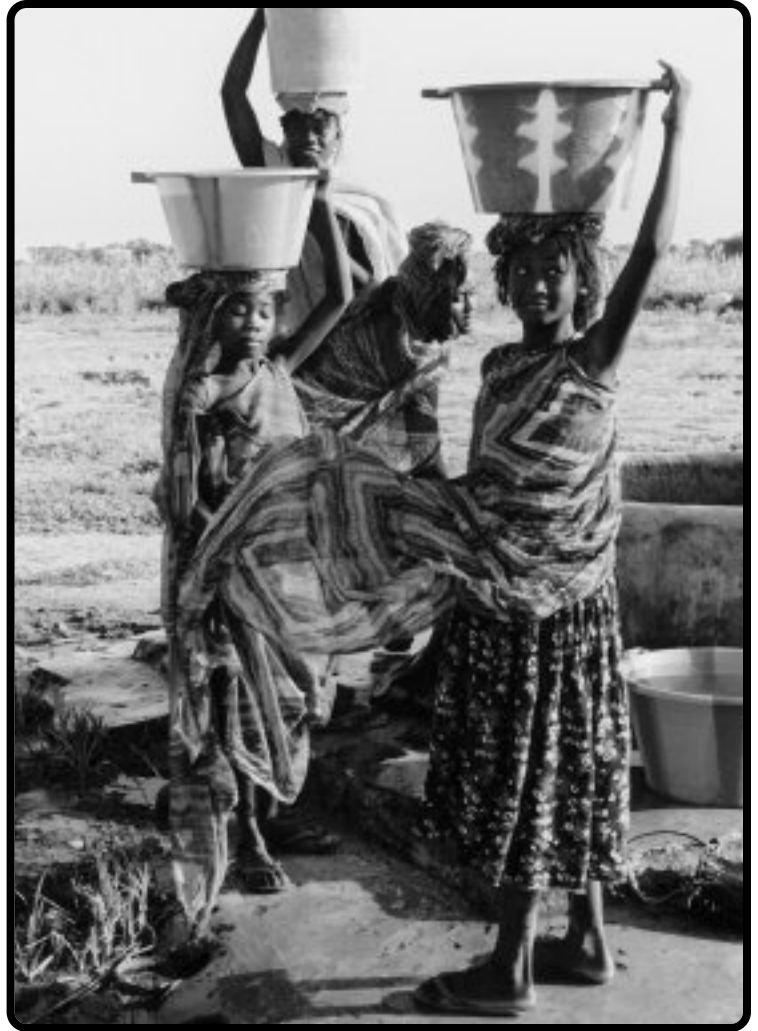


Uncommon Journeys

Peace Corps
Adventures
Across Cultures



Paul D. Coverdell World Wise Schools

Standing Out in the Crowd

R U N N I N G

by Peter Hessler

Peace Corps Volunteer, China (1996–1998)

(Excerpted from Chapter Three in *River Town: Two Years on the Yangtze*)

In the mornings I often ran to the summit of Raise the Flag Mountain. As I ran, I studied the propaganda signs along the route, although at the beginning there wasn't much about them that was recognizable. There were three signs on the road out to the mountain, and to me they looked like this:

建设精神 Cultu 更新生育观念
控制 People Mouth 增长, 促进社会进步
教育 Is 立 Country 基础

I finished my runs back in the center of campus, not far from the teaching building, where a stone wall served as a backdrop for an inscription of three-foot-high characters:

教书育 People,
管理育 People,
服务育 People,
环境育 People

That was how Chinese appeared in my first few months. I arrived in Fuling able to recog-



nize about 40 characters, all of them simple: people, middle, country, above, below, long, man, woman. There hadn't been time for more; the Peace Corps had given us an intensive course during our two months of training in Chengdu, but the emphasis was on learning enough spoken Mandarin to function. We had to study written Chinese on our own, and until I got to Fuling I simply hadn't had enough time.

I came to Sichuan because I wanted to teach, but I also had two other motivations: I thought the experience would make me a better writer, and I wanted to learn Chinese. These were very clear goals, but the way to achieve them was much less obvious. I hoped the writing would take care of itself—I would keep my eyes open and take notes, and eventually, when I felt I was ready, I would start to write. But Chinese was a different matter altogether and I had never undertaken something like that before.

That was one reason I had decided to come to China with the Peace Corps, because I knew they would try to teach me the language. Their Chengdu training course had been excellent; the classes were small and the teachers experienced, and it had been easy to make progress. In Fuling, though, language study was my own affair. The Peace Corps would pay for tutors, but I had to find them myself, and I had to decide which textbooks I would use and how I would structure my studies. It was a daunting task—essentially, I had to figure out how to learn Chinese.

For the first few weeks, Dean Fu searched for tutors who could help Adam* and me. He was as lost as we were—he had never known a foreigner who was trying to learn the language, and I suspected that secretly he felt the project was hopeless. *Waiguoren* couldn't learn Chinese—everyone in Fuling knew that. Our students found it hilarious that we even tried. They would ask me to speak a little Chinese, or write a character or two, and then they would laugh at my efforts. At first this didn't bother me, but quickly it became annoying. They thought I was

*Adam Meier, Hessler's Peace Corps housemate and fellow-teacher

VOCABULARY

Waiguoren: [wɪ-GOOR-en] Chinese for foreigner, or someone from out of the country

dabbling in the language when in fact I was serious: I knew that studying Chinese was one of the most important things I could do in Fuling. So much depended on knowing the language—my friendships, my ability to function in the city, my understanding of the place.

I also wanted to learn Chinese out of stubbornness, because as a *waiguoren* you weren't expected to do that. Such low expectations had a long tradition; even as late as the early 1800s it had been illegal for a Chinese to teach the language to foreigners, and a number of Chinese were imprisoned and even executed for tutoring young Englishmen. This bit of history fascinated me: How many languages have been sacred and forbidden to outsiders? Certainly, those laws had been changed more than a century ago, but China was still ambivalent about opening to the outside world and language was still at the heart of this issue. In good conscience I could not live there for two years and not learn how to speak Chinese. To me, this was as important as fulfilling my obligations as a teacher.

But this need wasn't nearly as obvious to everybody else. Dean Fu took a long time finding tutors, and perhaps he was hoping that we'd forget about it. We didn't need Chinese to teach, after all, and we already knew enough to buy groceries and eat at local restaurants. That should be adequate, people figured. In some respects, we were seen as English-teaching machines, or perhaps farm animals—expensive and skittish draft horses that taught literature and culture. We were given cadres' apartments, and we had our own Changhong-brand color televisions with remote. Our bedrooms were air-conditioned. Each of us had a good kitchen and two beautiful balconies. Our students were obedient and respectful. It didn't matter that, even as we were given all of these things, the leaders also gave quiet instructions to our colleagues and students that they should avoid associating with us outside of class. *Waiguoren* were risky, especially with regard to politics, and in any case we didn't need close friends in the college. We could teach during the day and return to our comfortable cages at night, and, if we

needed friendship, we always had each other. They even gave us telephones so we could call Peace Corps Volunteers who lived in other parts of Sichuan.

Some of the more insightful students sensed that this did not make a full life. In his journal, Soddy wrote me a short note, politely addressed in the third person:

Pete and Adam come to our college to teach our English without pay. We are thankful for this behavior. But we are worried about Pete and Adam's lives. For example: Pete and Adam know little Chinese, so they can't watch Chinese TV programmes. I think your lives are difficult. I want to know how you spend your spare time.

It was a good question. My teaching and preparation time rarely took much more than 30 hours a week. I ran in the mornings, and sometimes I went for walks in the hills. Adam and I played basketball and threw the Frisbee. I wrote on my computer. I planned other diversions for the future—subjects I wanted to cover in class, possible travel destinations. Mostly, though, I knew that there was plenty of exploring to be done in the city, but at the beginning this was the hardest place of all to open up.

Downtown Fuling looked good from my balcony. Often I'd gaze across the Wu River at the maze of streets and stairways, listening to the distant hum of daily life, and I'd think about the mysteries that were hidden in the river town. I wanted to investigate all of it—I wanted to go down to the docks and watch the boats; I wanted to talk with the stick-stick soldiers; I wanted to explore the network of tangled staircases that ran through the old part of town. I longed to figure out how the city worked and what the people thought, especially since no foreigner had done this before. It wasn't like living in Beijing or Shanghai, where there were plenty of *waiguoren* who had discovered what the city had to offer. As far as foreigners were concerned, Fuling was our city—or it would be once we figured it out.

VOCABULARY

Ambivalent: [am-BIV-uh-lent] Having mixed feelings about someone or something

Skittish: Easily excitable or made nervous

Cadre: a member of a small leadership group

Stick-stick soldier: A porter or laborer in China who carries heavy loads in freight yards or construction sites on short, bamboo poles (sticks) tied together with rope

But once I got there it didn't look so good. Partly this was because of the dirt and noise; the main city of Fuling was an unbelievably loud and polluted place. There wasn't as much heavy industry as in other parts of China, but there were a few good-sized factories that spewed smoke and dust into the air. The power plant on the banks of the Wu River burned coal, as did all of the countless small restaurants that lined the city's streets, and automobile emissions were poorly regulated. In winter the air was particularly dirty, but even in summer it was bad. If I went to town and blew my nose, the tissue was streaked with black grease. This made me think about how the air was affecting my lungs, and for a while I wondered what could be done about this. Finally I decided to stop looking at tissues after I blew my nose.

Noise was even more impressive. Most of it came from car horns, and it is difficult to explain how constant this sound was. I can start by saying: Drivers in Fuling honked a lot. There weren't a great number of cars, but there were enough, and they were always passing each other in a mad rush to get to wherever they were going. Most of them were cabs, and virtually every cabby in Fuling had rewired his horn so it was triggered by a contact point at the tip of the gearshift. They did this for convenience; because of the hills, drivers shifted gears frequently, and with their hand on the stick it was possible to touch the contact point ever so slightly and the horn would sound. They honked at other cars, and they honked at pedestrians. They honked whenever they passed somebody, or whenever they were being passed themselves. They honked when nobody was passing but somebody might be considering it, or when the road was empty and there was nobody to pass but the thought of passing or being passed had just passed through the driver's mind. Just like that, an unthinking reflex: The driver honked. They did it so often that they didn't even feel the contact point beneath their fingers, and the other drivers and pedestrians were so familiar with the sound that they essentially didn't hear it. Nobody reacted to horns anymore; they served no purpose. A honk in Fuling

was like the tree falling in the forest—for all intents and purposes it was silent.

But at the beginning Adam and I heard it. For the first few weeks we often complained about the honking and the noise, the same way we complained about blowing our noses and seeing the tissue turn black. But the simple truth was that you could do nothing about either the noise or the pollution, which meant that they could either become very important and very annoying, or they could become not important at all. For sanity's sake we took the second option, like the locals, and soon we learned to talk about other things.

I realized this in early November, when a college friend of mine named Scott Kramer came to visit. For five years he had lived in Manhattan, and yet the noise in Fuling absolutely stunned him; he heard every horn, every shout, every blurted announcement from every loudspeaker. When he left, we took a cab from the college to the docks, and Kramer, who worked on Wall Street and had a mathematical turn of mind, counted the honks as our driver sped through the city. It was a 15-minute ride and the driver touched his contact point 566 times. It came to 37 honks per minute.

If Kramer hadn't been counting, I wouldn't have noticed, and I realized that I had stopped hearing the horns long ago, just like everybody else in town. In fact, Kramer was the only person in the whole city who heard them, which explained why he was so overwhelmed. The entire city had been honking at him for a week.

For me it wasn't the same, and after a month or so the discomforts of Fuling weren't important enough to deter me from going into town. Despite the noise and the pollution, it was still a fascinating place, and I still wanted to explore its corners and learn its secrets. But the language was an enormous problem, and in the beginning it made the city frustrating and even frightening.

VOCABULARY

Blurt: To speak suddenly, often without stopping to think first

Mandarin Chinese has a reputation as a difficult language—some experts say it takes four times as long to learn as Spanish or French—and its characters and tones are particularly challenging to a Westerner, because they are completely different from the way our languages are structured. In Sichuan, things are further complicated by the provincial dialect, which is distinct enough that a Chinese outsider has trouble understanding the locals in a place like Fuling. The variations between Mandarin and Sichuanese are significant: In addition to some differences in vocabulary, Sichuanese slurs the Mandarin reflexive sounds—*sh* becomes *s*, *zh* becomes *z*—and certain consonants are reversed, so that the average person in Sichuan confuses *n* and *l*, and *h* and *f*. A word like “Hunan” becomes “Fulan.” The Sichuanese tonal range is also shorter, and most significant, two of the four Mandarin tones are reversed in Sichuan. If Mandarin is your starting point, it seems that the entire language has been flattened and turned upside down.

In addition, Sichuan is an enormous province where lack of development, particularly with regard to road and rail links, has resulted in vast regional differences. The Chengdu dialect is distinct from that of Chongqing, which is also different from that of Leshan, and so on. The town of Fengdu is less than 30 miles downstream from Fuling, and yet occasionally the residents of these places have difficulty understanding each other. At a Fuling restaurant, if you want the dish known as *hundun* in Mandarin—translated in English as “wonton”—you have to ask for *chaoshou*, but if you go another 30 miles to Fengdu you’ll have to call it *baomian*. Or, more accurately, *baomin*, because the folks in Fengdu slur the *ian* sounds.

The result is a hell of a mess that I hadn’t expected. I came to China hoping to learn Chinese, but quickly I realized there was no such thing. “Chinese” was whatever it took to communicate with the person you happened to be talking with, and this changed dramatically depending on background and education level. Educated people usually could speak Mandarin, especially if they were from the younger

generation—the walls of our classrooms had enormous signs that commanded: “Use Mandarin!” But the vast majority of Fuling’s population was uneducated and functioned only in the dialect. It made going to town a frustrating experience, because even the simplest conversations were difficult, and it also made my goal of learning Chinese seem impossible: I couldn’t imagine learning both Mandarin and Sichuanese in two years. In fact, all I needed to do was improve my Mandarin, which would naturally enable me to handle the dialect, but in the early months I didn’t know that. It seemed that I was in hopelessly over my head, and every trip into town was a reminder of that failure.

And Fuling was a frightening place because the people had seen so few outsiders. If I ate at a restaurant or bought something from a store, a crowd would quickly gather, often as many as 30 people spilling out into the street. Most of the attention was innocent curiosity, but it made the embarrassment of my bad Chinese all the worse—I’d try to communicate with the owner, and people would laugh and talk among themselves, and in my nervousness I would speak even worse Mandarin. When I walked down the street, people constantly turned and shouted at me. Often they screamed *waiguoren* or *laowai*, both of which simply meant “foreigner.” Again, these phrases often weren’t intentionally insulting, but intentions mattered less and less with every day that these words were screamed at me. Another favorite was “hello,” a meaningless, mocking version of the word that was strung out into a long “hah-loooo!” This word was so closely associated with foreigners that sometimes the people used it instead of *waiguoren*—they’d say, “Look, here come two hellos!” And often in Fuling they shouted other less innocent terms—*yangguizi*, or “foreign devil”; *da bizi*, “big nose”—although it wasn’t until later that I understood what these phrases meant.

The stresses piled up every time I went into town: the confusion and embarrassment of the language, the shouts and stares, the mocking calls. It was even worse for Adam, who was tall and blond; at least I had

unintelligible, but the one in the center of campus had changed slightly:

Teaching 育 People, 管理育 People,
服务育 People, Environment 育 People

Our tutors were Kong Ming and Liao Mei, and we came to know them as Teacher Kong and Teacher Liao. They taught in the Chinese department, and neither of them spoke any English. They had never known a *waiguoren* before. Dean Fu had been unable to find tutors who spoke English, and at last we told him it wasn't important. We wanted to get started and we knew that Chinese department teachers had good Mandarin.

Teacher Kong was a short man who wore glasses and smelled of Magnificent Sound cigarettes. He was 32 years old, and he taught ancient Chinese literature. By Chinese standards he was slightly fat, which meant that by American standards he was slightly thin. He smiled easily. He was from the countryside of Fengdu, which was famous for its ghosts—legend said that spirits went to Fengdu after death.

Teacher Liao was a very thin woman with long black hair and a reserved manner. She was 27 years old, and she taught modern Chinese. She smiled less than Teacher Kong. Our students, who also had some courses in the Chinese department, considered Teacher Liao to be one of their better instructors. She was from the central Sichuan city of Zigong, which was famous for its salt. Every city and small town in Sichuan claimed to be famous for something. Fuling was famous for the hot pickled mustard tuber that was cured along the banks of the rivers.

That was essentially everything we knew about Teachers Kong and Liao for months. We also knew about their Mandarin, which was very clear except for a slight Sichuanese tendency to confuse the *n* and *l* sounds. Other than that we knew nothing. To us they were like

Chinese-teaching machines, or perhaps farm animals—a sort of inexpensive and bored draft horse that corrected bad tones. And to them we were very stupid *waiguoren* from a country whose crude tongue had no tones at all.

My first tutorial with Teacher Liao was scheduled for two hours, but I lasted less than 60 minutes. I went home with my head reeling—had a human being ever compressed more wrongness into a single hour? Everything was wrong—tones, grammar, vocabulary, initial sounds. She would ask me a question and I would try to process the language to respond, but before I could speak she was answering it herself. She spoke clearly, of course, and it was also true that during that hour not a word of English had been spoken. That was what I wanted, after all—a Chinese tutor. But I couldn't imagine doing that for seven hours a week and maintaining my sanity, and I looked at the pathetic stack of flashcards on my desk and thought: This is hopeless.

For a solid month it looked that way. I was too self-absorbed to even imagine what it was like from the other side, but later I realized that it was even worse for my teachers. They weren't under threat of execution for teaching the sacred tones to a *waiguoren*—that law, at least, had been changed since Qing Dynasty days. But theirs wasn't an enviable job. First of all, we underpaid them. This wasn't intentional; Adam and I had been given wrong information about the standard rate for tutors. Teachers Kong and Liao, of course, were far too polite to set us straight, which meant that for the entire first year they worked for two-thirds of what they deserved. Even worse, though, they were underpaid for seven weekly hours of boredom and frustration. The lessons in the book were simple—taking a train, going to a restaurant—and yet I botched everything, and they had no idea how to steer me in the right direction. How do you teach somebody to speak Chinese? How do you take your knowledge of ancient poetry and use it to help a *waiguoren* master something as basic as the third tone?

We were all lost, and that failure seemed to be the extent of our relationship. Other Peace Corps Volunteers had tutors who spoke English, so at least they could chat together after class. They heard about their tutors' families; they ate dinner together; they became friends. My tutors didn't seem like real people—it was months before I learned that Teacher Liao was married and that Teacher Kong had a son. Here the language problem was compounded by the fact that at the beginning they were somewhat *cagey* and distant; they had never known a *waiguoren* before, and they weren't at all certain how to approach us.

Chinese teaching styles are also significantly different from Western methods, which made my tutorials even more frustrating. In China, a teacher is absolutely respected without question, and the teacher–student relationship tends to be formal. The teacher teaches and is right, and the student studies and is wrong. But this isn't our tradition in America, as my own students noticed. I encouraged informality in our classes, and if a student was wrong I pointed out what she had done right and praised her for making a good effort. To them, this praise was meaningless. What was the point of that? If a student was wrong, she needed to be corrected without any quibbling or softening—that was the Chinese way.

I couldn't teach like that, and it was even harder to play the role of a student. Actually, this became worse after my Chinese classes started to feel productive, which happened more quickly than I expected. The characters in my book's lessons had always been elusive, odd-shaped scratches of black that drifted in and out of my head, calling up arbitrary allusions that were misleading. They were pictures rather than words: I would look at 大 and think of Kmart, and the 27th radical—冫 reminded me of the letter B, or perhaps an ax hanging on a wall.

大 looked like a man doing jumping jacks. 点 was a marching spider carrying a flag across the page. I stared so long at those odd figures that I dreamed about them—they swarmed in my head and I awoke vaguely disturbed and missing home.

VOCABULARY

Cagey: Shrewd; sneaky; crafty

But at a certain point it was as if some of the scratchings stood up straight and looked me in the eye, and the fanciful associations started slipping away. Suddenly they became words; they had meaning. Of course, it didn't happen all at once, and it was work that did it—I was studying madly in an effort to make the classes less miserable. But I was so busy that I hardly had time to realize that progress was being made.

One day after more than a month of classes, I read aloud a paragraph from my book, recognizing all of the characters smoothly except for one. I sat back and started to register the achievement: I was actually reading Chinese. The language was starting to make sense. But before this sense of satisfaction was half formed, Teacher Liao said, "Budui!"

It meant, literally, "Not correct." You could also translate it as no, wrong, nope, uh-uh. Flatly and clearly incorrect. There were many Chinese words that I didn't know, but I knew that one well.

A voice in my head whined: All the rest of them were right; isn't that worth something? But for Teacher Liao it didn't work like that. If one character was wrong it was simply *budui*.

"What's this word?" I asked, pointing at the character I had missed.

"Zhe—the *zhe* in *zhejiang*."

"Third tone?"

"Fourth tone."

I breathed deeply and read the section again, and this time I did it perfectly. That was a victory—I turned to Teacher Liao and my eyes said (or at least I imagined them saying): How do you like me now? But Teacher Liao's eyes were glazed with boredom and she said, "Read the next one." They were, after all, simple paragraphs. Any schoolchild could handle them.

It was the Chinese way. Success was expected and failure criticized and promptly corrected. You were right or you were *budui*; there was no

middle ground. As I became bolder with the language I started experimenting with new words and new structures, and this was good but it was also a risk. I would finish a series of sentences using vocabulary that I knew Teacher Liao didn't expect me to know, and I would swear that I could see her flinch with unwilling admiration. And yet she would say, "*Budui!*" and correct the part that was wrong.

I grew to hate *budui*: Its sound mocked me. There was a harshness to it; the *bu* was a rising tone and the *dui* dropped abruptly, building like my confidence and then collapsing all at once. And it bothered me all the more because I knew that Teacher Liao was only telling the truth: Virtually everything I did with the language was *budui*. I was an adult, and as an adult I should be able to accept criticism where it was needed. But that wasn't the American way; I was accustomed to having my ego soothed; I wanted to be praised for my effort. I didn't mind criticism as long as it was candy-coated. I was caught in the same trap that I had heard about from some of my Chinese-American friends, who as children went to school and became accustomed to the American system of gentle correction, only to return home and hear their Chinese-minded parents say, simply, *budui*. That single B on the report card matters much more than the string of A's that surrounds it. Keep working; you haven't achieved anything yet.

And so I studied. I was frustrated but I was also stubborn; I was determined to show Teacher Liao that I was *dui*. Virtually all of my spare time went to studying Chinese, and the stack of flashcards on my desk grew rapidly. By the first week in November I knew 300 characters. I had no clear idea what I was shooting for—I had a vague goal of reading a newspaper, which would require between two and three thousand. But mostly I knew that I needed more knowledge than I had, and I needed it quickly.

In the mornings I ran to the summit of Raise the Flag Mountain, charging hard up the steps, my lungs burning high above the Yangtze. The effort was satisfying—it was challenging but uncomplicated, and

at the finish I could look down on the city and see where I had gone. It was different from the work of learning Chinese, which had no clear endpoint and gave me more frustration than satisfaction.

There was a skill to running, and in some ways it was the only skill I had in Fuling. Everybody else seemed to have found something that he or she was good at: The owner of the dumpling restaurant made dumplings, the shoeshine woman shined shoes, the stick-stick soldiers carried loads on their leather shoulders. It was less clear what my purpose was—I was a teacher, and that job was satisfying and clearly defined, but it disappeared once I left campus. Most people in town only saw my failures, the inevitable misunderstandings and botched conversations.

And they always watched carefully. The attention was so intense that in public I often became clumsily self-conscious, which was exacerbated by my suddenly becoming bigger than average. In America I was considered small at five feet nine inches, but now for the first time in my life I stood out in crowds. I bumped my head on bus doorways; I squeezed awkwardly behind miniature restaurant tables. I was like Alice in Wonderland, eating the currant-seed cakes and finding her world turned upside down.

Mostly I longed to find something that I could do well. This was part of why the simple routines of city life fascinated me; I could watch a stick-stick soldier or a restaurant cook with incredible intensity, simply because these people were good at what they did. There was a touch of voyeurism in my attention, at least in the sense that I watched the people work with all the voyeur's impotent envy. There were many days when I would have liked nothing more than to have had a simple skill that I could do over and over again, as long as I did it well.

Running was repetitive in this way, and it was also an escape. If I ran on the roads, cars honked at me, people laughed and shouted, and sometimes a young man would try to impress his friends by chasing after me. But crowds couldn't gather around, and none of the young

VOCABULARY

Voyeurism: [voy-ER-ihz-em] Watching other people, especially secretly

men followed for long. I ran alone, and in a crowded country that sort of solitude was worth something. There was nobody in the city who could catch me.

Usually I ran in the hills behind campus, following the small roads and footpaths that wound around Raise the Flag Mountain. I ran past old Daoist shrines, and atop the narrow walls of the rice paddies, and I followed the stone steps that led to the mountain's summit. I liked running past the ancient stone tombs that overlooked the rivers, and I liked seeing the peasants at work. On my runs I watched them harvest the rice crop, and thresh the yellow stalks, and I saw them plant the winter wheat and tend their vegetables. I first learned the agricultural patterns by watching the workers as I ran, and I studied the shape of the mountain by feeling it beneath my legs.

The peasants found it strange that I ran in the hills, and they always stared when I charged past, but they never shouted or laughed. As a rule they were the most polite people you could ever hope to meet, and in any case they had more important things to do with their energy than scream at a *waiguoren*. And perhaps they had an innate respect for physical effort, even when they didn't see the point.

The air in the countryside was often bad, because the Yangtze winds blew the city's pollution across the Wu River, and I knew that running did my health more harm than good. But it kept my mind steady, because the fields were quiet and peaceful and the activity felt the same as it always had. That old well-known feeling—the catch in my chest, the strain in my legs—connected all the places where I had lived, Missouri and Princeton and Oxford and Fuling. While I ran through the hills, my thoughts swung fluidly between these times and places; I remembered running along the old Missouri-Kansas-Texas railroad pathway, and I recalled the rapeseed blooming gold on Boar's Hill, and the old shaded bridge of Prettybrook. As the months slipped past I realized that even these Sichuan hills, with their strange tombs and terraces, were starting to feel like home.

But still the signs on the way to Raise the Flag Mountain were foreign, and even as they slowly became familiar they reminded me how far I still had to go:

Build **精神** Culture, New Give Birth **观念**
 Population Increase, **促进** Society **进步**
 Education Is a Powerful Country's **基础**

During that semester there was a volatility to the written language; it constantly shifted in my eyes, and each day the shapes became something other than what they had been before. Spoken Chinese was also starting to settle in my ears, and soon I could make simple conversation with the owners of the restaurants where I ate. The same slow shift was also happening with regard to my tutors, who finally started to change from tone machines into real people.

As this happened, I began to sense an edge to Teacher Liao that I couldn't quite figure out. It wasn't simply her tendency to say *budui*; she seemed slightly uncomfortable around both Adam and me, and there were moments where I almost thought she disliked us (which, given that we didn't pay her enough, would have been understandable). Later, I would come to recognize other reasons for this discomfort, but during that first semester I only sensed that there were complications in our relationship.

★ ★ ★

... Classes were simpler with Teacher Kong, who alternated weeks with Teacher Liao. He was slightly less inclined to say *budui*, partly because he had a lazy streak, but also because the struggles of that semester were slowly teaching us to recognize each other as people. Eventually he would become my first real Chinese friend—the first friend who

saw me strictly in Chinese. And even in those early months, before we developed a true friendship, I could see his interest growing. He sometimes asked me about America, within the limits of my vocabulary, and I sensed there were many questions he would ask once he had the chance. Certainly I had a few of my own that were waiting for the language to catch up with my thoughts.

We had classes in my dining room, where the morning light was warm after the sun rose above the shoulder of Raise the Flag Mountain. We drank tea while we studied—jasmine flower tea, the tiny dried petals unfolding like blooming lilies on the surface of the hot water. Before he drank, Teacher Kong blew softly over the cup, so the loose leaves and flowers floated to the far side, and this was something else I learned in those classes. If he sipped a leaf by mistake, he turned and spat lightly on the floor. I learned that, too—I liked living in a cadre’s apartment and still being able to spit on the floor.

★ ★ ★

... [One day] I came back from a run and realized that the sign in the center of campus had become completely intelligible. This was a moment I had always looked forward to—from the beginning, I had seen that string of characters as a benchmark, and I traced my progress in the way those words became meaningful. And one day all of it finally made sense:

**Teaching Educates the People,
Administration Educates the People,
Service Educates the People,
Environment Educates the People**

I stopped and took a long look. I read the sign again, waiting for the sense of achievement. But nothing was there—it was simply propaganda, the same sort of trite phrase that could be found in the students’ textbooks or on billboards all across the city. I would react the same

VOCABULARY

Propaganda: Ideas or information spread specifically to promote one idea or point of view exclusively or to discredit another one

Trite: Unoriginal, stale

way when the other messages on the way to Raise the Flag Mountain came into focus:

**Construct a Spiritual Civilization,
Replace the Old Concept of Giving Birth**

**Controlling Population Growth
Promotes Social Development**

**Education Is the Foundation
Upon Which a Powerful Nation Is Built**

All of it was the same old cant. Every time one of the signs became intelligible, I felt very little of the satisfaction that I had once imagined. Instead I heard Teacher Liao's voice in my head: Read the next one. You haven't achieved anything yet. And so I kept writing the characters over and over again at my desk, gazing out my window at the city.

★ ★ ★

... On the second day of January, the city of Fuling held a road race in the center of town. It was the Twenty-second Annual Long Race to Welcome Spring, and all of the city's schools and *danwei*, or work units, competed against each other. Two weeks before the race, Dean Fu asked if I would run on the college team....

"You must understand," he said, smiling uncomfortably. "There will be many peasants and uneducated people. They don't know anything about sportsmanship, and perhaps some of them will be rough. Also, in 21 years they have never had a foreigner in the long race. They welcome you to participate, but I think it will be different from in America."

I could see that Dean Fu thought it would be simpler if I didn't run, and I knew he was right.... All of the difficult parts of my life were already public; there wasn't any reason to seek out more crowds.

But there are no referees in running, and it is not a contact sport. There would be crowds but I figured that at least I would be moving. It couldn't be much different from a race in America—and even if it was, I was curious to see what it was like, at least once. I told Dean Fu that I wanted to participate.

He explained that every runner had to have a physical exam, and a week before the race I visited a doctor in the college infirmary. It was a low, tile-roofed building next to the croquet court, one of the old structures on campus that remained from the pre-Cultural Revolution days when the college had been a high school.

The doctor checked my pulse and blood pressure. After each test he smiled and told me that I was very healthy, and I thanked him. Then he led me to a side room where a dirty white box-shaped instrument hung on the wall. Dean Fu said, "Now you will have a chest X-ray."

I stopped at the entrance of the room. "I don't want to have a chest X-ray," I said.

"It's no problem," said Dean Fu, smiling. "It's very safe."

"I don't want a chest X-ray," I said again, and I looked at the dirty box and thought: Especially I don't want *this* chest X-ray. "Why is it necessary?"

"Everybody in the race must have one. To make sure they are healthy."

"Everybody?" I asked, and he nodded. I asked how many people would be running.

"More than two thousand and five hundred."

"And all of them must have a chest X-ray before they can run?"

"Yes," he said. "That is the rule. It is very safe."

It struck me as a ludicrous notion—that a city with a per capita income of about 40 American dollars a month would require a chest

VOCABULARY

Cant: meaningless talk or communication

X-ray from each of the 2,500 participants in a four-kilometer road race. I had my suspicions about what was really happening: Some administrator in the college was probably worried about me dropping dead in the middle of the race, and they wanted to cover their tracks. It was always Dean Fu's job to convey such commands to the *waiguoren*, and occasionally he served as a filter as much as a translator. It was a lousy job and I always felt sorry for him when I sensed that this was happening, but there was nothing to do about it except to find a tactful solution.

We were at an impasse. Dean Fu could see that I was serious about refusing to have an X-ray, and I knew that he couldn't simply back down and say that the procedure wasn't in fact required. We stood there for a moment, the doctor watching expectantly. Finally I told Dean Fu that I would go to my apartment and call the Peace Corps office in Chengdu.

I tried to call but the medical officer wasn't in. I sat in my bedroom for 10 minutes, reading a book, and then I returned to the infirmary.

"I'm very sorry," I said, "but the Peace Corps told me I can't have a chest X-ray. I don't know what we can do about this."

"It's no problem," Dean Fu said. "I just talked to some of the people in charge of the race, and they said it is fine if you do not have an X-ray. They will give you an exception because you are a foreigner."

I thanked him and apologized for the hassle, and he apologized back. Both of us shook the doctor's hand. He walked us to the door smiling and waving as we left.

There was no scheduled time for the race to start. The runners assembled in a disorderly mob at the starting area, and at nine o'clock the cadres began their speeches. The race would begin whenever the speeches finished, and the officials droned on and on while the starting line repeatedly broke and surged. A small section would make a

false start and the rest of the crowd would react, and then the police would call everybody back. I tried to jog in place to stay warm, fighting with my elbows to keep position.

The starting line was spread across a massive construction site where a new public park was being built. The entire left side of the line headed directly toward a six-foot drop—a small, crumbling cliff. On the far right was a narrow dirt road that provided the only safe exit for the runners, but it was so close to the start—less than 40 yards—that it would be impossible for the crowd to funnel in such a short distance. And even for the runners who did make it safely, the course immediately took a 90-degree turn that would claim more victims.

Without question it was the most dangerous starting arrangement I had ever seen in a lifetime of racing. I was tempted to pull out, partly for my safety but mostly because I wanted to be able to watch the disaster from the perspective of a spectator. Rob Schmitz, another Peace Corps Volunteer, was visiting us that week, and he and Adam took their cameras and gleefully waited across the road.

The college team had staked out a spot on the right side of the line, directly in front of the exit. Most of them were physical education students, and usually we were the best team in the race, along with the Taiji medicine factory. All of us squeezed together, waiting for the start. It was a cool morning and the winter smog hung low over the city.

Five minutes passed, then 10. The cadres kept talking, and the police were having trouble holding everybody back. Either they were going to start the race or it was going to start itself, and finally one of the cadres must have realized this. He fired the gun.

It was China. Chaos, noise, adrenaline; fear and surprise and excitement; a mass of bodies, everybody yelling, horns sounding, the earth pounding; all of us running madly, arms outstretched to clear room; legs pumping, dashing, sprinting, trying to keep the back kick low to

avoid being tripped; some runners shouting as they stumbled over the cliff, others skidding around the first turn, dodging the few unfortunate ones who fell and skidded below the rush of legs. The seconds slid past, each moment an eternity of concentration and effort. We flew down the street in a wild, charging mob, hit the second turn, and headed west on Xinghua Road.

The course began to climb uphill. The scene was still shaky with adrenaline but I realized that the eternity of the start was over, and that I was no longer a part of the starting mob. After the beginning of a race there is always that moment of disengagement, when the euphoria of being part of something massive is over and you realize that you are alone, and you have your own race to run.

I slowed down. Suddenly I felt tired; the adrenaline evaporated and everything slipped into focus. I checked myself—no scrapes, no bruises; no memory of exactly how I made it safely off the line. I glanced around me. I was in the lead pack, a group of perhaps 50, and the others were also settling in after the rush of the start. We were climbing steadily now and the pace was slowing. I felt my legs come back to me, the numb excitement replaced by the rhythm of a long, hard run—steady steady steady steady, up on my toes as the hill steepened. Police cars rolled their lights in front of the pack. Far ahead, groups of school kids were trying to cheat, jumping into the race with a lead of a hundred yards, but the cops pulled them out as they drove past.

The entire first half was uphill, and by the time I took the lead, perhaps two minutes into the race, I could see that the others were finished. It was a varied field—college students and *danwei* workers and a few athletes who clearly could have been good runners with more training—but all of them were done. Quickly I slipped ahead.

To lead any big race is a strange feeling. People speak of the loneliness of running, but I've always felt that the sport is lonely only in the races, and especially when the pack breaks and you find yourself alone

in front. In the pack you usually feel some solidarity with the other athletes, even though you are still competing, but in front there are no illusions. That's when the race becomes a chase—one man against the rest of the field—and I've always felt that this is the loneliest feeling in the world. And it's even lonelier when you are the only foreigner in a field of more than 2,000, and all along the course spectators are calling out, "*Waiguoren, waiguoren, waiguoren.*" Out-of-country person, out-of-country person, out-of-country person.

I looked back. Behind me I could see the rest of the field—an endless stream of people, a black-haired mob. The main pace car had slowed and I was following a few strides behind its flashing lights. I looked back again, so I would remember the strangeness of the scene. The hill was steep now, climbing toward the pointed tower of the Monument to the Revolutionary Martyrs. The street was lined with spectators and I could hear the wave of surprise as I passed; they were talking excitedly and exclaiming with amazement: "*Waiguoren, waiguoren, waiguoren.*"

And I thought: Not today. If you're looking for people who are out of their country, out of place, out of step, out of shape, awkward, clumsy; if that's what you're looking for, look back there. Look for the ones who started too fast, or the men who have smoked too many Magnificent Sound cigarettes, or the people who are wearing too many clothes and are choking with heat and sweat. Don't look at me—I've done this for many years in many places, and always it has been exactly the same. There are no referees, no language barriers, no complicated rules of etiquette. All you do is run.

By the turnaround I had more than 30 seconds on the next runner, and I took it easy from there. The second half was all downhill, and because it was an out-and-back course I passed the rest of the field. The ones who weren't too exhausted joined in the chorus: "*Waiguoren, waiguoren, waiguoren.*" But it didn't bother me a bit, because for those four kilometers I felt completely at home.

For the victory I won two pairs of polyester sports uniforms, both too small, with the characters for Fuling City inscribed proudly on the chest. I also received a certificate testifying that “Comrade He Wei,” my Chinese name, had won the Twenty-second Annual Long Race to Welcome Spring. The race organizers awarded me 20 yuan, and the college gave me five for participating on its team. They also gave me one and a half yuan for undergoing the medical exam, which made me wonder how much I could have made if I had agreed to the chest X-ray. All told I cleared 26¹/₂ yuan, which paid for two weeks of noodle lunches.

I was on the local TV news for the following week, and the next day’s paper featured a front-page story about the race. They reported that an American teacher from Missouri named H. Essler had participated, and there was a detailed description of the way I had warmed up before the start. They reported the excitement of the college representatives when I finished in first place, and they quoted one of the other top finishers, a young man from the medicine factory who said, “If this race had been right after my military training, I definitely would have beaten that foreigner.” The end of the article read:

The competition also succeeded in establishing patriotism in sports. When our reporter asked, “What are your thoughts about a waiguoren finishing first?” a Trade School student named Xu Chengbo said: “To have a sports competition in a Chinese area and allow a waiguoren to take first place, I feel very ashamed. This gives us a wake-up call: Our students and adults need to improve the quality of their bodies, because if we improve our strength, we can be victorious!”... A Southwest Military School teacher said: “The waiguoren took the initiative, and that sort of spirit deserves to be studied. Only if we plunge into developing our bodies, and have more diligent and scientific training, will we see the day when we achieve the championship!”

It wasn't exactly the reaction I had hoped for, although I wasn't surprised. There was a great deal of patriotism in Fuling, and sports always made these feelings particularly intense. ... Sometimes I wondered if it had been a bad idea to run in the race. A few of my Peace Corps friends thought that at least I shouldn't have tried to win. But I liked running races hard, just like many others in the competition, and I saw no reason to treat the people in Fuling like children. I wanted them to know that *waiguoren* were living in their city, and I wanted them to see that despite all my struggles with the language, there was at least one thing I could do well. If they reacted with shame, that was unfortunate, but perhaps when they grew to know me better it would be different. I figured it was a good sign that my certificate read, "Comrade He Wei."

A few days after the race, I had class with Teacher Liao, who beamed when we started the lesson.

"I saw on the department message board that you won the long race in Fuling!" she said. "I hadn't heard—why didn't you tell me?"

"It's not important," I said. "In fact, I didn't run very fast at all."

"Yes, you did!" she said, doubly pleased by my false modesty, which followed the appropriate Chinese custom. "That's a very big race—in all of Fuling City, you are the fastest person!"

"There are probably better athletes who didn't participate," I said. "And you know, Wang Junxia is still faster than me."

Wang Junxia was the Chinese woman distance runner who had recently won gold and silver medals in the Atlanta Olympics, and this reference made Teacher Liao even happier. She praised me again, and finally we settled down to a chapter on how to say goodbye. Either I did unusually well or she was in a particularly forgiving mood; on that day she hardly said *budui* at all.

Resilience Above All

MUSIC IN THE FIELDS

by Carrie Young

Peace Corps Volunteer, Mali (2001–2002)

Mali, in West Africa, one of the world's poorest countries, has riches that remain a secret to many people of the Western world. These riches are the kind that we all seek, but few are lucky enough to find. They are the secrets to happiness, the keys to laughter and music. And these riches can be found on the most difficult of days, among those who live some of the most difficult lives on our planet.

It is May in Mali, and the rains have not yet come. It is over 115 degrees Fahrenheit and my friend looks up at the sky. We have all been watching the sky for weeks. The spreading desert and the receding grasses in Mali are causing the rains to arrive later and later every year. My friend looks up once again and says to me with utter acceptance: "We think that it may be Allah's will that we die now."

The next day we watch and wait. Nothing matters at this point except that the rains come. Everyone is ready to begin plowing the fields, but nothing can be done until it rains. We continue to watch and wait.

The sun is a third of the way across the arc of the sky. The air is parched. The dusty, dry red earth of the fields is quiet.

A faint wind slips by me. I look up yet again toward the hills in the direction of the wind and I see a few clouds beginning to blow over them. There is a huge break in the tension of the village as the clouds move in.

The wind begins to blow strong. Bright fabrics blow out from the bodies of the women, dancing and slapping in the air. We all lean against the winds and head for cover, except



for the children, who run frantically toward the giant mango trees. Small mangoes fall from the upper branches and the kids race to collect them in their shirts.

Soon darkness covers us and the rain begins to fall, frantic from the wait. It feels as if the energy of the weeks before has built up in these clouds—as if they had been forced to hold their breath for weeks and now it has all broken loose. The wind blows branches out of the trees and the rain falls with the fury of a hurricane.

After about an hour, the rain calms and continues falling throughout the night.

The village will live.

The next day the men begin working acres of fields with steer and an antiquated plow. The women wake early to prepare lunch. It is made from the corn of the year before. They put the lunch in bowls and balance the bowls on their heads; most have a baby tied with a cloth to their back. They head for the fields. They will do this nearly every day for the next four to five months. Wake early, prepare lunch over a fire, and walk barefoot or in flip-flops to the fields with a child on their back.

When the fields are ready to plant, the men and women of the village will take a tool made of a wooden handle with a flattened piece of metal attached to the end and they will bend over the earth using only this simple tool for hours and hours every day.

Within this daily work to sustain life itself, there is a peace, a connection, and a tradition of laughter and music that makes the Malian culture one of happiness and richness.

There are five main family groups that make up my village. Mine is the Wattara family. Each Sunday all of the men in the family work in the same field together. They line up and work side by side, efficiently moving down the rows. The women prepare lunch, care for the chil-

VOCABULARY

Parched: Dry, arid

Frantically: With great agitation and frenzy; madly; crazily

Antiquated: Extremely old; out of date

dren, and also labor in the fields on these days.

These Sundays are unique, however, for more than just the joint work effort. These are the days of the music in the fields. The music comes from the hands of those women who have helped to raise this village. The grandmothers, little old women who are as tough as diamonds, come out to the fields on these days; in their hands they hold instruments made of gourds and beans, leather and wood. With these simple instruments they create music that contains their souls. Music that feels of their laughter and their losses, the years of hard labor they have done in these same fields. Years of bending, years of calluses, pounding grains and corn, carrying babies, cooking over a fire, carrying water and wood. Years of being a little girl, a woman, and a now a grandmother.

These are the women who send out the laughter and the music in the fields. These are the women who hold the secrets of the village, the secrets that the world is desperately in search of. The secret of how to make music out of toil and how to laugh in the face of hardship and death.

These are the rich people of our world.