

*January 10<sup>th</sup>, 2005*

## X-Mas and New Year's

Friends and family in the West,

Just as I'm sure it's equally big news in the West, the news of the tsunami<sup>1</sup> is a very big deal all over Asia, and China is of no exception. Ever since it happened, it's all everyone here has been talking about. It's a truly awful human tragedy, and it's an even bigger pity to have fallen on a part of the world that already struggles with poverty and disease enough as it is. Must they also endure further suffering at the hands of nature? It's really heartbreaking to see this happen anywhere in the world, but when it happens in these places, it's an absolute injustice. . . more than enough to prove once again that God is nothing more than a figment of your fucking imagination.

Speaking of religion, Christmas was pretty good here although at first I wasn't sure if I was going to be able to celebrate it at all. On the 23<sup>rd</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> I caught a very bad cold (yet again!), and so bad was it that I spent the 23<sup>rd</sup> all day in bed, as well as for most of the 24<sup>th</sup>, a day I was supposed to be working at the boarding school. Fang Xia came to visit me on Christmas eve in the late afternoon, and despite her pleas to stay at home for the night I insisted that we go out for dinner, even if it were just going to the restaurant just a block away from home. I was away from home for Christmas for the very first time in my life and my morale was low, and after lulling around my dorm for two whole days I was going stir-crazy and needed to get out, even if it were just for an hour or two. I felt very weak as we walked outside in the cold to get to the restaurant, but sure enough once we sat down and had our dinner I was feeling better already. Fang Xia didn't want me to eat some Beijing duck, but I managed to convince her to let me eat it anyways because we could then eat some duck soup afterwards.

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<sup>1</sup> The massive tsunami that ravaged South-East Asia and East Africa on December 26<sup>th</sup> 2004.

Of course she fell for it and I was able to eat some delicious crispy duck without my girlfriend giving me her usual look of disapproval<sup>2</sup>. I felt much better after eating a decent meal for the first time in several days, and once we got back to my place we exchanged presents.

Fang Xia had just recently returned from a week-long trip back to her hometown<sup>3</sup> in Anhui Province, which was the first time she had returned in over three years. She brought back for me some simple albeit very special presents from her native province as Christmas presents. Among most Chinese, Anhui Province is famous for four things: Anhui opera, black tea, the Yellow Mountain, and bamboo forests. Bamboo has been used for thousands of years as an all-purpose source of lumber and craftwork in most parts of south and east China, but in Anhui, where it's very abundant, it's used almost everywhere for just about anything you can think of. Bamboo grows here in the north too, but it's small and thin and not very useful for anything other than for decoration. In Anhui and in other parts of south China, bamboo trees are gigantic and thus have many ingenious uses. Fang Xia brought me several interesting gifts made from bamboo, including a rice bowl, a large tea cup, and a very pretty maquette consisting of a small table and chairs and even cups, all very small and meticulously made from carved bamboo. She also brought me some terrific black tea, and best of all, she brought me a small photo album containing pictures of her, including some childhood pictures as well as photos of her when she was a university student and when she first came to Beijing a few years ago. This was a very touching gift and I was reluctant to accept it, especially considering that she doesn't have many pictures of herself as a child, as she grew up in a poor rural village with her grandparents. She insisted that I keep it, so I carefully placed it somewhere safe so it will never get lost.

For my part, I gave her a dozen or so gifts that I bought at various times during the autumn, as well as a few presents I had brought back with me from Canada last summer and kept hidden all this time to give it to her for Christmas, if fate were kind enough to let us stay together by then.

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<sup>2</sup> An Anhui girl through and through, Fang Xia has never been fond of northern cuisine and doesn't care much for Beijing's famous duck, although I adored this dish immensely during my time spent in China.

<sup>3</sup> A small village near Huang Shan (Yellow Mountain), in Anhui.

Shopping for her was difficult because she doesn't wear makeup and very little jewelry, and it's difficult to buy "cultural" things for a Chinese person because as a Westerner what I might find pretty and "exotic" may be completely ordinary or even tacky to a Chinese person---although since the Chinese love tacky stuff, this isn't necessarily a bad thing. Luckily for my sake, she loved all my presents very much. Among the things I got her were two stuffed animals, both of which were pigs because she often calls me "zhu" or "xiao pang zhu"<sup>4</sup>, which is a little insulting but also a somewhat common pet name that Chinese women affectionately call their boyfriends to annoy them. I also got her a large calendar for the new year, each page adorned with lovely paintings of natural scenery and roosters to keep with the theme of the upcoming Spring Festival. I also got her a beautiful red scroll with the character "fu"<sup>5</sup> written on it in gold, which is a common decoration that people hang in their homes for good luck when the new year rings in. What makes this scroll special is that the character itself is written a hundred times over, each time written differently in correspondence to the era when the Chinese writing system was different. It's a really interesting way to see the evolution of the Chinese writing system, which despite having remained pictographic has nonetheless changed very much over 6000 years. It was so cool in fact that I contemplated buying another one for myself!

From Canada I gave her a box of chocolates that I had kept wrapped up and neatly tucked away in my closet all these months until Christmas, as well as a small bottle of maple syrup, which was shaped like a maple leaf and looks quite pretty. Fang Xia had never seen nor heard of maple syrup before, so when I explained to her how it's made in Canada and how it's eaten, she was profoundly fascinated about it in the same way I was when she showed me all my presents that were made of bamboo. For "Christmassy" gifts I gave her a Santa hat as well as a cute Christmas stocking, both of which made her laugh with amusement. Of course all the presents were painstakingly wrapped by myself as nicely as possible, and her Christmas presents wouldn't be complete without a nice Christmas card with some sweet words written on it to please her sensitive heart. All in all, we were both happy with our presents, and more importantly, happy to be with each other for

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<sup>4</sup> *Pig* and *Little Fat Pig*, respectively

<sup>5</sup> Loosely translated as "*good fortune*". Tradition dictates that the character should be hung upside-down in order to ensure that "*fortune comes your way*".

Christmas. . . hopefully for the both of us, this was the first of many Christmases we will spend in our life together.

For Christmas Day itself, we stayed in bed for the most part of the day until mid-afternoon when we went over to Cha Li's house for dinner. Jörg went back home to Munich for Christmas without her (she didn't have the money and couldn't go due to work constraints), and thus she was alone and invited me and Fang Xia over for dinner at their new apartment they had moved into since they got officially married last summer. Their apartment is so far away in fact that it's technically not inside the city itself but rather inside the Beijing Independent Municipality.<sup>6</sup> This new "suburban" neighbourhood of apartment blocks in Cha Li's area<sup>7</sup> is quite nice, although kind of cold and faceless to some extent. This is the new architectural trend that's sweeping all over urban China. Cha Li's apartment is only a two-minute walk away from the station, which is good because it took us more than an hour to get there by subway from my home in Xizhimen. I hadn't seen neither Cha Li or Jörg since the wedding, so Cha Li was happy to see me again. The apartment is very nice and comfortably spacious---and dare I say even Western standard, except of course there's no oven in the kitchen and there's no carpet so you have to walk around in slippers all the time so your feet don't freeze. How I miss walking barefoot all day on carpeted floors! After Cha Li gave us a tour of the place, we then took a quick walk outside to get some food at a local outdoor food market.

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<sup>6</sup> Beijing is considered an autonomous city and municipality that does not belong to any province, as do the cities of Tianjin, Shanghai, and Chongqing. This status is not to be confused with those of Hong Kong and Macao, both of which are *Special Administrative Regions* (SAR), which are given more autonomy for their first 50 years since reunification with the PRC, in order to ensure a successful political and economic reintegration. The cities of Shenzhen, Zhuhai and Shantou---all in Guangdong Province---are all *Special Economic Zones* (SEZ), whose economic regulations are far more flexible than elsewhere in China.

<sup>7</sup> Tongzhou, a new residential district on the far outskirts east of downtown Beijing. The Chinese refer to such areas as "suburbs", but these boroughs are drastically different than the typical North American definition of a suburban neighbourhood, both in appearance and in size.

Once we got back to the apartment, the girls prepared the vegetables and meat for a (surprise!) home-made hotpot dinner, while I sat comfortably on the living room couch watching TV, at both of their insistence. How could I refuse such a request from two pretty women who wanted to make dinner for me? Before you go on a jihad against me, I did help around by mixing the dipping sauce for our dinner and I set the table and poured the wine as well. All three of us love spicy food so the girls made extra sure that the hot pot was going to be a scorcher, and sure enough it was enough to make you breathe fire like a dragon. After dinner we sat down and chatted and Cha Li showed us her professional wedding photos, easily totaling over 100 different pictures for sure. It was nice to see but it was a little too much for a man like me to take, especially as the two girls kept swooning and chatting enthusiastically over each and every picture while I lay helplessly in the middle of both of them, holding the heavy photo album. Cha Li then cracked open a terrific bottle of German champagne that Jörg had left us for our dinner, and about an hour later it was getting late and we left for the long trek back to my dorm. For my first-ever Christmas away from home it really wasn't so bad after all.

The following day was like a second Christmas, as all the foreign teachers came together for a hearty festive dinner at a Russian restaurant late in the afternoon. Everybody was there: Juan, Manny, Céline, Robert and I were all present, joined by Fang Xia, Robert's girlfriend Julie, and Julie's roommate<sup>8</sup>. Robert and I had been together to four Russian restaurants here in Beijing, and this particular place---located only a two minutes walk away from the massive fortress-like Russian embassy as well as a few Russian grocers---is by far the best one in town. Since coming to China we've developed a certain fondness for Russian restaurants because the food is not only good (and dirt-cheap booze!), but the atmospheres tend to be very friendly and festive as well. . .whenever Robert and I go for "foreign" food, it's most likely sushi or Russian. Manny, Céline and Fang Xia had never been to a Russian restaurant before so for them it was a really great new experience, even for Manny who is by far the most unpleasantly picky eater to eat out with at a restaurant. Fang Xia is not very familiar with western food other than the most stereotypical (pizza, hamburgers, spaghetti etc.) and I was worried that it might not be to her liking, but she found the food I ordered for her to be quite good, especially the borsch.

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<sup>8</sup> A Greek-Australian named Lizza.

After dinner we went through beer after beer, vodka after vodka, and smoke after smoke. We all talked, joked around, and tried to beat each other at trivia. We had come to the restaurant at 3:30 that afternoon, and Manny was the first to leave at around 6:30 because he had to head off to London the next morning and needed to double-check his packed luggage. Fang Xia then left at around 9:00 because she had to work the next morning and by 10:30 Robert, Jules, and the Australian girl left as well. . .the only reason why Robert didn't stay longer was because he had too much to drink and was getting sleepy enough to pass out face-first right on our table. Juan ordered a last-minute second bowl of borsch for the road and I stayed with him to keep him company until he finished, and then we left the place shortly after 11:00. It was by all means the longest time I'd ever spent in a restaurant---roughly *seven and a half hours!*---and as Robert had so fondly mentioned the next day, the time we had there was arguably even more fun for all of us than Christmas was itself<sup>9</sup>.

From Boxing Day onwards I was back at work and giving students oral examinations, as the exam season would begin after New Year's Day and as a foreign teacher I'm not required to give them any exams during this period. Instead, I would have to do it during the last official school week of the semester. Since 3:05pm on New Year's Eve I've been officially a free man, and will continue to be on paid vacation until February 20<sup>th</sup> when the new school semester begins. Eager to celebrate both the impending new year as well as my newfound freedom, I was happy to receive a call by Fang Xia who told me that her wealthy boss Max invited her and I to join him and some colleagues at his girlfriend's restaurant in the far north-east of town, only a hop and skip away from the hotel where Jörg and Cha Li got married in November. Max's girlfriend Kim is the proprietor of a fancy Korean restaurant and we were invited to join them for dinner. . .everything would be on the house for the night. How could Fang Xia and I resist such a generous invitation?

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<sup>9</sup> I brought my camera and had Lizza take our photo. The two photos that were taken that day are the only ones that I own with all of us together, along with the inclusion of Fang Xia and Jules. It's one of my favourite photos for this very reason. I gave one of these photos to Juan as a belated Christmas present, much to his heartfelt appreciation.

We ate in a private room on the third floor of the restaurant, and joining me and Fang Xia were Max, Kim, Zhai Na<sup>10</sup>, and a very friendly man named Cao Jian<sup>11</sup>. Before we ate, Max gave belated x-mas presents both to Fang Xia and Zhai Na, as well as a few New Year's presents to his girlfriend Kim. Max then said he had a special gift he wanted to share only with me and with Cao Jian, and with those words pulled out of his bag a big bottle of Coke and a big bottle of scotch. Let the New Year's drinking begin! Fang Xia made me promise beforehand that I'd behave for the night and I kept my word, but I certainly didn't spend the night sober, making sure I got a good dose of Ballantine's from my generous host and friend. We made a toast for the new year and also had a small moment of silence in respect for the victims of the tsunami, which had occurred only a few days before and was still very fresh in our minds.

The food for the night was of course *kui* (pronounced *koo-ee*), or Korean barbecue for a lack of better words. It's quite popular in Beijing as a "foreign" Asian dish and one of the few of its kind that you'll run into quite often, along with Japanese and Thai. There are a few in my neighbourhood, one of which is particularly good and I've visited quite a few times before. Korean *kui* is basically the same concept as hot pot, which is to say you cook your own dinner and eat collectively with a group of friends or family. You place your thin slabs of meat<sup>12</sup> and vegetables over a grill heated by red hot coals underneath, and then when it's cooked you dip your food in a small bowl of soy sauce to cool it and then eat it. You can also take your cooked meat and vegetables and wrap them in a large piece of lettuce and eat it like a fajita of sorts, which is the best way to eat it from what Kim told me. Fish and seafood is also common on the grill, as is dog meat on occasion. I prefer squid most of all, which tastes magnificent over a grill. In most Korean restaurants I've been to they don't put any oil on the grills, so after five minutes or so the meat gets stuck to the grills and the waiters keep taking them out to replace them with new ones, annoyingly shuffling your food around in the process. This place however doesn't use hot coals but large gas grills instead and the meat never once stuck on ours as a result, which was really nice as it didn't interrupt our eating. We also had

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<sup>10</sup> Max's other secretary, who handled all the translations from Chinese into German.

<sup>11</sup> Max's legal advisor, who had also spent several years abroad in the United States.

<sup>12</sup> Normally *bulgogi* (paper-thin marinated beef slices)

a waitress who would pop in every minute or so and place the meat and vegetables on the grill for us and served us the food as well without us having to lift a finger. It was obvious they were on their best behaviour since they were serving the boss and her friends that night.

Of course, no Korean meal would be complete without the endless bowls of *kimchi*, the Korean staple dish of vegetables (often cabbage) pickled in a gazillion ways, normally with ginger, garlic, chili, and fish oils. Kimchi is as common to see on a Korean dinner plate as rice is in China or fish is in Japan, and there are endless variations of kimchi with a multitude of different tastes, ranging from sweet to bitter to very spicy. It tastes good enough, but I can't possibly see myself eating this stuff every day like Koreans apparently do. All in all, it's just pickled vegetables and isn't very satisfying. Among the other common Korean dishes we had were tasty potato pancakes as well as a giant omelet the size of a hubcap that we all dabbled at with our heavy silver chopsticks (talk about classy!). Everything was really terrific, but Fang Xia and I were slightly disappointed because we weren't served that much food and we weren't really full, and most likely the others felt this way as well. Nonetheless Fang Xia and I were being invited for a 5-star dinner and there was no way we wanted to be seen as ungrateful guests, so we didn't raise this issue and made sure that we showed our sincere gratitude to our kind hosts.

Probably the best time we had that night was the after-meal drinking and chitchat, with Max telling us one amazing travel story after another that he'd experienced in the sixty years he's spent on this planet. Like Juan, who is of the same age and has traveled even more in his life, Max likes to talk and share his stories, and just as Juan's travel stories captivate me with awe and admiration, so do Max's. I forgot how exactly we came upon the topic of his travels to Iran in the 1960s<sup>13</sup>, but in any case he spent nearly an hour passionately telling us an amazing tale of this odyssey when he was roughly of my age, when he and one of his best friends drove a Mercedes from Germany to Iran, driving through Turkey with the intention to sell the car in Tehran<sup>14</sup> and then fly back home. I can't possibly describe the story in its entirety. . .you'd have to ask him yourself in order to get every wonderful detail

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<sup>13</sup> During the Shah's reign, before the revolution and emergence of the Ayatollahs.

<sup>14</sup> German cars were not sold in Iran at that time and were highly prized as a result.

and hilarious anecdote in his incredible journey. All I can really say is that his trip involved corrupt Turkish border guards, Kurdish guerillas, the unknowing rescue of the daughter of a high-ranking military official, and driving through treacherous deserts in the middle of the night. We all hung on his every word like children being told a tall tale by their grandfather, and laughed hysterically when he recounted all the crazy hijinks he had gotten himself into during his excursion through Turkey to get to Tehran. This wasn't a case of a "big fish" story either. . .there's no doubt in my mind that everything he said was true. As they say, truth is stranger than fiction. There are limits to our imagination that only reality can show us in full colour, beyond anything we can ever dream about.

I truly admire people who have gone through such adventures in their lives, even if only once in their lifetimes. I think that life is about seeking out new moments and experiences in our lives, constantly growing and learning more and more as we go along. Travel is probably the greatest educator in life. . .by far, the people I've always found to be the wisest and most interesting are the ones who've traveled the most. You can't really understand another culture profoundly enough---nor your own---until you've traveled enough to shake up the old prejudices and false assumptions that lie in your mind. There's only so much that books, newspapers, and documentaries can teach you about this world. . .the remainder of your world education resides in your own travels. Not only that, but traveling sure as hell gives you the opportunity to acquire a ton of great stories to tell. People like Max and Juan---and even my good friend and roommate Robert---are testament to this truth in life. When I encounter such people, it begs me to look inwards and ask myself a vital question I've asked myself countless times since as far back as I can remember. . .

*If my life were a book, would it be worth reading?*

I only hope that if the time ever comes that I reach a ripe old age like Juan and Max, I will have lived a life full of memories---both good and bad---knowing that I've done something with my life, with plenty of stories to tell my grandchildren.

By the time Max finished his story about his escapades in Morocco the bottle of scotch was empty, having been attacked by all three men throughout the night. By then it was somewhere around 11:00 and the restaurant was closing and Kim had

to go make sure everything was taken care of by the staff before they went home. Soon afterwards Zhai Na left to go meet up with some friends before the clock would strike twelve, and Cao Jian also took off not too long afterwards so he could meet up with his girlfriend for the same reason. After that the entire restaurant was completely empty, save for me, Fang Xia, Max, and Kim. The ground floor's lights were all shut out and the entire place was dead quiet, with the exception of the ruckus we were making upstairs. Max brought two ice cold bottles of Spanish champagne that he had Kim put in the staff fridge downstairs, and I had the illustrious honor of cracking open the bottles and pouring the glasses for all four of us. With sparkling champagne glasses in our hands we all looked at my watch, patiently yet excitedly waiting for the clock to hit the big 12:00. When midnight came, we welcomed the new year with clanging champagne glasses and half-drunken cheers of joy, with plenty of hugs and laughter to share.

Eventually Fang Xia and I then hailed a cab and took the long ride home to my school and went to sleep. As for New Year's Day, I woke up with only the gentlest of hangovers, yet we both stayed in bed nearly the whole morning and afternoon, watching movies together with our feet toasting beside my radiator. We then went out for a typical Eric & Fang Xia "*romantic*" dinner that we have on special occasions: going to our favourite Sichuan restaurant and stuffing our faces with the most mercilessly hot food we could handle until our stomachs were full and our faces turned red from the spices. . .not to mention the constant laughter we always share in each other's company. We then made our way back to my place, where I opened a bottle of cheap Chinese champagne I bought last month specifically for this special moment we would be sharing together.

2004 has been a wild ride for a year. . .I had my heart broken by a woman whom I loved very dearly, established myself enough to finally convince myself that I'm a legitimate teacher, traveled further than I ever have in my entire life, spent a very pleasant summer back home despite having nearly no money in my pockets, and found redemption in the arms of a woman who is so amazing that not only has my heart finally healed, it's become stronger than ever before. My life has changed so much in the past year, possibly more than any other year I've ever lived so far. I hope that with this new year will have even more challenges, anecdotes, experiences, and opportunities in store for me than the last year. It'll be tough as hell to leave China in six months from now and restart a new life for myself in

Canada---not knowing for sure when I'll be coming back---but when the time comes I will make the journey, just as I did to start a new life here more than a year ago.

*Xin Nian Kuai Le!* <sup>15</sup>

Eric / Sun Yi  
Laoshi

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<sup>15</sup> *Happy New Year!*