

My Experience at the Great Wall of China

by

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The soil of Northern China is yellow, blown in from the west off mountains of loess. Many poets of Chinese history left their footprints in this fine yellow powder only to have them swept clean by the brooms of time and change. Yet for all this there are some things so constant and enduring in human nature that they stand as seemingly everlasting testaments to the accomplishments, and failures, of humanity. As I followed the partially swept away foot prints of those like Li Bai, Du Fu, Wang Wei , and countless others I came to realize how few other nations delight in poetry the way the Chinese do as well as how many Chinese have stood on the Great Wall without ever having seen it. Very few Westerners can understand this. *Bu dao chang cheng fei hao han*: you are not a real person until you have stood on the great wall.

My excursion to the great wall began in Beijing, but not really. I think it really began amidst the woods and cornfields of southern Minnesota; it began in an old barn standing like a broken down geriatric giant calling witness to the generations of men and women who worked and lived about his now broken and bent feet of lime stone and rotting wood. It was then and there that the muses awoke in me a yearning to explore humanity.

I awoke early that morning in Beijing before setting out for the great wall. It was difficult getting up because I had stayed up late the night before. I had had dinner with my friend Ms. Cheng. It was the first time either of us had been in Beijing, so it went without saying that we had to try the Beijing duck for which the city is so famous. After

wandering around the neon-lit streets of Beijing staring awestruck at the buildings and inhabitants, we finally stumbled on a restaurant. The meaning of the *han-zi*, or Chinese characters, over the entrance was clear, “Beijing duck served here.” As we went in Ms. Cheng pointed out a sign across the street. “Can you read it?” she asked.

I could not. “*Dui bu qi*, I am sorry I do not know those *han-zi* yet.”

“It is a saying that means ‘Enjoy your pain’, but not really that, it’s hard to translate. It’s like saying when you want to work towards something in life there is a certain amount of...”

By now we were well inside the restaurant and her voice was drowned amongst the voices cascading down from the floor above where guests were enjoying their meals of Beijing Duck. The restaurant was quite busy and we had to wait almost twenty minutes for a table. When we were finally seated I asked Ms. Cheng to continue what she had begun to explain, but she brushed my request aside saying, “No *Yi Bo*, I think it is better if you see for yourself. Perhaps tomorrow after you have climbed the wall you will see, without needing me to explain. That’s the best way”

I did not press her for a further explanation but I held onto those words and rolled them over in my mind, over and over again. So much I had seen in China was enigmatic at first, but when I came to an understanding of it, I saw it was really so simple that I began to wonder what it was that confounded me in the first place.

After waking, I sat on the edge of my bed for a few seconds allowing my consciousness to bubble to the surface out of my hazy half dream state. I ran my hand along the bed, feeling how stiff it was. It had taken me so long to get used to the beds in China. In the beginning it felt as if I was sleeping on the floor but as time and experience

can numb all pains, I came to a point in time in which it seemed quite commonplace. Then I forced my sleepy feet to carry me into the hotel bathroom. On the way I cast a side glance out the window, the sun was not even up yet. Good, I thought, I will get to spend the whole day at the Wall.

There was a group of seven of us, all American students, who would be going to the wall that day. Ms. Cheng also accompanied us. The ride from the heart of Beijing to the great wall north of the city lasted almost four hours. The ride was bumpy as we crooned down the dusty back roads of North China leaving clouds of fine yellow loess in our wake like a clumsy boat crashing through swells in an ocean of dirt and flower petals. It was early May and all the plum and cherry blossoms were in bloom. Here and there a farmer would cross the road leading his cart along pulled by some sort of livestock, which I imagined to have been oxen, but to this day I am still not quite sure. All this and more I saw from the vantage of my bus window.

Ms. Cheng sat beside me on the bus but barely a word passed between us over the four hour trip, unless it was to say “look” or merely to put her palm out flat pointing in the direction of something interesting, a mannerism characteristic of the Chinese much akin to our finger pointing. But it mattered not at all that we did not speak for I had no wish to speak and I suspected she did not either. The *shan-shui*, or landscape, spoke more than any person ever could. It spoke in alliterations of yellow dirt, gesticulations of brown and red swirled in like cinnamon mixed with sugar, exclamations of white flowers riding on the sting and ebb of the strong winds riding down on Beijing from Mongolia like Genghis Khan’s warriors of old. And it seemed to be saying something that could only be listened to but never recorded.

At last we arrived. The ride had been interesting to say the least, but I was sore from sitting and longed to stretch my legs. Little did I know I would do just that. After climbing the wall I hobbled around the next few days like an old man bent up with arthritis. But for that day the exhilaration of actually seeing the wall gave me an energy and drive I have rarely felt in my life, before or since.

We had to park quite a distance from the entrance to the national park. Leading up to the entrance there was a small marketplace selling everything from food to great wall memorabilia. The market place was situated at the foothills of the mountains, atop which the great wall rested like a slumbering Chinese dragon. The path leading through the marketplace was on a steep incline and it was a climb just to reach the entrance of the park. However, on the way we stopped at a table selling all kinds of dried beans. Ms. Cheng pointed to some large red ones, her arm stretched out and her flat palm singling them out.

“*Yi Bo*,” she began to ask, “Do you know the significance of those beans?”

She always called me *Yi Bo* and in time so would every one else I knew during my stay in China, but she was the first because she had given me the name. Suffice it to say that a rough translation would be “the solitary water wave.”

“Yes, this time I do know. It was Wang Wei who first made the beans famous with his poem *Xiang Si*, and they have ever afterwards been the symbol of forlorn lovers.”

“*Dui ah*, that’s right!”

And so we continued on our way.

The climb up the mountainside to the wall is a rigorous one. Exactly one thousand steps to the top. Not clean symmetrical steps regulated by the carpenter's square and geometry compass, but rough hewn steps of stone whose very shape was commanded by the contours of the mountain side. With every step gravity would nip at my heels and weariness whisper in my ears, but my excited heart pumped so much blood and adrenaline through my ears and legs that I did not hear its discouraging remarks and gravity could not keep up with me.

Upon reaching the top, I witnessed a veritable explosion of sights. As far as the eye could see, the wall stretched out in either direction rolling with the mountain range. Here it would climb, there it would dive down vanishing from sight as if the earth had swallowed it only to spit it back up with such force that it scaled back up the mountains and kissed the sky. I imagined that at night one could probably seize the moon in his hands from here. Down the mountain on both sides plum and cherry trees grew, twisted and gnarled by the dry winds of northern China. Yet for all their twisted wooden nature, they produced the most magnificent white blossoms. Every wind that came by would seize a handful of blossoms, allow them to eddy about in the sky for a while then drop them on our heads in a shower of delicately scented caresses. When this happened Ms. Cheng and I looked at each other and a smile spread across both our faces. It seemed to me as if it was one smile shared by the two of us.

"Yi Bo, I hope you understand now what enjoying your pain means."

I nodded and replied, *"Xian Zai dong le, Yes I think now I do."*