

Dear Friends,

Every time I leave India I am glad to get out of there, but after I have been out for a while I always long to go back. Just how much sense this makes is a question we may leave for another time, but by 2010 I was well into the longing cycle. I planned a trip to the holy city and pilgrimage center of Varanasi for February 2011, but then couldn't go because I had to go into the hospital instead (see Letter No. 10). I couldn't go the next year either, for reasons I now forget; by the fall of 2012 I really missed the place and was determined to get there. So I made my reservations, bought my tickets, got my shots and my visa, and on January 2, 2013, went to the airport and flew off to China to see the Great Wall.

To see the Great Wall? Why would a person who wanted to go to India go to China instead? It turned out that the cheapest ticket to Delhi (transit point for Varanasi) had layovers in Beijing and Shanghai, both ways. I could have bought a slightly more expensive ticket, but however I did it I would have had to stop *somewhere* to break my journey. Otherwise it would have taken at least 33+ straight hours on planes and in airports – too long. So since I had to stop somewhere, why not take the cheap ticket and stop in China? I had never been there (except to Hong Kong and Macao, and to Taiwan), and three of the sights I most wanted to see in the world (the Great Wall, the Forbidden City, and the Shanghai Bund) were right on the way. Even if I could stand 33 hours in Airplaneland, it seemed kind of silly to fly to Beijing and Shanghai twice each and never leave the airport. So I decided to spend a few days of intensive tourism in Beijing, then continue on to Varanasi, and do the same in Shanghai on the way back, turning my itinerary into a kind of sandwich: India between two slices of China.

## BEIJING 北京

So I flew to Beijing, 12 hours nonstop,<sup>1</sup> and when I got there Robinson Li was there to meet me, holding a sign with my name on it, ready to drive me to the Holiday Inn Express (!) Dongzhimen (!).<sup>2</sup> The waiting driver and the fancy (for me) hotel were part of my strategy for the sandwich. I wanted see as much as I could in four days in each city,



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<sup>1</sup> Not that I'm complaining. It took Pan American's *Philippine Clipper*, shown here approaching Hong Kong, six days to get to China on the first commercial passenger flight between North America and Asia, flying at 153 mph, stopping to refuel at Honolulu, Midway, Wake Island, Guam and Manila, and finally arriving in Hong Kong on October 23, 1936.

<sup>2</sup> There are few travel experiences more satisfying than coming out of the customs hall after a long flight to a strange and distant country and finding a driver waiting for you, holding a sign with your name on it.

conserving as much energy as I could for the demands of India. So I engaged an English-speaking guide, which I rarely do anywhere, to pick me up at my hotel, take me in his car to sights I selected (but in an order that made logistical sense), and return me to my hotel at the end of the day before the notorious local rush hour. And the hotel had to be comfortable by American standards, have at least some English-speaking staff, and have wi-fi and a restaurant on the premises so once home, I could stay home until the next day's tourism. The Holiday Inn Express Dongzhimen had all that (except for English-speaking staff – in the restaurant you pointed to dishes pictured on an iPad) at a price that would have been reasonable for a regular Holiday Inn in Salt Lake City.<sup>3</sup>



So there I was, in China (arms at left), country #72 on my life list.<sup>4</sup> Below left is the view from my window at the Holiday Inn Express. It looks like a generic American cityscape – but wait! There is something foreign about the place. Look at the windows on the low buildings in the foreground. Look at the caps on the two towers in



<sup>3</sup> Wi-fi was no problem, but what would have been a problem was the so-called Great Firewall of China, which blocks access in China to unapproved Internet sites and searches. To get uncensored Internet, my law school classmate, the media sage Andy Schwartzman, recommended I install a *virtual private network* for the length of my stay (I used Golden Frog). This worked by presenting my computer to the ether as if it were in Los Angeles. But if I failed to use it, trying to open Google led me to Baidu, China's tame imitation search site, and trying to open *nytimes.com* (or searching anywhere for *Chinese Communist Party*) caused the server to "reset."

<sup>4</sup> When I went to Hong Kong for the first time in 1976, it was a British colony and so didn't count as China, but was its own country (#26) for purposes of the list. When I returned in 1999 the British had already ceded Hong Kong back to China, so I could have claimed China then (as #59). But it didn't feel right to claim two countries for visiting the same place. I might feel differently about this if I returned, for example, to Slovenia in the former Yugoslavia. But on this second trip Slovenia would stamp something different in my passport; perhaps to reassure the

(footnote continues →)

the distance. Look at the air pollution.<sup>5</sup> Still, it is much more American-looking than it used to be – pictured above right is the same neighborhood in 1908.

On the first day Mr. Li drove me out of the city toward the Wall. It was cold in Beijing in January, and I was bundled up in my long silk undies and lined coat and woolen ski hat and scarf of imperial yellow. The car had darkened windows (Mr. Li explained proudly they were to make people think someone really important was inside), but it was still possible to see at first a densely built cityscape, mixing modern high-rises, rough-textured tenements with jalousied windows that looked very foreign, and low buildings with pointed gables hiding behind blank walls (clearly from the Ch'ing period, what we think of as the “old” China of mandarins and dragon robes and queues on men and bound feet and opium, when things were very different).<sup>6</sup> A wintry landscape of snow, bare trees, and (once outside the city) flat bare cornfields and frozen irrigation canals.

We were aiming for Mutianyu, an access point I chose because it had a ski lift for getting up to the Wall itself. Passing through farm country, we entered the wild and rugged-looking Yan Shan (Swallow Mountains), and then suddenly there was the Wall in the distance, snaking along the ridge-line, looking very small from far away. The closer we got, the bigger the Wall appeared; soon we could distinguish watchtowers like little forts. At last we pulled into the town of Mutianyu, its walls and roofs looking very Chinese, and made our way to the ski lift.

I enjoy riding ski lifts – sitting out there unenclosed, with my feet dangling over the edge, it feels like flying. It was great fun until I got off and realized that we were not quite there yet, but that there were several sets of uneven stone steps ahead, and snow in places along the way. Rickety and unstable as I have become in my seniority, I do not hesitate to ask for strong arms to lean on when climbing up dangerous stairways or stepping off rowboats on polluted rivers. So, leaning on Mr. Li, and stopping every so often to puff and gasp, I made it up to the top of the Wall, where I could really see how massive the structures are, and how sinuously they go on, apparently forever. Dew condensed on my

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*(footnote continues ... )*

world about their promises of autonomy, in 1997 the Chinese authorities were still using a stamp that said HONG KONG.

<sup>5</sup> On January 12, four days after I left Beijing, the Air Quality Index there (measured at the U.S. Embassy) hit 755 on a scale of 500. Buildings two blocks away became invisible; the *New York Times* reported that “all of Beijing looked like an airport smokers’ lounge.” See [tinyurl.com/cahkqvy](http://tinyurl.com/cahkqvy). Even 500 is 20 times the World Health Organization’s benchmark safe level. It wasn’t quite that bad when I was there.

<sup>6</sup> The Great Ch’ing (1644-1912) were the last imperial dynasty, overthrown by the short-lived republican regime of Sun Yat-Sen. Most of the pre-revolutionary buildings left in Beijing and Shanghai date from the Ch’ing period.





beard and froze there. I did not think to have my picture taken at the top, by the gatehouses, but below are two proofs I really was there.



Although I was not in a condition to do much clambering, I spent an hour or so on the Wall, impressed by its massive ambition, peering from the



16th century (Ming Dynasty) watchtowers and gazing out over its martial crenellations to the romantic view of snowy woods and mountains below. The Wall had long been on my Bucket List,

and it was worth pausing to fix it in my memory.

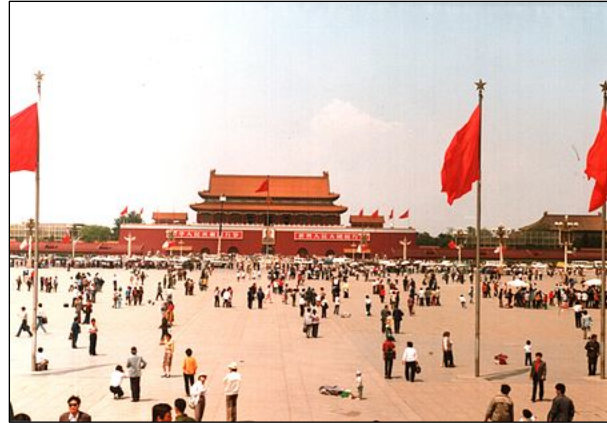


When the time came to go down again, I had a choice of taking the ski lift or



zipping down a curvy steel chute on a sleek toboggan. Fun though the toboggan seemed like it would be, I thought it unwise to risk my already iffy spine and joints just for the thrill, and tottered tamely back to the car whose darkened windows silently proclaimed my extreme importance.

The next day was reserved for Tienanmen Square and the Forbidden City. Tienanmen Square, the third largest city square in the world, is quite enormous.<sup>7</sup> It was not hard to imagine it full of tanks, and even on a quiet day there were enough soldiers around to keep it quiet. I had three objectives in the Square. One was merely to be there and experience the place, as it is a historical sight just by itself. I can report that it is soulless and overbearing enough for the most heartless totalitarian regime. It is so big that a picture showing all of it can communicate nothing of its human scale. The image above shows roughly the northern fourth. Of course there is no parking anywhere near the Square, so Mr. Li gave the car keys to a confederate with instructions to come back for us when called.



Another objective was to see the Great Hall of the People, site of Communist Party Congresses and similar shows of robotic unanimity. It is a very grand and dignified building with a gala red-carpeted entrance, an elegant conference hall, the nearly endless auditorium where the congresses are held (just a glimpse at left), staid paintings and artworks, and young soldiers in dress uniforms in the lobby. As a focus of national identity, it was as

cold and rigid and arrogant and anally controlling as the square outside.

<sup>7</sup>

At 440,000 square meters (m<sup>2</sup>), it is more than five times the size of the Place de la Concorde in Paris (86,400 m<sup>2</sup>); more than 11 times the size of Washington Square Park in New York (39,400 m<sup>2</sup>); more than 19 times the size of Trafalgar Square in London (23,000 m<sup>2</sup>) and St. Peter's Square in Rome (22,783 m<sup>2</sup>); almost 46 times the size of Union Square in San Francisco (9600 m<sup>2</sup>); and equivalent to more than 82 American football fields (5351 m<sup>2</sup>). See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_city\\_squares\\_by\\_size](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_city_squares_by_size). The whole six-block Morningside Heights campus of Columbia University is about 130,000 m<sup>2</sup>; after fitting it into Tienanmen Square three times there would be room enough to add the undergraduate south campus a fourth time, for good measure (20 blocks).



My third objective was the mausoleum of Chairman Mao Tse-Tung (Zedong as he is called now in the ugly modern *pinyin* transcription).<sup>8</sup> Long lines to get in, of course, and cameras not allowed, but here's a picture of him taken from the Internet. He doesn't look even as good as this any more – now he looks like he's made of plaster or dusty old wax. Of course no one looks his best when he's been dead for 37 years, but Lenin had been dead for twice that long when I saw him in the flesh, apparently fresh as a daisy, in 1992. Mr. Li told me that Americans almost never ask to see Mao's body, but it was high on my list of Beijing sights.<sup>9</sup> Now I've seen it, and they can't take that away from me.



After a pork-heavy lunch in a definitely non-tourist cafeteria, it was time for the Forbidden City, and also high on my Bucket List.<sup>10</sup> This is an extended precinct filled with symmetrically arranged and richly decorated pavilions, the seat of the Imperial Court before the Revolution of 1911.<sup>11</sup> It is one of the greatest sights in the world, and was enough all by itself to make the trip to China worth the cost and effort. I spent at least four hours there, until I just could not see any more; I would have liked to have stayed longer, or come back. As magnificent as the decoration was, and as evocative as it was to be on the spot where, for example, the Empress Dowager whispered instructions to her Emperors from behind a screen, the great mass of the dark red walls and the multiplicity of the pavilions, all in the same style but never seeming to end, made as great an impression.<sup>12</sup> On the next pages I show some images of the Forbidden City.

<sup>8</sup> The transcription I learned as a child, studying with the young Pearl Buck by the coal fire in our one-room log schoolhouse on the banks of the Yellow River, was called Wade-Giles, and perversely I use it in this travelogue whenever I can. It had its irrationalities, but at least you knew where you were, and did not have to figure out how to pronounce *Cixi*, as they now call the Empress Dowager Tz'u-hsi of the Ch'ing (now Qing) Dynasty. Rhymes with *Dixie*?

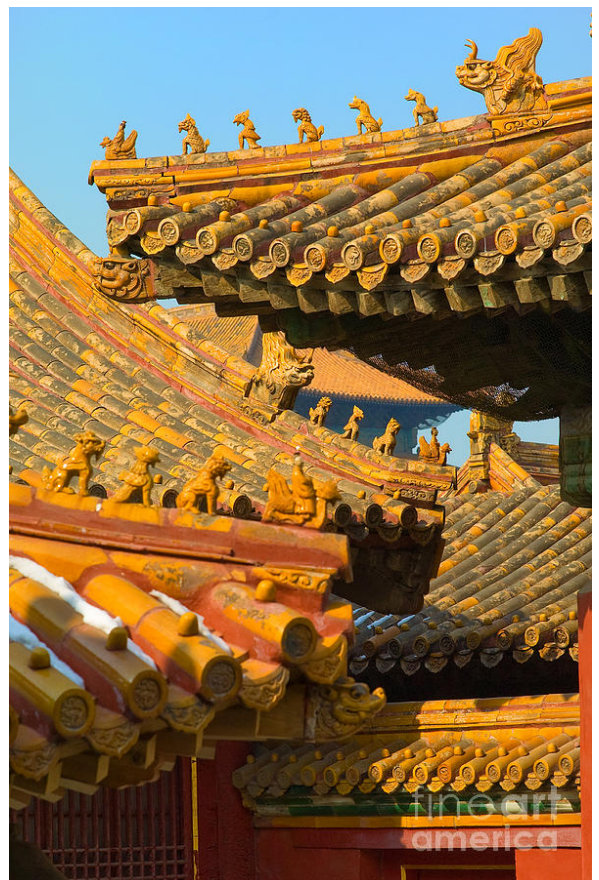
<sup>9</sup> *Pei-ching*, I mean, of course, in Wade-Giles. What was wrong with *Peking* as we used to write it? Peking Man. Peking Duck. Peking Opera. What's the problem?

<sup>10</sup> The Forbidden City is 2/3 again larger than Tienanmen Square. The southern entrance to the complex, with a huge portrait of Mao facing the square, appears on the national emblem, shown above on page 2.

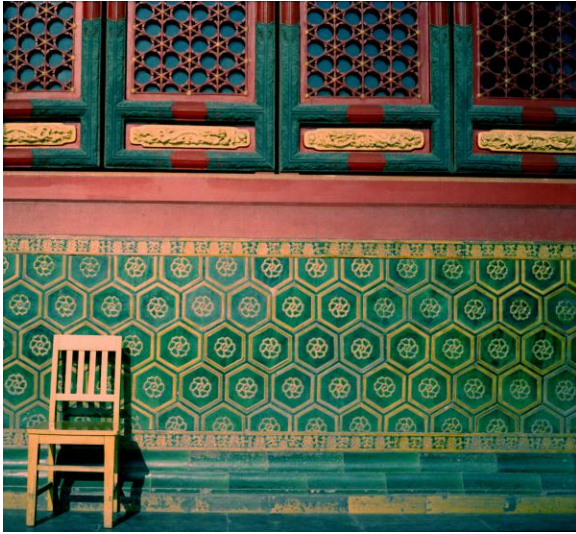
<sup>11</sup> The Forbidden City was constructed in 1406-20 under the Ming Dynasty, which gave way to the Ch'ing in 1644. The Revolution dates itself from 1911, but the last Ch'ing Emperor did not abdicate until 1912.

<sup>12</sup> Bernardo Bertolucci's famous film *The Last Emperor* (1987) was shot on location in the Forbidden City and offers dramatic and breathtakingly intimate views, including palace interiors, far beyond anything visitors can see.

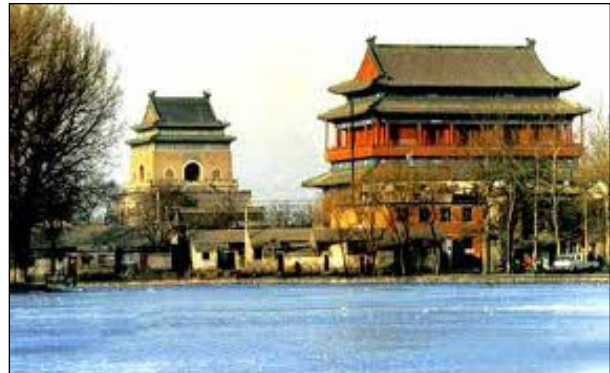








The next two days were devoted to assorted B-list Beijing tourism: the villas of the old Legation Quarter where the Europeans had their extraterritorial headquarters in the bad old days of the Unequal Treaties,<sup>13</sup> the elegant Ch'ing-style house of Soong Ching-Ling, widow of Sun Yat-Sen and a collaborator with the Communists,<sup>14</sup> the imposing Drum and Bell Towers (below right), the Marco Polo Bridge (site of the Japanese aggression against China in 1937), an observatory at the top of a fancy modern building where a dramatic panorama of Beijing could have been seen if there had been a lot less air pollution, the



<sup>13</sup> In the uprising known the Boxer Rebellion (1899-1901), the so-called Boxers (*I Ho Ch'uan*, *Yihetuan* in pinyin, meaning Religious Harmony Society), a peasant-based armed movement aimed at purging China of foreign influence and control, almost overthrew the Ch'ing Empire. An extended siege of Beijing in 1900 was only broken by the military intervention of foreign powers, including the United States. Above left is a scene of the American assault on the walls of Beijing in 1900; see [tinyurl.com/c3amc7p](http://tinyurl.com/c3amc7p) for more about this image. The Boxer Protocol of 1901 not only guaranteed foreign powers extraterritoriality in the areas assigned to them, and the right to station troops there for their defense, but allowed them to exclude Chinese from the whole district, which was felt as an acute humiliation.

<sup>14</sup> She was Honorary Chairman of the People's Republic for a few days before she died in 1981.



Imperial University and Library<sup>15</sup> (below left) where mandarins were trained under the old regime (scene from the museum below right), an enormous bookstore where I found a fabulous book of Chinese military insignia (almost 800 pages of color plates) going back to imperial days and including the Republican forces as well as the Communists,<sup>16</sup> and a vast Confucian temple and a vaster Buddhist temple (the Lama Temple) in the old style.



The Lama Temple (below left) was certainly magnificent. But as a Buddhist myself, I found the scene inside (there and in the other Buddhist temples in China) quite disturbing. People were bowing in four directions, they were lighting and waving around huge quantities of incense, they were kneeling and doing the *kowtow* prostration and leaving offerings of fruit and pre-packaged flowers before enormous statues of the Buddha, and acting in every way as if they were in the temple of a god. But this is of course a gross misunderstanding of the Buddha and his teaching. He was no god – indeed the very purpose of the vow to *take refuge in the Buddha* is to draw encouragement from the idea that people can bring about their own liberation.



Worshipping the Buddha is exactly the wrong avenue of approach.<sup>17</sup> For the first time I really understood the appalled reaction the leaders of the Reformation, like Zwingli



<sup>15</sup> Called the *Guozijian* (Kuo Tzu Chien).

<sup>16</sup> So what that it was all in Chinese?

<sup>17</sup> As the ninth century Zen master Li Chi famously said: if you meet the Buddha in the road, kill him!

and Calvin, felt inside Catholic churches. Get that incense out of here! Enough already with the ritual and the images! But I kept my opinions to myself.



Beijing is one of the largest cities in the world in population; it is huge and built up and jammed with traffic and



wide express roads (six Ring Roads and counting). I saw a lot of these, riding back and forth among the high-rises in my darkened car, but I also wanted to see some of the back streets, called *hutongs*, that the authorities have mostly torn down to make way for more high-rises and more superblocks. A few survive, and Mr. Li arranged a tour of one of them in a bicycle rickshaw (many of the hutong roads are too narrow for cars). See pictures above. The buildings were mostly pre-revolutionary, at their cores anyway.



The hutongs may be largely destroyed, but if you look for it there is a lot more Ch'ing era domestic architecture even along the large streets than I imagined there would be, ordinary houses and shops definitely of the era (see left), the occasional Ch'ing gateway or dragon behind walls. I expected just a few isolated monuments but not so – you can see the past hiding all over Beijing.<sup>18</sup>

Also the modern

stuff, really modern I mean, which I expected to be grim and banal, is in large measure quite good. There are boring boxes, of course, and Vegas-style vulgarities, but a lot of it incorporates elements of classical Chinese architecture – inclined roofs and pointed gables, pavilions on upper floors, entrance gates – in pleasing, meaningful and effective ways. And some of the



<sup>18</sup>

Why am I passing through the present busily hunting for the past? Discuss.



super-modern stuff that doesn't do this is also very very good – exercises in form and curve and innovative shape and surface a lot better than almost anything we have in America. This was a total surprise – I had expected unrelieved schlock and horror and vandalism, and found instead, or alongside it anyway, lots to like. Shown above right: the Wangjing Soho complex by Zaha Hadid (not yet completed).

And then it was time to leave for India. During my visit to Beijing I did not see much of ordinary life. It was only a stopover, after all; I was not aiming for the soul of China on this trip, just for as many major sights as I could see in a reasonable time. Although I drove through many miles of them, I did not wander the city streets – it was January and very cold, plus Beijing is huge and I was not staying in a residential neighborhood but in a commercial part of a town. There was little within reach I could have walked to even if I had the energy and were warm enough, and I didn't and wouldn't have been. I did the same in Shanghai on the way back, and don't regret it. But I don't rule out returning some day and seeing more of China in a less tightly focused way.

## VARANASI वाराणसी



So Mr. Li came for me one last time and drove me to the airport, and I flew first to Shanghai and then on to Delhi. As my plane to Varanasi did not leave until the next day, I had to spend the night in Delhi. But it was a thrill, as it always is, to land in India and smell the distinctive Indian smell, stirringly spicy even though I know it is made mostly of auto exhaust and the smoke from coal and dung fires. There are many reasons I should not like India (arms at left), and none of them seem to work.<sup>19</sup>

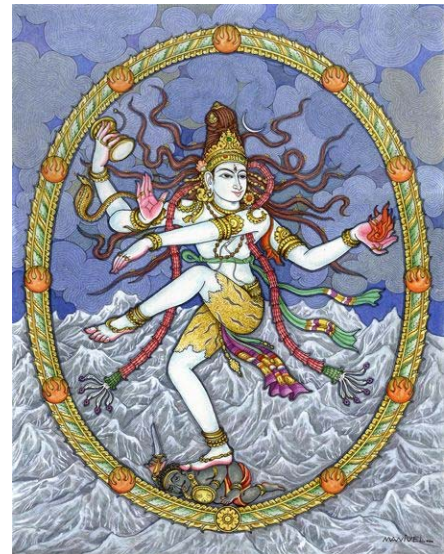
A driver met me at the international airport and took me to my Delhi hotel, which looked a lot better on the Internet than the dive it turned out to be, with a harsh neon light overhead in my room, and my only window looking out on the noisy lobby. But there was a shower, and the lobby quieted down, and anyway a person can put up with almost anything for one night. The restaurant looked very questionable, but *pooris* (thin sort-of-pitas cooked in oil so the centers puff up with steam), served with jam, seemed safe enough. The next day the same driver took me to the domestic airport and I flew out to

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<sup>19</sup> This deliberately unheraldic emblem, adopted when India became a republic in 1950, depicts the capital of a pillar the Emperor Ashoka Maurya (304-232 BCE) erected at Sarnath, near Varanasi, at the famous deer park where the Buddha preached for the first time (an event called *Turning the Wheel of the Dharma*). Ashoka made Buddhism the official religion of his empire, which included most of modern India. The Dharma Wheel below the feet of the middle lion is the central motif of the Indian flag.

Varanasi. I could just make out the peaks of the Himalayas in the distance, poking through the clouds.

Varanasi is one of the oldest cities in the world, and one of the holiest. It is the most important Hindu pilgrimage site, so sacred that a person fortunate enough to die there need never be reborn. At the beginning of the world Lord Shiva (right) cast an enormous pillar of light, called the *Jyotirlinga*, through the earth and so far up into the heavens that even Lord Brahma, Creator of the Universe, could not find the top of it, and Lord Vishnu, Sustainer of the Universe, could not find its bottom. Where the Jyotirlinga passed through the surface of the earth is where Varanasi came to be, and when Lord Shiva came down from His Himalayan fastness to live on the plain below He picked Varanasi as the fairest spot on which to settle, and lives there still.<sup>20</sup>



I took a taxi from the Varanasi airport to my hotel at Assi Ghat, at the southern end of town.<sup>21</sup> As usual this introductory cab ride was my reinitiation into India, and although I have done it many times by now, it is astonishing every time. The taxi dove as much as drove into streets crammed with cars and bicycles and motorcycles, and hundreds of people and animals (including the famous cows, and some Asian buffaloes, and flocks of little goats wearing sweaters), and oxcarts loaded with bales and vegetables and furniture and wood, and pushcarts and rickshaws, and everything that had a horn or a bell was honking or ringing it. My jaw dropped to its usual place at the top of my shoes. Every so often a *wow* rose unbidden to my lips. Although I am used to it, I never get used to it. I find reciting the Kali mantra<sup>22</sup> is a useful way to keep my head from actually exploding when I re-enter India.

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<sup>20</sup> For a comprehensive and absorbing treatment of the physical and spiritual history and nature of Varanasi, and some fascinating insights into its sacred geography, see *Banaras: City of Light* (1981) by the Harvard Indologist Diana L. Eck. *Benares* (whose name Eck spells in an eccentric variant) is the traditional English spelling of *Varanasi*, which means *between the Varuna and Assi Rivers* (tributaries of the Ganges). The religious name of the city is *Kashi*. To read about the iconographic elements of the image of Lord Shiva shown above, see [tinyurl.com/b9huop7](http://tinyurl.com/b9huop7).

<sup>21</sup> A *ghat* is a stepped access point leading down to the water. The Ganges riverfront in Varanasi is a series of ghats, all different, extending one after another for several miles. It is possible to walk from one end of the riverfront to the other along these ghats without entering the city streets. Assi Ghat is roughly where the Assi River, now a small choked rivulet, meets the Ganges.

<sup>22</sup> *Om Kali Durga Nemo Nemaha.*



I finally arrived at the Hotel Temple on Ganges, where I have stayed before. It is called that because the very pious swami who owns the place has a small Shiva temple right on the premises. The hotel is about halfway between a modern hotel for western tourists and an Indian-style hotel for Indians and backpackers. The rooms on the upper floors share a terrace overlooking the river, but there are no elevators (rooms are locked from the outside with massive padlocks in the Indian manner). The bathrooms have western facilities, sort of, but the hot water only works when the electricity is on, and it goes off several times a day. The food (strictly veg) is carefully prepared using only reverse-osmosis purified water, so it is safe to eat, but the Indian-style dishes are highly spiced (I lived mostly on macaroni and pancakes and French fries and banana lassis, and packaged cookies, and fruit (like bananas and oranges) that I could peel myself.<sup>23</sup> It even had wi-fi when the Internet connection was working (that too went off unpredictably). Moderately expensive by Indian standards, it was still cheaper than a Motel 6 back home. It was not Switzerland, or even the Holiday Express Dongzhimen, but it was a safe haven.



<sup>23</sup>

A suicide diet for a diabetic, but what else could I do? A *lassi* is a kind of yogurt smoothie. Beware the Indian lassi not made with bottled or purified water!

Above, top row, is the hotel (the lighter-colored building in the background), and its courtyard and the street beyond, giving some sense of the local chaos (there were cows in the courtyard too). Second row: left, the view from the terrace toward Assi Ghat; right, the river from the terrace, early morning.

A safe haven was good to have, because I need one in India. It is overwhelming, so much happening all at once, multiplicity and simultaneity, no filtering at all, everything right in your face. It is like standing in front of a firehose of experience, noise and smells and crowds and traffic. Animals everywhere; also pilgrim processions and rickshaws and boats and music and fires and bells and car horns and conch shells (sounds like a *shofar*) and and and and. Amplified music and gaudy imagery sacred and profane always waving and clamoring before the ear and eye. People flying kites, and not just children, either. Coal fires and wood fires and gas fires and fires from garbage – I saw a family huddling around a fire fed from a burning kite. And dung fires too, part of what gives India its sharp and oddly pleasing aroma. Children and women follow the cows, oxen and buffaloes around, pick up their wet steaming dung, pat it into shape, and stick it on a wall to dry. When it's dry they take it down and burn it. This goes on in the densest cities as well as in the countryside.



Walking around Varanasi (or riding in an open rickshaw), in the *ghats* and alleys and the main streets, feels not like tourism but like swimming in a viscous medium, against the current. Whatever direction you move in, there is a current flowing the other way. Corpses decked in flowers are paraded through the streets, headed for the burning ghats (selling the wood for the pyres is the main cremation profit center). A corpse is brought to the shore at one of the ghats for burning; the flowers are taken off the bier and at once a nearby cow starts eating them. A person could write a whole poem about that and still not add anything to the experienced moment.

The filth is unimaginable if you have never been to India; even if you have seen it, it is still barely imaginable. Big pools and piles of the excrement of large animals. Any waste land becomes a dump for rubbish and garbage and uncountable millions of plastic



bags, rooted through by goats and pi-dogs and bristly sharp-tusked feral pigs (right). Streams of sewage run along the sides of the streets. It is OK to throw orange peels in the street in India – there is no point in saving them for rubbish bins (no such thing anyway). What difference does one more piece of garbage make? It is like peeing in the ocean. India is not clean, and it is not comfortable, but I don't expect it to be. The firehose, and the acid-trip immediacy, is what I come here for. It is like taking LSD on a roller coaster – not restful, but definitely not boring.



As I had been to Varanasi before, my purpose this time was not tourism but just to experience being there. So I spent a good deal of time at Assi Ghat (left), the southern entrance to the riverfront, which as mentioned was right next to the hotel. It is a wide space with shrines and pavilions and places to sit. There was always a lot going on: boatloads of pilgrims, *saddhus* camped out in lean-tos made of

plastic sheets,<sup>24</sup> bathers, old men reading newspapers, goats and cows and mangy dogs, games of cricket, little stalls, people playing flutes or flying kites, shrines daubed with vermilion. Someone set up a speaker and tested it by blasting out OM SRI GANESHA, which I took as a good omen. I saw a Hindu saint who looked just like Jesus (to the life: long curly black hair, long curly black beard, drapy robe, twinkling eye, knowing air, ironic smile, electric charisma) addressing a crowd of admiring disciples in orange and red, gathered around him on white plastic chairs.<sup>25</sup>

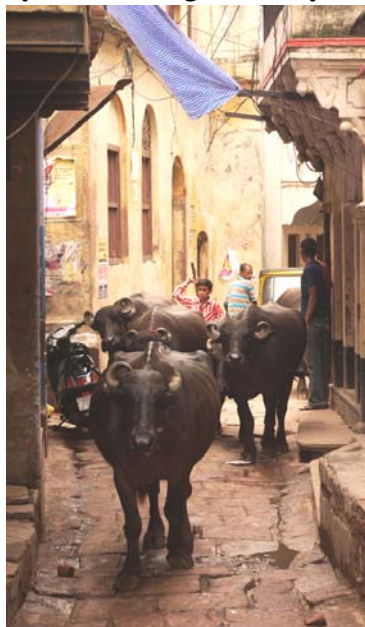


<sup>24</sup> *Saddhus* are wandering ascetics, often painted or covered in ashes. Although I didn't take the photo at right, I did see this man and many more like him.

<sup>25</sup> I would have taken a picture of him, but I found myself disinclined to take pictures in Varanasi at all. It seemed futile – you might as well try to take a snapshot of the entire world. Also it felt very intrusive to be a westerner with a camera, clicking away at the natives with their quaint dress and customs, as if I were at the zoo. At least half the pictures in this letter are from the Internet.

I set out to walk along the ghats from Assi to Dasaswamedh (the most populous and crowded of the them) near the *chowk* (main market street) and the Bangli Tola (main back street of the Old Town). It is only about two miles, and the last time I was in Varanasi I did it in one day. This time I did it in three segments, partly because I am older and creakier and less agile at clambering up and climbing down steps and edging around buffalo patties, and partly because I was in no hurry. Unlike many elegant European capitals, there are places to sit all over Varanasi, even on the ghats – ledges, steps, benches – and I stopped often to rest and watch the passing scene. Did I want a boat? No, thanks. Would I like to buy a *mala* (Hindu rosary) or some postcards or a foot massage or a pinwheel or some tea? No, thanks. Young men on the make and boys looking to practice English accost tourists all the time and are almost impossible to shoo away, but a finger to the lips suggested that I was in silent meditation (Gandhi was silent one day a week) and they usually respected that and left me more or less alone.

When I had done enough ghats for one day I made my way up the steps and through the dark slippery alleys to the road. Then I went back home in a rickshaw, an open carriage powered by a bicycle and even more exposed to the traffic madness than a taxi or a three-wheeled tuk-tuk (a sort of cross between a rickshaw and a motor-cycle, see right). My brother Adam prefers to take a



boat in Varanasi rather than a rickshaw, and he has a point, but the landing at Assi Ghat was kind of torn up and difficult to ascend, so I usually took the road. In addition to cows and oxen and buffaloes I passed goats, sheep, horses, pigs, chickens, rats, and countless desperate-looking mongrel dogs. No elephants or camels, although you see them on the street in other Indian cities, and hardly any cats; lots of birds, though, including kites and hawks and even eagles, and insolent Indian crows. I guess the chickens are for the Moslems, as eggs are not considered veg by the Hindus, but the pigs belong to no one. The goats do, though, which is why so many of them wear little sweaters, and the cows and buffaloes are someone's too, let out to forage for garbage during the day and then wander home. Some cows are tethered, and are fed household garbage; some wear diapers so as not to waste the useful dung. I cannot quite figure out what the buffaloes are for – they are used as plow and draft animals in the countryside, but not in the alleys of Varanasi. And yet whole herds of them are carefully led through the streets, bathed by hand in the river, and then led back again, to backyard enclosures.





I spent a lot of time every day walking around Varanasi, on one errand or another or just wandering. I went to the Hanuman temple, sacred to the monkey-god Lord Hanuman (left).<sup>26</sup> The temple compound is full of monkeys begging for food, sometimes quite aggressively. I found a Ganesh temple, founded by a Maratha king two hundred years before, hidden away in a chamber inside an enormous brick and stone bastion on the river front, accessible only by a tiny unmarked door up some

steps at the side. I spent a grim hour at Manikarnika Ghat, watching the cremations (right).<sup>27</sup> Coming out of my hotel one morning I heard men singing *bhajans* (Hindu hymns), followed the sound into a building (not exactly a temple but clearly filled with sacred purpose), and stayed for at least an hour, listening.<sup>28</sup>



I saw old men straining every muscle to push bulky high-piled handcarts through the streets. This kind of brute labor is seen everywhere in Varanasi and across India. It would never occur to anyone in America to try to move such heavy loads without an engine. I watched the *dhobi-wallahs* wash laundry in the filthy river and wring the water out by beating the cloth against stones. Then they laid the laundry out on the ghats to dry in the sun (left). You would think this would not work, but dhobi-wallahs get

clothes much cleaner than the fanciest French laundry. I spent a couple of mornings in the quiet neighborhood behind the hotel, away from the ghats and cars and the main traffic. It was hard to believe I was in the same city, no more than a few lanes away from noise

<sup>26</sup> Lord Hanuman is shown here in a scene from the *Ramayana*, carrying a mountain from the Himalayas to Sri Lanka so that a special herb growing on the mountainside can revive Lakshmana, one of the heroes in the war to rescue Rama's consort Sita, who has been kidnapped by Ravana, the demon king. Maybe you had to be there.

<sup>27</sup> It is not permitted to take pictures at a burning ghat, not that I would have anyway. I took this picture from a boat.

<sup>28</sup> I stayed well out of the way, but another westerner came in, walked up to the group, sat himself down right in the middle, and set up a microphone to capture the singing and take it away with him. This is the kind of greedy commodifying westerner I tried very hard not to be.

and madness. I went to a tailor recommended by my hotel, to have some clothes made (shirts and jackets and trousers), which I always do in India as it is hard to find clothes in America that fit me off the rack. With typical Indian surrealism his shop was called The Bed, even though no beds or bedclothes were made or sold there. He fixed me right up.<sup>29</sup> Beijing, where I had been only a few days before, began to seem like somewhere I had visited many years ago.

I hired a tuk-tuk to go through a herd of buffaloes, down a road so rough as to be almost impassible, and cross with bone-jarring violence a rattletrap pontoon bridge across the Ganges, on which steel plates had been randomly laid so they sometimes mitigated the washboard effect of the bridge timbers and sometimes didn't. The goal was to get to Ramnagar and the peeling crumbling old palace of the Maharajah of Benares, who lost his state even before Independence. Parts were open as a museum, where visitors could see the signed picture of Queen Elisabeth of the Belgians, given to the former maharajah when she stopped here in 1925 and still kept on view in a dusty cabinet. Also decayed moth-eaten tiger heads, and a rusty old Plymouth with a royal license plate, and flies everywhere, and hungry dogs, and people asleep. Pictured at right: the moldy former barracks of the maharajah's guard.



For a slice of life I didn't need to go any further than the courtyard in front of my hotel, pictured top right on page 13. It was made of half-built, half-ruined or demolished structures – part of a wall fallen at an angle, a line of unmortared bricks, new additions on a partly-collapsed second story, people flying kites from a roof, a whole happy-looking family living in the space below. (Every floor of every building in Varanasi displays asymmetry in one way or another.) Cows were tethered in the courtyard. The west wall had crumbled so it lay open to a side lane, but a passageway leading to Assi Ghat's main street (probably once a gatehouse when this courtyard was whole) now had an active tea stall inside. I hung out on a sort of ledge near the gatehouse; an elderly lady walked by often with a small child and waved to me; we became silent friends. An extended Indian family was spending the day on a neighboring roof – an old man dozed on a mat, women braided each other's hair, there was cooking and eating, a scene that could have been timeless except that one of the women was talking on a cell phone.

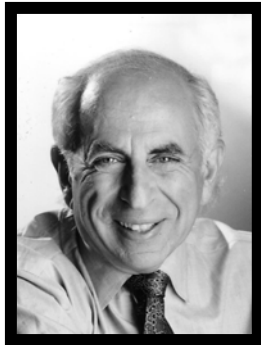
One of the things I planned to do in Varanasi was commit a portion of the ashes of my late beloved teacher Professor Bernard L. Segal to the holy river – perhaps, as tradition

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<sup>29</sup> Love is never having to sew your sari. (Extra credit 1970s cultural reference.)



holds, this will entitle his soul to liberation from rebirth.<sup>30</sup> I rented a motorboat (rather than a rowboat, as I wanted to continue on north of the bridge), with a boatman of course, and set out on the river. I chose a spot opposite Harishchandra Ghat for the ceremony. It is the southernmost of the burning ghats, active but not the most intense or scary of them. Harishchandra was a legendary Indian king famous for his honor, truthfulness and moral courage, and for the absolute reliability of his word, which made it seem like a suitable place to honor Bernie.



Bernie's daughter Amy had given me a portion of his ashes in a small cloth pouch. I opened the pouch and slowly poured the ashes into the water, and then threw in the bag as well, because a residue remained inside. I recited the Kali mantra while performing this ceremony; Kali, the consort of Shiva, is the



goddess of death, and consequently also of time and transformation. In addition to the ashes, I threw a coin into the river, as is customary in lieu of the priest's fee when a priest is not present.<sup>31</sup> And then, again following Hindu custom, I continued on down the river without looking back.

Engine off because going with the current, my boatman Deepak rowed me north, past all the ghats, beyond the bridge and the Varuna River where sacred Kashi ends. The ghats of Varanasi, so exuberantly varied in their architecture, so intensely and vividly used, taken together form one of the great sights of the world, more intricate and majestic than the Grand Canal in Venice, more granular and colorful than the New York skyline – like nothing else on earth, at least nothing I have ever seen or heard of. At the top of the next page is a picture of one small section of the Varanasi ghats – imagine this going on for three miles.

Once past the sacred city, the Ganges becomes just an Indian river, with the same gentle rural scenes that can be seen all over India. Small cultivated patches, buffaloes, little skiffs, fishermen pulling in their nets. Eat fish from the Ganges, where billions of gallons of untreated raw sewage, not to mention dead animals and incompletely cremated human bodies, have raised the pollution levels to thousands of times what health agencies allow for irrigation, let alone for drinking? Why not just shoot yourself? And yet they do fish

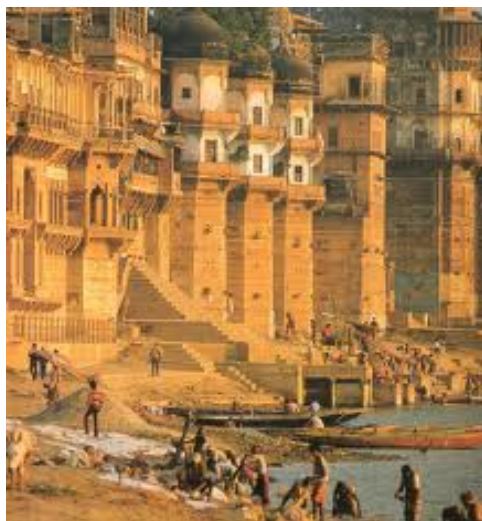
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<sup>30</sup> Think of it as a GET OUT OF JAIL FREE card. I performed the same service for Dr. Timothy Leary on my last visit to Varanasi in 2002.

<sup>31</sup> No conservative rabbi could be found anywhere in Varanasi.



there, and swim there, and bathe their babies there, and drink right from the river. Why they do not all die from it is a great mystery – in fact many do die, especially children, from dysentery and hepatitis and cholera and typhoid and parasites. Below are two views, taken from the water a mile or so apart.



It was unusually cold when I first got to Varanasi, but after it warmed up I slept with my windows open, and often awakened at about four



to hear the Song of Kashi, a kind of symphonic hum made of bhajans and temple bells and rickshaw bells, and amplified singing and drums and tambourines and conch shells and taxi horns, seasoned with the *adhan* (Moslem call to prayer) and with an underscoring of the antiphonal barking and baying of dogs all over the city. It was very musical, part howl and part thrum. Usually there are cow mooings, too, in Varanasi, but the cows are all asleep at that hour, at least until dawn when the crows and songbirds start.

After two weeks I had had about enough of India for the time being, although in a few months I knew I would start longing for it again. I was tired, and was coughing from the chronic respiratory infection I always get there (the Delhi cough, it is sometimes called, a product of heavy air pollution, and the coughing and sneezing going on all around me, and the luridly unsanitary conditions). I really needed to get home, so I took a taxi to the airport and flew to Shanghai.



## SHANGHAI 上海

So suddenly there I was in Shanghai, and it felt very strange, after leaving familiar but exhausting India, ready for home, to find myself in a chauffeured van in a city with which I had no connection at all, looking at stuff which while interesting didn't feel like what the doctor ordered for just this moment. I had had two culture shocks already on this trip, and to go back and do the first one again felt both excessive and retrograde. But there I was anyway, prepared to make the best of it – I had wanted to see the sights of Shanghai, and I had four days to do it.



The most famous sight in Shanghai is the *Bund*, meaning the long row of massive buildings built on the west bank of the Huangpu River in an eclectic mixture of European styles, especially Beaux-Arts and Art Deco.<sup>32</sup> Some of the buildings are notable in themselves, but the most notable thing about them is

their European appearance, a function of the European domination of Chinese trade in the 19th and early 20th centuries. The Bund is too big to get a good picture of it all at once, but shown above are two of the main buildings: the Customs House (left) and the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank building.

I explored the extravagantly decorated lobbies of many of these buildings, with their carvings and mosaics and sculptured details. One of the most beautiful and impressive was Sassoon House (now the Fairmont Peace Hotel), completed in 1929. Below left is a metal plaque from Sassoon House, one of four depicting what were then contemporary (but are now period) Shanghai scenes; below right is an Art Deco panel from the reception area. While I was on the Bund I took a cruise on the Huangpu, on an excursion boat named the *Wu Liang Ye* (Five-Grain Liquor), which offered a fine view of the local shipping as well as the modern architecture on the other bank. Call me a reactionary,<sup>33</sup> but with few exceptions the modern stuff did not seem nearly as good or as memorable as the European-style buildings of the colonialist exploiters.

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<sup>32</sup> The word *Bund* is not the German for *union*, but is actually of Hindi and ultimately Persian origin, meaning a river embankment. Its use in Shanghai is said to have come from the Sassoon family, whose worldwide business interests were headquartered on the *bunds* of Baghdad. Unlike the German word it so confusingly resembles, the Shanghai Bund rhymes with *fund*.

<sup>33</sup> OK, you're a reactionary. You're a right-deviationist too.



Most of the next few days were taken up with tourism, going as in Beijing from one sight to another in the van. Among the most interesting of the sights was the former synagogue (below left), now a museum. Although there were Jews in Shanghai before Hitler, the availability of the Jewish community as a refugee center in the 1930s and 40s is what gave it historical importance. Also worth remembering: Chou En-Lai's house in the French Legation quarter, actually the house of the Communist Party cadre in Shanghai, which the Kuomintang (Chiang Kai-shek's party) allowed them to occupy for a time around 1946-7, before the final showdown.<sup>34</sup> The offices and quarters are Spartan enough for the most dedicated communists. Shown below right: the upstairs sun porch. There is also a lovely garden, and visitors can see Chou's old Buick.



There were lots of other sights: Sun Yat-Sen's house; the very room and table at which the Holy Chinese Communist Party (which has helped folks out ever so much whether they wanted to be helped or not) was created in 1921; the Temple of the Jade Buddha

<sup>34</sup> The KMT spied on the Communists with binoculars from the house across the street.



(where the men's room was filled with a cloud of incense so thick I could not see or even breathe, maybe a stash of the stuff had caught on fire somehow); another gigantic bookstore where I found four more heraldic and insignia books, all in Chinese; another observatory tower I couldn't see out of because of the air pollution; a noodle shop with delicious chicken soup; a Taoist temple in a remnant of the old Ming Dynasty city wall, dedicated to Kuan Yu, the so-called Red-Faced General, who died in 219 CE and became a god; the Long Hua Temple, done in the distinctively antique style of the Sung Dynasty (most of its buildings do not actually date from the Sung period, but are imperial-era restorations); the gleaming new Maglev train,<sup>35</sup> which whisked me from an inconvenient city location out to the airport and back at speeds up to 258 mph; and the immense and fabulous History Museum, where scenes of Shanghai history were reproduced in uncannily natural-looking, sometimes life-sized dioramas. Below, three views of the Long Hua Temple: pagoda, temple structure, Buddha image.



Most of this going back and forth among city destinations was unavoidably done on major thoroughfares. Everything seemed new and clean after India.<sup>36</sup> Shanghai is full of modern high-rises; unlike in Beijing, most of them are pretty mediocre. But it is the quantity that amazes. Shanghai from a car on a main road looks a lot like an American city, where the downtown center sprouts high-rises and post-modern towers like gigantic spores. But while American cities usually have just one node of these towers, Shanghai has node after node – it is as if Houston were laid next to Detroit next to Denver, like one generic American downtown after another. I did try, though, to get off the main roads when I could and explore the back alleys, where I found markets full of the most

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<sup>35</sup> Magnetic levitation. The train can achieve high speeds because it uses the mutually repelling force of similarly charged magnets to suspend the train above the track, thus eliminating friction. See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maglev>.

<sup>36</sup> It was a shock to see traffic obeying a traffic cop – in India drivers pay no attention to the police, and the police, even the traffic police, pay no attention to the traffic.

delicious-looking lobsters and shrimps and intriguing organ meats and tempting sausages and crunchy salads. The markets looked clean as a whistle, compared to India.<sup>37</sup> But I am so careful about avoiding bad food in third world countries that I didn't have any of it, even though it looked completely wholesome.<sup>38</sup> Below, three scenes from the back streets, and also for good measure one of the History Museum dioramas.



As always on a foreign trip, I made it a point to get out of the city. Among the classic tourist spots are what are called *water villages* – small towns built on canals like Venice,

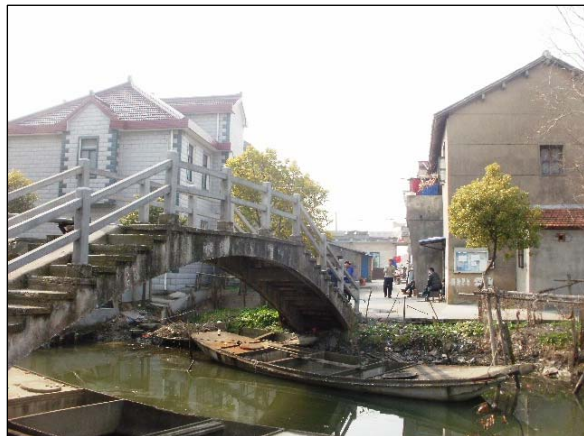
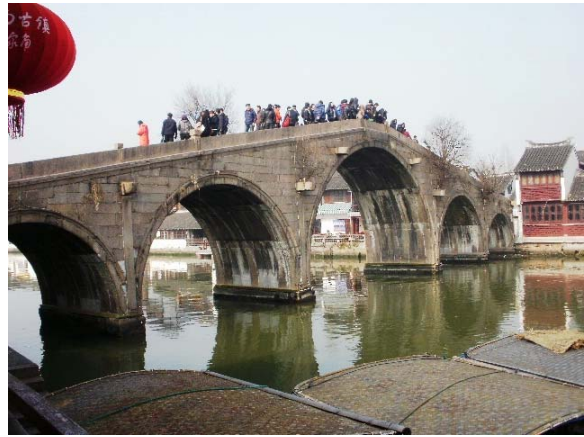
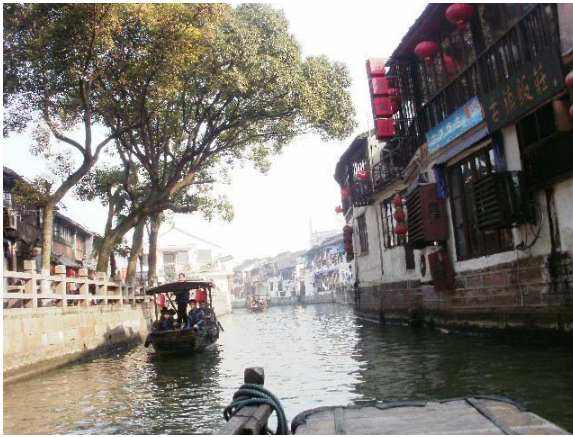
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<sup>37</sup> Of course, compared to India the inside of my refrigerator looks clean too.

<sup>38</sup> I did find a fabulous Chinese takeout place, in the real Chinese style where you queue up outside and they chop it up for you, roast pork, yum. I went back for more the next day – this let me have picnic dinners in my hotel room and skip the inefficient overpriced noisy hotel dining room completely.



where people get around on boats or walk across bridges. I arranged to go to one of these, and it felt a lot like Provincetown or Fisherman's Wharf – a picturesque place so overrun with souvenir shops and restaurants that it was hardly possible to see what the original attraction was. Below top row: two scenes from the “village” of Zhu Jia Jiao. But I insisted on seeing some real countryside, and forced my driver and guide to take me out into the boondocks, or as close to the boondocks as we could get given that Shanghai, being the largest city in the world, has already eaten most of its boondocks. We met a lady pushing a cart with farm tools on it and she invited us into her compound – chickens, goats, even a fish pond. Below bottom row: two scenes from this semi-rural interlude. The two villages look remarkably similar, except that one is made of an older fabric tarted up for tourists, and the other is nothing special and just what it seems to be.



And finally, I saw the finish line in the distance. I staggered and lurched toward it, waiting for the snap of the tape as I pushed myself over, the roar of the crowd, the jumpy hand-held camera, the score (by John Williams) building to crescendo – and at last the seat belt and the long flight home, where I took a deep breath, washed the red dust of India out of my skin and beard and clothes, slept for a few days, and began writing this long, long letter to you.

David

February 2013

