

China Trip 2007

I went to China in July for two main reasons: to gather material and ideas for my doctorate, and to prepare for a new edition of my book, True Son of Heaven (which I'm hoping will be printed in a Beijing Olympics edition). I ended up traveling to some parts of China I'd never visited, but that are very worth visiting, and seeing and learning strange and surprising things. As I often say, you never know what you'll find around the next corner in China. Best of all, I came back in one piece – with some ideas about how to proceed with my research.

Here's my account, and some pictures of "new places." Hope you enjoy.

David

From Shanghai

It's been six years since I visited this town, which seems to become even weirder. (Along with sprouting a few hundred new high rises, I suppose.)

I'm staying in a small, reasonably priced hotel just off of Nanjing Road, a lively shopping road where cars are forbidden, but very little else is. In the spoof *Airplane*, there's a scene where the hero fights his way through an airport past religious vendors. "Hare Krishna!" "Wack!" "Jews for Jesus!" "Pow!" "Jerry Kids!" "Karate Kick!" That gives you a pale, attenuated picture of what it is for a white man to walk down this street after dark. "Watch-bag!" (I'm not sure whether this is supposed to be one word or two – though I've heard it a hundred times or so by now.) "Video!" "Massage-lady-saiks!"

You also meet conventional beggars, and some poor folks who want plastic water bottles, which they take in for a few pennies each.

There are a few standard cons. In one, a girl engages you in English, saying at first she wants to practice English, then invites you to tea / coffee / something. If you go, other things are offered, but you find "coffee" with peanuts, etc, comes to about \$30. I don't know what exactly happens after that, but it's not supposed to be the end of the evening . . .

A more innocent con involves "students" who just happen to be in town (they were here six years ago, too) who invite you to an art exhibit, featuring their own art, which you are supposed to buy. You may get chiseled, and they are probably lying through their teeth, but they're nice, and it is real art . . . I'm no judge of quality.

The most charming con is a new one, to me any way. A boy and girl engage you, again, in English conversation. They say they're tourists in Shanghai too. They just went to the museum, but the tour was too big and they don't much like art. But they heard about a tea exhibit . . . would you like to join them for a tea ceremony? They take you to a real teahouse, where it turns out the tea costs each person about \$40 or something. That's where I jumped ship. Doubtless the "students" get a kickback for success.

Nanjing Road leads from "the Bund," the waterfront district with the colonial style banks where old pictures of Shanghai were taken, and across it the super modernistic Pudong district, with its television tower that looks like a space ship. At the other end, the road leads to Peoples Park. Across from Peoples' Park is Muen Church, the largest Protestant church in Shanghai, where I went this morning.

Afterwards, I met an intelligent young pastor at another church, and he explained Christianity in Shanghai. The city is divided into twenty districts; each has two (Protestant) churches. Probably about one percent of adults in Shanghai belong to these churches.

Other, unofficial meetings, take place around the city. I've run into a few people who are involved in these house meetings, as I've talked with people in the park. Based on what people told me, and these encounters, it seems likely that more Christians belong to these house meetings than to the official church.

This pastor, obviously no stooge for the state, but working with the state churches, is in a ticklish and complicated position. The three self church has its strengths and weaknesses, he pointed out. On the plus side, it's helpful to have a visible church that is accepted in society. But while the people who come are devout Christians who understand their faith, they tend to be passive. They put in their weekly appearance and feel they've done their duty to God. An African doctor agreed, "People go to the open churches to learn about Christianity. But once they've experienced the house churches, they'll never want to go back." The open churches are a bit formal, passive, and tend to cater to older people more. House meetings have more young people, and everyone participates.

Pastor G had a remarkably insightful perspective on international affairs, and the role of the Church in China. It's a perspective you hear from a lot of Christians here, and it's one that might surprise a lot of Westerners, who take the media too seriously. He was familiar with Samuel Huntington's thesis in the Clash of Civilizations, though he gave it his own tweak. What the world is seeing, is a clash of faiths. The world needs America, he said. Europe is sinking fast: it lacks the guts and will to withstand Islamic radicals. Government propaganda is, of course, anti-American, but Pastor G shrugs it off. I point out that lots of Americans think Bush is the problem in the Middle East. "They are ignorant," he comments.

Pastor G offered some even more remarkable arguments, regarding the future of China, which I won't repeat here.

People have been pouring into Shanghai over the past years, explaining the need for so many gigs, to keep everyone busy, as socially productive parasites, if nothing else. The town sprouts skyscrapers like my yard sprouts dandelion flowers. Some of them pulse at night with spreading colors like a squid threatening a potential foe. Tour boats cruise the river in front of the Bund, covered with bright strings of lights. The Chinese love gaudy colors; can't blame them, when I look at this grey city in the dim daylight. The place is full of life, though, reminding me of what Taipei used to be like, or even the bar scene in Star Wars.

I took the train to Nanjing. I spent two days and a night in this city, an old capital that is also growing skyscrapers at a rapid pace, visiting China's national theological seminar, and getting some materials for my research. Korean food seemed to have become popular in Nanjing, so I ate at a Korean restaurant two times during my brief stay, and also the Confucian temple. (I surveyed the waitress and her friends – she was a student at Nanjing U – and was surprised to learn they thought Marx offered the most hope for China's future. Some superstitions die hard.) The new subway took me right to the train station, for only about a quarter, and I took an overnight train to Luoyang, in Henan Province, that night. (Saves the trouble of getting a hotel.)

From Luoyang

Though I had the better class of bunk -- soft sleeper -- I didn't sleep much because of loud snoring from a man on the bunk below. No problem, it was a comfortable berth, with a place to put my backpack and safe. I like taking the train for other reasons besides expenses. You can talk to people, watch the landscape go by, and see things from a different perspective than by air or road.

We crossed the Yangtze River as we left Nanjing, with a red sun setting just before we left. The train passed through northern Anhui -- it was a slow train to Chengdu in Sichuan -- and when it became light enough to see, the topography turned out to be flat, with a low fog covering plains, mostly planted in corn. (Rice begins to appear further south in the province.)

The first city we passed in the morning was Kaifeng. Aside from the mist, the buildings looked indistinct and were surprisingly few in number. I did notice a church, about four blocks from the railroad. I also noticed two houses next to each other with the characters "Tian Ci Bai Fu" on top -- "Heaven gives a hundred blessings." This is not usually intended as a "Christian" message, I don't think, but certainly fits Christian orthodoxy well, as do many other spring couplets.

Kaifeng was the capital of the northern Song (960-1127). Emperor Hui Zong was famous for his love of art, and neglect of the military. (Perhaps he was a Democrat.) He also fancied himself related somehow to the Jade Emperor, the Taoist Zeus, whom as I recall he met in a vision.

The art from that period truly is astounding. One famous painting, which I really love, is called Painting of the Qing Ming (holiday) on the River. (Qing Ming Shanghe Tu) This is a long, horizontal scroll of the city of Kaifeng, in astounding detail, though it is only six inches or so high. It shows scenes in restaurants, people doing business, a boat cutting loose from its ropes as it is pulled past a bridge -- a kind of "day in the life of" photo series in one long collage.

Thanks in part to the artsy proclivities of emperor Hui Zong, the Song was invaded by the Mongols. The royal house fled south, to reform at the city of Hangzhou, until Kublai Khan took the rest of China a century and a half later.

The next city we came to was much larger, Zhengzhou. Crumbling six story apartments spread in all directions, with hardly any attractive building in sight. A few new cars were on the road. To add injury to insult, a power plant just outside of town poured out fumes that made a beeline toward the city.

My first impression of Luoyang was much nicer. Foreigners are relatively rare; people stop to look when I arrive sometimes. A lot of new buildings have gone up. A woman at the train station tried to convince me to stay at the Ming Yuan hotel, but I didn't like the looks of it, and wandered further down Liberation Road. A few blocks later, I came to a very nice looking new hotel, obviously over budget, but I decided to have a look. Sure enough, the posted prices began at about \$90. But a manager came over and asked what I was looking for. When I told her in the \$25-38 dollar range, she gave me a splendid room on the 12th floor for that price. I guess business must be slow. Luoyang is famous for its peonies, which bloom earlier in the year. (Another of my favorite Song paintings is of peonies and a cat.) July is the wrong month to come to Luoyang -- also it's too hot -- which turned out to be good for me.

Luoyang is another of China's ancient capitals. Founded, I believe, by the founder of the Zhou Dynasty, Duke Zhou, Luoyang has played host to many of China's smaller dynasties, and also (for a while) the great Tang Dynasty. China's only empress, the cruel Wu Zetian, moved the dynasty to Luoyang from Xian for a while.

I walked down the street a few blocks, after showering. I found a park that seemed to be dedicated to the Zhou Dynasty. A rough sandstone carving of Count Zhou, the most lauded Zhou ruler (he's considered a great sage), was the centerpiece of the park. But they'd also set rather nice-looking square pillars in two rows on the side of the park, with quotes mostly from the ancient "Book of Poetry." This is one of the ancient "Five Scriptures" that Christians find so interesting, because they express a clear faith in a Supreme God. (Though of course those parts aren't likely to be quoted in a public park in modern China.)

Two people came up to talk with me -- really talk, not practice some con -- a student, a boy about 20 or so, and an old man. I couldn't make out whether he wanted to speak in English or Chinese -- it turned out to be Chinese. Rural folks here seem to speak a horrific dialect of Chinese.

(Second day) Luoyang is the main city in an area of about 7 million people. The city itself is flat, but there are mountains on three sides, though out of view in the summer mists. Like many cities in China, Luoyang has been modernizing by leaps and bounds. The city is cleaner than some. It has wide boulevards, with four lanes in the middle, then elms, then 15 feet on either side for two wheeled vehicles -- bicycles are still a bit more common than motorcycles, it seems -- then more trees, then a huge sidewalk. (It helps if you build things when people can't protest about their homes being torn down.) The people have the sense to walk, not on this huge sidewalk -- which is used for parking good and vehicles, as well as walking -- but in the bicycle lane, where there's more shade from the intense sun.

I met a young man who wants to go to Australia to do his MA. He's from a Christian family, and is reading *Purpose Driven Life* in Chinese, which he found in Beijing. (I also gave him my China book.) As we were walking down the road, a middle-aged man riding a bike raised his hand and said in a loud, sardonically solemn voice, "Greetings, comrades!" My friend said that was Mao's tone of voice. This sounds quite funny in modern China.

Today I visited the Dragon Gate Grottos. These are a remarkable series of caves on a sandstone hill about ten miles from the center of town. When Luoyang was the capital, high officials would commission, or even carve them themselves. Caves stand on both sides of the Yi River, which had been dammed to create a small lake. The carvings had been "defaced" in the most literal sense: in the 30s, thieves chipped the Buddha faces from hundreds of these figures to sell to museums around the world.



Figure 1--Dragon Gate grottos. These Buddhist carvings were created during the Eastern Wei (mid 6th) to Tang (7th to early 10th) dynasties, on a sandstone cliff outside of Luoyang, northern Henan. Many were carved by members of the ruling elite.

But they remain amazing. This is the style of the

Great Tang dynasty, the most confident art of a growingly confident China from 493 to about 800 AD. Some of the detail is stupendous. The main grotto -- about fifty feet across -- has magnificent statues of Buddha in the middle, his disciples, then bodhisattvas, surrounding him, then four "great generals" facing each other from across the grotto. This one is open to the air, pigeons find homes, and you can see it well from across the river. It also suffered less damage than most.

Nevertheless, there's something a bit monotonous about this art. The figures are always sitting. The figures in the center seldom show much human expression. (In the largest carving, two of the generals standing off to the side are squashing forlorn little figures under their feet --- I don't know whom they are supposed to be.)

On the other side of the river is also a garden, winding up into the hills, dedicated to one of my favorite Chinese poets -- Bai Jiayu. Bai was a humane poet of the Tang who served in the army, but showed a lot of feeling for others. My favorite of his poems is long and a bit political, mourning over foolish decisions and the harm they do. But here are a couple shorter poems:

“Little frogs (boys) are steering a row boat
To steal white lilies
They don't know they should hide their passage
Breaking a path through the lily pads.”

“Surprised to find the blanket and pillows cold,
And again, outside the window all is bright.
Deep in the night, I know a heavy snow has fallen.
And now and then, hear the sound of bamboo breaking.”

Here also China's one empress, He Zetian, had poetry parties. (She wasn't too popular, maybe because she killed a lot of people. The poetic temperament, I guess) General Chiang Kai Shek apparently also planned his war on the communist party in the town that grew up here.

Luoyang itself is becoming civilized in the modern way. They're building a huge new part of town that looks like a thriving, upscale American ex-urb. They've built two stadiums, one for swimming, just in case they decide to hold Olympic events here!

I visit a nice four-story shopping mall, configured artistically around a central square, where among other things a permanent pick-up basketball game is in process, across from the hotel for meals and to

type on the Internet. For two to four dollars a crack, you can get some good noodles, or eat a bit more at a very clean Korean (yes) restaurant.

What are really good, though, are the peaches. I bought three yesterday for about 14 cents, near Luoyang's open church. (I also bought a watermelon in Shanghai and put it in the fridge; I may try the honeydew next.)

Not much of real consequence was accomplished in Luoyang, though. It was worthwhile visiting the Dragon Gate grottos. But I didn't learn much at the church. Apparently Luoyang isn't really the center of Christianity in Henan province. And so I decided to set out for Nanyang, a somewhat smaller and less developed city in the south of the province.

From Nanyang

It turned out the only available train from Luoyang to Nanyang was at three in the afternoon. So after checking out of my luxurious \$30 suite (I had changed to a slightly smaller, quieter, but still very nice room), I walked to the train station. I carried my backpack, but it wasn't too heavy because I left most of my books at the hotel, planning to return in a couple days.

It had been raining, and with overcast and occasionally dripping skies, the hike to the train station, about a mile away, was not too hot. While Chinese train ticket booths are usually as noisy and crowded as the stock exchange, and few of the people as well dressed, this time the line was short, and a seat available. I went outside, past the ring of taxi drivers who overcharge, to the street where they charge

normal rates, and got a taxi to White Horse Temple.



Figure 2--White Horse temple, the oldest "official" Buddhist temple in China.

This is the oldest "official" temple in China, built in 68 AD, originally. The Han Ming emperor apparently had a dream about someone coming from the West, and, since Christian missionaries didn't get their in time, built this temple to receive the

scriptures two Buddhist monks brought. (On two white horses, thus the name.)

The grounds are extensive, and have been tastefully refurbished: koi ponds, lotus, carved stone pathways, juniper or cedar trees. (Even the garbage cans were of stone carved in the figures of animals.) But it took me some time to find anything old at this oldest of all Chinese temples. There were stone steles on the backs of tortoises, calligraphy, a drum tower -- but built or reconstructed in the

last 15 years, often with funds from Japanese or Korean Buddhists. (One artifact had even been contributed by an Indian Prime Minister.)

A monk told me the temple held about 110 monks, from all over China. (He was from Henan.) The temple belonged to the Lin Ji sect, about which I know nothing, but like most temples in modern China, and most official religious sites, is more a Kiwanas club for all schools. The monk also told me, though, that the Four Heavenly Kings at the Dragon Gate Stone Grottos were somehow defective, not pure, like the Four Heavenly Kings in the first temple building. (Representing the four directions, one with an umbrella, another a dragon, another a pagoda, the fourth with a *pipa*, a fat Chinese instrument.) But like at the Dragon Gate grottoes, one of these Heavenly Kings was also squashing a little humanoid, which the monk could not explain, beyond saying it was not supposed to be human.

The temple was peaceful enough, until tourists arrived. But what I liked best was a pair of very old cedar or juniper trees in the building at the very back of the complex. They were, another monk told me, 1400 years old. One was leaning at about a 30-degree angle, with a marvelous vine draping it. This vine was about 5 inches thick, and rose into the boughs of the tree to produce a canopy of large soft orange bell-shaped flowers. It reminded me of the bush that ran up the garage of the home I grew up in -- a scarlet trumpet, I think it was called -- only this "vine," said the monk, was 800 years old. Patience, Dad.

It was a good day to take a train. The dreary day became increasingly drizzly, then rainy. Fields of corn passed, one after the other.

After watching out the window some time, standing in the "smoking" section between cars -- so I could stand, and no one was there smoking anyway -- a businessman came and joined me, and we struck up a conversation. Later another man a lot like him joined us. This was fortuitous, because the two knew a great deal about the district. They were worldly, competent, self-confident sorts, the first markedly intelligent. (The other had been to Germany.)

After answering my survey questions, the conversation turned to religion. All these miserable little towns, they told me with scorn, were honeycombed with believers of some sort -- a bunch of old ladies who get together to sing hymns in the evening. "They're not really Christians like in the West," one said. "If you ask them, 'what is Christianity?' they can't tell you. It's just an emotional crutch for them."

During the heyday of the Mao era, these people were "sent down" from the cities to these mountain regions. (We were passing through a hilly area, and they rise to some 7,000 feet in this area). The idea was, that if there were war with the US, they would survive. Perhaps Mao also just wanted to get rid of them. Now the area is closed, and people have nothing to do in the evening. That's why they go in for all this emotional religious stuff -- just superstition, I was told.

No young people believe. And there isn't much of this in the city. People have other things to do with their time. (Yes, no doubt --- playing computer games!)

One of these gentlemen recommended a hotel, which he told me "had more character" than the other hotels the other man recommended. I took a taxi (75 cents!) to an older but nice hotel, with a quiet courtyard, and checked in. Across the street, and down a little side street market, I noticed a cross rising a few stories. So after dinner, I went over to see if there were any Friday night meetings going on.

Sure enough, there were two groups of people, more female than male, singing songs. Not all were old, and there were also quite a few men. I joined the downstairs group, who were practicing Psalm 23.

This beautiful psalm has been set to a wonderful Chinese melody. As I listened, a sense of peace seemed to fill the room; the words and melody harmonizing perfectly.

Afterwards I talked with an older woman, in her early 60s but quite healthy looking aside from one reddened eye, and a young man. Sure enough, she told me that the Christian faith had brought her a great deal of peace. Her three children had all died when they were young. It was through this that she came to know God better. The young people called her their "elder" (shang bei, a term used to describe a boss or other superior, higher officer, etc). She added with a grin that the young man (he was about 30) could be "tiao pi," or a troublemaker . . . God had given her a spiritual family.

I asked how many Christians were in the city of Nanyang. "There are meetings all over the place," they told me. They estimated that about a tenth of the people in this town are Christians.

When I talked with the pastor, the next day, he confirmed this figure. We also talked about the role of Yuan Zhiming, whom I am doing research on. All three pastors I talked with extensively on this trip knew quite a bit about Yuan, and at least two of them had his materials on hand. Not all of them entirely agreed with his ideas.

Attending church on Sunday turned out to be an odd experience in some ways. I sat in an overflow room and watched the sermon on closed circuit TV – a thousand or so for each service, but they plan to build a larger sanctuary. Pastors here take turns preaching, and the young woman who preached had a shrill voice that I didn't much like. Her sermon was meat-and-potatoes Biblical exposition, and I had to admit (even while wondering if the real reason Paul didn't want women to preach was he didn't like high-pitched noises!) sincerity radiated from her face (couldn't see that at first, the cameraman was pretty inexperienced), and her message was sound.

Afterwards, a bossy man of about 35 tried to "take me under his wing." "I have lots of foreign friends," he told me, shepherding me to the second floor of a large office and classroom area next to the sanctuary. (So why do you need me?) "I help them get things done."

Great. It turned out he had come to the church to find his mother. The two had quarreled, and he hadn't seen her for six years.

As I left the church, someone else came up to me, and thrust some writing into my hand.

"When did you come to China?"

"How long have you believed in the Lord?"

"Glad to meet you!"

"Are you often on the Internet?"

"Is there anything you need help with?"

She was pretty cagey, though. (If this is the right note – two people gave me similar notes that day.) She either belonged to a house church network, or some kind of cult, I decided. In any case, while she wanted to talk, she didn't want to say much "until I understand you."

One thing was obvious: she did not approve of the Three Self Church. (The people at that church had actually argued with one another whether or not they were "house church," it seems their relation to the 3SC was ambiguous – but not to her.)

We didn't talk long. Later, I surveyed more people in a local park. Then I took the train back to Luoyang, surveying a few more people along the way – also seeing the mountains this time, in clear sunshine. I spent another night in Luoyang – highlight, watching older women play a game using their feet with a kind of heavy, oversized badminton birdie, with brightly colored feathers, and them giving me the "birdie." The next day, I took another train to Xian.

The train was packed, and I probably knocked a few people in the head getting on with my pack, and another little pack I bought in Luoyang. But paradoxically, it actually turned out to be hard *not* to sit. People kept offering me seats, though I'd really rather stand most of the way. I mainly talked with a very nice air force cadet, who wanted to practice his English, a woman with a son in Denmark, and an eleven-year old boy, to whom I gave an American quarter. No chance to do surveys, or perhaps I was too tired.

I did notice three open churches from the train window. Then we left Henan and began skirting the mountains into Shaansi, including the great granite cliffs of Hua Shan, which I climbed last time I was in the neighborhood. (With some help from a tram.) The countryside became drier, but the weather was still muggy.

We arrived in Xian late. A man tried to steer me to a backpackers' hotel. I revolved, and asked a taxi driver to take me to a hotel that was "not too expensive, but clean, safe, and quiet."

Except for the first, while I'm sure he tried, he struck out on all three. The next morning, though, I was able to get a ticket to Xining, and then visited the ancient Altar of Heaven on the outskirts of town.

From Xining, Qinghai Province

I feel human this morning. I didn't last night; after staying in a rather nasty hotel in Xian, and getting a single hour's sleep, a cold, a long wait for the flight, and a couple weeks of hot, humid weather.

Xining is an immense improvement.

I'm staying at a plain but dignified hotel with long corridors. You put your own blankets on the bed, and showering is an art. Last night the water was icy cold -- we're 7000 feet up on the Qinghai-Tibetan plateau -- but this morning it turns out you can take a shower, if you find that fine balance between extremes that the philosophers talk about. Wiggle the knob in one direction, and you freeze; in the other, and you slip over into the opposite event horizon and are par-boiled.

But as I said, the place is an improvement. It feels safe, number one. I got a solid six or seven hours of sleep, and my cold (recently acquired) has entered a less annoying phase.

Best of all, the weather here is much cooler than down in the enervating heat of the Chinese plains. It's raining, and I may need to get a jacket.

Looking out on the city, a typical spread of old and new high rises of a rectangular persuasion, it is framed on two sides by mountains, rising to the south it looks like (through the rain) at least four to five thousand more feet.

People have proven helpful so far this morning. They are a mix of Han Chinese, who speak unusually standard and understandable mandarin (note: it turned out later I was just lucky with the first few people I talked with), Hui Muslims, and (I think, though I can't say for sure yet) Tibetans -- though they are more in the outlying districts. The Hui presence -- these are the Chinese muslims -- account for the many barbecued lamb restaurants I noticed on the way in. Some women also seem to wear a very light version; not of a veil, but of a head covering that suggests one.

My plan was to try to get a bus to Dunhuang -- whether possible or not, I don't know, but I think I'd better lay low, and recover a bit. Get a map of the province, jacket, figure out transport back to Shanghai (plane or train?), maybe plan to visit the great highland lake for which the province is named. Look for the church. The old town should be more interesting.

So it turned out to be. There are a few open markets, lots of Muslims and Tibetans toward the train station. Then in the town center-- turns out a lot bigger than I thought at first -- there are very nice parks, shopping centers, and at least three KFCs. (They're beating McD's badly in China.)

A few images stand out: Tibetan monks in purple robes talking on cell phones; a farmer with a bamboo basket full of about a hundred peeping yellow chicks; a Muslim woman with head dress and a little girl carrying a bamboo cage with a green bird in it.

I also visited one of the churches. (The taxi driver took me to a Catholic church first -- we passed a billboard with a photo of downtown Seattle as a backdrop in one back street, and I also saw Mount Rainier in another add!)

The church I visited can seat about a thousand, and is a long rectangle, with simple wooden benches and old blankets covering them to soften the wood, I guess. It was built six years ago. As I came in, a squat 40ish pastor was leading forty or so people, who turned out to lead meeting points around the city. He was talking calmly and with humor about what it means to work together, using Paul as his source. Afterwards we talked a bit. It turns out there are about 15,000 Christians in the city, with three churches and some 50 meeting places.

He takes what strikes me as a pretty typical approach to culture. The walls are covered with pictures of Jesus -- the Last Supper, knocking at the door, leading sheep -- and in them all Jesus looks entirely European, as does everyone else. I asked about Yuan Zhiming. I thought he might be leery of his anti-communist politics, but it turned out that wasn't the problem. He said he has "bad theology" because he teaches that some ancient Chinese sages are in heaven. "How can you be saved without Jesus?" He asked. But he seemed to like Yuan's more recent, evangelical work.

Well, maybe it's not time yet for most Chinese Christians to sort that issue out. But I did stick up for Yuan's ideas a little.

I also bought tickets to Lanzhou on Saturday by train, then by plane to Shanghai on Sunday.

Qinghai Lake

The next day I took an outing to Qinghai Lake, China's largest, covering an area of about 2,200 miles, but shrinking. It's also remarkable because of its elevation of about 10,500.

Originally I was going to go with a Chinese tour group, which I looked forward to doing, because while people have been friendly here, I was looking forward to some longer conversations. (My hotel is in a mostly Muslim district, and they speak a dialect of Chinese that is hard to follow. The more quickly modernizing parts of town are mostly Han, and people speak very good standard Chinese; they also seem more willing to talk, or confident in their ability to communicate, perhaps.)

Anyway, I missed the bus. The day before, I bought the tour ticket at another hotel, and assumed that was where the bus would go from. They asked me the name of my hotel, but I didn't remember it, and the hotel card key was blurred beyond reading. When I finally returned to the hotel, I tried to call and tell them, but the phone or number didn't work. So I decided just to go to their hotel and pick up the bus before it took off. Arriving at 7:30, it turned out they were going from somewhere else -- I never did figure out where -- but someone said they'd drop by to pick me up.

After an hour of waiting, it turned out the bus had left. (The hotel telephones were also down, so the girl at the front desk had to use her cell phone.) In embarrassment, the company dug up a taxi driver to take me to the lake, putting \$40 in my hand to pay the fare. (I'd paid \$12 for the ticket!) I offered to pay the extra charge myself, but they refused.

My driver, a woman, then called her husband on her cell phone, who took over driving responsibilities on the edge of the city. (Apparently there are strict laws about who is and who is not allowed to drive in the city -- especially after 8 AM!)

Unfortunately the couple did not speak good Chinese, and we struggled to communicate the rest of the day. He also turned out to be rather bossy, and not inclined to let foreigners follow non-standard tourist inclinations.

After leaving the growing little city of Xining (pronounced "see! neeng!" I counted some 20 skyscrapers of 20 or more stories under construction), we passed fields planted in wheat, potatoes, and "big bean," (not at all like green beans, a more stalky and less viney plant, a whiter and fatter bean I believe), then a woods full of trees called *rong shu*, poplar I think, and with the bark of poplar, but the less "willowy" shape of an aspen.

We passed through a ravine with tall mountains on both sides, and little wild flowers on the rocks. The mountains were mostly covered with bushes and trees, but several thousand feet above, I could see yellow patches of "oil flower vegetable," or rape as it is unfortunately called in English (sold in the more PC title of "canola oil," which beautify much of highland Southwest China from about March on. (Lower down, I saw other patches of these flowers from which the bloom had gone.)



Figure 3--The "lowlands" around Qinghai lake, at about 10,500 feet, blossom in rape (aka "wild mustard" aka "canola oil" aka "nano hana") as late as July, as opposed to March lower down. Mountains rise another 4000 feet or so nearby, with shepherds pitching their tents on the lower hills.

Passing through old Han villages of mud, with flowers (hollyhocks and petunias do well here) and brightly covered gates

contrasted with the mud, then two typically ugly "county seats," we began to climb more precipitously. The driver kept to the back road, though a new toll road ran parallel to our track; it turns out to be rather expensive, this highway to Tibet. (A car full of foreigners rented a taxi from Xining to Lhasa, the driver said -- the fare alone was some \$400, which would be cheap in the US, but not here!)

One does not need to go to Tibet to meet Tibetans, though, and the demography began to change. Most Tibetans in China live not in Tibet, but in surrounding provinces: Sichuan, Qinghai, Yunnan, and Gansu. This is the "greater Tibet" that was swallowed earlier, after it had done its share of swallowing. (I would learn later that the Dalai Lama himself was born in a mountain about thirty miles from Xining.) There are also many Mongolians in the province, and some 40 officially admitted ethnic groups altogether, according to one source.



Figure 4- Near the Dalai Lama's hometown. This village is Muslim. Most Tibetan Buddhists who lived higher up have moved, or been moved, closer to the city, apparently. Barley was his family's main crop; malevolent ghosts their primary danger.

Trees were left behind. This was the great grassland of the Qinghai-Tibetan plateau. Nothing grows very tall up here. Sheep, goats, and occasional mule or horse, and a few shaggy white yaks, were scattered among the hills. (The sheep, which were the most numerous, don't seem to mind very steep slopes.)

Before we arrived at the lake, we passed through an area of sand dunes. Some of the most beautiful flowers grew on or around the dunes, my favorite of which is a series of concentric rings of white and soft purple, a bit the shape of Indian paintbrush, but more classy.

It had been raining all the way, but the mountains were fairly visible.

Qinghai Lake itself turned out to be a vast stretch of light gray, with a bit of refracted sunlight peering through clouds in the distance. (The color on the far shore reminded me of Er Hai, in Yunnan province -- another beautiful and large highland lake -- but the lake itself seemed less blue.) Approach to the lake turned out to be guarded by Tibetan interests, barbed wire, and (perhaps) aggressive Tibetan sheep dogs, one of which growled a warning at me when I stopped to take pictures.

The main place to go down to the lake was one of the great tourist traps of China. Dozens of restaurants offered local specialties. The main offering was the local fish -- huang yu -- which turned out to be as ugly as sin, rather yellowish and ling codfish, for some \$15 -20. (The lake is salty, though how saline I don't know -- not enough to keep fish from making a home in it.) An argument ensued with my driver, who I rather suspect had a stake in getting me to pay silly prices for lunch. (A typical Chinese scam.) I ended up paying about \$6, still the most of any meal on this trip, for some lamb in red sauce, a dish of bamboo sprouts and ginger, tea and rice. I know that doesn't sound like much in the US; and positively paltry in the UK. But sorry, fish just isn't my thing -- nor tourist traps.

Another standard purchase for Chinese tourists is honey, from the many beehives that line the road, with fields of rape stretching towards the lake. On the other side of the road, mountains rose some 3000 feet above the lake (for those counting, that would be up to about 13000 or 14000 feet), with the huts of shepherds just below the steepest slopes of the mountains. Some dark green vegetation covers the slopes above that point; what it is, I can't guess. I would have loved to go up and see, though you have to walk slowly at that elevation, but the area was fenced off. It looks like visitors can stay in Mongolian yurts in camps a bit lower down, though.

The other local delicacy for sale beside the road was wild mushrooms. My driver stopped to buy some, but decided they were too expensive. The degenerative effect of a tourist economy! Oh, well, the local Tibetans seem to be doing well out of it.

Turns out they were having an international bicycle race around the lake. We didn't run into any of the cyclists, but it was the big news in Xining, and the rest of China, and my driver was quite put out that I'd never heard of it.

It was great to get out of the city, though, and breath some fresh and cool air. (Little as there was of it.) I also wandered on the hills a bit, finding some pretty quartz with orange lichen, to put in my garden somewhere. Every other day of this trip, I had something to accomplish; but this day was just for fun.

The road to Llassa is, as always, a much-contested path. The train that way is \$150 or so from Xining, a lot for that distance, and sold out anyway -- you can't get a seat.

The mountains here are not as spectacular as the glacial-hung peaks in the Tibetan area of Yunnan I visited several years ago. But it has a wild, endless prairie feel to it, despite a certain amount of development, lots of power lines, etc. This land goes on forever. Some of the local shepherds even wore leather "cowboy hats."

Religion in Xining

It's the Muslim day of worship, and the walk past the two large mosques a couple blocks from my hotel is lined with beggars displaying their infirmities. Some of the most attractive women in Xining (granted, not the fashion capital of Asia) are also Muslims, though: the black or white lace head scarf, is sometimes combined with flower patterned vests, the dignified walk typical of local Muslims, and a touch of Central Asia in the face, bring out striking effect in some young women. But the old men, with their white caps and patriarchal goatees merging into beards, are striking in a more solemn manner. Men in Muslim caps sell fruit and herbs in an alleyway next to the main mosque. The Muslim district is a very crowded mile or so of apartment buildings and mostly small businesses.



Figure 5--A Muslim girl buying goods outside my hotel, Xining, Qinghai.

One of the hotels in this district is called "Qinghai-Tibet Holiday Inn." It's an immaculate six or seven stories. When you enter the main door, you face three huge photos of Mecca, which entirely cover the facing wall. The

female receptionists all wear Muslim garb, but greet you in perfect Mandarin. The elevator has a proof of the existence of God (whom Chinese Muslims call "True Lord," pronounced "Jun Jew"). I was tempted to move into this hotel just to read the proof more carefully. It's quite a shock for highly secularized, "communist" China.

Xining ("see! neeng!" or "Western Peace") itself has roughly the population of Seattle, though with fewer people in the "suburbs" (using the term loosely, to include the mud huts of farmers in nearby mountains). Even the whole vast province of Chinghai (pronounced as spelled -- "green sea") only has 5 million or so people, less than Washington State. Xining seems to be the one real city.

This population is roughly divided into three parts: Han Chinese, Hui Muslim, and Tibetan Buddhist. Last night I got into my hotel elevator with both men wearing Muslim caps, and a Tibetan Buddhist monk. Sounds like the beginning of a joke, but nothing particularly unusual in this town-- apart from my presence.

The central district is largely Han Chinese, and it is sprouting parks, expensive shopping stores (\$600 jackets, etc), and high-rise buildings, like the rest of China. The people here seem a bit more relaxed and traditional. Girls hold hands. Those inclined spit freely, in the Internet bars, in middle-class hotels, in the streets. You see people carrying little bamboo cages full of crickets through the streets. Foreigners elicit mostly friendly or baffled stares, and the occasional "Hello!" The smell of coal dust is the most common, overpowering scent.

Don't be suspicious of girls holding hands. When I first came to China, even sailors could hold hands innocently.

The best of this district, despite the nice new park, sprouting attractive apartments, and the expensive Guo Fu department store (where you can get a great upscale buffet dinner for \$5), is the night market, a few blocks away.

I love this market! Fruits and vegetables in colorful rows, crowds filing around vendors selling snacks in the center, firing woks, and much more enticing smells than coal dust . . . The pepper fried fish for 70 cents, the dumpling and herb soup for 80 cents, the spicy wrapped herbs flame fried . . . Then you sit on a small chair in the gathering dark, sometimes people want to talk, sometimes just watch the passing crowds.

In Xining you can find the old China that one begins to miss in some eastern cities. Mental photos: farmers with bamboo baskets of peeping yellow chicks for sale; a Muslim mother and daughter carrying a cage with a green bird in it; Tibetan monks in purple making calls on their cell phones (always, for some reason) . . . well, OK, that's a little new. Aside from the spitting and coal dust, you also find lots of people on bikes as well as motorcycles, and lots of beggars. The old man who came up to me while I was eating in the market was very persistent: I offered him my peppery fried corn, and he showed me his toothless mouth. I offered the delicious fish, but no, he wanted cash. Sorry, I don't give cash. Later I ran into a family from Anhui who really did want food; so glad I had bought one of the large, oblong local cantelopes, though I hadn't known what I was going to do with it.

The Muslim district is, as I said, about a mile square. Nearby towns, including farming communities, are also largely Muslim. These are mostly Hui Muslims, who are ethnically Chinese, basically, with as I said a touch of Central Asia in their features. There are about ten million Hui in China, with some spilling over into Southeast Asia. (Where their distinctive communal character sometimes furnishes the basis for organized crime syndicates.)

Maybe there is something to be said for a religious community wearing distinctive clothing, though -- the Sikhs, the Muslims. By doing so, you declare, "I am a Muslim. I am a Sikh." You can't get away from your identity. This may give some people a sense of responsibility and "witness" as they go about their daily lives. Certainly it lends them a sense of identity -- which is why Jews, Muslims, Sikhs, also Christian Copts, have been able to retain solidarity within a sometimes hostile larger community. It gives them a sense of identifiable brotherhood, and an instant solidarity -- showing any potential foes the strength of their community. "Don't treat on me!"

On the other hand, the more pious part of the Muslim community is now effectively cut off from the rest of China in some ways. As a local taxi driver explained to me, "We seldom make good friends with the Hui. Do business with them, sure. But if they come over to our house, they can't eat our food! They don't eat pork. So we don't usually make good friends."

Could it be the pig that saved China from "going Muslim?" This puts the episode in Acts, in which the Lord told Peter to eat "unclean foods," in a remarkable perspective. Here is an episode, little appreciated by modern Christians, which changed the course of history. Here is a turning point in cultural history: "take up and eat."

Advice I have tried to follow.

The second large religious community in Xining is Tibetan Buddhist. Theoretically, that probably includes local Mongolians, though they have "become Han" to some extent, it seems.

The Dalai Lama was born about forty miles from Xining, so yesterday I took a taxi to see if I could find where he was from. We drove twenty miles to the Muslim county seat of Peace (Ping An). Then we traveled up into the hills, passing many Muslim farming towns, with mud walls set off by often-colorful entryways.

The countryside here was beautiful, as the Dalai Lama's mother said in her autobiography, "a wealth of forests, lakes, hills, mountains, and fertile soil." The main crop lower down is wheat. They used to grow more barley, and still do at high elevations, where the weather is cooler. This was one of the crops the DL's family grew. He came from a prosperous, hard-working clan, that hired other workers. His mother used to get up at about 3 A.M., and go to bed fairly late . . . that was the lifestyle, especially

for women. The men, she noted, including her otherwise kind husband, could be pretty lazy. (Her view of gender relations in Amdo Tibetan culture was quite less positive than her son's, who thinks the sexes were equal!)

I didn't quite make it to the DL's home village. We drove as high as we could, then I walked up a mud track a bit. But apparently it was over the next mountain. The taxi driver hadn't agreed to wait that long, and I didn't have much protection from the strong 8,000 foot sunshine, which was at its fiercest. Apparently not many Tibetans live up there anymore anyway; most have been moved down in the direction of Xining, or elsewhere.

The driver told me that the DL's hometown hasn't been preserved by the government, which sees him as a traitor. "The Panchen Lama's house is very nicely preserved," though. How tiresome this government can be. As I told the driver, while I'm not a Buddhist, and don't idolize the man, all the world has respect for him. This business of never compromising, even if you get 90% of what you demand, of making enemies of people with whom you disagree, is such an unpleasant trait.

The land is indeed beautiful, stretching into high hills and distant, green mountains. A muddy creek poured the blood of the hills into the plains. On the way back, a brief thunder and lightning storm broke, pounding the taxi with the biggest hailstones I'd ever seen. (Not being from the Midwest.) Then sunlight shown on a Buddhist temple built into a rock on the far side of the muddy river: perfect timing, if the camera I borrowed from my Dad does its work.

For most Tibetans here, Buddhism is a vital part of life, but only vaguely understood, it seems. There are three versions of the Amdo language: high, middle, and low. Almost no one understands the high language, which is the language of religion: thus rituals are almost pure magic, since even the monks don't know what the words mean. Old practices are however reviving, such as the practice of having one son become a monk, to gain merit. This may explain the large number of Tibetan monks I've seen.

This is one reason the Chinese rejected Tibetan Buddhism, by the way. During the late Tang Dynasty, the emperor concluded that too many men were being wasted on celibate and work-free lifestyles, and cracked down on Buddhism, making monks get real jobs. During the Yuan, Tibetan Buddhism was the religion of power, and powerful political monks offended the Chinese by digging up the graves of Chinese kings, and by esoteric orgies in Beijing. That seems to be when esoteric Buddhism, which had been popular during the Tang, took a nosedive in China.

The business of celibacy, or at least not getting married, is to Buddhism what eating pork is to Islam, for the Chinese. This is also a cultural barrier to the spread of the religion among the Han Chinese, and one reason why the religion is in cultural isolation.

And this is precisely the issue that matters for my research.

So what religion do the local Han Chinese believe? No doubt, like much of China, Marxist education has led to complete secularization among many of the young here. But Buddhism and Taoism are also still popular here, it seems.

There are also at least some 15,000 Protestant Christians, and some Catholics. The Protestants meet in three churches, and about 40 meeting points, mostly in houses. (Though there may be other groups, founded by outside networks, which meet independently.) The church I visited can hold about a

thousand at a time, long, rectangular, with rough wooden benches covered in old blankets to pad them a bit. The meeting points have from 50 to 200 people; these would be large churches in Japan!

The number of Christians appears to have doubled in the last ten years. (Though I can't be too sure that the figures compared from Tony Lambert are entirely comparable

The pastor of what I think is the largest church is a calm, heavy-set man who is instantly recognizable as a natural leader. His message -- he was giving a training session to leaders of the meeting points when I walked in -- is practical, and offered with light humor -- he was offering principles from St. Paul on working together. He struck me as a dynamic, intelligent, and driven Christian leader, however.

Back to Shanghai

Noon on July 21st, I took a train from Xining to the capital of the adjoining province of Gansu, a long, stretched-out province, dry to the bone, than runs along the Great Wall. The train took six hours, rather than 3 1/2, the rest of the time spent sitting at more or less random spots between cities, waiting I think for someone to fix the track. This was painfully boring, because the people on this train seemed to prefer staring at the foreigner than to talking with him. Most Chinese have it in their heads that a white person can't possibly speak Chinese, even if he's sitting on a train in the middle of nowhere, without a tour guide, and is reading a Chinese book . . . or even if he's just bought three Chinese books from you. The only thing to do is try to say, "forty-five yuan" in English, and hope he doesn't say anything too complicated back. In any case, many people in these parts really don't speak a Chinese that is easy to understand.

The landscape became progressively -- or regressively, rather -- poor in the strict sense of "dirt-poor" -- the houses are made of mud of a color hard to distinguish from the soil. But the soil is more colorful, with wheat and corn the main crops, and little white moths flitting around the fields, and apple, peach and pear trees in courtyards and orchards.

Finally we arrived in Lanzhou ("orchid territory," the same "zhou," pronounced "Joe," as in "Guangzhou," etc), the capital of Gansu. About ten percent of the provincial population of some thirty million concentrates in this city, which is famous (or infamous) for its stagnant LA-basin type air, made the worse (and much worse than LA, I think), by petrochemical plants which ring the city. I saw stacks firing as we came into the city, but the air appeared pretty clean for my first visit. As we moved through the outskirts of town, typically rough mud houses gave way to the makings of more prosperous urban China.

With the help of a brother and sister, and a cab driver, I found my way to the main hotel district, and the stately, upgraded Lanzhou hotel. After trying a hot pot (my first real food of the day, I was hungry as a wolf and downed most of a pile of meat, plus a vegetable called "tong gao"), I wandered the town and found myself an Internet cafe, then back to my hotel. Foreigners were clearly few and far between in this city, and people were really friendly. Also their Chinese was easy to follow.

The next morning a public administrator from another large district in southern Gansu (of some 2 million plus, but no train), sat next to me on the bus. I explained I was researching religion, and we talked about that a bit. He asked, "Are you involved in any charities?" He added, "People here could really use some developmental assistance," giving me his contact information. When we got to

the airport, he treated me to the famous Lanzhou beef noodle soup in a restaurant across the parking lot.

The flight was pleasant. The Shanghai girl to my left had just come from a tour that started in Chengdu, and went through the beautiful Tibetan high grasslands, through Qinghai and down to Gansu, so we had a lot of notes to swap. She told me the Tibetan hound is famous for its fierceness, though the modern beasts are not full bloods.

During this trip, I've been conducting a casual survey of Chinese thought about religion. Sunday was my best day for this survey, having the chance to ask seven people -- including those sitting next to me on the plane -- to fill the survey in. (I haven't been too aggressive.)

I took a taxi to the hotel I usually stay at (past hundreds of sprouting skyscrapers), the Nanjing hotel, bought a little watermelon and put it in the fridge, and went to Peoples' Park, knowing that on Sunday, there will be a lot of students anxious to practice their English. Sure enough, I talked with two cousins from Xian, and then three students from China's best university, Beijing University. As usual with these conversations, once the students realized their conversation partner speaks their language, they prefer to switch languages; but I was hard-core, and made them speak English most of the time. All filled in my survey. One asked me my religion, then noted that lots of other students at Beijing U are Christians. (Which has been the case for some time, according to Lambert.)

The reason I mention the survey, is that one of the things I've noticed while taking it is the respect a lot of modern young Chinese have for the ancient ruler, Emperor Qin. Qin, from whose name our word for China derives, was the bloody and cruel conqueror who united China in 221 BC. (Famous for, among other things, burying Confucian scholars alive, and then burying a lot of his officials with him.) Like many bullies, he was also a coward, forbidding his officials from mentioning the word "death" in his presence.

This disturbs me, frankly. A few years ago, a famous Chinese director made the movie "Hero." In this powerful film, an assassin whose family had been murdered by the tyrant plotted to kill him. After going through many trials, he confronts Qin, only to learn the tyrant is actually doing all this murdering for good reasons. He is, after all, a tender heart, who simply realizes that the good of a united China outweighs the evil he is doing along the way, and therefore, with great regret and sorry, is killing right and left.

A subtheme of the movie, if it's not my imagination, seems to be, "Uniting China is always right, even if we have to invade Taiwan in the next few years to accomplish this."

Anyway, one of the questions I asked on my survey was, "which China ruler do you most respect?" Among the possibilities I include such a benevolent and great ruler as the Kang Xi emperor, also Sun Yat-sen, who overthrew the Qing, and tried to found a more modern and humanistic China.

I am finding, though, that Qin is very popular right now. Why? As the person on my right on the plane wrote yesterday, "He united China."

While I was talking with the two students from Xian in the park, a man missing an arm came up to us. It would be unfair to call him a beggar exactly -- he also collects used plastic bottles for recycling. I didn't have any bottles, so I said no. The students told him I speak Chinese, and used to live in Taiwan. He turned to me with great passion, and some humor. "Have you ever met Chen Shuiping?" He asked,

referring to the president of Taiwan, a member of the Peoples Progressive Party, who has spoken about independence. "He hasn't invited me over to his house yet," I admitted. "If you do meet him, you tell him something!" He added. "LET TAIWAN RETURN TO CHINA!"

And that gives you as good a picture as anything about how Mainland Chinese feel about that issue -- from beggars to intellectuals. The Chinese are perhaps the greatest nationalists in the world today. Many times, people I met asked me straightforwardly, "Do you like China?"

As China grows in power, it is not hard to foresee trouble on the Taiwan front. As much as Chinese in general like Americans, they can be roused on this issue. Things might get testy.

I've noticed an interesting trend, though -- if you can call it that, maybe call it a question instead. The few Christians who took my survey seemed to like the Kang Xi emperor most. Kang XI was a far-sighted ruler, and friends of the Jesuits (though he got mad when the foolish Pope tried to dictate how to mix Christianity and Chinese culture to the Chinese, and to missionaries who actually knew something about the subject -- the famous Rites Controversy). Kang Xi represents a far more benevolent phase of Chinese greatness than the bloody Qin tyrant. I am wondering if this is general. The Chinese philosopher who I am studying places these gentlemen in a very interesting light . . . Perhaps I will mold a future survey to compare Christian and non-Christian opinions on this issue, among other things.

In the evening, on the way to an Internet bar, a man grabbed my arm to encourage me to come into his massage parlor, or brothel, or whatever it is. I shoved his arm away and said, "What are you up to?" He yelled back at me (I receded quickly up the street) "F U!"

I'm getting tired of this heavily touristed, jaded district. After e-mailing, I got into the elevator with four young men, about 20 or so. One turned to his friends and said, "Shall we mug the foreigner?" I glared at him, and someone said, "Maybe he speaks Chinese." "We were just joking," they told me.

Probably so. I wasn't afraid; they were all smaller than me, and I wasn't in the mood to be afraid.

But this neighborhood is going to the dogs, no doubt about that. First of all, hundreds seem to make a full-time living off of scamming the many foreigners who walk this street. Second, I think people here are generally less friendly than in most of China -- big nose overload, perhaps.

A couple blocks away (today is my book-buying day), they appear to be putting up a new McDonalds. At least someone had spray-painted a word to that effect on the wall of a construction site. It was a compound word, made up of "Mc" (a Scottish prefix meaning "son of," I believe) followed by an Anglo-Saxon term, normally four letters long, referring to a byproduct of human ingestion, generally of marginal value in post-agricultural societies. I believe (though of course I am only guessing) that the compound word was intended to express skepticism over the value of this form of foreign investment in the neighborhood. (It is also possible a Westerner wrote it.)

What do those naive fools say about how the world only needs to talk, to get together, so we can all be friends? The more some people see of a certain kind of Western tourists, and a certain type of Western culture, the more they'll hate us, IMHO.

I'm getting a little tired of some of the people on this street, myself. (Apart from a great little restaurant by the hotel.)

My feelings about the neighborhood were not improved by an incident that took place later the same day (I think it was) near Peoples' Park.

Peoples' Park is the Central Park of Shanghai: a centrally located urban oasis, where old folks practice Chinese instruments and various forms of dance and exercise in the morning, and people from out of town come to hang out. On one side lies a pond with tall lotus or water lily fronts thick with flowers, rockeries, and trees shading benches. On Sundays students from different parts of the country gather to practice English, and are eager to engage a foreigner. When they learn the foreigner can speak Chinese, they are just as eager to carry on the conversation in their own language. So I come to find people to interview, and a large percentage of my "victims" are from this park.

As I was coming to the crosswalk, I noticed a short young woman with long hair and a rather furtive look on her face, putting a golden purse into her bag. It looked like she had taken it from another girl, who was carrying lots of stuff just in front of her. It also looked like a young man in a white shirt was in on the theft.

Unfortunately, I reacted too cautiously to catch the thieves. I first tapped the victim on the shoulder and asked if she had a gold purse. She was startled at first to be touched by a foreigner, but recovered, and confirmed that she did have such a purse. Not any more. She set off vainly in pursuit. I talked to a traffic person, who called a cop over, and I explained what happened. He thought – and this is the first idea in most peoples' minds, it seems – that the criminal might have been from Xinjiang. (Someone warned me that a person from Xinjiang tried to steal out of my pack at the train station in Xian – partly because he was talking with me, and making it hard to pay attention, I think.)

Anyway, the rest of the country is mostly still pretty friendly. Watch out for train stations and Nanjing Road, though.

I got up at 5 the next morning, and flew back to the States without a hitch, though with increasing sniffles.

The trip was, I think, pretty much a success. Talking over some of the issues involved in my doctoral research with Christians and other helped me figure out how to go about this program better. I also gathered a fair amount of useful material, both oral and written. Learning more about Chinese history, and visiting key sites – the Silk Road, ancient Buddhist worship sites, the home range of the DL – and taking pictures – will I think be helpful if a new edition of True Son of Heaven is published.

The visit also reminded me how much of a foreigner I remain to China, in many ways – all research and familiarity aside.