

Exploits of a geriatric in China

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Before I went to China in May 2010, I asked my friends about precautions I should take going to China. One of my friends who, has not been to China but is quite knowledgeable told me to take my own pair of chop-sticks with me. Concerned, I asked a Chinese friend. He calmed my fears with, "Nowadays they give you new chop-sticks at every restaurant". Apparently he had only Beijing in mind. In any case I went to China and obviously came back, all in one piece, without any major mishaps. I mean I blew a couple of talks, though someone wrote a paper answering a question that I posed in one of the talks. My feet got swollen and I thought, my kidney was in trouble and, I was retaining fluids, but it turned out it was excessive walking, and gout, that caused it.

Life is a mix of good and bad and that is how I like it. But with a transplant kidney inside me, I have learned to make sure that there are not too many surprises for the important little fellow. So, I make some discreet enquiries, to sort of make sure, before I go to another country. When I got there I found out that more than the transplant I should have taken my general health and age into consideration. Here in the US we usually live our days in considerable comfort with cars to haul us from place to place and with lifts to carry us from floor to floor. We have no idea of the rigors that one faces at some Chinese Universities.

Of course, mine was a very special case. I lost my job, in 2004, to a technicality that requires visiting faculty to discontinue teaching after a period of three years. Though the school completely forgot this technicality in my case, the department head went above and beyond the call of duty to make the technicality work. Since then I had literally gone to seed. No walking, walking from classroom to office or classroom to classroom used to be good exercise; just enough work/movement in the garden to disqualify me for the disability benefits and spending my time glued to the computer were my other activities. With this kind of "training", at the age nearing 68, I jumped to my feet and announced that I was going to China. I am over-dramatizing the situation; it did not happen quite like that, I decided it on a repeat of invitation.

Obviously the young man who had seen some of my earlier work, and thought inviting me was a good idea, had no idea of the state of my "preparedness"! (I myself had no idea!) I do sincerely hope that we are able to publish the stuff we worked on while I was there. In any case, I thought, "If I am going to China then why only Beijing, why not Chengdu also?" I have known a guy in Chengdu for ages. He has often cited my work and we have corresponded quite often. Apparently, the guy in Chengdu was waiting for something like this to happen. It was then decided that I would spend a week in Beijing and then spend a week in Chengdu and then continue what I had started in Beijing.

Before you place your tongue to roll out the word stupid, let me tell you that I have done much worse. Once I visited a number of American universities traveling by Grey Hound, giving talks and having discussions along the way and keeping notes to write the paper based on those discussions. But of course that was more than twenty years ago. At around 45 you can take that kind of rigor even though your blood pressure is killing your kidneys. OK, it was stupid of me to take on traveling to China in my kind of state, but the point is I survived.

Survive I did with flying colors. In Chengdu, I visited nearly all the places they wanted me to visit. The Museum, the Shrine of Heroes, a mountain Shrine; if there was any place they thought important they would want me to visit it. My Chengdu friend's graduate students were very enthusiastic and looking at their enthusiasm I would also enthuse myself and take some Ibuprofen to keep the pain down. When there was no talk or discussion session, or meal time, I was on foot savoring this sight or that.

In short they showed me and made me taste everything good that they could, in a week's time. Let me say that I walked in that one week more than I had walked for a couple of years. What is more

important, pain aside, I had not enjoyed myself as much in several years. Did I mention that Chengdu is in Sichuan province the world renowned center for delicious and hot Chinese dishes? Well yeah and I tasted a lot of them, in good restaurants and in not so good restaurants. (A couple of times I insisted on going to a simple place where ordinary folks ate and ate with used chop sticks.) Apart from taste and sight I recall a whole lot of warmth and friendliness from my host, his students, and from folks who I passed by. Here are some pictures from that one week.





The only not so fond memory of Chengdu is that on the second day of my visit there, Nystatin, my swish and swallow medicine ran out. You see I have to take a steroid called prednisone as part of my medication and that, along with my immune-suppressant medication, causes me to have thrush in my throat. That is, I sort of have no defense against the spores of the fungus which normal folks can handle easily. It is something that my doctors put me on right after my kidney transplant. I know, babies have thrush like that. You can consider me a baby. The story that I am telling you does show that I have not grown up much. This oversight of not carrying a full bottle with me did cause me some discomfort. But then I survived, didn't I? Part of my survival tactic was to drink a lot of tea. Seeing my "interest" in tea my host and his students presented me with enough tea to last me for several years.

Back in Beijing, my feet were permanently swollen and I thought I was retaining fluids. The diuretic that I had taken as a precautionary measure did not seem to help. The throat was also a source of problems, let alone the aching hip joints and knee joints. Not knowing about the shape I was in, my Beijing host had already put me down for a number of talks. I salute my stupidity, that in spite of my condition I decided to go along with the schedule. I think I mixed a few things up in my first talk, after Chengdu. Of course the legendary Chinese politeness and the limited audience, sort of, saved the day. But my host, a sharp young fellow, knew that this was not the man that he met a few days ago.

Slowly and painfully I explained to him that I had some problems and some worries. My host immediately set to work. My kidney was the prime concern, so he took me to a hospital and had my blood-work and urine-analysis done. It turned out that my kidney was fine; the creatinine was a bit elevated but that is understandable in a transplant patient. For the pain he got me some capsules that worked wonders and I could walk without too much pain. (Nothing fancy, the capsules contained much stronger Ibuprofen than I had ever dared to use!)

For my throat I went to another hospital. I appeared before a panel of three young female doctors. One of them spoke English well. They looked into my throat and found that there was some irritation, an indication of a possible bacterial infection, so they prescribed an antibiotic. For the, possible, fungal infection they gave me some medication and in a couple of days I was able to think straight. Thanks to that I was able to fine-tune what we were working on and was able actually to prove a couple of new results. (During that period I also prepared a talk meant for general audience, on numbers, that I later put on my webpage at www.lohar.com and at my blog at Open Salon at: http://open.salon.com/blog/mzafrullah/2010/07/14/numbers_large_and_small_uses_and_misuses) What is more interesting, all that examining and medication cost around six hundred Yuan, less than \$ 100.00!??!!

The story of my visit to China does not of course end there. When I got into a better shape, my host made sure that I saw some places in and around Beijing. Summer Palace, Forbidden City and the Great Wall of China, spread over several days, spaced so that I would not exert myself too much and I would also give the remaining talks/lectures that I was scheduled for. To the Summer Palace and to the Forbidden City I was accompanied by the lovely young lady whom I decided to call Susan, a graduate student of my host's. She also took me to a nearby Chinese mosque. It was all fun and wonderful, in spite of my swollen feet.







My host himself found some time to take me to the Great Wall.

The ancient wall is a big attractor of folks from all over the world. I saw white folks from the US and from other parts of the globe. I saw Arabs, Africans, Indians and some Pakistanis. I was there, a Pakistani American. Of course, the biggest part of the crowd was still the Chinese and the Asian crowd. Chinese were there in large numbers, perhaps because of a saying of Mao-se-Tung that went something like: a man is not a man if he has not visited the Great Wall of China. The man who transformed a nation of opium users to the current great stature among nations must be respected for his contribution to his nation and to humanity.



As we were walking from the Great Wall to the Railway Station, my host spotted a weed along the road. He told me that his mother knew about the herbs a lot and if he remembered right this particular one could help my swollen feet. In any case he picked a handful of it and as we returned to the hotel room, where I was staying, dumped it on the side table. He took a sample and confirmed from his mother that he had picked the right herb. With that news he also brought a pan. He put that stuff in the pan and poured boiling water from the small kettle meant for making tea. After mixing with warm water from the tap, he told me to soak my feet in that. He also helped me, and this kindness made me homesick. A few years back when I and my children lived together, they took care of me like that. God bless my children and God bless this young man who was kind to a useless geriatric like me.

During my visits to those historical places and generally during my stay in Beijing I had a chance of looking at people more closely. I like children a lot. Perhaps they remind me of my childhood, my

lost/unused treasure. So I smile at them, make faces at them or wave at them and being in China would not stop me from doing that. To my surprise not only did the children respond but their parents did too. Some of them would want the child's picture with me. In some cases Susan also took the pictures. Whatever picture the media might paint of the Chinese, they are friendly. (Even to a crummy looking wayfarer/visitor like me!)

I wish I could say the same thing about the Chinese shopkeepers! I am not talking about big stores where they put the price-tags and expect you to pay or walk, as in the US. I do recall haggling to lower the price of a certain tea, at a Beijing Wal-Mart. It was a day before I left for Chengdu. I went shopping with another student of my host's. She said it was "close by" and so we walked. For me, in my condition, it was a very long walk indeed. By the time we got there I was looking for something to drink. I spotted at the entrance of the Wal-Mart a small corner shop that looked like a tea-shop.

I have become a penny pincher since my "retirement" but who counts pennies when the next step seems impossible to take! I asked for tea, for myself and for the young lady. Well surprise, surprise, it was not a tea shop, as in tea shop. He sold various kinds of tea in packets. But of course he would make some tea for us to test the flavor of it. "Come what may", I thought and agreed to sample the best tea he had. With the flourish of a Japanese host (as I have seen in the movies) he put some tea in a China pot poured boiling water in it, which he instantly poured out, poured in fresh boiling water and let the tea-pot sit for a while. Then he poured three small cups, one for himself, one for the young lady and one for me.

One sip and I knew it was no ordinary tea! It seemed my tongue had walked into a jasmine garden. I blurted out: "jasmine tea!" The fellow shook his head in negation. I did not believe but could not explain the lift the tea gave me. I had another cup and with those two small cups I thought I could walk another few miles. I asked for the price and found out that a pound of it would cost me nearly half of my allowance for the whole month. In any case I paid for the drinks, haggled some to have the price of the tea leaves lowered, unsuccessfully, and left. The tea that I drank there is called teguyaen. I later bought some and enjoyed the same flavor and uplift every time I drank it.

I came truly face to face with the Chinese shopkeepers when I was planning to return. I had had so many presents that I needed another suitcase. My host decided that his wife should take me shopping, as she knew how to shop. This young lady spoke fluent English and was immense help. When I decided on a suitcase and asked for the price, I got a shock. I could buy at least three suitcases like that in the US with that kind of money! But then I saw the lady in action. She offered one fourth of the asked price and stuck to it. In the end I got the suitcase for a reasonable price, though my wife thinks I paid more than I should have. While the haggling was going on I remembered shopping in Pakistan and in Morocco. But there I knew that overpricing and haggling was the custom!

Now a word about the place where I did the shopping, it is called five golden stars. It is a huge market, which gave me the impression of being the flea market of all flea markets, on the one hand and reminded me of the covered markets of Shikarpur (Pakistan) which I have been to as a young boy and of the covered market of Istanbul which I have never been to. But it was a bit stuffy. Some exhaust fans could probably make it more enjoyable, for the shopkeepers' young children if not for me. Those shops are run as family businesses and I saw the whole families there running the shops. The pallor on the faces of young children made me write these lines. That pallor was a bit more than the paleness you see in the Chinese skin.

If you are looking for some sum up lines, I have none. I can however tell you what inspired me to write this "report". Of course I have been to a number of countries and have not even shared a single photo nor have I written anything about my other journeys. What made me write about this? Well, the following lines might tell you what inspired me to start writing about my China visit. I learned from my visit to China that I can push myself a bit more. So I took up a teaching assignment at a university, in another state. A few weeks into the job and I had a bad diarrhea. Concerned that it might interfere with my teaching I took some Imodium which blocked me up and I noted that my kidney was a bit

stressed. So I went to a walk-in clinic where I was told to go to an emergency room. At the emergency room they did check me thoroughly and told me there was nothing to worry about but ran the bill to more than a thousand dollars and tried to make sure that I pay it from my pocket; thinking perhaps that I was a foreigner. That's precisely when I started writing. Then one memory led to another and hence this rambling account.