

# LA FAMILIA HAYBURG:



## ON THE OPPOSITE SIDE OF THE WORLD

**Beijing: The Great Wall/Great Wall Adventure Club/The Forbidden City/Tian'anmen Square/subway system/train station/international airport/other essential sites and activities; Xi'an: Terracotta Soldiers, International Train K3**

(ADDITIONAL PHOTOS AT: [www.juanitohayburg.com](http://www.juanitohayburg.com))

VOLUME TWO

JUANITO HAYBURG

—EXCERPT: PART TWO OF SIX—

Feeling satisfied that we appropriately helped out several destitute Chinese, we continued our walk to subway station Dongsishitiao Qiao Station where we caught Line Two (blue). We were delivered us to the Jian Guo Men transfer station, and then two stops West on Line One (red), to Tianamendong. This is the station for Tian'anmen Gate (Gate of Heavenly Peace) and Square. We walked around the East end of the Gate, to a more secreted The Working People's Palace of Culture. It was a surprisingly quiet blend of gnarled trees, sculptures, and no alternate access to the Forbidden City. We retraced our steps to the Gate of Heavenly Peace and passed beneath Chairman Mao. We found an obvious booth to pay the 60¥ (\$7.27USD) per person entrance fee at the next impregnable wall, the Meridian Gate (Wumen). This entrance to the Imperial Palace was so named because during the emperors living there six centuries before believed they were at the center of the universe.

According to the information provided, that belief was extended by the Yuan dynasty, which were the first non-Chinese (the Tatars of Mongolia, who adopted the name “Kahn”) to rule over China during the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> Centuries. The Great Wall had been constructed to keep them *out*, but they were too powerful, their empire stretching from as far West as the Mediterranean Sea to the Pacific Ocean. What was so interesting to me was that these Mongols were the same pillagers (the Golden Horde) who were exacting tribute from a fledging Moscow during this time period. Equally interesting, the walls around this palace complex were not unlike those around the Kremlin—tall, seemingly impenetrable, a warning to not proceed further. I was not surprised, because this was not only a time of subjugation and colonization, it was also of extensive contact. Besides physical goods and armed troops, language, ideas, and religion intermingled throughout the world's greatest empire. Perhaps the most well-known Western messenger in this cultural exchange was Marco Polo, who was able to safely make both an overland and sea journey, partly due to the Kahn recognition that ensured his safe passage. His path of travel was incorporated into the famous Silk Road (neither a single road nor only for silk), an already-centuries old trade route that had portions of a Great Wall built alongside it for protection of travelers, traders, and their merchandise.

This is one of the largest palace complexes in the world. It is 74 hectares (one-third of a square mile, the same area as 15 soccer fields, about the same size as the National Mall in DC, or slightly smaller than the Vatican City) rectangular area has nearly 10,000 buildings and rooms surrounded by a moat [52 meters/170feet wide, 6 meters/18feet deep] and a wall [actually, a rectangular prism that is 10 meters/33feet high with an 8.6 meters/28feet base, retarding to 6.7 meters/22feet top]. A visitor should give it no less than three hours to walk through this 600-year old construction of the Ming and Qing Dynasties. We took five hours, but that included an hour intermission from this World Cultural Heritage site. During the break, we kept our ticket stubs while departing through the West Flowery Gate and over the moat. Alongside it, a broad expanse of green, leafy roadway and sidewalk ran between the moat and the Southern extension of Beihai Park. There were also several small, nameless in English, but well identified in Chinese, restaurants in wide spots between the moat and sidewalk.

We strolled by the first one, but as we approached the next one, however, the proprietor and wait-staff (his family?) stood at the door, enticing us inside. Once seated, we were faced with the rare instance of being compelled to try something different because we couldn't read the Chinese-only menu, though the prices were in familiar digits. Surmising that the higher price meant either more food (rice or noodles, and lots of it!) or a higher-quality (Eggs Benedict instead of soft-boiled eggs would be my analogy), or even possibly a combination of the both. We took a small chance with this ordering in the blind—we each ordered three different prices. Enrique's high-end meal was sumptuous presentation of roasted meat kabobs, veggies, and lots of rice. Katarena's middle price had pleasing cubed-chicken with pasta, and lots of rice. I, with the lowest price, ate tofu—and lots of rice. I imagine that fish was also available, but there was no need to find that out as all of the meals were delicious and most filling.

Going back outside, we resumed our exploration, strolling on a bit farther North, toward Jingshan Park and the more-well-known White Dagoba on Qiong Island in Beihai Lake. Many bicyclists passed us, enjoying a dedicated lane as they wheeled the perimeter of the Forbidden City complex. We noticed

that sky had clouded over, so we abruptly turned around to finish our tour. Walking back toward the West Flowery Gate, we chanced upon a family who were having a picnic, complete with musical accompaniment. It was the classic stereotype of an elderly Chinaman with a white goatee played a traditional erhua, a two-stringed Chinese violin, singing the words in high-pitched voice. Meanwhile, his great grandson sailed a toy boat in the moat and his great-granddaughter worked on a kite, while other family members served home-made food—and a lot of rice—onto separate dishes. It was delightful to see this family enjoying the day, and I pushed my own on back into the museum.

Re-entering the Forbidden City through the West Flowery Gate, we paced ourselves around and through the thousands of building. Some are back rooms but others are stunning architectural gems commemorating rulers and desires of a good food, good relations, good intentions, good everything. As per a placard, many centuries ago, should a person touch the good marble friezes, they would instantly be put to a bad death. Much like what I had seen in the depths of Carlsbad Caverns, it was a warning, but quite unlike what I had seen there, this sign was adhered to. It also accounted for my obvious hesitation to touch any relic, whether posted, such as in Carlsbad Caverns, or not, a la the Roman wall in London. I imagine that anybody living today might feel the same way about vandals that graffiti their premises, tractor-trailer units, train cars, or other physical surfaces. But, then, I also knew that should I begin to remotely consider committing such an act, I would immediately be seized and made an example of, a lesson to any other lawbreakers. It was a bizarre juxtaposition, to see all this beauty and notions of perfection to have something so imperfect as the slavery and death penalties used to create and maintain it.

The most significant difference between this historical field of jewels from other gems is that we were rarely *inside* a building observing, but the buildings were all around us. We existed as a moving part of the structures, the architecture enveloped us, exhausting us as much from the visual overload as well as the strenuous trek.

The now-threatening skies began to open up, forcing us to run, finding shelter wherever possible. We eventually concluded our thorough, if not rushed, tour by exiting from the East Magnificent Gate, with no interference from the park administrators, as this, too, was now their means of egress.

Fortunately, the rainfall lightened considerably into an imperceptible mist as we walked East on the road, which divided Chizi street between Nan to the North and Bei to the South. We crossed it and strolled South on Bei Heyan, a wide, divided boulevard that had impressive modern 5-star hotels and stores alongside it. We also passed hutongs, meandering streets and alleys, which were an archaic social classification system based upon closeness to the Forbidden City, and predated the angular, modern-city construction. But nearly all of Beijing is a first-world city, and is preparing itself become host to a first-class Summer Olympics of 2008.

We ambled South, back around to Tian'anmen Gate, and into the S13 subway station. Our intention was not to go back to the hostel, but to safely pass underneath Chang'an Jie (Eternal Peace) Road. Our passage was restricted by the vendors, the universal flea marketers who were hawking their wares in a rainfree area. Just as on the sidewalk, it was likewise restricted but the desire to sell, fueled by the hope of a big payback and a new easy life of wealth. This is the driving force that compels millions, if not billions around the world. Going by the sellers, I considered their competition. As we survived that gauntlet of salespeople, we encountered a variation on the sales strategy.

Two nicely dressed natives met us as we emerged from the subway. “You are not from here. Where is your home?” he asked with a smile, extending his hand.

I suspect my shorts, Hawaiian shirt, and Beatle's cap rendered my attempt to blend in useless, as I told them, with pride, “El Paso, Texas, USA!”

“So you are from America?” his voice unwavering. “Is it OK if we went with you to practice our English? It is no charge.”

I'd forgotten the LP warning that young college-age Chinese will do exactly as what this couple was doing, and, after an indeterminate amount of time, will expect payment for services rendered.

She explained, “You see, China is a large country with many different dialects. Here in the North, we speak Mandarin that is still separate from the South or the West. Even within the city, you can hear differences as people come far away for work. One language most of us use is English, which is good because we will be hosting the Olympics in 2008.”

As we walked around Tian'anmen Square (“Square of Heavenly Peace”), we conversed extensively, beginning with introductions: his name was “John”, her name was “Sue”. (Undoubtedly, Anglicized for our benefit.) Walking past the massive Five Star Red Flag flying from a guarded pole, they showed us Tian'anmen Tower, the Monument to the People's Heroes (Renim Yinxiong Jinian Bei), the Great Hall of the People (where the National People's Congress meets), the Chinese National Museum (housing both the Revolutionary and the History Museums), and the Mao Zedong Memorial Hall and Mausoleum. Some of the buildings charge an entrance fee, but we never investigated that aspect.

Tian'anmen Square is a 440,000 square meter (about 3½ times the size of the National Mall in Washington DC) assemblage point is reputed to be the single largest in the world. More interesting to me was the specific site where the as of yet unknown, lone Chinaman who had stopped a tank during the democracy protest of 1989. Our guides could not tell us his name, nor could they tell what had happened to him. He might have been tortured and killed, imprisoned for “re-education,” spirited out of the country to a distant safe haven, or simply disappeared among the billions of other Chinese. Regardless, his presence is still there, voicing a desire for self-expression and freedom.

Paralleling his voice, I told Sue and John about the National Mall, “...a focal point of assemblages like Tian'anmen Square, where frequent demonstrations are held by the people to express opinions about national policies. Over time, there have been similar occurrences of arrests, death, and thuggish behavior, all committed by the our government against people wanting a change in national policy. The citizenry have wants that are universal.” and we were all silent for a moment, reflecting.

“That this was part of the reason for our visit,” I continued, “is to learn that, as human beings, we all possess yearnings which cannot be repressed. In exercising our own freedom of movement, we will become better residents of planet Earth by understanding other occupants and their situations.”

Sue and John were glad for us, albeit acting hang-dog for themselves.

“We are not able to go far,” she began, “it cost much money for college. And not many Chinese can afford passports.”

They were shocked when I asked them if they were able to split expenses by sharing an apartment.

“We've heard about how common that is in the West, but never here. It is just too difficult. We still live at home.”

I remarked that college in the USA is likewise costly, and, as part of my job, I almost always recommend to my students that they start their post-high school education at El Paso Community College ([www.epcc.edu](http://www.epcc.edu)). I gave them the same litany that I have given to virtually all of my students at Tierra de Parque Secundario Escuela.

“El Paso Community College is the best place to start, because you can still live at home for the first two years before transferring the University of Texas at El Paso if you've taken the appropriate basics. It is cheaper to knock out your first two years at EPCC, even better than living in a dorm on campus at UTEP because you can save four to six hundred dollars a month, which adds up to over twelve to fifteen *thousand* dollars. That can buy a lot of college!”

“That's somewhere between ninety-nine thousand and one hundred twenty-four thousand yuan.” Enrique, always keenly aware of finances, interjected.

“That is so much money!” John remarked, his eyes wide. “But all of you have that chance. So many of our friends had no choice but to accept work given to them. They had no choice, you always get to choose. That is better than money. You can pick your leaders, your future, anything you want.” John said with a hint of palpable suffering.

I understood his tacit dissatisfaction, and agreed with him that it certainly seems that way, “...but

our opportunity to make choices through voting is virtually the same as yours. The vast majority of the possible electorate in the USA simply do not bother to register for their civic responsibility of choosing our leaders and laws. We have an oligarchy, and we probably see it strongest in El Paso because the few who do make an effort inevitably simply choose 'wrong' (usually a Democratic slate, to whom the elected Republican leader funnels away money, influence, and pork barrel). You see, the USA leadership is supposed to be decided by one person, one vote, and that the government was of the people, by the people, and for the people. That has changed over time since so few people bother to participate in the most fundamental societal obligation of voting.” I could see that both he and Sue heard my words, but did not comprehend the ramification of the political process.

I felt as though I was talking to my students who had just turned eighteen, much the same as colleague Tonia has told me about her students who become new adults in her Government class; “Oh, they get this glassy-eyed stare when they turn eighteen and realize how much their one vote counts. Then they forget to register.”

We had a remarkable three-hour sojourn through the political heart of China. This is both the physical and emotional center of our two Chinese acquaintances, who live in that ever-changing environment of an authoritarian state with a vibrant free-market economy. They escorted us into an even older section of Beijing, on the Southern edge of the Square of Heavenly Peace. I became a bit alarmed as it was a narrow, densely packed hutong, Qianmen Dajie, but relaxed when we came to a cybercafe. I paid the cashier three 100-yuan (\$36.33USD) notes for us to check our email, then gave our guides a 100¥ (\$12.11USD) note for their time, effort, and revealing themselves in a manner that undoubtedly spoke for most younger Chinese. They thanked me and skedaddled, leaving me somewhat ashamed of myself, so casually paying them such a slim amount for what had turned out to be an intensely interesting and educational tour of the showpiece of China.

Most significant today was that the three of us had essentially covered the Imperial City of China. It's boundaries were largely unchanged from declaration of its titular designation in 1280, when the Mongol horde under Kublai Kahn swept into power under the name “Yuan.” This dynasty ruled under various names, until to 1949, when Chairman Mao arrived. He stated the country was now the People's Republic of China, a communist stronghold, and ensured that his legacy was as strong as any of the previous rulers.

He had had the huge barrier walls (I thought of the original walls around the Hanseatic Berlin.) destroyed, to be replaced with current Ring Road Two, and broadened Chang'an Jie, as well as enlarging Tian'anmen Square to accommodate (his) Communist ideology of big = impressive = intimidating = awe-and-fear inspiring, *and* his personal mausoleum and hall.

In 1402, Ming Emperor Zhu Di firmly established the Imperial City boundaries when he formally moved the capital from the South (Nanjing) to the North (Beijing). It was all laid out in strict accordance with Feng Shui philosophy of the 1400s, along the South-North/East-West lines

Then I felt my stomach twist when Katarena expressed a need to use the loo, and disappeared behind a closed door at the back. I stood at the door, ear pressed up against it in a vain attempt to hear sounds suggestive of a bathroom, but the 200-plus noisy computers defeated my eavesdropping plan. I was anxious for a few minutes, until the door opened and out came a woman, but no Katarena. I became *extremely* anxious when she only smiled at me—there was no mistaking I was an Anglo father waiting for his Anglo daughter—and told me that my daughter would be out shortly, then closed the door again. With my heart racing, I waited. It seemed to take forever, but Katarena did emerge, unscathed and in one piece. I kept her close and escorted her past rows of people busily typing away to Enrique, and two open terminals beside him. We became oblivious to crowded hall, taken into the ethereal cañons of cyberspace and welcoming the messages of Elena.

It was twilight as we went back through a darkened square to the subway, bought some small snacks, paid our 9¥ (\$1.09USD), and entered the efficient train. After changing to the #2 line at the Jian Guo Men transfer station, we were soon leaving the Dongsishitiao Qiao Station, walking West on

Giongrentiyuchang Bei (Worker's Stadium Road). As we passed the Worker's Stadium, I saw the Worker's Parking lot not full of cars, but of people. Interestingly, they were divided into two distinct groups, all dancing.

One group was practicing swing dance to prerecorded music, while the other group was involved in an equally energetic disco dance, also with prerecorded music. Despite such a disparity in the sounds, it seemed like a near-perfect harmonic convergence of well-choreographed bodies twirling, sliding, sweeping, and touching. We moved on, passing the Outback Restaurant, its small parking lot full of cars, before finally coming to our own familiar hostel and a good night's rest—for Katarina and Enrique.

I had calmed down when I started considering options: For now, Katarina and Enrique were safe and secure in this hostel, I had access to money, and our passports were current, complete with valid visas. The only challenge was figuring out how to leave this city and country that I had worked so hard to get us into. As I concentrated, a tight band seemed to wrap around my head, just above my eyebrows. I knew a solution existed, and it might involve going by plane instead of train. The downside to that is, while we might have more time within cities, such travel would quickly deplete the funds I had allocated for our journey, as well as missing out on my primary objective of a trans-Siberian train crossing.

My next plan of attack was so obvious that I was astounded at not thinking of it first: Speak with my fellow hostellers. They have always been a ready source of relevant and reliable information. In doing so, I learned of a hostelmate, Todoso, who had obtained train tickets on very short notice. I felt the band around my head loosen ever-so-slightly. My quest now was to find this individual who may be able to help me devise a solution. After certifying my identity (no better proof than a passport) and my dilemma, I was directed to post a request on the bulletin board.

While thumbtacking my message on the board, I was fairly shouting his name when a somewhat sleepy man came down the steps, growling “¿Que? What do you want?”

Just as gruffly, I replied “Are you Todoso?”

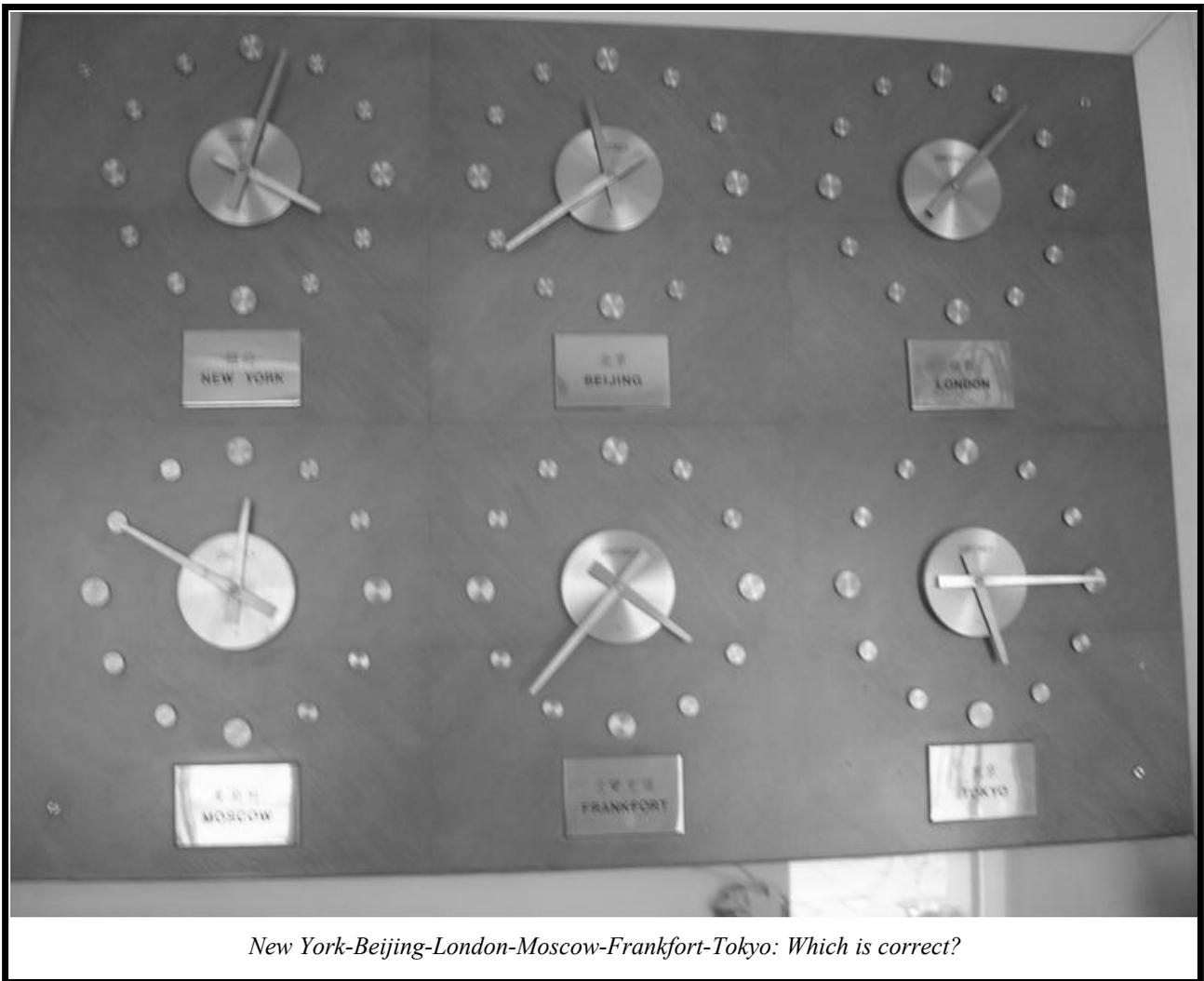
“That's me. Why are you bothering me? I *was* asleep when I heard you yelling my name!”

I immediately bowed my head as the band greatly eased its constriction, and I softly replied, “Todoso, I deeply apologize for disturbing you, but I too am exhausted from a situation in which you may be my only salvation.”

He then reflected my attitudinal change, replying in an equally soft voice, “Oh. Very well. We can talk below. I'll meet you in the lobby in a few minutes. Who are you?”

“Juanito Hayburg. Thank you so much, Todoso. See you soon by the highly inaccurate clocks.”

He smiled, knowing exactly what any world traveler knows about time zones as well as pinpointing precisely where we'd meet.



Eagerly, I bounded down the stairs to a couch underneath the disorganized time display, where he joined me in ten minutes. I have never been so focused in my life as the words jumbled out of my mouth, “How quickly can I get train tickets to Russia? I understand you got tickets really fast. Please tell me how!”

“You may have misunderstood” he began, and my headband tightened as my anxiety level jumped. “Yes, I was able to buy train tickets on very short notice—this is high season, you know—but I went in the opposite direction. I had to go to Hong Kong to get my entry visa validated just to exit through the North. It was three-days *one-way* in a hard seat, which was horrible, with the smoke, spitting, crowdedness, and constant noise, including one that is sounds like an old Basset Hound in the

throes of death. It was one of the worst trips I've ever had. I'll never do that again, but it was cheap, all I could afford. Back to your question: I bought my ticket at CITS (China International Travel Service, which I had forgotten was also recommended in LP.) in the Canon Building. Been to the railway station yet?"

"Yes," I replied with disgust. "Growing up, I remember being told that I acted like a Keystone Cop or was in a Chinese Fire Drill. Surely, those pale in comparison to the railway terminal! But I figured it out, only to be told that there were no tickets for two months!"

He smiled, acknowledging the pervasive chaos to an untrained (pun intended) eye, continued, "Well, that's because you should only go there with tickets *already* in hand. The Canon Building is one stop East of the Jiang Guo Men transfer station, at Yong An Li. When you walk out of the station, one of the first skyscrapers on the other side of the Ring Road Two will have 'CANON' in bright red letters at the top. Can't miss it. CITS is located on the ground floor, and you may be able to get Northbound tickets there. However, they don't take cards, only cash."

My headband completely disappeared, replaced with hope and possibility, and we then had lengthy, pleasant conversation about our personal lives.

"I've just completed a 2-year stint with the Peace Corps ([www.peacecorps.gov](http://www.peacecorps.gov)), and am going to visit some friends in Ulaan Baatar. Following that, I am going to London via Moscow on the train, and ultimately to a science position at a high school in Madison, Wisconsin."

"I, too, am an educator on a similar train trip across Russia, but exiting through St. Petersburg to Helsinki and Scandinavia with my children."

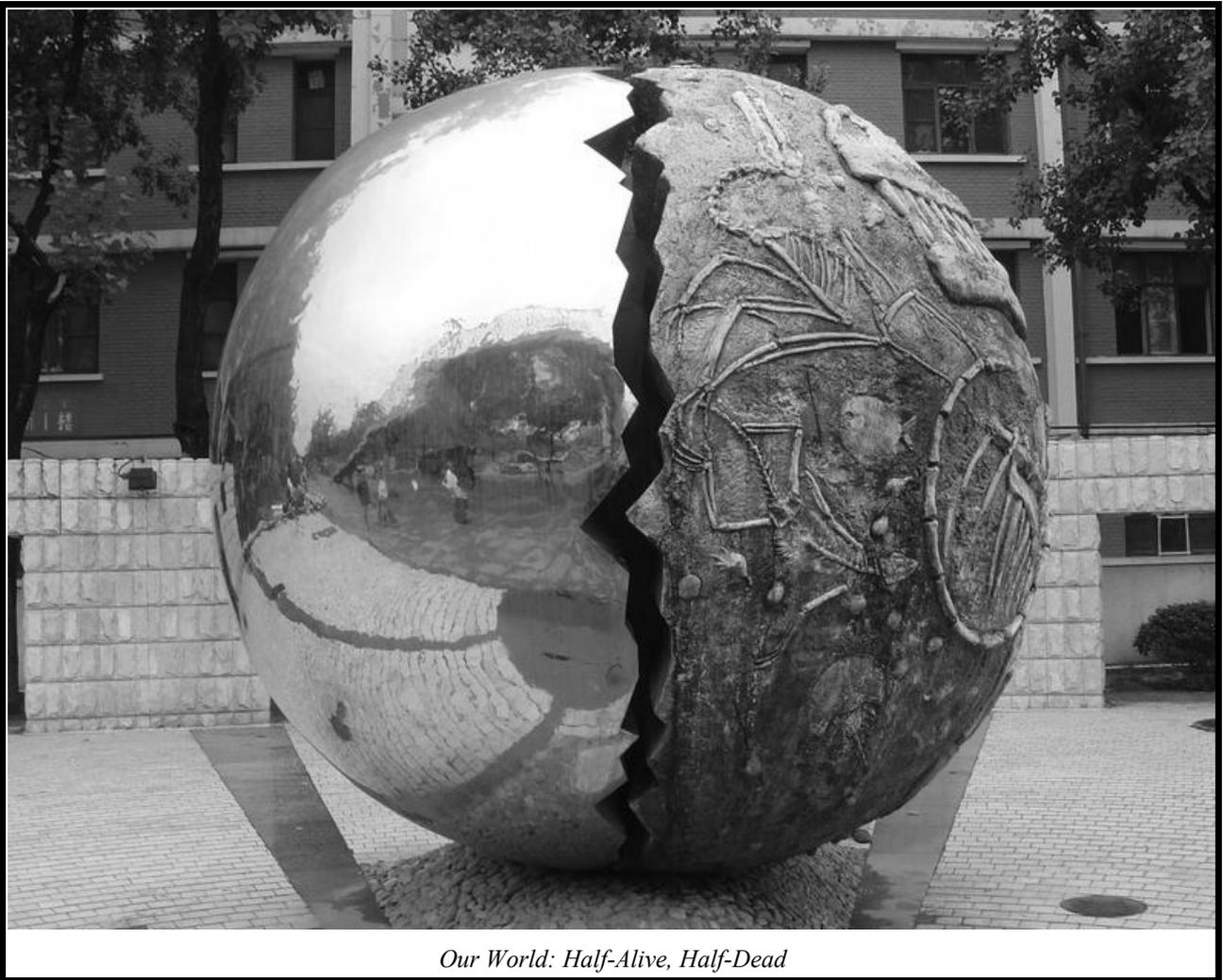
"Juanito, it is outstanding that you are taking your children on such a mammoth trip, and I hope they have a better future because of your greathearted effort."

I glowed with his compliment, and we both retired to our rooms, mutually satisfied with conversation. I joined Katarena and Enrique in desperately needed slumber.

They slept, but not me.

I was still in turmoil concerning our being able to leave Beijing, and slept uneasily. I rose early, but this time with a definite plan. Todoso had given me the information I needed, and I rolled off my bunk, quickly showered, and dressed. I bounded downstairs and outside for what I felt was the most important transaction in Beijing—possibly of our entire trip—buying our departure tickets.

I went straightaway to the Pacific Center Shopping complex next door, which had several ATMs. Amazingly, I had remembered Todoso telling me, "However, they don't take cards, only cash." Even more amazing, I remembered several PIN numbers. But perhaps most amazing, was that I was able to get a staggering 6,000 ¥ (\$726USD)! In a trot, I beelined West on the South side of Stadium Workers Road, passing familiar landmarks, and seeing one I'd missed before: a sculpture of our Earth.



*Our World: Half-Alive, Half-Dead*

It was obviously our planet, having seen similar models before, from the disfigured one on display in Battery Park, Manhattan, New York City, in the Pinecone Courtyard of the Vatican Museum a few weeks ago, as well as many globes. I stopped briefly to observe it, a hemisphere of pseudo-water, the other hemisphere solid, rotating on a liquid-filled base.

But it could also be an interpretation of my brain. Half of it in utter confusion until I figure things out, then calm and placid until the next moment of heightened concern. And what better example than the highs and lows I am experiencing as I grapple with departure from this fine city? I memorized the location and pushed on, passing by a previously unseen garden, before I arrived at the now familiar Dongsishitiao Qiao Station.

I went through the ritual of paying 3¥ (\$0.36USD) and received a receipt to show the guard before descending to the platform. Few other passengers were about due to the earliness of the day, I became alarmed that, while it was Monday, maybe it was a special day (like the EU election day in Athens!) and all my striving was for naught?

I followed Todoso's directions, changing trains at the JiangGuoMen transfer station, and going one stop East, to Yong An Li. Nearly racing out of the sparsely packed station, I looked skyward toward the buildings on the other side of Ring Road Two. I saw the bright red letters of CANON and knew I was close. It was too early for much motor traffic, but there was enough to keep me rushing across the

frontage road. While crossing, a green net bag caught my eye, and I saw it repeatedly run over by car tires. It was perfect! I wanted it, but couldn't stop now, not when I was so close to a possible exit strategy. I ran onto the sidewalk going under the overpass, and then toward the Canon building.

Initially, I couldn't get in—barricades and motor cars tightly parked around it prevented my entry. So close, and so far away! I walked around the lot, I saw a small gap, intentionally left by the workers for their own entry, and I furtively snuck through.

At the door, I caught my breath when I saw three armed guards—had they seen me? Am I going to be so close to a potential way out that I'm going to be locked up? I played it cool, walking right up to the door as if I owned the place, and, to my great disbelief, he opened the door for me, with a smile. Then I realized that he was probably extending the graciousness to a woman who had quietly followed me.

It made no difference, I was in. I went to the first clerk, who pointed me to another clerk, who pointed me to a third clerk. The woman who had followed me was already there, putting lots of money on the counter. I sidled up alongside her, and began talking with her in a casual, but mostly in awe of her, adroitly using me for an escort. Her name was Stephanie, a French woman from Nice and she was on her way to visit friends in Ulaan Baatar.

“So you were in Nice thirty years ago. I don't think we would have met—you are much older than me. But I do thank you for getting me in here. I wanted those guards to think that we were together so they wouldn't question me.”

“Since you are going to UB, which is where I want to go, why don't we go together? After all, the guards think we are together. What's more, you come with both our offspring, too!” I told her with a conspiratorial smile.

“Obviously, we've done quite well as a couple so far, but now it is time for a divorce. Besides, my hosts in UB are close friends and they would take great offense at not being invited to my marriage!” as she bought a one-way ticket, for departure tomorrow morning. “Please play along with me”, she whispered, then slapped my bearded face—hard! My quickiewife indignantly stormed past the bewildered guards, who quickly opened the door for her. I stood there, mouth agape, rubbing the handprint on my cheek, in much greater awe.

The last time I had been struck by a woman was a deserved slap by a barfly in Rota, Spain in 1975 or 6. That woman's hit not only sent my black military-issued glasses across several tables, but knocked me out of my chair, onto the floor where I laid for a few minutes recovering. My shipmates were in an uproar, laughing, taunting me to get up and defend myself while simultaneously encouraging the waitress to sock me again, put me down for the count. I did get up, retrieved my glasses, and humbly sat down, apologizing to her for my rudeness. She accepted it, but warned me to never, ever, treat a woman as I had her. It was a good lesson, and I still remember it well—undoubtedly for the rest of my life!

I had become the center of attention with Stephanie's display of self-assuredness. Truly, I must be a schmuck. When I turned my attention to the clerk, she frostily told me that my wife had gotten the last seat out, and the next train didn't go North for three more days. She also informed me that there was a hard sleeper cabin available on it, but could not guarantee if our fourth companion was a non-smoker, though certainly a male.

In fact, all I'd heard, seen, and read told me that *everyone* smoked, even in the youth hostel. LP reports that while China may have a fifth of the world's population, it smokes almost a third of the world's cigarettes, probably all puffed in hard class!

The passenger classes aboard train consist of: hard-seat, the absolute bottom of the barrel, minimum price category that caters to millions, probably more, of impoverished passengers, like Todoso. LP recommends that everyone, particularly Westerners, should try it, but not for too long. The next class up is the hard-sleeper, followed by soft-seat, then soft-sleeper. One rare class exists above that, the Deluxe, obviously the most expensive, which limits who may be found in it—government officials, high ranking army officers, and, not surprisingly, Westerners. I was soon to find out, my

family would be in that special group.

“However, if you are willing to wait,” she told me in her stone-cold face, “I do have an international train departing for Moscow in a week which has three *deluxe* class berths open. Smoking is specifically prohibited there.”

No question about it, that was our train, our way out. Just out of curiosity, I asked,

“Do you take a charge card?”

“Yes. With a five percent extra commission.” she replied officially.

I didn't care. Whatever it cost, this was the link we needed, not only to get out of town, but to continue the rest of our trip. I gave her my VISA charge card, which she took, along with our passports, into a separate room. I felt huge relief, knowing that we had time to absorb more of Beijing and were going to have a week-long, smoke-free journey to Moscow. I was elated.

Then she returned with my VISA card, three triple-page tickets, our passports, and my receipt, which I signed. I noticed a barely visible amount, reflective of a failing—or little used—printer, above my name that looked like “10,000.” I had been relieved, but now I was aghast.

Then I shrugged my shoulders, knowing that I will meet Elena's final command “...bring them home safe and sound.”

“You will be leaving on July seven, at seven hundred, on International Train K three from the Beijing Railway Station, just on the other side of that (she pointed through the wall) roadway. I advise you to be early, as the station can be a bit chaotic.” she told me as she handed me the passports, VISA card, and tickets.

“a bit chaotic” was the understatement of the year, but I was in a fog, still recovering from sticker shock.

Almost unconscious of my surroundings, I wandered out, through the secret passage, and jumped back from the street, narrowly avoiding a collision with a motorcar, horn blaring. I shook myself awake, and carefully crossed the frontage road to the sidewalk under the overpass. Traffic had increased, but I plotted a strategy that included darting across the next frontage road, scooping up the green net bag, and continuing on for eventual return to the hostel.

As I put my plan into action, elation gripped me, knowing that I had performed one of the most significant acts of parenthood, satisfying both my children's demand for comfort and my wife's command. Moreover, I now had a net bag to carry essential food and water in, something I had learned that we were in desperate need of during our 32-hour train trip from Berlin to Moscow!

I backtracked to the subway station, where I found inexpensive bottled water and purchased two liters, stowing them in my newly acquired net bag. Energized yet relieved with this miraculous turn of events, I slowed down, and even the sting of Stephanie's slap felt good! I went through the mechanics of buying my fare, boarding the train, disembarking at Dongsishitiao Qiao, and floating back to the hostel, finally joining Katarena and Enrique in bona fide peaceful sleep.

Waking up a short time later, they were in as high spirits as I was, which were lowered a bit when Katarena queried me about the price.

“Ten thousand.” I flatly replied.

“Is that in Yuan or Dollars?” asked Enrique.

“Uh, I'm not sure,” I told him, producing the receipt for him.

“This is in Yuan,” he steadily told us. “It cost us about four hundred US dollars apiece for these tickets, as I figure it.”

Our spirits, especially mine, soared again, knowing that I hadn't bankrupted our entire trip on a train ride.

“Since we are going to be here a while longer, let's make some plans.” I told them.

“I want to go to our embassy!” said Katarena.

“I'd like to eat some more food.” was Enrique's response.

“And I'd like us to go to the Terracotta Soldiers.” I added.

With that, the three of us trooped off to the Beijing Tourist Information Center, located no too far away on the Worker's Stadium Road—we had passed it a few times already, scurrying back and forth to Dongsishitiao Qiao. The clouds and moisture of yesterday were history, now it was Sunny and hot and we moved at a slower pace. Feeling hungry, we entered a Kentucky Fried Chicken restaurant next to the center.



*An epicurean delight when in need!*

It was not as crowded as the McDonald's we had been in on our first day in this city, and, though we still had to wait in line, I thought a number of patrons were probably inside for the air conditioned comfort.

As per my style, I started talking with whoever was near. It just happened to be an Iranian, Dr. Alireza Ebrahimzade.

"I am familiar with your country. I had schooled at Washington State University in Spokane, and am now the international manager for Barez Plastics, in Tehran."

His family had occupied a table, and, taking a hint from them, Katarena and Enrique found a table to sit at while I waited in the queue beside Dr. Ebrahimzade. He was an exceedingly pleasant fellow who had nothing but good things to say about the USA, especially our educational system.

"You are welcome to visit Tehran, and I will be your guide," he sincerely told me. "I'll take care of everything."

I quickly accepted, but retracted it with "... we probably won't be able to afford going there anytime soon." I didn't mention that the hostilities from President Bush toward that part of the world was another factor in keeping me away. Our Commander-in-Chief is already delivering bad press as it is, and I didn't want any part of it, even on the friendliest of terms!

Alireza and I cemented our momentary friendship with solid handshakes. We waved goodbye after eating the incredibly inexpensive meals, and went next door, to the information center.

In the Beijing Tourist Information Center, we met Steven Zhang, who gave us invaluable

assistance in purchasing some cheap air tickets to Xi'an, home of the Terracotta Soldiers ([www.travelchinaguide.com/attraction/shaanxi/xian/terra\\_cotta\\_army/index.htm](http://www.travelchinaguide.com/attraction/shaanxi/xian/terra_cotta_army/index.htm)) for 05JUL2004. The price for three round-trip tickets was 4,000 ¥ (\$484USD) cash, which I had plenty of since I was able to charge the train tickets, back at the hostel. Since Katarena and Enrique were using the computer there free of charge, they volunteered to stay while I ran back for the money. Within 15 minutes, I had made the trip, but we needed to wait a bit longer as the tickets were yet to be delivered.

It was a most agreeable wait in the air conditioned office, and I struck up a conversation with Ruben, a young corporate lawyer from Singapore who had schooled in London. Speaking with him just reinforced my earlier actions of going Deluxe class on the train. He described of how he had taken one, and only one, hard seat trip, which cured him of every traveling that class again.

“It was unbelievably bad. You had to claim your spot and stick to it. I got up to stretch my legs and use the loo, and when I returned, all the garbage, crap, cigarette butts, and filth had been swept into my spot. I couldn't believe it. But as soon as someone else got up, we moved all of it to his spot so I could sit down. And since it was a long, all-day trip, everyone had a chance for the growing pile to stand over. I was lucky it was small for me, but the stench very nearly made me sick. And the spitting! I think some of the people were getting ready to die! They would cough up their insides in this ear-splitting, guttural sound, and spit onto that pile of crap. You might think you paid too much for Deluxe, but, without question, it is the only way to travel by train. Good job!”

Despite the expense, I began to feel pretty good about our tickets, both the international train and the airline. Speaking of which, the other two sets of tickets arrived within 5 minutes via a bicycle messenger, and we shook hands with Ruben and Steven before departing. This time, our heading was toward our embassy. We didn't have far to go in the burning Sun before we entered the crowded Dongsishitiao Qiao station, filled as much with passengers as with people seeking relief from the heat.

Our plan was simple: retrace the route I had taken earlier when going to the CANON building, and walking a short distance to our embassy. Once again, I neglected to take into consideration the actual distanced versus that showing on the map. Not only did transiting on the very crowded subway take longer, it turned out to be quite a long walk along the Jianguomenwai Dajie, the Eastern extension of Chang'an Jie. We took refuge in the coolness of the Friendship Store complex, which appeared to cater to foreigners more than natives. We rejuvenated ourselves with some Starbucks mango slush and, being uncertain of the specific location of our embassy, proceeded to inquire a tour guide of its whereabouts.

“Andy,” I inquired, “can you give us some direction to the USA embassy?”

“Do I know you?” was his immediate, wide-eyed response.

I realized that I should have begun our conversation with an introduction.

“Please pardon me, but your tour group (Canadian high school students) told me about you and your outstanding knowledge of the city. I am Juanito, and these are my children, Katarena and Enrique. We are from El Paso Texas, USA, and wanting to register at our embassy. Can you help?”

“Well, sure,” he said, a bit friendlier. “Just go down there (he pointed toward a gated entrance) and ask the guard. It is close.”

We easily found the entrance, but I eventually considered that my ears were the problem. Was he just been warding us off? Or maybe I just didn't hear the “d” as in “closed”? We had spent an hour searching for an access, finding only Chinese guards who neither smiled nor were willing to speak any English. It was mutually perplexing. They wouldn't even speak their own tongue, remaining mute. Indeed, they seemed to ache from the arduous duty of ensuring that nobody could get remotely close to any of the many embassies in this neighborhood of high walls topped with coils of razor wire. I figured that was probably a response to bombings of USA installations around the world, as well as the all-encompassing *raison d'état*, “9-11”.

We did receive some help from two BMW salesmen, showing their superb cars to well-moneyed Chinese in a secluded pavilion. Besides their fluency in German, they spoke flawless Mandarin *and* English. I daresay, they spoke several other languages as most Europeans do. But our greatest help

came from Adam, an embassy worker, whom I was able to easily profile.

“Hi!” I began.

“Hi!” came his response.

“That’s pretty good English.” I kind of yelled at him.

“That’s because I’m from the USA. Walla Walla.” he said. “Your English is pretty good too. Where do you call home?”

Lowering my volume as we came closer, I replied, “We come from El Paso, Texas. We are here on a, sort of, uh, working vacation. We’d like to register our passports at the embassy. Do you know anything about it, where is it? We’ve been all over this area, and have seen flags of various countries, but where is ours?”

Showing him our map, he turned it correctly—we had been using it upside down.

Chuckling, he said, “My name is Adam. I work in the embassy, which is behind me, well-hidden down the lane, but you can’t get in right now—we have a normal workday, and it’s afterhours. You would normally be able to come in on Monday, but it’s the Fourth of July weekend, so we won’t open until Tuesday.”

I slapped my forehead, and, with exasperation in my voice, “Of course, it’s a holiday weekend! I’d forgotten!” I also forgotten to introduce any of us, but, thanking him, we returned to the Friendship Store for the loo, and we also indulged in a few things not seen in a long time—peanut butter and marmelite—as well as some balm for Katarena, a memory stick for Enrique, and a world map for me.

“You know,” I said to Katarena and Enrique as we made our way back toward the hostel, “when I posted my request for info about the train to Moscow, I saw a sign-up sheet for the Great Wall hike. Let’s do it tomorrow, but we have to get up early. We still have plenty of money left, and it only cost 90¥ (\$10.90USD) per person. What do you say?”