



freeborn - free based - free be - #1138

5 September 999

Took a bumbling 375 bus, the metal door swinging and slamming with passengers grasping the seats and the seams of the fabricated walls, just to stay upright. Passed a park on the way. With the last of the warm weather, all the three-*kuai* barbers are on the streets. These barbers, both men and women, are named after the price of their haircuts. Three *kuai* is the equivalent of twenty-five pence. In their white coats with rusty scissors, they tend to congregate in the public parks and along quieter sidestreets, eager to trim, shave and style anyone walking by. The barbers are a friendly bunch and often offer a decent customer a bit of fortune-telling or political gossip, in addition to the cut. Like the much respected city birds of Beijing, they cluster in groups, and are a cheap, efficient way of finding out what people are talking about.

27 September 999

Spent this day a feverish wreck, having lived less than a month in Beijing. I must have eaten something. Shivering and thinking about the first day of the graduate level English classes I taught today. My students run the gamut, but most are in their early twenties, spindly and often with poor eyes. ("Too much studying!" they quip). They are ferociously smart. Figures vary, but most estimates show that each student beat quite a few thousand fellow applicants for their spot at Tsinghua University. The primary basis for acceptance is a single test score.

Been listening to my neighbours rattle around in their own apartments. The walls of our building are fantastically thin. If anyone has sex, all of us know.

Looks don't vary much. Short, choppy haircuts are a favourite among the boys. Girls wear modest, baggy clothing and absolutely no make-up. The occasional low-cut shirt emerges, though it remains tucked away under a huge, cinched cardigan. Undergraduate classes are mostly crowded with young girls who majored in English at this technical university. Postgraduate classes are the opposite, consisting of middle-aged men doing their advanced degree work in chemical engineering or nuclear physics. All are dead serious about their intended professions.

Of course, no one had purchased the book. So I bantered about sourdough bread and cable cars in San Francisco. I watched them grizzle when I brought up Taiwan and entertained them with the thought that I am well beneath them in age and stature, having never studied nuclear science at Tsinghua, as so many of them do. Despite my apparent goodwill on the first day, the heat of the Gobi raged across my forehead and the sweat, which began as a trickle, became a rivulet down my back. The throat was a seared fish, and the nose is a waterfall.

Tonight the television in the local dumpling restaurant was blaring an official happy for the fiftieth anniversary production of the Communist Revolution, replete with tulle fabrics, pirouettes and many singing solos. The back of the stage was bedecked with huge red banners, extolling the glories of the past fifty years. Six, heavily smoking men inside the restaurant took turns between staring uninterested at the screen and at their food, juicy bits of dough and meat between chopsticks worn raw. There are some exhibits to be seen in town, photo propaganda complimenting the CCP hurrah, which now engulfs the country.

8 October 999

Outside, Beijing throws a fit in a dust storm, the desert dust mixing with the soot from cylindrical coal blocks and chopstick wrappers. All of it kicked up and swirled into a highly breathable mess. Been listening to my neighbours rattle around in their own apartments. The walls of our building are fantastically thin. If anyone has sex, all of us know.

3 November 999

One of my undergraduate students writes about love on the internet: "With the development of computer technology, everything in our daily life is increasingly related to the internet. We are now used to reading news, watching TV programmes, speculating in stocks and even shopping via the internet. For us university students, the internet is also a

fantastic way to communicate.

"Thus, cyber love comes into being. Many people think of cyber love as being so romantic, so true. It seems that more and more people are for it or taking part in it. However, I want to say something different.

"The internet can produce the chance for two hearts to meet, in pure net, and there's little truth. We can talk freely in the chat rooms or [on bulletin boards] or send email to others. This kind of non-face to face communication provides a huge space for imagination. For there's no scruple, shy boys can be talkative, lively girls can be cool ones on the net.

"Consequently, it's possible for an emotionalist to fall in love with a cyber friend without knowing his real age, occupation or even sexual distinction. This is the cheating of the internet. Words can't express the full definition of love, nor can chatting. Perhaps sometimes it really moves you, but it is just a fleeting feeling. What's more, when someone says 'I love you,' maybe he is saying the same thing to another or two."

It's obvious that the internet is having a revolutionary effect on the way young students here interact. It may not seem like a big deal in the west, where people pour out their emotions and deepest regrets as a

matter of course, but in China, people are severely oppressed, as much socially as they are politically.

18 November 1999

I can't stand the way life, in its general, slow, loping way, has moved on. The season has changed completely. The sun is lying low, setting early. Heavy padded jackets are replacing light throws. Flowers, and most of the good fruit, are becoming impossible to find. Winter is setting in. I am a silent sight of destruction, having taught whole lessons on the auctioning of John Wilkes Booth's house. Inadvertently, I gave the class a handout I didn't read beforehand and I had to come up with an extemporaneous four hours on Booth, Lincoln's assassin. That was hell. I've also lectured on the evils of smoking, and have little or no recognition of what I've been teaching once I leave the classroom – not a single idea of what I have done. I am a talking siphon, a walking talking mannequin.

"I remember the tanks, I have heard as many as 500 people died that night, is it true?"

Foreign teachers, despite their embarrassingly high salaries as compared to those of mainland Chinese teachers, are considered pariahs on the university campus. Occasionally we are looked upon as the oddly taller folk – "How tall are your parents? Your grandparents?!!" –

who should be at the disposal of our Chinese teaching contemporaries for free work, extra grading or quick midnight phone calls to explain a choice English phrase or a confusing grammatical structure. I am constantly prodded to teach huge, hulking groups of faculty children. "Because you have the right look for them – blond hair, blue eyes. You are like our own, live cartoon!" as one female professor whispered ecstatically to me. At £163 a month to the average professor's £125, the conventional wisdom seems to stand that those foreign teachers should be eager to jump in where all others have scuttled out.

Sometimes local teachers chortle "foreign devil" when you walk by. However, Tsinghua is a delightful campus, orderly rows of trees, punctual platters of steaming dumplings served up in a cluttered alley inside the South Gate. In the wintertime, the huge fishing pond by the hospital freezes over. A thick coat of snow lies quietly on top for a few days, until the top is tested, brushed off and made ready for a twenty-four-hour rotation of ice skaters.

30 November 1999

A graduate student from the Computer Science Department discusses the preparation of his favourite dish, listing a few key words first:

- 1) shrimp
- 2) struggle
- 3) beg

- 4) nose
- 5) stab
- 6) digestive system
- 7) revenge
- 8) spoils of war

He writes, "I like cooking and eating shrimp more than commenting on their taste. Seeing the live shrimps struggling in boiled water, I am quite satisfied. Although they beg piteously, I will not pay any attention to them, neither will I show them any mercy. After adding a spoonful of salt, I transfer the shrimps to a plate. I can feel they are at their last gasp. I am so eager, but I forget they are sinister. One of them stabs my finger with its sharp nose. Angrily seeing my now bloody finger, I understand they are revenging me. I pull down its head ferociously and peel off its hard skin. The fresh and delicate muscle looks attractive. I know I can enjoy these spoils of war. Unfortunately, I suddenly feel something wrong with my teeth. Oh, it's the digestive system of the shrimp."

12 December 1999

Riding the bus the other day, a man boarded with a large, metal statue of Mao. The seemingly indestructible statue was still wrapped with a bit of paper around an extended arm holding the red book. Very carefully, however, the man had blindfolded Mao, perfectly covering

his eyes and face, with red fabric, which had been tied in a neat knot at the back of the statue's head. The man and I stared at each other, and then mutually at the statue for the entire ride. Twenty minutes later, he got off. No one else seemed to take notice. Was it his protest? Their disinterest? Everyone's tacit approval? Simple protection of the goods? Perhaps an uneven muddle of all.

4 January 2000

One of my students on the coming of a sexual revolution in China: "When manpower is freed and everybody seeks a better life, the country is going to get rich. Adam Smith said something similar to that before, and the U.S., Germany, Japan, as well as China during the Tang Dynasty, can prove it. It was not until after Freud's theory on sex that we begin to take a new perspective on the freeing of manpower.

"The question is, how to free manpower in China? Nowadays, China has comparatively little oppression among the classes, ethnic groups, religions, genders or races. Yet individual initiatives are still in bondage. The possible answer I give is: sex, which unlike other kinds of oppressions in which some oppress others, has oppressed the whole nation. In my point of view Chinese, especially the Chinese men, are lacking something. And only that very something can give them real potency, prowess and prudence to face up to the gap, build up their ambitions, and devote themselves into making China a great, if not the best, unit-

ed nation. The Chinese government has already changed its viewpoint from frugality to encouragement, allowing people to spend money, as the planned economy shifts to a market one. Why shouldn't the view on sex be changed?

"In fact, it has tried to change several times. I understand from Snow's *Red Star over China* that the Chinese Communist Party was in nature a group of reformists of Chinese traditions, as well as social rebels. However, due to the deeply branded indoctrination of Confucius, notions on sex and the lesser-educated grassroots, even Chairman Mao's Cultural Revolution, was misled into chaos. In the Eighties, after the enlightenment by poetry, sex symbols in Cui Jian's rock music blasted in Beijing University's canteen ... were spread all over. In the Nineties, movies did this. In 2000 and onward, it will be the internet. And if Adam and Eve had not eaten the apple, they would still be just two dolls in the garden."

This essay may seem rambling, bouncing from personal feelings to larger ideas on sex and nationhood, but the idea that a student would even broach these ideas and draw some new connections between the much discussed political changes in China and, in some ways, the far less discussed coming of the nation's sexual revolution, is incredibly important. This is primarily why the internet has become so influential here. Essentially it is solving questions and problems the west

addressed a long time ago. On a mass media level, young Chinese are just beginning to approach questions of sexual freedom.

3 February 2000

Sat outside a locked door for ten minutes, on a filthy padded floral chair, waiting for the office to be unlocked. I was supposed to have "office hours" for my students. A fairly fluent young man came up to ask a few questions. My task was to correct his speech, rollickingly entitled "My Definition of Success". Examples included, but were not limited to, his mother, Neil Armstrong, the Taiwanese founder of Yahoo, and Sir [Alex] Ferguson.

While we were talking, a middle-aged woman wearing garish make-up decided to join us. She wasn't one of my students and the young man didn't know her. Sometimes, people would simply come up and watch a foreign teacher do his or her job. It is a monitoring technique born out of total party control. Other times people walking by would get curious and stay for the afternoon. Once, a man in a suit came to one of my classes in the middle of the semester, stayed for a week and then never returned. I have no idea what this particular woman wanted. She had nothing to say about the definition of success.

20 February 2000

A student speaks in class on memories of 1989: "At the time, I was a

small boy. I was very short. I remember everything in black and white, there were no colours at the time. I remember looking at it all from the bottom up, being so much shorter than everyone else is. I would walk out with my mother and watch the tanks go by, [with a] jeep leading them, which stopped to ask for directions. The old lady who told them was wrong. I remember the tanks, I have heard as many as 500 people died that night, is it true?"

At the local grocery store this afternoon, I asked for "chu chou ji," which I believe loosely translates as "quickly send away the bad smell machine."

My notes written after class: now older students are looking for information, looking for the truth. They go to the news sources belonging to countries that consider China a threat, like the U.S. Somewhere between those still forbidden western sources and that of the CCTV [official state television] there is a semblance of truth. And, with all major western news sources still blocked from the street, and firewalled on the internet, that semblance is precarious. Since many people cannot talk freely, they talk in code.

Spring is when political events take place. One year ago, the Falun Gong crackdown began in earnest, the Chinese embassy was bombed by the U.S. and June 4 was the tenth anniversary of the democracy

protests and massacre in Tiananmen Square.

My students' memories: parents of dead university students petitioning to have their children buried in one cemetery as a commemoration. This was strictly forbidden. The image of the democracy goddess. One student (same one who collected colourful candy wrappers when he was young and organised them in a special book according to the English alphabet – "s" for strawberry flavoured ones, "g" for grape) recalled walking out, late at night on June 3, to see the tanks streaming out of a nearby military base in southern Beijing. His mother, a survivor of the Cultural Revolution, took him out to see it because she was extremely interested in the Chinese democracy movement. She frequently told him stories of life under Mao. His father, however, wanted to keep a low profile. He is a party member. Hard to tell if the father did not want to see what he knew would happen, or if he was wary of becoming mixed up in it. Students free-associated from one memory to the next, unprompted.

I had a sense that by expressing themselves in English, many felt distanced from the events of 1989 and were able to talk more freely than they would in other circumstances.

27 February 2000

I started class today by asking if anyone wanted to jump in where we

had left off last time. Silence pervaded. One said that the Beijing students were especially adamant about moving on. Everyone seemed uniformly pucker-mouthed to me.

Moments later, a young woman admitted she did not know until eight years later that students had been killed in 1989, and even now everything she knows about the event has been overheard, snippets of conversation from a family friend or two. Her father, a lifelong Party member, listens to the Chinese language Voice of America every morning. She was surprised to learn that foreign packages are opened and searched in Chinese post offices.

1 March 2000

"I am so tired of reading this, it's garbage!" said one student, slamming her government-approved textbook down on the desk. "I want to hear a lot of voices and perspectives. This just gives me one – the government's." (The funny thing was that the textbook included an article about the mass media and the importance of being well-informed and making decisions for oneself.)

3 March 2000

The following was scrawled up on the blackboard when I went into my Friday oral English class to teach. It speaks to the randomness let loose on students here when Chinese teachers teach English, I think. In the

end, the words on the blackboard form a vague, bizarre haiku.

Why are so many rural labourers in Beijing?

Why do people keep pets?

Necessities

Attitudes toward . . . why?

Razor

Circus scissors

Unnerving

Midgets

Phenomenon

5 April 2000

In an effort to arrange housing for next year, I was stretched to the very last limits of my bureaucratic tolerance level, and then those limits were rearranged into a whole new configuration. I was doing somersaults and back-flips until I was left only with my last, ephemeral tactic of smiling stupidly and praying to god that these hulking, austere women, languid behind police counters, will not suddenly stamp a form or sign a dotted line, thereby forbidding me from living in any apartment block anywhere at all, for the rest of my natural life.

So the woman asks questions, and a series of phone calls are made. Beside me throughout, my landlady Jenna harbours a look of dread.

She occasionally pulls me outdoors, explaining how the tourist visa I now have is shit because I am actually working and does Tsinghua University know this? I spit out something untrue about a sick father in Hong Kong. This is followed by more shenanigans when the officials see that my residence permit at Tsinghua is through July. And so they want me to stay there through July. This is a gorgeous example of the meddling that would drive me to the brink if I knew I could not already get around it. Jenna guffawed and confided that they were just being hard asses, that this should be no problem (could they possibly care?) My landlady passes some cash over the warped, plastic counter to the officials on the other side. Finally, some form is issued. I fill it out in upstanding English block letters (largely incomprehensible to those around me.) This is something I am supposed to carry with me at all times from now on.

24 April 2000

I have run out of deodorant. This is proving a problem, as I have never sweated so much in my life as I do in China. It is disgusting. At the local grocery store this afternoon, I asked for "chu chou ji," which I believe loosely translates as "quickly send away the bad smell machine."

Everyone looked at me like I was absolutely nuts. They were vaguely suspicious. Finally, this one surly little piece of a woman goes behind a counter in the back and pulls out a small package of something that

was nowhere on display. She then showed me the two little vials, positioned in their white plastic packaging with a small divot in between. She said that you took some of the powder, mixed it with water and then spread it under your arms. She just about died as she was gesturing this. I was near hysterical myself.

I continued laughing and then asked her if she was dead solid certain that there were no other products elsewhere in the store. She responded with a resolute "no others". Then I asked her how she could be so sure, and she pointed out, with none too much joy, that she actually did work there, and could I please pay for the product now? The product, from Southern China, cost seventy-five pence. As I walked away, the woman conferred with her cohort over how strange I seemed to be – after all these months of shopping and living here, she's finally caving in! I can't imagine what this stuff is all about, mixing powders that look like corrosive enzymes with water and then spreading the whole damn mixture over my skin.

Later, Tina, a twenty-two-year-old student told me, "Some Chinese use powders but most don't use anything. If they do have this type of problem, a lot of people don't know about it or how to deal with it." So why don't stores carry more and better deodorants? "Maybe Chinese don't have this problem at all."

The product I bought smells terrible. Grainy. Abrasive. Rash inducing.

I May 2000

Nearly one year in China. Having returned month after month to the same fruit stall in this northwestern suburb, I know the cycle of the harvests, the waxing and waning of the produce mounds.

When I first arrived, beginning in late summer: peaches, huge and hulking in tinged skins, bursting to contain the white flesh; round persimmons too, soft and grainy with sugar on the inside, later dried and dusted with powdered sugar. Always marvelled at how easily I ate the skins when they were dried, none the more clean, but it was just procedure with the dried ones, whereas the whole, wet ones were peeled, eaten from the inside out but never in their entirety. I take my persimmon cues from those around me.

Autumn: was it the tangerines in autumn? Great piles of bright and then pale orange? These were later wrapped in inexplicable red plastic or clear bags. The tangerines were full of seeds but had a strong and biting juice.

Winter: things got sparse, the unprecedented weather! A fierce cold, absolutely unseen but piercing like a hiss. The earth below your feet cracked and snapped as though frozen straight down to the core. I

especially remember the bananas at this time, frozen through, browned with the cold. Fiji-type apples made their rounds too, but nothing did well in the frigid cold.

Early spring: March was the first signs of the roundness to come at the fruit stand, though things start out oblong with gluts, like the great glut of pineapples from Hainan. Skinned, a jagged knife cuts deep ridges into the yellow flesh, spirals. Next come the strawberries, covered in fine seeds, and the small, seedy berries in black and pale yellow, prominent stems which you delicately eat around and then discard with long, hoisting fingernails.

Late spring/early summer: the fruit I can't even name – the little, pale orange goblets, with oddly shaped pits and seeds inside, a whole production to peel them, to manoeuvre around the seeds themselves, leaving you with only half a bite of fruit, so stingy! But round round round, all is round now. The little cherries, the great piles of watermelons, cut in red, spiky stars on the side of the road, and the yellow gourds with white, bland flesh.

21 May 2000

The grand lake of the Summer Palace

Besieged with anonymous photographers.

The orange roofs of lake vessels floating across

Rippled waters. A dull sparkle in green and blacks.
Trees, in clusters, and clumps, spread across the hilltop.
A strange happiness, a kind of curiosity that peers over
Shoulders,
Buys water (bottles!)
Smokes invisible cigarettes.
Across the way, families cram into paddle boats,
Scramble up hills, paths that don't exist.
A wall separates the water from the mountain,
Topped like a cake
Its temples and palaces,
Its curved archways and imperial heights.
A frosting of people.
Today the weather is warm
And a trickle of sweat laces my chest.
Astonishing, it is already noon,
The sun at its hazy zenith,
Rays undulating down through the pollution
Low clouds, coughs.
A group of men walk towards me,
Each clad in blue/black camouflage.

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