 magic needed to get booking.com’s phone to ring, either, so I send an email and pray.

A few minutes later a woman at booking.com phones me back. I explain what I saw. It doesn’t feel safe. Is George legit? What happens if I go back? But I have no choice—there’s no place to stay, and George has a good record with the website. I return, not without a little trepidation. No one’s in front of the flat. George lets me in. He shouted at me to come back, he says, because he wanted me to see the police come. His landlord doubled the rent illegally, was there by chance trying to change the locks when I showed up and is trying to intimidate George, who won an appeal. I’m not 100% sure that means they won’t come back, but I head in. And I’ve got a place, at last, to rest my head in Amsterdam.

The city is stunningly pretty in the spring sun. It’s more than twenty degrees warmer than Montréal, and that makes up for a lot of stress. Cyclists are everywhere, but then they always are in Amsterdam; a disproportionate number of them are fit, yearningly beautiful women, but then they always are, in Amsterdam.

April 20

Odd how things go, sometimes. I sit in a flat that is completely mine and has been since I gathered myself and returned post-thugs. George’s other bookings have all cancelled or changed their dates. Privacy, unhurried. De Baarsjes is a mixed neighbourhood of linked brick houses, all of three stories. It’s probably gone from working class to middle class and now sits, a little uncomfortably, somewhere in between.

It’s less than ten minutes’ walk to Lootstraat and the Fijnhout Cultural Centre, though, where I’ll be leading CATT this August, and where I met today with the winsome Margherita to sign the contract. This was the culmination of the Amsterdam leg of the trip, yesterday being the day when I got my legs under me and hit the ground, running.

Two shows at Toneelgroep, or, more properly, at the Stadtshouwburg, the municipal theatre where Ivo Von Hove’s enormous company is domiciled. I wanted to see *Oedipus Jr.*, a product of their youtheatre programme, because I’m always interested in how far training programmes take young actors and in what direction they point them. The show was highly entertaining, interactive as I think youth shows will need to consistently be in future, featuring Toneel’s signature awesome but subtle use of lighting and sound. I could understand much of the Dutch, but I kept my vote with the majority whenever our “team” was canvassed, fearful of being singled out and exposed as an outlander. Such joy in the performances, such pure intent in the eyes.

Half an hour after this (and after a second cortado in the theatre’s sprawling and charmingly retro café) I was ushered to my seat in the first balcony to see Guy Cassiers’ production of *May We Be Forgiven* (*Vorgeef ons* in Dutch). What a risk! Almost three hours long, featuring little beyond rapid-fire (and amusingly translated) dialogue, the cast of eight taking turns behind microphones armed with pedals which trigger sound cues. Occasional interaction ensues, but of a symbolic or representative type; an actor will take a pose while behind his microphone, for instance, or the “children” of the play’s narrative will huddle on the floor at the front of the stage (still miked). The two children who form the counter-narrative were played, fascinatingly, by two actors, aged 58 and 60—and played well. Better than well; archetypally. Lucas Vandervost successfully embodies a teenaged youth and Katelijne Damen a junior school girl. Both are outcasts at school, children of a dysfunctional family that explodes after a clandestine kiss at a Thanksgiving dinner between their mother, Jane, and their Uncle Harold. Shortly afterward their father George runs into and kills the parents of a teenaged boy. He returns home to find Harold in bed with Jane and kills her with a lamp. He is trucked off to a mental institution while Harold, remarkably and quixotically, begins to take responsibility for the consequences of his action in having fallen into an affair with Jane (he was washing the dishes in his brother George’s house at Thanksgiving when she leaned over and kissed him). The two children must be cared for immediately; he moves into his brother’s home. He is let go by his university for teaching a course (on Richard Nixon) that is out of date. He goes on a priapic bender, meeting, in the current American way, a series of disconcertingly messed up women, while managing his brother’s court case and institutionalisation, learning how to care for two smart but understandably messed up children, and, eventually, even taking in a third, the young survivor of the car crash. Oh yes, and Harold also takes in the aged, semi-senile parents of one of his dates, who arrives with them on a date one night and is gone the next morning.

Does any of this sound funny yet? It is, sometimes ruefully so, sometimes with a sharp incision borne of the writer AM Homes’ insistent distrust of—and enduring faith in—the family unit. The fact that the family is Jewish, desperately trying to celebrate a Christian holiday when the *merde* begins to hit the fan, only adds to the sense of people who are displaced, who are untrained in the notion of taking responsibility, not only for one’s own actions, but sometimes, simply, because someone has to do it. Harold is old school. He’s boring—hence his thrill at being discovered by the exotic Jane in the kitchen. And he’s reliable. There’s a job to do, children to raise. He begins to navigate by constantly talking to people, looking for clues. It turns out he’s on the right track, simply by asking—and listening.

A remarkable production in many ways, right at the outside edge of tolerance, time-wise, for a play of this determinedly non-realistic style. But the half-full house was mostly standing at the end. They felt, perhaps, as I did, that the heartfelt but unsentimental display of the innards of a family with no clear sense of how to cope with modern life deserved applause.

Walked back to the flat still half-expecting the locks to be changed, but all well. In two days a lot has been done. Time to move on.

April 22 Beijing

Sorry, I missed a day. Almost literally. Taking an overnight flight dislocates one’s sense of time and place. Morning in Amsterdam, evening in Stockholm, next morning in Beijing after flying over virtually the entire length of Russia to get there.

Beijing is electric with activity, but not overwhelming. The traffic is dense but less chaotic than some places, like Cairo and Rome; there are pockets of empty space on the streets and especially in the *hutongs*, the alleyways that form the traditional heart and soul of the city. My friend Leah met me at noon at my hotel. I wasn’t sure how long I’d last, but we walked, talked and ate for almost eight hours. Leah took me on a cook’s tour of the hutongs she knows best from her previous time in Beijing (she works for a theatre NGO on a project posting now). My jaw dropped as she conversed casually in Mandarin with people on the street, asking directions to the Koryo Tour office I’d asked her to help me find. It’s an incredible feat, picking up a non-related language such as Chinese Mandarin, and she did it in less than two years.

But that’s Leah. She’s very young (25), but that doesn’t account for her fearlessness. Since taking my Theatre Ideas class—then called Theory and Criticism—and being introduced to Mssrs Brecht and Boal, she has charted a determinedly international course in Applied Theatre. I sent her to Accra, Ghana on an internship when she was 21, six months in that delightfully anarchic city on her own, working effectively for a theatre NGO. She taught English for two years, on her own as a single white woman in Beijing, taught for nine months in a tiny rural village in Thailand, took her Master’s degree in London, did project work for three months in India. She’s been my CATT Assistant during that time, as well, three times in all, Rome, Casperia and in Athens, where she flew from Beijing to join in the fun. She’ll be in Amsterdam for number four in August, too.

All this without a kopeck of support from her step-father, who has been consistently dismissive of a career in the theatre. Well, here’s showing ya: now Leah is working overseas in theatre, being paid, thinking about a PhD. She’s one of those ebullient, can’t-say-no-to-her women who combine strong street smarts with a developing intellect and a will that is not to be denied. And she’s a great tour guide. After our successful visit to Koryo, where I bought a few small items that were part of a sale of North Korean and Chinese items, and where I talked enthusiastically with Nick Bonner, Koryo’s founder, about possible theatre tours in future, Leah and I headed for a vegetarian restaurant she knows. Like Koryo, but less by design, the restaurant is not far from my hotel, and we ate a four course feast over three hours that cost ten dollars for the two of us.

Then it was off for a walk through nearby hutongs. Leah had lived in a hutong in her first stay in Beijing, and it was remarkable to watch her return and chat with the locals of the gritty enclave with real pleasure. Hutongs perform Beijing magic—ten metres into one and the noise of the capital city disappears. Poured concrete, sheet metal roofs, glassless windows—there’s nothing pretty about hutongs, but they have their own pulse and vibrancy.

I took my leave of Leah after seven in the evening and she pointed my way back to the hotel. With only a couple of false exits, I managed to get inside safe and sound, armed with a plastic bag full of junk food and soda. It’s been a stressful two days, after all. Some people do yoga.

Tomorrow it’s an early start for my first tour. The confirmation message was waiting for me in my room. I read it and watched comfortable familiar American tv, munching away on Doritos, mulling over the many images and observations that imprinted themselves on my consciousness. People mostly dress quite well here, for one thing; and tall white folks are, I guess, still unusual enough to draw the occasional stare. But the atmosphere on the street never felt hostile. Every interesting café or restaurant had a free seat; this did not match the stereotypes dancing through my head, but that’s why one travels, isn’t it?

April 23 A Guy Named Ming

I wonder how many Americans visit the Ming Tombs thinking they’ll find a 7’6” sarcophagus of the former Houston Rockets star? Unlikely, you say? From a country that has elected representatives who believe the world is 6000 years old?

I saw Yao Ming play, once. I had a Thai-Canadian girlfriend and it was a really big deal for her; there was some kind of Asian solidarity/identification thing going on. Anyway, from far up in the rafters in Toronto’s arena the big man was clearly visible, but that’s about it. I’m a passionate sports fan, but live team sports have never been my thing. Yao Ming was just another bug performing amongst other bugs. Not that I said that to Vanita.

Anyway, *Beijing*. Today a two-day tour I’d booked included the aforementioned Ming Tombs, an underwhelming underground concrete bunker which gives the impression the Mings were either devoid of creative imagination or flat broke. Enver Hoxha-level dreary. The day began with a visit to a jade emporium, the kind of sponsored visit such tours always try to include now. And why not? They’re paid well to include the tour on the itinerary. Such visits always include some kind of perfunctory demonstration of the artisan-like skills that produce the products you are hard-selled to buy. In this case we strolled past a series of older men behind a glass wall, each at work on various stages of jade carving. It might even have been interesting if we were allowed to watch for more than a few seconds. The artifice of the deal was clear; the workers acted like buskers in a metro tunnel, picking up their instruments when the crowd went by and then stopping when there was no audience. Nonetheless, jade is an exceptionally attractive stone, and the Chinese do a lot of commercially viable things with it. It makes for a great gift, and I am an inveterate travelling gift buyer. Money was dropped.

The day’s best experience was predictable, but no less thrilling for that: the Great Wall. One can see various parts of the Wall across China. The Mutianyu part has the advantage of not only being incredibly scenic but fairly close to Beijing. Again, it being a tour, we weren’t given the option of climbing up to the wall on foot, as it would take too long. But a funicular is never a bad idea. I’ve taken them in Genoa, in Santiago, and in Budapest, and they always deliver. With a bit under two hours to actually walk the wall maximising one’s time up there was a priority.

And maximise I did. The wall was, surprisingly, not incredibly busy with people, and as I climbed the ascending steps on the western side there were fewer and fewer. The steps are steep, there are many of them—on my way back, I counted more than 1200, and those were just the vertical steps—and the scenery is as good beside the cable car as it is from the higher turrets, so most people are discreet in the face of valour. Not me, of course. I rambled past plump Prussians, lipidinous Latins, doddering and infant Chinese (fascinating), grim, flinty-eyed francophones and Englishmen who looked like they should never have gone out in the noonday sun. The views are epic. The mountains which ring Beijing fall away at the Wall into steep valleys filled with the dark green of conifers and deciduous trees in cohabitation. As my time dwindled, I came up suddenly against a retaining barrier that had been erected to prevent further climbing. In what I am learning is true Beijing fashion the space in front of it had been obscured by two merchants, one insisting that I wanted either a water or a beer (beer? Really?) and the other selling pennants and the chance to photograph you for a fee. Once I realised that in fact there were no stairs on either side of this charming duo I half-jumped, half-rolled over the barrier onto a lip on the other side, then over the wall’s edge back on to steps on the other side. Rules are flexible in China, at least on the street. Leah told me later I was just acting in accordance with local norms. I’ll use that.

After another 250 or so vertical steps I was up much further than I’d intended to go. I was also completely by myself, which was exactly what I’d intended. I surveyed the landscape, letting my heartbeat calm, as a pale sun beat down on features I sensed would no longer be fair by evening. A stunning, unforgettable view, a moment of pure serenity. And then done. Life, like a heartbeat, moves on to the next rhythm. Back I went, breaking into a run at points, reminding myself of Machu Picchu and the day I ran along that mountain’s edge, unprotected and gleeful as a delinquent robbing a candy store. I didn’t want to be left behind to make my way back to Beijing, after all; but mostly, I just wanted to run.

April 25

I have a VPN. I resisted, for various unsupportable reasons, until today; but the inability to access gmail, facebook, and above all, google search was hamstringing me. I seem to have finally found the key to texting Leah, after perhaps fifteen attempts using every combination of “+”, “0” “00”, and finally, by removing a “1” from her number; I have no sense of certainty whatsoever that the gambit will continue to succeed, so every contact feels immediate and fresh.

Beijing opened up a little to me yesterday. The tour I’d signed up for was a conventional one, with visits to Tian’anmen Square, the Forbidden City, the Temple of Heaven and the Summer Palace. Although these are memorable sites I won’t describe their history or significance here, because my experience of them had more to do with the people I was with and the thousands of others who joined us there.

Our group was small and demographically distinct from that of the day before. Where the Wall tour had been primarily people my own age, this group was all younger, less than middle age in fact. I found it a relief. I had no rapport with the people of my own age the day before; they didn’t seem to want to chat or make contact, and they had far less fitness or willingness to push on for experiences. The lunch two days ago was painful, awkward and banal, whereas yesterday conversations began to erupt and reserve began to break down. Our guide, “Paul”, whose English was amusingly garbled and delivered in rapid-fire, machine-gun bursts of compressed syllables, provided the initial subject of entry. We were a motley crew: James and Lucinda from South Africa, Remek from Poland, Jacques, a sino-français from France, Vito the Italian, and Tanja, the Torontonian who knitted us together.

The moment she clambered aboard our little minivan the atmosphere changed. Some people have the innate ability to put others at ease, and Tanja has that quality. She’s beautiful, a quintessentially Canadian type of modern beauty, with her South-Asian heritage, but it’s not an intimidating beauty, more a quality that invites conversation. Gracious, open, funny, she began to get people conversing. I listened, wondering if I would be the odd person out because I was the oldest of the crew, but soon she and Vito and I were the inner circle of the posse. So typical, I thought, of my recent experiences; I wait until it’s almost too late but then my inner desire for meaningful touch wins out.

One of the sponsored visits of the tour was to the Chinese Academy of Chinese Traditional Medicine, where we each received a free foot bath before being bombarded by doctors who diagnosed each of us, remarkably, with conditions that could be ameliorated through the purchase of various herbs. My doctor asked me my age, I responded, and Tanja, who was beside me, gasped. She thought I was 25 years younger than I am. I don’t really bloom at such compliments (and they went on for a while), but it’s rewarding to me that what I do to maintain my fitness is recognised, in tangible and intangible ways. In this case, through the company throughout the day of a beautiful young woman and a charming and funny Italian man.

At the Summer Palace Paul instructed us sternly not to try and walk to the island, as it would take too long to come back. While the others milled about by the bridge, I suggested to Tanja and Vito that we find a pedal boat and go out on the water. For the Gang of Three the option turned out to be a row boat. There’s no chance an urban Italian guy is going to do any rowing, and Tanja set herself at the stern like a princess, so I cheerfully set about the task of putting us out in the water. The rowing stroke came back to me naturally. I rowed without effort for about forty minutes before bringing us back safely to the waiting hook of the shoremen.

After a notably unsuccessful visit to a pearl-selling shop—we three hid, swilling coffee in a small alcove—the tour had officially ended and the minivan trundled towards out hotels. Tanja swung into action. All but the South Africans got out at the Wangfujing shopping street and waded into the Night Market, located in a hutong just off the main street. Swirling masses of people, mostly Chinese, gawking at or chewing the fried scorpions or slugs on offer at every kiosk. We found our way into a higher-end souvenir shop where the technique of the Chinese hard sell continued. It’s easy to deal with, this kind of insistent sell, if you’ve spent time in New York or any big Chinatown. You know it’s coming, and if you’re not too preciously bourgeois about it, you can get what you want at a better than listed price, or reject their advances and be certain that their feelings, if they ever had any, have sustained not the slightest injury.

The group repaired to a nearby Pizza Hut to await the completion of carved gifts Remek and Tanja had bought. The meal was satisfyingly familiar, the service notably bad, the prices head-snappingly high; but the conversation, into its fourth hour, just kept going. Poland, France, Italy, Canada, China; the combined travels of each of us; how could one run out of things to say?

To this point I’d made no plan for finding a way back to my hotel, trusting that somehow I’d manage it when the time was right. We returned to the souvenir shop, where buddy was on perhaps his twentieth flute-like instrument of the evening, serenading potential customers to a recorded soundtrack only a Peruvian street band would love. The carved gifts—likenesses of loved ones—that Remek and Tanja had ordered weren’t ready yet, and it was getting dark, so I took my leave. A fond but unsentimental *au revoir* and I was back amidst the swirling masses of people, making my way to an intersection and using my best New York hailing gesture to flag a taxi. I showed the driver my address on a card and he cursed for several minutes; I’m not sure why. It was a good fare for him, because I was a long way from my hotel. Who knows. But it was New York surly; I’m accustomed to that kind of reflexive urban snarl, I’ve experienced it from New York to Buenos Aires, Paris, Rome and places in between. It’s familiar, and even if it isn’t the familiarity of home or family or other tangibles of a comfortable existence, it’s the kind of familiar that I know and feel a part of.

Climbing out of the car on Chungxiu Lu, hard by the hotel, I was embraced by the Beijing night. A sunny, warm day had turned into a pleasant evening. People were ubiquitous but not filling every centimetre of space. In Beijing there are always people, but paradoxically there always seems to be pockets of quiet and peace. One chooses what one needs, and goes and finds it. It awaits.

April 25

The VPN continues to provide me with my NY Times fix, which is all I really wanted it for. I could live long and prosper without checking my email or facebook, but there are *expectations*. Such are the buffer boundaries of our adult lives.

A morning of minor orienteering success, involving finding the Koryo Tours office all by myself (I am now a Big Boy), walking through a Nike store price-checking my current sneakers (nose bleed high) and having a flat white at the ever reliable and uncomfortably ubiquitous Costa Coffee. No tours today. Legs still tender to the touch from the pounding they took at the Wall, but Beijing is increasingly comprehensible and I’m covering more distance each day.

In the afternoon I walked out to Beixingqiao metro station to meet Leah, so we could catch a bite before heading to a Beijing Opera show. Leah is relentlessly fearless, if fearlessness can be so described. She talks to *everybody* in her improving Chinese, including dogs, cats, babies, mothers of babies, old ladies (“Aunties” she calls them) and metro attendants. It’s like she’s running for mayor. I’d vote for her. Dinner at a place she chose, a tomato and noodle soup she ordered for both of us. My only job was to pay and keep her entertained.

The show was touristy, as I knew it would be, but it was marvellous for all that. The performers were serious and precise, the costumes of red and yellow silk spectacular. A performer made himself up in the specific character make-up of the young hero on stage as we were taking our seats, and a small group of musicians took up their places in view at the right side of the stage. From this one can see exactly where Ariane Mnouchkine got many of her staging hallmarks (and her love for what the French still call Oriental Theatre is well documented). The musicians play off the performers and vice versa. Without utter synchronicity the show would lapse into caricature. The style was so reminiscent of my experience watching kabuki, evidence of Chinese culture’s long reach through Asia and beyond.

Leah taught me how to buy a metro ticket, so we took a couple of metro lines, she parting before me, and I walked the 3 kilometres or so from Beixingqiao in the agreeable night air. Dongzhimennaie Dajie, the main street in my area, was thronging with people eating street food, talking on corners, giggling conspiratorially over frozen yogurt. I haven’t seen a scene like that since I lived in New York in the 80s. That was underlined for me as I watched a guy, so clearly on his way home, tired but with a looseness in his hips that I remember from my apartment cleaning days in NYC: *now my day is done, and I’m living here*. More and more, as I relax while walking, I notice the relative calm of this megalopolis. Many intersections here have no traffic lights; they leave circulation up to cars, trucks, pedestrians and cyclists to figure out. Old people on bicycles calmly crossing major thoroughfares as traffic whizzes around them. Young ladies in skirts, upright on their bikes, gazing dreamily straight ahead as delivery scooters, mopeds, segways and crusty malcontents seated on plastic boxes pop up and disappear like obstacles in a video game called *Bike Path*. There is a trust here, a belief in the social compact that I have never seen in North America. It’s not a blind or a naïve trust, I don’t think, it’s what that word actually meant before it became corroded and we became jaded: *trust*.

April 26 Museum

Morning on Gong Ti Beilu, hard by the Workers’ Stadium. I have decided to try and mail stuff home. Even at this early stage in the trip, I’ve accumulated more than I want to carry. The weather has changed, too, and what kept me from hypothermia in miserable Montréal is now superfluous. First lesson: there are Post Offices for mail and Post Offices for packages. I’m waved next door. I take out things from my backpack and make the universal sign of “box” to the interested man behind the counter. He gets up and shows me several fetching varieties of box, and when I hem and haw, he opens a door to a back room and shows me more. The hidden stash!

I select one and Mr. 1 calls on Mr. 2 to perform his duties. These appear to involve going through all of my stuff and deciding if they are worthy of the services of China Post. He comes upon the box of foot massage powder I’ve purchased as a gift for my sister Karen and stops. Reads the signs on the box. Turns it over. I helpfully open it—nothing to hide, sir! He is, it seems, nonplussed. So Mrs 3 is called upon. She may be the actual power in the office. She directs me to unwrap a jade figurine, humphs, and allows it in the box. Mr. 2 shows her the foot massage powder. Oh, no, no, no, no, no. No footy powder for Canada.

She departs, her job complete. Mr. 2 sets about constructing the box, which is no fragile vessel. He tapes the edges together, stuffs the box expertly with my gear and then uses a plastic strap machine to bind it beyond the eyes of all but the most unreasonable Canada Customs agents. And all for the low, low price of…about one hundred dollars.

With this success achieved more quickly than I’d anticipated, I was free to acquire some culture. As Leah had schooled me on the metro system, I was able to get down to Tian’anmen and walk over to the National Museum. This is China, encapsulated: entrance to the Museum is free for all (socialism) but you have to pass through a security check outside, several hundred metres from the actual museum (also socialism), and then walk through a maze of jerry-rigged fences and barriers in single file before you end up at…the toilets. Obviously I’d taken a wrong turn, but how could one know? Spotting an entrance, I began to walk towards it before a security guard shouted at me and held up his hand in the universal gesture of “Stop, Moron!” No, no, no, white boy, you have to get back in single file and take that *other* set of fences and barriers.

Inside the museum, having found the entrance, I was frisked by yet another security guard and my backpack put through yet another x-ray machine, in case security force number one had missed something. After that, they leave you alone, and the museum turns out to be quite a surprisingly modern and entertaining place. On each of the vast floors there are long bar-like counters; on one side they sell souvenirs, and on the other refreshments. Off to each side there are rooms, halls, really, displaying one particular element of the collection. So porcelains are chosen for this hall, massive socialist portraits for another, a superb collection of Chinese coins dating back several thousand years for a third. The most fascinating room, however, was a swag room. In it the accumulated gifts of nations from across the globe are displayed. Many of them are tacky, such as folk art from Romania (the Ceauśescus were not art mavens). Some of them must have completely baffled Mao Zedong or Hu Jintao, such as three metre high ebony carvings of African warriors replete with huge lips and bulging eyes. Others reflect the perfunctory nature of the interchange, such as the two matching silver bowls, donated years apart by Bill and Hillary Clinton, almost as if one asked the other what he’d given to the Communists years ago, you know, when we were in charge? And then predictably, the embarrassing: the flowers in shapeless glass from an Ontario premier, the silver maple leaves in a frame from a Canadian Governor General. Ah, Canadians. We always pick up the bill but we scrooge on the gift.

At evening time I went for a walk in Dongzhimen and decided to get a salad at a nearby Pizza Hut. Beside me I watched in fascination as a mother and daughter ordered what looked like a meal of several dishes. PH is an expensive restaurant by Chinese standards; it’s a date night or special treat. As the dishes arrived the lanky young girl set about consuming them, face down, bowl to mouth, in wordless and determined fashion. The mother never took her eyes off her child, occasionally speaking to her, seldom being answered, and never—not once—taking even a bite of the food. By the end, the little girl was moaning in satiated agony and the remaining food was being boxed. Little boys ran wildly around the restaurant, shouting and beating each other with balloon animals. A kind-looking grey haired man tried to round them up with only fleeting success. I was fixated on a waitress, and the curve and sway of her breasts, hidden but discernible under her uniform. Each of us allied to our preoccupations, wedded to our beliefs, watching, watching; watching the life of the people around us.

May 7 Dandong—the return from DPRK

Last evening I discovered my camera was missing. As the reality of it hit me I had to laugh, ruefully, at the tricks the Creator plays on us all: no soft shoe act without a little rug-pulling.

A final check of the hotel room, breakfast in the hotel’s foyer and off with David for a stress-free day leading up to the overnight train to Beijing, from which I write you. You, yes, Reader; I see you. Thank you for hearing me out.

David is 36 and looks 23, and speaks English relatively fluently on account of having spent seven years in Dublin. He’s honest about his government’s controlling tendencies, but not unduly bothered by this. He’s a well-informed guy; he mentioned Tiananmen 1989 without prompting, though he proved naïve about the possibility of North Koreans in China assisting defectors. His hometown, Dandong, spreads out in a narrow line along the river border with the DPRK, and though he says there are almost never any incidents these days, there are watchposts on both sides and soldiers patrolling the wide island that brings the two in near contact. David says Dandong is suffering economically, as it has no particular industrial specialty and, at two and a half million souls, is only the sixth largest city in the region. But it’s paradise compared to what exists across the river. China deports defectors, which is why most of the crossings happen further upstream where the Yellow River narrows and the urban area peters out.

From the inside of the car as we head out of town towards the Great Wall, I like Dandong. It has an older, 60s look, with a bunch of new buildings along the riverfront. There are shops of every size everywhere, a fair amount of English language signage, and a quiet buzz on the streets. David says he has a stress-free life here, compared to a bigger city.

We arrive at the Wall’s northeastern-most point, where it snakes up and over Tiger Mountain. (Was this what Brian Eno was referring to?) It’s still early in the season and the vendors are setting out their stalls without any great hope, but they call out cheerfully to David as we pass and he responds. He asks if I walk back in Canada. I assume he’s nervous about my ability to walk the wall. Within five minutes he’s dropped behind. By the time I’m on the other side of Tiger Mountain he’s fifteen minutes out of sight. I wait for him in the pale warm sunlight, looking out over to a land I was visiting less than 24 hours ago. Where my camera probably still lies, damnit. Low buildings, spaced apart, some tiled fields, no sign of life.

David reappears and we take an alternate, off-piste route back over the other side of the mountain, looping back to where we started by climbing along the rockface. Now you’re talking, I think. As we round the curve of the mountain a soldier appears out of nowhere—we’re twenty metres up—and asks David to see my passport. It’s in the car, but he lets us go. A little spooky.

The Wall is exhilarating but also a bit confounding. At points it would have been easy to clamber over if I was a marauding Mongol (or Korean); walls just can’t be patrolled to the degree they need to be to be effective barriers. Donald.

The walk over, we head for a souvenir shop, but there are no postcards; my favourite way of contacting friends has gone the way of the commercial dodo. No fridge magnets, either. I’m mildly outraged by this: people still have fridges. Don’t they?

Lunch at a faux-traditional restaurant in a mall that, at two o’clock, is as quiet as a church, if there were churches in China. The clearly under-age waiters serve us in what Canadians used to call *coolie* uniforms, and the specialty of the house is what I indelicately tell David looks a lot like fajitas. Rice flour flatbread with fillings you add to the centre and roll up, with cute little taro sticks for dessert, tied up in bundles to look like straw and placed in baskets on a toy mule. The same old-style Chinese folk tune plays over and over throughout our meal. Our driver joins us and out-eats the two of us combined. It’s hungry work, driving for entitled foreigners.

We have so little on our itinerary that there’s time for an actual coffee at an actual café. It’s a Korean chain that I spotted on the way into the mall, and David and I chat enjoyably about things Chinese and things global for an hour. I’ve passed on the tourist-bait unfinished “Broken” Bridge so we only have the boat cruise on the Yellow River before my train.

Our timing is good. The boat only leaves when the captain judges the amount of people sufficient, and within ten minutes we’re cruising down the middle of the river with a panoramic view of slightly faded affluence on one side and what might be a set for a 1950s era film on the other. David has a life he likes. He makes enough money from guiding people like me during the high season to live and travel during the off-season, and he’s traveled to Europe, amongst other places. China is opening up and its people are increasingly eager to see the world, and the regime is increasingly willing to let them. It’s not really even a socialist country any more, says David; it’s a command economy, dependent on the improving quality of life of its citizens for its legitimacy. David fits right in to that paradigm. He could have stayed in Ireland, but he wanted to come back.

The cruise is done in forty minutes. We’re early, but I tell him it’s okay to drop me at the station and we say a pleasant farewell. It’s a beautiful, modern place, with a supermarket, comfy chairs in which you can purchase a massage, and electronic noticeboards even I can understand. I’ve got a bottom bunk in my six bed cabin. The crowd pretends to line up for the entrance and surges forward the moment the clock hits 6:01, 30 minutes to departure. I do my best Canadian hockey player and hold my place, and I’m through, even correcting a local on how to feed the ticket through the scanner. That’s the most stressful part of my day done. On to the train where all the beds are taken, and there are no cabin doors, which is curiously reassuring after some of the experiences I’ve had (Niś to Sofia, five gypsies, one knife and a hundred cartons of contraband cigarettes, I’m looking at you). Three hours into the twelve hour ride and they’ve turned out the lights. No one, mercifully, is snoring. Yet.

May 8 Beijing

We roll into the capital city around 8:30, on time and after a night-time tour of city and country. My bunkmates have been mostly civil and civilised, not consistently so, and that reflects China’s changing customs to me, the way cellphone use in Canada is taking us back from 21st century manners to late 1950s or earlier.

I’m as sick as a dog. I managed pretty well with David in Dandong, but once I’m on the train I’m using tissues like they’re going out of style, and only by ransacking my bags throughout the night do I find enough to tide me through till morning. We roll into rush hour at Beijing’s main railway station, and I soon find myself moving with crowd in the nearby metro on my way to Dongsi Shitiao. It all functions surprisingly well, and is much different than my expectation. But the plain fact about megacities is that, like their smaller confrères, people have routines. They mostly go where they need to go and those places have their capacities. That’s how it works in Beijing, anyway, where the major facilities, like the metro and the train station, are built large enough to feel safe even when they’re packed. Istanbul, in contrast, offers a kind of gorgeous anarchy; little corners of munificence or beauty or peace tucked in the tiny space between the tilting shops where Muslims love to call out to each other across the street, turning a huge city into a set of villages.

I can’t afford to stop, or even slow down. I have so much to do and so many places left on this daunting tour. So with my head pounding and my face flushed I trudge through my tasks, never speeding up, never slowing down. I don’t have time to see the sights. I’m just trying to survive. There’s editing to do of the DPRK part of this diary before I send it out to people. There’s picking up the stuff I left at the Koryo offices. James and Marcus are in touch through the day, letting me know they’ve found my camera, which I hoped for but did not expect. Marcus is back in Beijing tomorrow, so I should be able to get it before moving on to Ürümqi.

I do some background reading on Ürümqi now that I have my Lonely Planet material back—banned in the DPRK—and it becomes apparent I could have done more, had I had more time to plan and research. But I’ll make the most of what’s in store. There’s dinner at my new fave vegetarian place tomorrow with Leah and a possible show the night after, if I get back from my day tour in time. I need to write you, my dear reader, I need to write more cards for those who like the idea of having a little piece of China on their fridge, I need some hygiene stuff I couldn’t find in Pyongyang. Enough to do. Now it’s 9:30 and I’m wilting with fatigue and illness. This, too, is a part of the traveler’s experience. You move on.

May 9

I wake with a question: *am I better?* The answer is *not yet*, but progress has been made judging by the fewer tissues used today. Still, I sleepwalk through most of the day, taking two naps.

I manage to retrieve my camera from the returned Marcus at Koryo, to my relief, to post some cards to Canada, exchange some money at a bank, and have a long and lovely dinner with Leah. Not all lost, then. Yesterday it occurred to me that I have a tour booked for tomorrow. I could not be less interested in following the tour of tours with another view of the Summer Palace. We’ll see what I do in the morning.

And then…a flight to Ürümqi the day after. More plans. Hope the cold keeps receding before I go through a heat scanner at the airport. Move on.

May 11 Beijing Capital to Ürümqi

I feel like Death warmed over, as they say. In Canada I would be at a hospital, but I’ve got things to do. Mercifully, taking the Airport Express Train to the airport from Dongzhimen Station is easy peasy, with the result that I arrived at my gate, after security and checking in my bag, a full three hours before my flight. The Creator knows when I need a hand, though, so She has helpfully placed a coffee shop a few metres from my gate, and I’m swilling decent Americano with red ginseng added. Not because I think it’s going to help, but because that was the option. I feel like a leper on a day trip. Glad for the freedom, always checking to see if I’ve coughed off a body part.

Final thoughts on Beijing. The first day was crucial. With Leah’s help I managed to venture out into town quickly. I got lost on the way home that night, but it wasn’t traumatic; I could feel I was picking up the way the place works. Then Leah helped me learn the metro system and I was effectively away to the races.

Beijing has a lot of people; I don’t even know how many. But it’s surprisingly easy to get around and, as I said once before, most places have only as many people as they can hold, because people follow established routines. My area, selected only because it was close to the Koryo Tours office, toured out to be a hip and happening Embassy District, quite central to the big sites, with lots of oafés to work at. Quite a few fellow Caucasians too, some spending their way to ease of movement, some wearing the semi-permanent frown westerners reserve for places where they think everyone is engaged in a conspiracy to take advantage of them, or where they’re sure someone is going to let their kid poop on their shoes.

Displays of aggression are frowned on in Chinese society. As a result this is a society, like Britain, where the passive-aggressive action is King. Lines are respected only inasmuch as everyone in them continues to take their space. Bikes, of which there are, perhaps, millions, glide across intersections against red lights. Delivery cart drivers and Mercedes owners alike take absurdly tight turns around corners in order to beat pedestrians crossing to an open space. This is 1980s New York with more toys, and a lot less yelling, though the honking can get fast and furious at certain times of day. You could not pay me enough to be a bus driver in Beijing.

Still, it works. I’ve seen few of the calcified bottlenecks that mark other, smaller cities like Rome. Everyone has a strategy, as folks in megacities do, and, doubtless, their own corner that is all theirs, protected fiercely and prized. The old city and its history exists uneasily, pushed up against the new. Perhaps this is preferable to the North American way, of pretending the old, both things and people, do not exist.

May 11 Ürümqi

What a mad, fascinating, irritating, exhausting day. Speak and you will learn how Michael tested the limits of his capacities as a traveler and intercultural communicator.

First, the context: I’m in Ürümqi, a truly multicultural place, where Uighur is written on signs in Arabic, Mandarin Chinese is dominant and you see little English and hear even less. People in a city of 3.5 million openly staring at a white guy? That’s new.

Context the second: I’m still sick. Less so, tonight, at least I hope, because this virus doesn’t appear to exist on a single gradient. So my tolerance for all things ambiguous is way down. And I am making mistakes.

The airport. China Southern is one of China’s big three, and there are lots of clerks, which is good, because their website won’t let westerners check-in. That enables me to ask for an aisle seat, at least. I’m alone in the row until a guy decides he wants more room and takes the window, with one seat between us.

I’m hacking away softly, enjoying the sentimental movie on the screen and trying to ignore the guy across the aisle who takes off his shoes, hoarks loudly into the vomit bag and is otherwise an annoying example of not-quite-ready-for global-primetime-manners. Four hours to Ürümqi. The strange thing is it’s Beijing time in Ürümqi, for political reasons, so there’s no time loss, even though we’ve travelled about 2500 kilometres. In Beijing it was dark just after seven, while in Ürümqi people are having a festivities Friday in light lasting well after 9pm.

Getting out of the airport I head for the taxi rank to avoid the touts and flag a guy. As he stops I realise that the pack of papers I threw away in the Beijing airport, thinking it was the just the printed version of my ticket, contained the Chinese language version of my booking, and therefore this guy’s instructions on how to get to my hotel. He’s already fed up with me as I search my bag for it (wrong) and then decide to open up my computer (pronouncing the Chinese words doesn’t work. Pinyin looks great, but bears no relation to how Chinese actually say words). We’re in the car, on the highway, and my computer is booting up even more slowly than usual, and then Adobe has to open, and I show him the file, finally, through the police-grade metal barrier in the car, and this guy could be a New York driver, he gestures in irritation and finds a way to pull over. Reads it, grunts, and we’re on our way.

He finds the hotel and I tip him for the aggro I caused, and so he won’t back over me as I get my bag from the trunk. I check in, courtesy of a lovely young woman who speaks pretty good English and rescues her floundering colleague (and me). My Visa card goes through. That’s a relief because I’m down to my last RMB. Which, in a spectacular burst of illness-fuelled desperation, I spend in a rabid half hour of shopping. This is done because

1. I don’t want to shop in the dark, and I don’t know yet that it stays light out here past 9.
2. I was awakened from my post-flight snooze in my room—twice—by an overeager tour guide who told me I should be ready because we’re going to Turpan tomorrow instead of Sunday and it will be about 35 degrees.

So within twenty minutes of checking in I’m roaming through one of the strangest malls I’ve ever seen, a subterranean zoo of kiosks with bored Asian girls who don’t look at all like their Beijing counterparts. I go through a security check to get on the freaking escalator, for shite’s sake, and then again through another scanner when I go into the sun block section. The security guard there appears flummoxed when I wander back and forth between sections. Forbidden? I doubt it, maybe people just know where to go. I’m looking for shave gel, which I negotiate in sign language successfully, barely avoiding a purchase of under-arm deodorant, and then sun-block, because I remember where it is from having been over there before (*Hi Mr. Security Guy!*)

Then it’s off outside to look around and I come upon a T-shirt store, and if it’s going to be 35 I’m thinking something with short sleeves (I don’t have anything) might be a plan. I find something I actually like—yes, it’s black, but it’s *nice*—and the ladies said Visa was fine, so I hand them my visa card, and…nada. No tap, no strip, no insertion. Nope, nope, nope. Something keeps coming up in Chinese which seems to disconcert the ladies. (“This man is a foreign devil!”) Finally, I rummage through my wallet and with almost the last of my RMB cash I make the payment. I have 48 RMB left for three full days in Ürümqi, with a wonky Visa card. Not good. My ATM card, since you asked, didn’t work at all in Beijing and in one bank the machine ate it for about five minutes, forcing me to actually look at the emergency numbers on the wall before it belched it back out. With that cautionary tale in mind, I am loathe to try that gambit again.

By this point it’s seven-thirty and, though the attendants on the flight very, very kindly found me a vegetarian meal, I’m famished. Cute girl at the counter (thank the lord she has a long shift!) says the restaurant of the hotel on the fifth floor should take my credit card, and for sure the western restaurant next door will.

Western restaurant, you say?

That generally means one thing to me: *pizza.* So I saunter over, it’s a classy joint, there’s a guy who sits down at a grand and puts down some tasty licks, I’m placed in a booth, although I later come to believe that’s because *it’s easier to pass by and stare at me that way*, since almost everyone does. I have myself a pizza, and an elderberry soda, just because, and the day is beginning to seem a tad more normalised. And then I try to pay.

Buddy the waiter had indicated at the get-go that they took Visa; I’d asked. But same deal as the clothing store. Thoughts, unhelpful thoughts, start to drift through my exhausted cranium like tumbleweeds: *what if you have no card, no ATM access, and no cash* *for four days*? Tomorrow’s a Saturday, the banks will be open, though only the Bank of China makes exchanges, and they open after ten, when I’ll already be on the road to Turpan with “Johnson”, my guide, so nicknamed (I assume) because his Chinese name in Pinyin is “Majie” (“Majie Johnson”. Get it?). The girl behind the counter is giggling nervously, like this is the first time she’s ever been swindled, and the manager, a sweet, slender, professional lady with a tiny bit of English, comes in and tries various options I’ve already run through. Finally we agree to go, at my suggestion, back to my hotel, where I hope the desk staff can pay her and put it on my bill.

They do, but it takes four grim phone calls and about twenty minutes (my Lady of Salvational English has left her shift). The manager, who’s been very nice about what basically is white-collar theft, says good-bye and leaves. And I’m still fucked, because I have no money and now face, at best, meals in the hotel restaurant the next four days. And what about the other three countries left on this part of the tour? I don’t have the Euros or USD to cover that length of time.

I’ve made it this far, so let’s try something really simple and stupid and see how it plays. I make my way across the street to the ICBC bank, fully expecting it to eat my card. And I press a few menu choices and realise that their machines are designed to handle “contactless card” transactions, that is, from your phone. But somewhere hidden at the bottom is a note in English that says “Please insert your card”—which you don’t do if you’re doing a cardless transaction, obviously. So, in the spirit of a random day, I do. And lo and behold, for no logical reason whatsoever, it works, and I’m 1000 RMB to the good. One can just puff up with pride sometimes, all for pushing a plastic card into an orifice.

Ürümqi is challenging on a lot of levels, but today the challenge was internal. Feeling like crap, long flight arriving without much of the day left, new city, new level of incomprehension, and crisis in hygiene supplies. Not exactly material for a Perfect Storm, but that’s enough for my day, Friend.

May 12 Turpan

A long, strange, exhilarating and frustrating day, impossible to capture, but, with the little time left in the day to me (it’s ten pm), I shall try, dear reader.

Majie picks me up at a little after 9 from the hotel lobby and we negotiate our way out of town. It’s Saturday, light traffic, but there are one-way streets and the first of the innumerable checkpoints along the way to Turpan, our putative destination. Along the way there will also be plenty of tolls, some electronic, some manual, all this bureaucracy pretty much making the concept of “highway” completely dysfunctional.

Majie is a nice guy, soft around the middle, clearly a Dad, with all the caution of a Dad driver, which will drive me mad by the end of the day. Initially I make him out to be Han, which is disappointing because I want some answers on the Uighur tensions in the area which have created a security presence like no other I’ve seen in Asia. My hotel has a scanner and a guard, the restaurant where I inadvertently stiffed the manager last night has a security guard, the *hallway* linking the two has a security guard. It’s Belfast, 1977, basically. But it turns out Majie is an ethnic Hui, a descendant of a nomadic people who ventured down from Mongolia and mixed with the locals. Unlike the Uighurs (pronounced “WEE-gers”) the Hui (“WHEE”, not “HOO-ey”), the Hui speak Mandarin and most of them can pass as Han.

The ride out to Turpan, a centre of Uighur culture, is long and fascinating. For while Majie isn’t answering any of my direct questions on the conflict it’s easy to see what’s been going on since China ended its period of weakness and began to assert its historical claims everywhere, including in Xinjiang. The Uighurs are a Turkic people. They were once the dominant people in the region but the Han have slowly and inexorably taken over, moving in loads of people over the past 50 years. Along the highway it’s easy to see how and why.

This region is a goldmine for commodities related to energy. There’s coal, which China still uses in poorer areas. Wind turbines stretch for miles and miles—the largest collection, by far, that I’ve ever seen. There are, literally, thousands, including one placed so close to the highway that the propeller passes over your car, making one feel like a ball on a huge mini-golf course. There are oil rigs, looking like mechanical T-rexes bobbing their beaks in and out of the ground. And there’s 16mm of rain *per year* in a climate that reaches the 50 degree mark consistently in summer, so the solar panel business China now dominates is centred here.

We see lots of other kinds of energy on our way, of the human kind. Uighurs bent over in the fields, working their crops manually, cheap affordable labour producing cheap, affordable produce. Women on scooters or motorised carts whiz around us, delivering produce to market or setting up stalls along the side of the dusty road. There are vineyards, lots of them, growing grapes for both wine and raisins, which I try at lunch and which are delicious. Pomegranates, tomatoes, potatoes in the higher lands around the Tianshan mountains, “greenhouses” made entirely out of clay, i.e. baked mud. And a thriving tourism industry based on in-country Chinese who want to see something exotic.

This place is a gold mine. The Uighurs are doomed.

They’re already down below 50% of the population. Not that they’re oppressed in any overt way beyond the extra security everyone suffers through at the moment. Uighurs appear to have equal rights as citizens. They enjoy instruction in their native tongue, and make far more money on average than they ever did when they were separate. That’s the Han way: a rising tide floats all boats, but swim against that tide and you will disappear. Actually your boat probably disappears eventually, anyway. By then you’re too fat and too far from your identity to recognise what you’re losing. The Uighurs previously resisted learning Mandarin, but all of the ones we met, and Majie seems to work with many, speak Mandarin simply because, as government employees, they have every incentive to do so. They make more money. Eventually that will take root throughout the region. They may have switched their orthography from Latin to Arabic letters, but Saudi Arabia isn’t riding to the rescue in China anytime soon.

The Han Chinese have every card, including the beautiful Uighur cultural sites we visit. They’re run by the Chinese government and manned by mostly Uighur staff—a beautiful, Eurasian people, by the way—so it’s a bit like an American site like Little Bighorn or Wounded Knee being run by local native tribes. *Or you could work at the casino. How about it?*

There’s a stunning mosque and minaret made entirely from mud, er, baked clay. When I first saw giant buildings made from mud in Morocco five years ago I was stunned at their stability and durability. Even though bricks can be made from this clay the early incarnations of society created a distinctive look for the houses of worship by using the local material in this way. There’s the Gaochang ancient city at the day’s end, a 5 sq. km. expanse of ruined mud buildings, an outer and inner city wall, which once held 40,000 people. There are the grottoes at Bezeklek, a sequence of caves which survived , more or less until **yet another** German thief/archaeologist (yeah, I’m looking at you, Schliemann, you bandit) made off with a huge collection of murals he literally cut of the walls of the (mud, of course) caves. All, sadly, bombed in Berlin during the Second World War, because, of course, as you know, the Germans did some other stuff.

Best of all, there’s lunch at Mohamed’s. Mohamed greets us at the entrance to his vine-covered garden with a “Salaam Aleykum, aleykum Salaam”, which I’m at least culturally literate enough to understand and say back to him, which makes him smile broadly. Mohamed, then, is Uighur, as they’re the followers of Islam in the region. He and his family—I meet his wife, his daughter, and her two kids, well, I don’t meet them, they run past our table constantly, having the time of their lives—run this highly successful restaurant based entirely on reputation. The place is off the main road and hard to find unless you know it. The reputation is, according to Majie, who packs away a two-man sized meal in our time there, based on the *naan*  bread Mohamed makes by hand fresh each day. There are two kinds, both delicious: a sesame savoury number and smaller triangle versions filled with rosehip jam. That’s the appetizer.

Mindful of my experience in DPRK, I quickly ask Majie to request that they don’t serve us too much food. Something clearly gets lost in translation, which appears to come out as *serve Majie all the food*. I’m happy with my small plate of noodles and the naan. We sit in an arbor, cooled in the 37 degree heat by a light breeze and the shade provided by the vines. I’m in China, eating *naan* bread under grapevines to an Arabic salutation. It’s utterly delightful, an intercultural blast which brings together the Mediterranean (on both sides) and South Asia. The Uighurs get the credit for all that. This is a culture that is a little bit special, as Majie tells me afterward. The Uighurs are known as “live for today” types, quick with their hospitality and up for a party. This lies, as Majie notes, in stark contrast to the Han, who are the Puritans of the Chinese mosaic: hard-working, a little on the humorless side, putting their pennies away.

When two opposing ideologies meet in a federated state the so-called “southern” culture is almost inevitably derided as ‘lazy”, “irresponsible” and “parasites”. The way the north views the south in Italy, the way Germany views Greece (but oh, how they love to holiday there!), the way Serbs view the Albanians, Croats the Dalmatians. And in so doing the so-called “northern” culture overlooks the magical properties of having something less predictable and planned in their midst, the seedlayer of innovation and inspiration.

We grind our way back from the Gaochang ruins to Ürümqi in more than four hours. It’s almost ten and I’m screaming inside with frustration at the checkpoints, Majie’s timid driving, the fruitless, self-defeating security…until I realise I’m acting like a real Han. Time to channel some Uighur thinking. That’s what I came here to experience, and I have done, and my view of this people and this region and of China will never be the same again.

May 13 Ürümqi

Still digesting everything from yesterday’s trip into the heart of Uighur territory. Today it’s time to learn, formally and informally, about the Han stronghold, the regional capital. Majie picks me up at half nine and the streets are bustling with Sunday traffic.

So many things are coming into focus about the Chinese way of life, having come to a regional outpost from experiences in Dandong and Beijing. More on that later. First, we’re off to Hong Shan park, a cute little patch of green in the city’s north end that, at this relatively early hour, is still pretty empty. There’s a pagoda there, built at the end of the 19th century by the local government apparently to stave off the negative influence of a…dragon? People are superstitious here, Majie says. Yeah, but…civic policy? Anyway, it’s a nice view from the little hill over the unremarkable skyline of the city, and the pagoda, also unremarkable, is seen, and we’re on to my focus for the day, the Xinjiang Autonomous Region Museum.

The Museum comes highly recommended and it lives up to the hype. Even Majie, who’s probably been here dozens of times, is proud of the ethnographic section, where one can walk through exhibits from each of Xinjiang’s ethnic minorities, of which there are almost too many to account for: the Uighur, Hui, Manchu, Mongolians, Kyrgyz, and Kazakhs are only the best known. Many minorities are down to 100,000 people or less. Each section is a stunning display of hand-made traditional grab, silk for formal occasions, with rich brocades and detail work. Each culture seems to specialise in particular colours derived from the plants and minerals available to them, the Kyrgyz and Kazakhs, for instance, both horse-riding peoples, tend towards velvets of deep blues and black (which would show dust less readily), with some of the most beautiful leather boots and accessories you’ve ever seen. The peoples living in the north of the region, such as the Mongol minority, use animal skins in creative ways, many of which retain the animal’s original shape.

There are exhibits of cooking pots and domestic furniture and ways of life, and each section demonstrates how music, even in nomadic cultures where anything you make you must carry, was viewed as essential to living. Dulcimer-like instruments of various sizes (most shorter than the Korean version I saw in DPRK), lots of hand drums with ox hide covers, and violin variations that run the gamut from three stringed and miniature to a three-necked, nine string instrument that is obviously the ancestor of every 1970s guitar hero’s axe.

It’s a dazzling display, and of course it’s one of those intercultural conundra. Does it demonstrate the respect the Han have for minority culture? Or is it a cultural mausoleum? I have great affection for ethnographic museums. And I separate from the received ideology of most progressives in my belief that, once a culture comes and steals your lunch, and you try and fail to retrieve that lunch, that your job is to survive and keep what there is of your dignity. And part of that could include being part of a museum built and funded by the bullies who took your lunch in the first place. That the people who were in a place first deserve squatting rights in perpetuity is a lovely idea, but that provenance is unprovable and the principle itself, while seldom questioned, is inherently contestable.

We’re kidding ourselves if we believe governments ever venture very far beyond pure, primal schoolyard thinking. There’s a reason for that. Bullying, by and large, works. There’s another reason: civilising, training the brutishness out of individuals and a people, is hard, long, uncertain work. It takes a lot of guts, a lot of patience, and there is no guarantee—none—that it will pay off. Or that its effects will last, as we’re now seeing in the United States.

I’m as inconsistent in my beliefs as anyone in this. I’m outraged by the Russian annexation of Crimea. I adore Israelis and have a life-long fascination with Judaism, yet I believe the creeping annexation of the West Bank is an international crime. I also believe the Palestinians have largely brought this on themselves, through weakness and the inability to organise and fight. I’m okay with the Chinese taking back Hong Kong, because the British were bastards. The American-led hiving off of Kosovo from Serbia was an abrogation of the post-WW II international process. But I have many Albanian Kosovar friends who are fiercely proud of their culture, delighted with their good luck, and are working hard to create a civil society where one didn’t really previously exist. The Serbs, god love them, are the people with whom I feel the greatest, most intimate bond. But few Serbs lived or travelled to Kosovo when it was a part of Serbia. It was an historical legacy that they’d lost track and control of. Their land got taken because Milošević was a monster and bully who riled an even bigger bully. And as a result now there’s a “Bill Clinton Restaurant” in Prishtina.

We must fight for fairness. We must fight with what we have—intelligence, charm, beauty, wit, force—but we must fight. The world is not an innately peaceful place. And we must *choose* our fights. If the lunch is taken, you fight for supper, not for the crumbs on the floor.

So the Uighurs have lost their dominance over other minorities to the Han juggernaut. The Kazakh and Kyrgyz minorities, intriguingly, have national entities to go to if they wish, but their numbers are holding firm. The Uighurs, like the Kurds, the Basques and the Catalans, among others, have a homeland, but no country. Not every people gets one of those.

We exit the museum after looking at some spectacularly shrivelled 3800 year-old Indo-European corpses and head for a 47m high gilded statue of Buddha in another park. Buddha? *Very large, Buddha. Very gold.*

It’s time for lunch and Majie outdoes himself. We visit a local Uighur restaurant, right beside one of the city’s bigger mosques (closed). If the mosque was open the restaurant would be packed today but we find a booth and, while the male owner periodically peeks round a corner and stares at me with a strange, vapid smile, the female owner expertly takes our orders and a vegetarian feast appears. Majie brings me a fork and I tell him off. He saw me eat yesterday, he should know better. Automatic thinking. I see it all the time. I brandish my chopsticks and polish off the broccoli, Chinese cabbage and a tofu dish with rice. Majie has decided he’s going veggie today, so that’s all there is. It’s a superior meal, made all the more enjoyable for the presence in the restaurant of so many Turkic people. Homies! Central Asia, of which Xinjiang is the easternmost part, is the battleground where Asian culture met Indo-European. The result is often spectacular. Eurasians can be strikingly beautiful, even without hybridisation.

Our final visit against lowering skies and the cooling air is to the new market, constructed eight years ago by the Han government in order to move the ethnic minorities who comprise its vendor population to the part of the city where most of their customers now live. It’s open and airy, with lots of buildings and covered spaces—the complete opposite of what most Muslim markets choose to look like. It’s not chaotic, no one is screaming out their wares or haggling fiercely over prices, there’s actual space to move in the corridors. Most Muslim peoples wouldn’t find this the proper atmosphere at all—it’s a bit antiseptic, it doesn’t really feel lived in. But there’s a panoply of beautiful stuff and I come away with a lovely jade pendant, purchased at considerable expense, for my girl Nina, the daughter of my good mate Jason. She’s had a hard go the past couple of years and deserves a nice gift. Okay, I always bring her a gift. I’m just sweet on that girl.

The market is a kind of museum, like the Autonomous Regional. The people are live, not made of wax, but there’s something curiously perfunctory about it. It’s a good living, better probably than before, but something essential is gone.

14 May Ürümqi

A quiet day amidst spatters of rain and a drop in temperature of almost twenty degrees. I’m a tall, mysterious figure in a black plastic shell walking the streets of a frontier town.

The ladies in the breakfast room like me. Friendly “nihaos” from the security staff as I walk in. It might be my only healthy meal, so I scarf down as much as I can. Bulgaria, Sofia and Varna, run through my mind like a film as I eat. There are few places on this earth where I feel better than there, and none of them are in Canada, my putative homeland.

The search for something to do commences. Coffee? I failed yesterday but I resume the search, fearless, dogged, intrepid…desperate for caffeine. And along Xinhua Beilu, hidden under some scaffolding I see a sign that says coffee and “we specialise in our baking”. I’m game. The Americano is surprisingly good, though it takes five minutes to make in a way I’ve never seen, and I may be the first so-called *Americano* they’ve ever served, given their gawking. There’s a security guard, of course, and he’s the only other customer in the place, eyeing me in a friendly way as I sip. *So that’s how white people drink coffee, eh?* *Wait ‘til I tell the wife.*

I fill in five postcards and manage to waste a considerable amount of time, but sooner or later even the Chinese will start to get antsy if you take root in their café, so I exit and head for Hong Shan park, where Majie took me yesterday. I pass by the CC Mall, hoping it’s magically going to be open today so I can mall around, but no dice. Ürümqi has a Potemkin Village quality. So many buildings have lovely façades but they’re empty. All conventional reasons, I suppose: lack of business, renovation, developers holding on to empty sites for a better rent. But there are so many, of so many kinds, such as The Mall, the mosque from yesterday, and any small shop not named “Oppo” (a local mobile company), that it makes you wonder just how prosperous the city is and whether it’s being propped up by the regime.

Hong Shan is a much cuter and more peaceful place when you’re not being hurried through it by a guide. I climb the steepest way up to the top, as is my habit, and I arrive in front of the ferris wheel. And it’s revolving, slowly. For 30 RMB, I can’t pass this up, and I don’t. Slowly, inch by inch, the wheel takes me up above the city, and it’s the most peaceful part of the day by far, away from all the ambient noise and the chattering people, just me and the trees and the cityscape. It takes a good ten to twelve minutes to complete and I enjoy every second of it.

I amble about a while longer in the park, enjoying the quiet and the space, before heading back to the hotel for a siesta, as there’s nothing more I can do. I’ve managed about four hours in a city that opens up reluctantly to visitors. Refreshed, I encounter better luck when I go back out in the late afternoon drizzle. I find a café, the “Eversun” that the counter staff had recommended the day before and have quite a decent pizza with a latte, because frankly, my dear, I’m in no mood for more Chinese food this day.

Let’s tackle *that* little canard. You know how people say, “Oh, Canadian Chinese food, it’s so different than *real* Chinese food, like in China.” No it isn’t. If you go to an actual Chinese restaurant that serves actual Chinese cuisine in Canada you’ll find exactly what I’ve been eating here. Even the *Chinese* don’t know the names of all their dishes, as David told me in Dandong; that’s why there are picture menus. Of course vegetables and meat taste different from country to country, even the salt may taste different, but Chinese cuisine is no longer the joke-Cantonese shite we had as kids. And there’s essentially no difference with what you get in China proper. Bowls of your main course, to be shared, with the rice arriving last. That’s it. Yes, there’s even MSG in some of the food here.

Last day in China, so I’ll close with one or two thoughts on my experience, nothing major or profound, but still some thoughts. One is that China is still very much a *developing country*, in the sense that its people are getting used to new levels of prosperity. So the manners are not consistently middle-class, and a lot of the time they’re on the disgusting side, and that’s how it is when a culture changes fast. Signs cautioning men against spitting can be found, but they are ignored. Babies squat in the street to defecate. People smoke in restaurants. You accept it, or don’t come, because it’s their country, not yours.

The other indelible image is sonic. This is a country where you’re given no space to think. Noise pollution is everywhere. It’s loud, and grating to a westerner’s ears, from the canned, tinny music of each and every shop to the cheap mics used by the poor store employees who stand on the steps of their owner’s shops and call out for customers. The Han Chinese are a loud people, generally; when they’re enjoying themselves the decibel level goes way up. But for a Northerner, it’s torture at times.

China is much more like Orwell’s *1984* than the DPRK, which is the fashionable villain *du jour* in the West. In terms of CC camera coverage this is the most heavily surveilled country in the world. Ürümqi is by far the most security-intensive environment I’ve been in for more than thirty years; every shop, hotel and office building has at least one guard and a scanner. And, of course, there’s the fact that you require a Chinese sim card to get any internet at all outside Beijing, and that, even as I type this, off-line, my computer is showing signs of being scanned. The Han bet that they can buy the acquiescence of the Uighurs and other minorities. They’re making the same bet with their own people. But they like to hedge their bets.