

May 30th, 2005

Return to Manchuria, pt. 3

And now, the final chapter in my recounting of my second trip to China's northeast. . .

After scarfing down a quick early-morning breakfast we checked out of our hotel and left for the train station to catch our train to Changchun. Since the ride would be relatively short and we'd be sitting in a hard seat compartment similar to when I went to Tianjin, I only had to pay a miniscule price for our tickets. The ride only took slightly more than four hours and we arrived in Changchun shortly before dusk.

Changchun is more to the north than Shenyang is and it was noticeably colder that evening when we got off the train. It didn't bother us that much however, and in any case the hotel we booked on the phone from Shenyang was located only a brisk twenty-minute walk from the train station.

In an interesting twist of events, Changchun was a surprisingly big contrast in comparison to Shenyang. . . Changchun was gray, gloomy, noisy as hell, and full of beggars. The streets were poorly marked, every fifth window was broken or boarded up, and the taxi drivers were among the most reckless I've seen in all of China. Because Changchun was the capital of Manchukuo I thought that this city was going to be pretty and well-cultured while Shenyang would be a dump, but it turned out that the opposite would hold true. . . Shenyang was a clean, cultured, friendly and happening cosmopolitan city, whereas Changchun's cityscape was sadly unpleasant to the eye and most of the locals were far from friendly. Aside from a dozen or so giant buildings that the Japanese had built for military and administrative reasons, the rest of the city is a big sprawling mess. Changchun must have been on the brunt end of some serious war-time mayhem to have made this city such an eyesore. . . either from severe Japanese pillaging or Soviet tank blasts or both. Although far from being the ugliest city I've visited in China, it's certainly not among the prettiest either.

The child beggars were of a depressingly large number in this town and were a hassle to fight off. . .like in Beijing and in other big cities they're being controlled by an adult who *pimps* them (for a lack of better words), knowing all too well that people are more willing to give money to a child beggar than to an adult, especially if the child is persistent enough. They're trained to harass just about any adult that gets in their path, especially in the presence of a foreigner. . .if they see a Westerner, they'll run over to them as quickly as their feet can get them, well-aware that foreigners hand out more money. They're relentless once they have you in their sights. . .they'll follow you, yell at you to get your attention, grab your hand, and sometimes even wrap their arms around your legs or hug you in the hopes of tugging at your heartstrings. While an adult beggar often stays in his place (normally sitting down or standing in a certain spot) and will seldom get in your path if you try to avoid them, child beggars will follow you for *several blocks* on end, constantly harassing you despite your best attempts to tell them to leave you alone.

It's as much a nuisance as it is heartbreaking to witness this over and over again, no matter how long I've lived in this country. Some of these kids are as young as five, and it's not easy to tell a kid that young (in Chinese) to go away. Living in Beijing, you see beggars on just about every major commercial district, bridge, and underpass, especially in the bar and diplomatic districts. . .that's where the money flows, so naturally that's where they go. The great majority of these people are from far-flung rural townships in much less affluent provinces and head off to the bigger cities to beg, sometimes with other relatives accompanying them as well. Some of these beggars are heart-wrenchingly grotesque and in dire need of help. . .people with burnt heads and faces (sometimes without a nose or eye), swollen purple lips exposing toothless mouths infected with bacteria, shoddily-amputated legs or arms, and in some cases, people with hands and feet and faces so disfigured that I often wonder if they have some form of *leprosy*.

Sometimes taking a walk down a busy street in any major Chinese city can turn into a disturbing head-on collision with some of the most repugnant examples of this country's most destitute people who have been cast aside and buried beneath the towering skyscrapers built by China's *nouveau riche*.

I can't for the life of me find the words to describe the sorrow and shame I feel when I turn my head away from the sight of these forlorn outcasts on any given day. . .but what can I do when I'm surrounded by poverty on nearly every street corner, where I'm hopelessly outnumbered by so many miserable souls? What can a lowly teacher possibly do to make a difference amongst all this wretched desolation that haunts me like a spectre?

I sometimes give money to adult beggars---they often beg just so they can eat something---but I usually don't give money to child beggars, as much as it pains me to turn them away, especially as persistent as they are. I simply don't because the money doesn't go to them. They're being pimped by adults who manipulate these children into working for them rather than having to beg for themselves. Whatever money these children rake in, the majority goes into the pockets of their boss. Whenever you see a child beggar on the streets in China, there's most likely an adult who supervises him from a distance, waiting to collect his money. From what I've been told by many Chinese, it's also quite common for adult beggars to *rent* these children in order to assist them in their own begging, hoping that by adding a child to in the mix they could get more sympathy from passersby. . .they often pose as "mothers" carrying their children, or in the case of what I saw in Changchun, they lie down on a plank of wood with wheels under it (hiding one or both of their feet to look like they're crippled or amputees), and have the children drag them around the streets.

Although I'm not in their shoes and can't possibly know the desperation that comes with such a wretched existence, I can't help but feel angry and disgusted when I witness such a vile manipulation of children. . .and for this reason it would be irresponsible of me as a guest in this country---and as a teacher whose main profession involves the safekeeping and education of literally hundreds of children every week---to carelessly throw away my money every time I see an impoverished child. The children won't get a chance to keep the money for more than a few minutes, as their handler will only snatch it away from them soon afterwards. It also worsens the situation in the end. . .if I give the money to the kids, then it will only further strengthen their understanding that Westerners are ignorant moneybags who can't control their emotions. As they grow older and the sympathy may fade away, it might end up making them angry and turn to more violent means to get their daily petty cash and turn to mugging instead.

Instead, I sometimes offer these children small pocket candies instead of money. I readily admit it's not the best tactic as I'm still handing them out something, but it's better than money because the adults who push them around don't get a cent from me. If the kids don't accept them and ask for money (which often happens), then it's obvious that there's an adult who's pulling their strings and won't accept anything other than cash. For the other kids, they smile and gladly take it, and for a brief moment they're just like normal kids again. I wholeheartedly admit that it's not the best solution but I think that giving food to beggars rather than money during my travels is a more responsible way to behave while traveling, and a kinder gesture as well. I don't have the power to relieve them of their pain. . .but at least I can do my best to give them a bit of comfort whenever I can. To a man who hasn't eaten in days, an apple can mean so much more!

In any case it's always unpleasant to see any beggars on the street---child or adult---but it's an unfortunate reality. Some might blame this on the "failures" of communism or "God's will" or some other false and blatantly ignorant excuse, but the fact is that this is a country of over a billion people after all, and despite all the hype about China's predicted emergence as an economic superpower in the near future, this is still Asia. Poverty is something you see every day in this part of the world, even in the big cities. China is developing into something really big on the world stage, but the key word is *developing*. . .it still has quite a long way to go before being on par with the Western world and there are no magical political/economic systems that can save everyone from poverty. China is a communist country and therefore the government's main political emphasis---at least in principle---should be the well-being of the populace, but there's only so much that can be done in terms of ideology when it comes to actual policy. The government---any government---cannot possibly take account of all its citizens, especially an Asian country that until only about fifty-five years ago had suffered decades upon decades of European exploitation, civil war, and genocide.

Since Deng Xiaoping's reforms during the 1980s, many serious ideological compromises have been made (or "*punches in the face*", as Juan aptly calls them), some of which would make Mao Zedong weep if he knew what's happened. . .among other things, healthcare and dentistry are no longer free and in most aspects neither is education, both in the primary/secondary and university levels. Even my middle school, while technically publicly-subsidized, the parents

still have a to pay a tuition fee every year, and a particularly expensive one at that as it's widely considered to be the best language-oriented middle school in north-west Beijing and among the top ten in the entire city. It seems that China's once-proud *iron rice bowl* has cracked over the years, if not vanished altogether. Not all is rosy in the new China. . .too many are being left behind.

More than once I've silently asked myself what Mao would think if he could see what's happened to the *People's Republic* he fought so hard to build and so many had died for. Sometimes when I see the Old Fighters continuing to march onwards and all the while still donning their *Zhongshan zhuang*¹ with pride, I can't help but wonder what the New China looks like through their eyes. . .eyes which have seen so much suffering and hardship and loss that their spoiled grandchildren cannot possibly comprehend. Are they happy to see a burgeoning prosperity finally come to China after nearly a century of violence and starvation, or are they disappointed that the ideals they passionately fought and starved for have been lost and forgotten by a generation of *one-child policy* kids who won't have their first job until they've reached adulthood? The China they grew up in was poor and ignorant yet *united* in poverty and optimistic for the future, ever marching onwards in the struggle for an altruistic brotherhood of peasants and workers where the wealth will be shared and no one will go hungry. The China that now exists has embraced the almighty dollar---"*To be rich is glorious!*"said Chairman Deng---and returned to its old vices of self-interest and wastefulness that plagued them for centuries.

During Mao's time the peasants were finally given the respect they deserved for so long, yet today's 900 million peasants are looked down upon as the scum of the earth, as if it were shameful and embarrassing to share the country with a majority of the population that still works the land and struggles every day to have enough to eat for just one more day. Do the Old Fighters ever feel lost---or even *foreign*---amidst the China that now surrounds them? I have met a few in the past but never asked them such questions, out of respect for all the burdens they've carried throughout their lives. . .yet how I wish I could ask them myself and know how they feel about this, and hear their extraordinary stories that I nor anyone else of my generation could ever truly understand!

¹ The gray and blue military garb that Sun Zhongshan (Sun Yat-Sen) often wore, often erroneously referred to as the *Mao suit* in the West.

After checking into our hotel we then took a brisk walk around our block looking for a good place to eat. We didn't walk too far out however, as the past three days were pretty jam-packed and we had already done a fair amount of walking on that day as well. Across the street from our hotel was one of the city's main gathering places---a large park---and not far away from the park were a few restaurants and more hotels. We ended up going to a Manchu restaurant, which was really cool as we had spent so much time in Manchuria yet never actually had the chance to sample traditional Manchu-style dishes. Northeast China is home to one of the world's biggest sources of ginger, and not surprisingly it's included in many dishes all over China and especially in this part of this country, although this shouldn't come to anyone's surprise. The Manchurians must have been big fans this spice because there were heavy doses of it in almost everything we ate that night, which suited me quite fine as I enjoy the taste of ginger very much. Among the couple of dishes we ate together were smoked donkey meat (served cold in small boneless chunks), eggplants and a special Manchu-style chicken dish topped with peanuts and onions and ginger slices, and a pleasantly pungent and spicy ginger sauce. There was no ginger in my beer however, but then again I didn't want any in it anyways. In all honesty I must admit that the food we had that night in Changchun was definitely among one of the best meals I've ever had in all the time I've spent in this fascinating country. Who would have thought that we'd find such a gem of a restaurant in a dimly-lit corner of a dirty street in downtown Changchun? It seemed like our luck was beginning to turn for the better in this city!

After dinner we made our way back to the hotel and had a very good night's sleep. . .the hotel was a 4-star quality establishment (although it was arguably 5 stars in comfort and service), and the only reason why we chose that place was because they had almost nobody in the hotel during this time and they offered us a 50% season discount (during May Week?) that I couldn't resist. Our hotel room was nearly twice the size of almost every other hotel room I've been to in China and even had luxury shower and bathtub, which my girlfriend thoroughly enjoyed. We slept like babies in our large separate beds, covered with gentle linen sheets and resting our heads on soft goose down pillows. It was by far the best hotel I've stayed at in China and we loved it so much that we slightly wished we could have stayed there an extra night just to enjoy the modest luxuries of a bathtub and a very soft bed. The small luxuries of Western life that I sometimes miss!

The following morning we had a *spectacular* brunch in the hotel's massive dining hall, bursting with all kinds of breakfast and lunch dishes to fill ourselves up with, including Chinese, Korean, Russian and Western foods. Fang Xia and I weren't sure when we'd be having lunch or dinner (or if we'd even eat later in the day), so we made sure to fill up while we could. This was easy to do as the brunch smorgasbord was full of tasty things to eat, and we took the time to enjoy our brunch together on the last full day of our trip. The dining hall was exquisite and highly decorative and we stayed there for nearly two hours, not feeling the least bit rushed to finish our meal. After eating we checked out of the hotel and made our way to the Manchukuo Puppet Emperor's Palace Museum.

The Japanese were ecstatic to have conquered such a large and strategically important part of China with such ease, but they also knew that they were not prepared yet to implement their master plan of invading all of China and Asia: millions of troops back in Japan had to be trained for such a war and new factories had to be built to make the necessary war materials. Manchuria provided the perfect base of operations, as it was home not only to abundant sources of coal and iron, but many Russian-built factories remained intact throughout the region. More time was needed to exploit Manchuria to its fullest strategic potential and train the necessary amount of troops in Japan in order to fulfill their *divine destiny* of domination over Asia.

In order to hide their intentions of a full invasion of China long enough to prepare its military for the task, the Japanese re-christened Manchuria as Manchukuo, a Japanese puppet state that would be governed by Pu Yi, China's last emperor. Changchun was chosen as Manchukuo's "capital city", and a Chinese government building-cum-Japanese Embassy was converted into his new palace.

Pu Yi's Manchukuo residence has since been converted into a museum in Changchun and is one of the most famous historical sites in northeast China. It goes without saying that the place is enormous and opulent, with courtyards, gardens, dining halls, and just about everything else you can think of. It took us several hours to see everything! Just about every room in the area is on display: Pu Yi's bedrooms (he had several), his wife's lush bedroom, his mistresses' quarters, his private barbershop, his private office, his family's private religious altar. . .and even his luxurious private bathroom, where he read, approved and signed all of his

official government decisions. In the other buildings adjacent to the main residence are the residences and offices of important Japanese government officials, including the Japanese “ambassador” to Manchukuo. A large garage also houses several of his custom-made cars, most of which were American (including a Studebaker and a Cadillac), and transported to Manchukuo by train after being shipped to Tianjin from the United States. Included in this garage is his ill-fated getaway car that the Soviets captured in Shenyang when he tried to escape to Japan and surrender to the Americans. There is luxury everywhere, from the mahogany staircases and marble encrusted doorways, all the way to the crystal chandeliers. And let’s not forget the immaculate dining hall and the throne room! A home fit for an emperor, even for a phony one.

In spite of all this grandeur there is still an aura of sadness that lurks all over the palace grounds. The ground floor of the main building is littered with pictures and portraits of Pu Yi and his wife and family, yet I can’t recall any single picture showing anyone giving even the faintest hint of a smile. Everyone in these photos looked so terribly joyless, as if they wished they were anywhere else in the world instead of this palace. With the exception of the Japanese officials who were free to roam around and leave the premises, the remainder of the people inside were just like prisoners, and this was especially true for the emperor and empress. Pu Yi lived his life in Changchun just like he had as emperor in Beijing’s Forbidden City. . .under house arrest in one of the most beautiful prisons you could end up in. Aside from the occasional state visit to Japan or ceremony that required his presence elsewhere in Manchukuo, Pu Yi never left his home. All he did was rubber-stamp whatever policies his Japanese masters imposed on him, entertain Japanese/Axis guests, and hang around the house with not much to do. I’m sure that becoming “emperor” again in this way was not exactly what he had in mind when the Japanese offered him the job. It’s hard to imagine that this was what he wanted.

His beautiful wife, Empress Wan Rong, fared much worse than her husband. Pu Yi was much too busy with state affairs to be bothered with spending time with her and often left her alone with nothing to do. . .she was very seldom allowed to have any guests, save for her tutors who taught her Japanese etiquette and foreign languages. She basically became his trophy wife to be used for aesthetic reasons during ceremonies, much as the Japanese were using him for the same reasons. Pu

Yi and his wife slept in separate quarters very far away from each other and he would very rarely see her there, and it was widely believed he had a sexual dysfunction and it embarrassed him so much that he never had any sexual relations with her throughout their entire marriage². Whenever she would throw a fit or display any kind of unhappiness at a public function he would later punish her by isolating her even more, sometimes forcibly keeping her locked away in her living quarters or by giving away some of her other rooms to his female relatives. The isolation and constant boredom eventually took its toll on her mental state and she frequently smoked opium as a means to pass the time. She later became a heavy user and an addict, which severely affected her mental stability and her once-beautiful appearance. Unfulfilled by her husband and starving for companionship, she often engaged in adulterous relationships with plenty of men, including many servants and just about any man she could easily seduce into her gold-laced bedroom. She later became pregnant³ and soon afterwards became schizophrenic from her drug use and isolation and Pu Yi had her and their (apparent) child sent away. She died in a prison in Yanji⁴ in 1946 after being captured by the PLA, and Pu Yi wasn't notified of her death until three years later.

The building itself is a monument to one of China's darkest moments in its entire history as a civilization, and because of its war-time history it makes you wonder just what exactly went on in some of these rooms. . .just how much did Pu Yi really know about what was going on outside the palace gates? How much did he omit in his confessions in order to save his life from the firing squad? Just how responsible is he for the atrocities he helped unleash on his own people? When you walk through the vast hallways in this palace, it leaves you wondering just how many stories could be told if these walls could talk.

² They slept in separate beds throughout their marriage, further perpetuating the popular rumours that either he had a sexual dysfunction or was actually a homosexual, although the former is believed to have the most substantiated validity than the latter, as Pu Yi re-married later in his old age after being released from prison.

³ According to the movie *The Last Emperor*, the father was Pu Yi's chauffeur, whom the Japanese later killed in order to avoid a scandal.

⁴ The capital of an ethnic Korean autonomous prefecture in Jilin, near the Korean border.

Just as the scenes depicting Pu Yi's early life were shot on location at the Forbidden City in *The Last Emperor*, the Manchukuo scenes were all shot at the actual place where they occurred in real life here in Changchun. If you've seen the movie and have a good enough memory you can recognize these places quite easily while wandering around the mansion. . .including the coronation scene when a drugged-out Wan Rong (played by Joan Chen) eats flowers and yells "*ten thousand years!*" to a cheering crowd, as well as the scene when the mansion falls under siege and everyone scrambles to get out before the Russians arrive. It seems only fitting that they shot the scenes for the movie at the actual place where they really happened. . .it makes it feel all the more real and true.

An adjacent building was converted into an exhibition showing some of the royal family's finest jade and jewelry and other priceless heirlooms while another larger one is dedicated to Pu Yi's life as a prisoner, displaying his old prison uniform, excerpts of his confessions and post-prison memoirs, as well as tons of photos of him during his prison years playing ping-pong and practicing tai chi, eating with other prisoners, and helping others learn how to read and write. There is also on display the actual copy of his official release declaration and many pictures of his last years as a gardener and archivist in Beijing, including a photo of him alongside Chairman Mao. To Zhou Enlai, the Chinese premier at the time, Pu Yi was a prime example of the success of using rehabilitation rather than severe punishment and the death penalty. . .showing the even an emperor can become *re-educated* to serve the people if given the chance to redeem himself. I wonder if the current Chinese government ever gave that a thought! All in all, regardless of what you might think of his fate and of China's treatment of its prisoners since then, Pu Yi's life is certainly a very fascinating one indeed and one that ultimately ends on a somewhat happy note, with a man who found redemption for his crimes and found more peace and freedom in his life as an ordinary gardener than as an emperor.

After spending such a long time exploring this massive compound and diving headfirst into decades of history, Fang Xia and I then retreated to one of the lush gardens to unwind a bit, and then later made our way out and had a brief lunch at a restaurant a few blocks away.

Afterwards we headed off to visit the Manchukuo State Council on the other side of town, not really because we really cared that much but because there's not much else to see in this town other than Pu Yi's palace and an amusement park. . .and that place was too far away and expensive and it was already mid-afternoon. The Japanese-made State Council building was far away on the opposite side of town and couldn't be reached directly by bus from where we were⁵, so we took a taxi to get there. Along the way, we saw over a dozen Japanese-built buildings from the Manchukuo era, all of which were gigantic and had nice Japanese architecture and lovely gardens. The State Council building has since been converted into the Norman Bethune Medical Institute, and a large statue of the highly revered Canadian doctor stands at the entrance. Of course, I made sure to take a picture of that!

Although it's now a university, they still do tours of some of the older places that are kept as museum pieces and left untouched by the university. Fang Xia and I did the tour, but to our surprise and amusement, the tour only lasted a mere fifteen minutes!

Most of the place has been converted into the university so there's not much to see on the tour, and our friendly guide (an elderly woman who also runs the herbal medicine shop at the building's entrance) didn't take long to explain to us the history of the building, as well as point out its special architectural features. The only thing that really stood out was Pu Yi's private elevator shaft, which is entirely made out of copper and continues to shine as brightly today as much as it probably did all those decades ago.

The elevator is rumoured to have a passageway that leads to a deep underground tunnel that goes on for over twelve miles in length (perhaps as a bomb shelter that leads to the palace?), but the tunnel is of course closed to the public and its actual whereabouts in the building is classified information. It's enough to make you wonder yet again what secrets lie below the surface! The whole tour was very short, but we were only charged five kuai each, compared to the Japanese tourists whom unbeknownst to them were being charged five or six times as much for the

⁵Changchun's entire urban layout revolves around an unusually awkward north-south axis, making any kind of traveling around the city extremely difficult and time-consuming.

same tour! We asked the guide if we could wander around the old university but we were politely told that this was not permitted, as this prestigious university is home to the biggest collection of *cadavers* for scientific research in all of Asia (whoa!), and out of respect to the families of the donors, only authorized students and faculty members were allowed to roam anywhere beyond the ground floor of the building. With not much else to see in this place, we took a quick gander at the medicine shop and then left the premises.

Having left the State Council building much earlier than previously expected, we were left with a few extra hours to kill before our train home to Beijing and didn't have much left to see or do in this town, and had already eaten an hour or so before arriving in this place. We took a quick walk around the city's main square only a few minutes' walk away from where we were standing, but we did more than enough walking during our trip and were weren't really in the mood to do much more walking. Soon afterwards we took a taxi and stopped by at a small market located a few minutes' walk away from the train station to do some browsing, and then we headed off to the station to get back on our way home.

We then spent the next three hours or so hunched over each other in one of the train station's hot and overcrowded waiting rooms before hopping on the train for the fourteen-hour ride back home. We arrived in Beijing the next day at a quarter to six in the morning, exhausted but invigorated after spending nearly a week backpacking in the northeast.

Our trip had its ups and downs of course but ultimately it was a wonderful experience, and apart from missing out on Changbai Shan yet again we pretty much got to see everything we set out to see. Backpacking is great as long as you have a Plan B or C in the case of sudden changes, and have a willingness to spend most of your days on your feet. With the many frustrations that come with traveling in overpopulated China, you need to have plenty of *patience* above all.

If fortune does not turn in our favour and this was in fact our last trip before I go, then it was still worth it and we have no regrets. I have yet to go somewhere in China that hasn't enticed my fondness for this country that I've grown to adore so much!

There's much to write about my life since returning from our trip, but that will have to wait for another time.

Until then, I remain as always,

Eric / Sun Yi
Laoshi