

Ellen's China Diary Part Three: The Journey to Shanghai and Suzhou, December 2007

December 24-28, 2007

Well. It certainly was an adventure.

On Christmas Eve, Don and I and Elizabeth Wang (see China Diaries I and II) took off from Beijing on China Air for Shanghai in the south. We flew on a lovely, brand-new airplane, with individual video monitors in the seat (a Nicholas Cage movie showing! Oh joy!) and a yummy “western” breakfast of scrambled eggs and a hot dog (what they think a “sausage” is) and instant coffee. But we were amazed to get even that much, as the flight from Beijing to Shanghai was just a little over two hours. (Try getting a US airline to feed you that well for such a short trip.)

We arrived at Shanghai airport in time to meet up with Santa.

Like last year, we found Santas all over the place, in Beijing, Shanghai, and Suzhou. Several of the Santas, like our friend here on the right, were playing saxophones.



Why? Dunno. Some Bill Clinton connection, perhaps? (Elizabeth says the Chinese really like Clinton. My students asked me if I was going to vote for Hillary.) Then off we went by taxi to the heart of Shanghai and a motel creatively named “Motel 168.” (More lucky than Motel 6, as “8” is a very lucky number in Chinese. Elizabeth explained that the sound of the word “8” in Chinese is very much like the word for “fortune.” The number “4,” on the other hand, is very unlucky, as it sounds a lot like the word “death.” There are no rooms with the number 4 in them

in the motel, and the floors go from 3 to 5. The Beijing Olympic Games next summer will begin on 8/8/08. Can't get much luckier than that.)



Then out and about Shanghai on a cold and blustery day (but not as cold as Beijing). We went of course to the famous “Bund” (remnants of Shanghai’s decadent past)—and were dutifully impressed with the massive Greek-style buildings. (The big buildings are now mostly all banks, with a couple of decadent Giorgio Armani stores thrown in between. We even found a “martini” bar, but only peeked in long enough to find the western toilet in the bathroom.)

As night began to fall, we made our way to the Shanghai shopping district and found us a bar in an expensive hotel, where we were able to get a Bailey's (Elizabeth) and a draft beer (Don) and a white wine of unknown origin (me). So this is how we celebrated Christmas Eve in Shanghai:



Then off again to dinner at a restaurant that Elizabeth said was extremely “famous” because Bill Clinton had eaten there. (See? I told you he was a big deal in China.) And yes, indeed, there were Bill and Hillary on the wall beaming away from a picture taken who knows when.

The next day, Christmas, dawned dark and damp, and indeed it rained most of the day. Undaunted by the wet, we headed off by bus to Zhouzhuang, about 1.5 hours outside of Shanghai, and whose name Elizabeth said meant “water town” (how appropriate). There we found an entire town of little shops (all selling the same things) and little restaurants (all serving the same things) encircled by canals with Chinese-opera singing “gondoliers.” (Oh, such a

piercing sound!) Pretty cool overall, and I got me a good deal on a beautiful faux-silk reversible bathrobe with dragons on the inside and outside for 200 yuan (\$27).



(The shopgirl initially asked for 800 yuan; then Elizabeth went to work with the usual dialogue:

Shopgirl: Look at this quality! Every stitch was sewn by hand by talented mutant dwarfs!

Elizabeth: I blow my nose at your mutant dwarfs! This is a piece of crap!

Etc. Etc. The usual)

Back into Shanghai and around the corner from our motel to have dinner at a very cute restaurant with a ludicrous live “Santa” greeting everyone at the door. (Imagine a skinny, 22-or-so-year-old Chinese guy with black hair and a white beard stuck to his chin and you get the idea.) The highlight of our Christmas dinner there was a luscious bowl of “Pig Lung Soup,” which, yes indeed boys and girls, had big ol’ hunks of LUNG floating around in it. Elizabeth assured us that this soup is VERY GOOD for colds (Elizabeth had a cold and we were all afraid we’d get one from her, too), and it makes sense, I guess, that one should eat LUNG when one’s LUNGS are under siege. But of course once I saw what was actually in the bowl I couldn’t eat it. (The rest of the food was truly delish, thank goodness.)

Back to the hotel for a peaceful night's sleep and then off to Suzhou (pronounced SUE-joe) by train in the morning.

And that's when the real adventure begins

Our transportation problems begin when we take a taxi from the motel to the train station and the stupid cab driver (according to Elizabeth, who was quite peeved) takes us to the WRONG train station. (Seems there are two in Shanghai, on different sides of town.) Elizabeth assures us that it will be quicker and easier to just take the subway to the other train station, instead of a cab, even though we are each carrying a bag that is quite heavy.

The subway is MOBBED with people (“TOO MANY PEOPLE IN CHINA!” as the constant refrain goes) and we are squashed inside with no air conditioning and poor Don is sweating and looks like he might pass out and we are reminded of why we usually prefer to take a taxi, however misguided the driver may be. But we survive the trip (“We saved 2 yuan by taking the subway!” Elizabeth crows.) and get aboard a lovely (and very fast) train to Suzhou, a city little less than an hour northwest of Shanghai. We relax, we kick back, and I watch the scenery going by (all farmlands and shacks—green fields and vegetables, and terrible, terrible poverty on display).

The train arrives at Suzhou and people rush to get off. Everyone but Don and I, that is, as we assume that there is time to pack up our stuff and detrain in a leisurely manner, as one would do in the US. Ah, but as you may have already anticipated, gentle reader, we are NOT in the US and the Chinese do not go anywhere in a leisurely manner and indeed Elizabeth is already off the train, while I am struggling behind Don to get my shit together and make my way out.

We get to the door of the train car, Don steps off the train onto the platform, I come around the corner behind him, step up to the door . . .

And it closes in my face.

And I am shocked, because I assume that it will open again if I just step up to it.

Nothing doing. The door stays shut. I can see Elizabeth outside the door's window, yelling, “Ellen!”

And then the train starts to move. AHHHHH! I am yelling, “No! No! Stop the train! I have to get off the train!” and I am frantically looking for some sort of emergency button I can push that will stop the train. Nothing to be found. AHHHHHHH! What am I going to do? What am I going to do?

And the train picks up speed and hurtles off to Changzhou, the next town.

I panic. “DOES ANYONE HERE SPEAK ENGLISH?!?!?!?” and lo and behold a savior appears, in the form of a lovely young (22-year-old?) Chinese woman who says, “I can speak some English. How can I help you?”

So my new friend, “Sue” (as I find out later) escorts me to the official train ladies (I don't know their actual job titles—they're all women and they're in a sort of faux military uniform and they look officious with their hair neatly tucked into tidy snoods) and this train lady asks for my passport and ticket (thank god I have both of them and have not left them with Don) and fills out some detailed form in duplicate as I chat with Sue (“Oh, you are a Professor at Beijing University? I am going to BeiDa myself in a week. May I contact you there?” “Well, of course!”) and then I get Sue to call Elizabeth so that she knows I am going to try to get OFF the train in Changzhou (only 20 minutes away) and get on the next return train back to Suzhou and please wait for me at the station there.

Sue the Savior then goes back to her seat and the train lady says to me, “Please stay here. I will take care of you.” I do as I am told.

As we pull into Changzhou, the train lady motions me to come to the door (SO I WILL SURELY GET OFF THE TRAIN THIS TIME), and says to me as we're waiting, “You only have 2 minutes to get off the train, you know.” I reply, “Well, I certainly know it NOW!”

I step off the train and am immediately met by a male train official (conductor? security guard? KGB agent? Who can tell, it's another guy in a uniform) who speaks with the female official train person, who gives him a copy of the form she has filled out on me. “Hmph!” he says, and then to me, “Follow me!” which I of course do. He takes me into the train station waiting room and hands me over to the train agent woman working there and she somehow communicates to me that I am to stay there till the next train back to Suzhou arrives. I sit.

I figure out that I have about a half-hour wait, and sure enough, after 30 minutes another train pulls up heading in the direction of Suzhou, and the female train agent waves to me and I get up to go out. Somehow she manages to make it clear that I am to go to Platform 5 to wait for the train. I get there and am met by yet ANOTHER KGB agent, who again says, “Follow me!” and leads me to a place to wait for the train, which arrives, and I get on.

This time I sit in a front seat right by the door to get off. I will be the FIRST OFF the train in Suzhou!

Twenty minutes later (more green fields and decrepit shacks blurring by out the window), the train stops in Suzhou, I get off, follow the crowd to the exit, come out of the train terminal (it's a nice sunny day), squint around the huge crowd, looking for Don's big western face and Elizabeth's long mauve coat.

No one is there to meet me. What the @\$%&!!!!

OK, maybe they had to leave to get something to eat or something. Or they're walking around while they wait. Surely they were able to find out when the train back from Changzhou would arrive? Surely? Where are they?

Thirty minutes go by and I am feeling very bereft and abandoned and sorry for myself and stressed and maybe I am going to start crying and I realize I have to do SOMETHING. So I turn to this lovely young (22-year-old?) woman, who looks a lot like my earlier savior Sue and say, “Excuse me, do you speak English?” “Yes, I speak a little.”

Ha! Saved again! I ask her to call Elizabeth's cell phone, which she does, and after much blah blah in Chinese, she says to me, “They are coming for you.” Merciful heavens! Then there they are, Don's face and Elizabeth's coat, and I am truly saved (although I still want to cry). I come to find out that right after I was spirited away by the train to Changzhou, Don and Elizabeth made their way to the “customer service” office at the train station where (as Don tells me later) Elizabeth raised holy cain with the officials, something along the lines of “How could you let this happen to a DISTINGUISHED PROFESSOR AT BEIJING UNIVERSITY?????” I also find out that the Chinese information network has indeed put out an APB on me (they have all my stats, including age, from my passport that the train lady official copied down) and that is why all these official train people knew how to get me from one station back to the other.

But there was a comical break in the communication pipeline—the officials at the customer service center assure Don and Elizabeth that there will be someone official to meet me at the train when I get back to Suzhou and escort me directly to the customer service office, so Don and Elizabeth must wait there for me. Then when they see that my train has come and gone, and no me in sight, they raise more hell with the customer service officials who tell them, “She didn't get off the train in Suzhou. She is now in Shanghai.”

Well, you can just imagine what Don and Elizabeth thought when they heard that, but just as they are trying to decide what to do next, Elizabeth's cell phone rings and they are told that I am indeed in Suzhou, waiting by the exit. (Don tells me later that Elizabeth really lost it then; those customer service officials' ears are probably still ringing.)

Well, all's well again, and we have a delightful rest of the day/evening in Suzhou with friends of Elizabeth's, Alex and Jenny (shown here in front of a very pretty Christmas exhibit in the tourist-y center of town).



After a mostly delicious dinner (“Oh, duck tongues? No, thank you.”) Alex takes us around in his car on a tour of Suzhou's other areas, including a huge industrial park area, which is all lit up with Christmas lights and is actually very beautiful. There are also many many many tall apartment buildings and other skyscrapers, which we are surprised to see, as the guide book Don and I read seemed to give the impression that Suzhou was a rather small and quaint town. “How big is the population of Suzhou?” I ask Alex. “Oh, it is a very small city in China,” he replies. “Only about 7-8 million.”

We spent the next day (in pretty much steady rain) exploring two of Suzhou's main sites. The picture below is of a part of “The Humble Administrator's Garden,” a truly beautiful and serene place, even in winter. I imagine it must be quite lovely to be here in the summer, when everything is in bloom. It must be even lovelier to be here if one is the emperor, and there are no tourists milling about and making noise. (“It is good to be the emperor,” Elizabeth says, unknowingly paraphrasing Mel Brooks.)



After lunch we visit the Suzhou Silk Museum, where we learn how China invented the art of silk making about a gazillion years ago, and even see a big platter of mulberry leaves with little silk worms munching about. In one room there is an actual silk weaving loom, which is very large and has perched high up on it a woman weaver who is dressed not unlike a Chinese peasant from Mao's time, but who is also wearing spike-heeled boots. Ah, the incongruities of China!

That night, we head back to the train station to catch the overnight train back to Beijing. (Elizabeth has threatened to get a rope to tie both of us to her, but we manage to all get on the train without leaving anyone behind.) We have reserved a “soft sleeper” compartment, meaning

that we are in a little bitty hot stuffy room with four bunks, two at sitting level, two up high. Don and I commandeer the bottom bunks, Elizabeth clambers up top, and we all hope no one will come to claim the remaining bunk.

All goes well (despite the fact that the toilet on the train is a Chinese toilet, ugh) and we are all asleep when our door opens and a Chinese man, mumbling some sort of apologies, clambers up to the empty bunk. Oh, great, I think, what if he snores or farts all night long? But no problem—he is quiet all night.

We arrive in Beijing around 7:30 AM to a wet snowfall, all of us successfully detrain, make our way once again to the subway, split from Elizabeth at one stop, and then Don and I navigate the subway and a taxi back to the Shao Yuan hotel on the BeiDa campus, which now feels like home to us.

As I think back over my Shanghai/Suzhou adventure I am grateful to my heroines—the two young Chinese woman who spoke a little English and saved my day. These young women are China's best bets for the future—smart and compassionate. Nice to know I could depend on the kindness of these strangers.

[Note: This is the last installment of my China Diary. I have now been to China SIX times (I can hardly believe that myself) and while there's always something amusing and amazing to see, the sense of newness and wonder has pretty much worn off. I may return again, I may not, but I will never forget my time in the People's Republic and how much I learned from the (mostly) wonderful Chinese people.]