

## 2 – CHENGDU

My flight from Lhasa to Chengdu was enlivened by chatting to a young French lady in French and English, and the regular distribution of presents and snacks by the cabin crew: a small carrier bag, orange juice, a cardboard box of bread, cakes and chocolate, tea and coffee, and finally peanuts.

After nearly two hours we descended through the clouds and flew over a flat and uninspiring landscape. We touched down and the plane came to a halt at a very small airport building. Curiously we didn't have to go through the building – we simply walked around the side of it. However, on seeing a CITS (Chinese International Travel Service) office in which I could buy a ticket for a flight to Beijing, I decided to make enquiries. Much to my satisfaction I was able to avail of a flight in three days' time, on Sunday, 6 September 1987, when the other members of the Irish Chinese Cultural Society delegation would be arriving, and so I happily paid the ¥482 for the journey. I was given a receipt and told that I would have to collect the ticket from another office. Nothing seemed to be straightforward here!

I then travelled by bus through the large and ugly city to the Jinjiang Hotel, close to the River Jinjiang, where I joined two English girls, a French fellow, and a Swedish chap. Between us we got a couple of rooms; the Swedish chap and I shared one of them. Feeling quite filthy, I treated myself to a welcome shower and cut my overgrown fingernails. Later I joined the others downstairs and we went out for a meal. We had to collect the French lad at the CAAC (Civil Aviation Administration of China) office across the road, where he had bought his ticket to Beijing, also for Sunday morning. I was disgusted to discover that he had paid only ¥412 – the CITS office at the airport had charged me ¥70 more!

We found a restaurant nearby; although it appeared to be quite posh, the staff turned out to be rather surly. As the two girls and the Swedish lad were vegetarians, I ordered vegetable soup for them. The French chap and I ordered two dishes with meat: pork and chicken. This came with a huge bowl of rice. The three large bowls of vegetable soup arrived later, but the girls kicked up a fuss when they discovered morsels of meat in them, and got their money back. (They should have known that this was common practice at that time, as many Chinese people were unfamiliar with the concept of vegetarianism then.)

Once we had finished eating, we split up and went our separate ways. I walked along the main street until I found the CITS office, where I was told that I was too early; would I come back again on Saturday? Not pleased with this reply, I told the young lady how a friend had bought a ticket from the CAAC office this morning for the same flight to Beijing on Sunday, had got his ticket immediately, and that it had cost him ¥70 less than mine. I asked if I could be refunded in order to do the same. Surprisingly the young lady said yes, and asked me to wait. Having spoken to some of her colleagues, she suggested that I buy my ticket from the CAAC office and then return to her office to get back my money. I almost agreed, then remembered that I did not have enough FECs left. She finally compromised by giving me back ¥300; if I succeeded in buying my ticket, I could return on the following morning and claim the remaining ¥182. What a crazy arrangement! Another brush with idiotic Chinese bureaucracy!

I now retraced my steps and returned to the CAAC office. Noting that it would be open until 7.30 p.m., I popped up to my room in the hotel, where I collected my passport and crossed the road to the office. After waiting a good while to be served (during which an arrogant American barged ahead of me without apology), I was told to come back the following morning.

Annoyed by this turn of events, I plunged into the narrow *hutongs* or back streets opposite the hotel in search of a house belonging to friends of John Beckett, an Irish musician, conductor and composer, who was a cousin of the famous Samuel Beckett. When John, my father and the New Irish Chamber Orchestra had toured around China in 1980, John had met a man named Martin Mao and his girlfriend Nancy Hu here in Chengdu. As John had learned that I would be in Chengdu this year, he had asked me to look them up and to send them his regards.

With me now I had Martin Mao's address in Chinese written in the back of my pocket notebook, which I showed to several people. I was continually directed straight ahead. I asked shopkeepers, people in the street, and people eating their evening meals on their doorsteps. At last I found house number 114, but the door was firmly padlocked and the building was in a state of dilapidation. A small crowd gathered, a discussion was started, and I was asked to sit down on a low bamboo chair in front of a shop on the opposite side of the road. Finally a man who spoke good English appeared. He explained that the Maos had moved house and were now living somewhere in the suburbs north of the city. I would have to go to a police station in order to find the address. However, at this point a neighbour who knew the Maos' new address turned up. My English-speaking companion kindly wrote down the address for me both in Chinese and English.

He then asked me to follow him. He collected his bicycle and led me to a nearby taxi rank, where he spoke to a driver. I would be charged ¥10 for the

journey. I thanked my companion and off we set through the streets of this rather gloomy and ugly city. I certainly hadn't taken to the place; the fact that the weather was dull didn't help either.

At last we arrived in an area full of grey, depressing apartment blocks, and the road disintegrated into black mud. The taxi driver pointed to the relevant building, but as I had difficulty in knowing where exactly I was supposed to go, he came with me, asked a couple of people, and together we climbed up some stone stairs. He knocked on door number 60 and it was opened. It was the right place. I was invited inside by a hospitable family, who asked me to sit down and wait. I paid the taxi driver and he left. The people here spoke no English, but fortunately I was able to understand some of what they were saying. I had been asked, '*Nǐ chī fàn le ma?*' ('Have you eaten?') – a common formulaic question that is normally politely answered with, '*Chī fàn le*' ('I have eaten'). However, as I was now rather hungry, I said, '*Méi chī fàn le*' ('I haven't eaten'). I was given to understand that a meal was being prepared and I was offered a large mug of tea, which was regularly topped up with boiling water. Finally bowls of good basic food were produced and we ate together. I got the impression that the elderly lady must be Martin's mother, and the other people his siblings. One lady had a tiny baby, who was brought off to be fed elsewhere.

At last the door opened, a lady walked in and greeted me in English. This was Nancy, now Martin's wife. She explained that Martin was working as an interpreter in Egypt, and that she was now working in the medical college where both she and Martin had been studying. It was purely by chance that she had decided to call this evening in order to visit her in-laws. As she would be free both tomorrow and the following day, she offered to be my guide around the city. We had a long discussion about John Beckett, music, and other topics. She ate some food with us and then, as she needed to leave at nine o'clock, we set off together, having said goodbye to her mother-in-law. She led me to a bus stop and gave me instructions on how to travel back to the hotel. I bought my ticket for just one *máo* (ten *fēn* or cents), wished Nancy goodnight, and travelled off through the darkened, though still busy streets. I kept my eyes open for the hotel but realized that I had missed it when we reached the terminus. The young lady conductor who had sold me the ticket laughed, apologized, and asked me to sit behind her. The bus turned back immediately and soon it was time for me to hop out at the hotel.

Inside, I took a look in the shop, bought a packet of postcards, and went up to my room. I settled down to write some postcards and then my diary. My room-mate lay in bed watching television for a while, then switched it off and prepared to sleep. Just then the cough that had developed while I was in Tibet began to trouble me, and kept my companion awake. It got worse

when I lay down to sleep, waking me up in the process. My friend then had to use the bathroom, where he vomited. This woke him up thoroughly, as he had to go out several times. He sat up reading and I wrote until I had finished my diary entry. Finally we settled down to sleep.

This morning I woke after a reasonable night's sleep and had a makeshift breakfast in my room, using up some food that I had in my bag. As my roommate was quite ill, I went off in search of one of the English girls who, I had been told, was a doctor. She came to the same conclusion that I had come to: that he had eaten something recently that had disagreed with him. She recommended that he stay in bed, eat nothing, and drink as much boiled water as possible. When I went downstairs, I tried to reserve the room for him for tonight, but the hotel rules and regulations prevented me from doing this – I was told that I was too early. I noted the telephone number for reception so that he could book the room later.

I then went out, crossed the road to the CAAC office and, without too much delay, bought my ticket to Beijing for ¥412. I returned to the hotel to leave back my passport and then walked to the CITS office, where I was greeted by the same young lady as yesterday. For obvious reasons she had little to say to me today, and my money was returned rather begrudgingly! I had learned my lesson the hard way; in future I would not use this service again.

Delighted to be finished with this time-wasting business, I now set off northwards to the Wen Shu monastery near the train station. No doubt I could have travelled by bus, but I did not know which bus to take. It was a fairly long walk, but I did not mind; I strolled along, taking in my surroundings. Occasionally I stopped to look at shops. I was on the lookout for Chinese shoes and a wide sun hat, but I did not find what I wanted. I noticed that Fujichrome slide film was now sold here, which was good to know in case I ran out of film.

At last I arrived in the area near the monastery, which was made apparent by the presence of tourists and stalls selling religious artefacts. I quickly found the ornate entrance and wandered inside, only to be stopped by a man who ran after me, shouting, 'Mǎi piào!' ('Buy a ticket!') I apologized, retraced my steps and bought an entrance ticket for a trifling sum.

I went in again and had a look around. I was not very impressed by the place, despite the fact that it was full of people and worshippers (a phenomenon that I had not encountered ten years previously). To my mind, the architecture and statues were inferior to what I had seen during my previous visit all those years ago. I found the statues rather gaudy.

I had not been here long when a young man approached me and began to speak to me in English. As his accent was very strong, I found it difficult to

understand what he was saying sometimes. He asked me if I would have lunch with him and a friend – they had planned to eat dumplings. Because I had made no firm plans for the day, I said yes. The lad collected his bicycle, which he had left outside, and off we went. By now I was feeling rather hot and tired, and the walk seemed endless. We turned left at the end of the narrow street and found ourselves on a main road. We stopped at a little restaurant, where my companion ordered two large dishes of tasty dumplings and two bowls of soup that tasted like water that had been used to wash the dishes. After a few minutes my companion went off to find his friend and left me to help myself. As I was feeling quite hungry by now, I made short work of the top dish, and was finishing the last of the dumplings when the two lads appeared. The second chap spoke English much better and had a nicer manner than the first. We chatted over our meal and another dish of dumplings was ordered. I reflected that this type of informality and casual camaraderie among Chinese and Westerners would not have been permitted ten years previously. Although most of the city that I had seen so far looked rather drab and dated, one could sense that things had moved on, that there was a relative air of prosperity, and that there was far more freedom – though policemen and soldiers could still be seen everywhere.

When we had finished our lunch and relaxed, I was invited to join the lads and a few more friends in the People's Park, where we could drink tea together in a tea house. As both of the young men had bicycles, I was put on a bus and told to get off at the big Chairman Mao statue at the start of Renmin Lu (People's Street). Off went the bus, but before I knew what was happening, the bus had zoomed past the statue, turned a corner, and had travelled halfway down Renmin Lu. There was no stop until it finally turned right into another street. Rather than foot it all the way back to the statue in the heat, I made my own way to the park, which was not too far away. I walked to the wrong entrance at first, and was directed to the main one around the corner. I was not surprised that there was no sign of my companions, for they were probably waiting for me at the statue. In the meantime I chatted to a Chinese man in English. He had a map of the world in his bag and took it out to see where Ireland was. A reasonable amount of detail about the country had been included.

At last the two lads arrived on their bicycles. They stopped and asked me where I had been. I apologized for what had happened and we entered the park with a fellow who was studying Japanese, and also five pretty girls, one of whom was a journalist. Two of the girls spoke excellent English: the journalist and one in a red dress. The others spoke little or none at all. Two very petite and slim girls were waitresses in a hotel; both were well dressed and very pretty. The fifth girl was not so slim, though she was quite good looking – she wore a very beautiful dress. This young lady, a trainee hotel

manageress, kept smiling at me; her smile went straight to my heart and made me want to run away with her. I now realized how attractive these city girls could be when they were well dressed. No doubt I had seen such delightful young ladies ten years previously in Beijing and other big cities, but their beauty had been dimmed by their dull clothing, lack of makeup, and regulation pigtails.

While we tried to find a free table in the tea house, I noticed a man using special tools to attend to another man's ears. As I had never seen this before, I assumed that it was some type of acupuncture treatment. Having found no space in the general area, we were obliged to go upstairs to an empty area and sit down there. Bowls with lids on metal saucers were placed before us and boiling water was added to the tea leaves that had already been put in the bowls. We spent the remainder of the afternoon sipping the tea and conversing; from time to time fresh boiling water was poured into our bowls.

Not long after we had sat down, I was approached by the man with the wire tools and who, without asking, began working on my ears. My companions tried to shoo him away, as he was demanding two yuan for his service, but I did not mind and let him continue. His job was cleaning the wax out of people's ears. I found the procedure very gentle and quite relaxing. He was a good businessman, knowing that a rich foreigner would be a good target for his skills!

The two girls on either side of me were very interested in everything that I had to say, and were very grateful to have a foreigner with whom to speak English. The young journalist was quite fluent in the language, whereas the girl in red on my left was a little slower in her delivery and comprehension. Some of the others came and went. The fellow I had first met left us for a while, and he was slagged because of his offhand manner and sloppy English. When I nicknamed him 'Joker', the others had a good laugh at this.

I was asked where I came from, what type of work I did, my interests and hobbies, and so forth. We discussed various topics, one of which was the people's concern about corruption in high places here. Now that the old régime and its values had faded away, it was now unofficially permissible to be rich and corrupt, and this was a constant worry for the populace in general.

We stayed chatting in the tea house until about 5 o'clock. I was invited to join them all for a meal in a nearby restaurant, where they would order the famous Sichuan 'hot pot'. Not being at all keen on spicy food, I was rather wary of this, but I decided to go along with them and at least try it. We walked for a while along some narrow streets, still chatting, until we reached a small, though highly recommended, restaurant. Here we sat around a circular table, in the middle of which was a metal cooking pot full of oil,

heated from underneath by gas. Somebody chose what we would eat, and soon we were served bowls containing food that I could not identify (presumably raw meat and vegetables), and liquids, which I presumed were spices. The oil in the large pot already contained red peppers and other spicy vegetables. I was shown how to take a piece of meat, using my chopsticks, dip it into the bubbling oil, allow it to cook, and eat it. I tentatively tried one or two items, which I did not like at all, and then had to stop when something scalded the inside of my mouth. As I refused to eat any more of this revolting food, which my companions were enjoying to the full, one of the lads kindly went into the restaurant next door and ordered a dish of 'ordinary' food for me, which I ate with the others. However, as the place became so hot because of the gas stoves and fumes, I had to go outside for a while, where I sat on a stool. Because the others had been so good to me, treating me to lunch and then tea in the afternoon, I offered to pay for everyone's meal in the restaurant, which cost ¥35.

I was now asked if I would take the English class in a nearby school this evening. As I was happy to do this, a telephone call was made and we walked to the school after we had finished our meal. It was a rather dirty and dilapidated place. After I had made use of the crude toilet at the back of the building and washed my hands, I was introduced to one of the teachers, who led me to an empty classroom that had been opened specially for us. The room soon filled with eager students, though fortunately there were not too many of them.

Once I had been introduced to them by the teacher, I began to tell the students about myself, my parents, my background, and my country, which I sketched roughly on the blackboard. I took care to speak clearly and slowly, and deliberately restricted my vocabulary. Anything that the teacher felt was too advanced for the students was translated into Chinese.

After I had finished my monologue, I was asked some questions, including one about AIDS. One girl declared that it was a 'mystery' to her why I had chosen to go to Tibet. I steered my way around this as best as I could, but I later realized that I could have said what I liked, since everybody here seemed to be very open. I then asked some of the students about themselves and discovered that one chap was a member of the PLA – the People's Liberation Army! I feigned fright but the fellow just laughed.

I then asked to see the English language book that they were studying: a volume of short stories followed by questions and explanations. I asked some of them to read a story of their choice and corrected their pronunciation. I was quite thorough about this, for I had noticed some common mistakes among them all. One girl could not run consonants together; for example, 'explanation' was pronounced 'eku-su-pu-la-nay-shun'. No matter how hard she tried, she could not omit the rogue vowels.

As with most Chinese people, the students frequently mixed up 'he' and 'she', as only one word is used for both in Chinese – 'tā'. I then read the stories aloud and got them to repeat everything, sentence by sentence, paying attention to the intonation which, I told them, was important for the meaning. They had all read the stories in a bored monotone. They were all excited to do their own bit and were not in the least bit shy.

Without realizing it, we continued for about two hours and stopped only when the school was closing. All the students expressed their appreciation and thanked me profusely; we agreed to get together somewhere tomorrow evening. I said goodnight to them and walked with the teacher to a bar by the river, where we found a table outside at the water's edge. I was treated to a glass of beer and I chatted to some more students, four of whom spoke English excellently. A young couple excused themselves and left. I chatted to a chap about religion – though mostly about Hinduism and Buddhism. Later 'Joker' and the girls appeared. Earlier the girl who was the hotel manageress had opened up – she was apologetic about her poor English – and now we talked a little again. We stayed here drinking beer and orangeade until 12.30 a.m., and only then decided that it was time to go to bed. It had been a great day and we had all enjoyed it. My companions walked with me to the bridge, where we said goodnight. Back in the hotel I had to disturb my Swedish companion to be let into my room, but he did not mind.

My companion left early this morning with another chap who had been sharing our room; I slept on until about nine o'clock, when I got up and took a leisurely shower. Feeling pleasantly clean and refreshed, I left the hotel with only a vague plan of action for the day. Seeing a bus outside bound for the railway station, I hopped on board. I had decided to travel to the nearby village of Xindu which, according to my guide book, was worth a visit. Fortunately the bus was not too crowded and, of course, the fare was dirt cheap.

The journey lasted about half an hour. I hopped off at the station and asked an official where I could find the bus going to Xindu. As usual, a hand was waved vaguely by way of direction and I followed it. After asking just one other person I managed to find the bus which, as luck would have it, was about to leave. I asked where I could buy a ticket, and was told that I could do so on the bus. The fare turned out to be just eight *mao* (¥0.80).

We soon set off along the chaotic streets of northern Chengdu and finally left the city via a long, straight and uninteresting road. After a while I fell asleep, but woke up when we suddenly crossed the road and turned left through a grubby little village, then drove along a country road. I found the area most uninspiring, perhaps because of the dull weather. I was glad that I

had not done what my room-mates had done yesterday: they had hired bicycles and had cycled out all this way for nothing. We passed fields and farms, and soon arrived in a small but busy town, which looked rather unattractive: it was Xindu. I got out of the bus and followed a Chinese couple to the local Buddhist temple along a touristy street lined with stalls. My admission ticket cost three times more than the locals paid: six *mao* as against two.

Once inside, I realized that this temple was just as uninteresting as yesterday's. As I had not eaten any breakfast and was now very hungry, I went off in search of the vegetarian restaurant that was, according to my guide book, within the complex. I soon found it and wandered inside to see what people were eating. The food looked interesting, but I was unable to order anything since one had to buy a ticket at a hatch, over which hung a piece of wood with the menu written on it in Chinese characters, which I could not read. Just to make matters worse, I could find nobody to translate them for me. In the end I had to admit defeat and go off in search of an ordinary restaurant. Fortunately I found a rough-and-ready one nearby. I wandered around inside, followed by a stout woman (who was obviously in charge), and looked at what the people were eating. She pointed at a dish for me; I agreed to eat what it contained and asked for some rice. She then beckoned me to a table and yelled something to one of the cooks in the kitchen. Shortly afterwards she asked me if I wanted soup; I said yes. What type of soup? She suggested, '*jī dàn*'. I recognized the words but could not remember what they meant. In an ear-splitting voice she hollered at one of the girls in the kitchen, who came out with an egg. Egg soup! '*Hǎo, hǎo*' I said – OK. Minutes later a waitress appeared with a huge bowl of steaming soup containing eggs, tomatoes, cabbage, and other vegetables: as we would say in Ireland, 'there was eating and drinking in it'. Despite the crudeness of the place, the food was good and very filling.

With about ¥6 less in my pocket (no doubt I had been overcharged), I left the noisy place just as a large group of students were sitting down to a huge, tasty-looking meal. By now I felt tired and listless, and did not care where I went or what I did. I asked somebody the way to Gui Hu, a nearby park with a lake in it and, once again, received a vague wave indicating the direction. I set off along a street in which I found a shoe shop that sold traditional Chinese shoes with cotton soles. Although they were not exactly what I was looking for, I decided that they would do. I tried on several sizes before I was satisfied and paid ¥4 for them, which was not at all expensive.

I then managed to find my way to the park. It was pleasant enough, but it did not look its best in such gloomy weather. I paid a small amount of money for an entrance ticket, found a wooden pavilion with uncomfortable seats and relaxed for a while. I rested and later walked listlessly around the rest of

the park. People were amusing themselves by sailing on the lake in little motor boats. Having completed the circle, I went off in search of somewhere to drink tea. I bought a couple of little cakes in one place and found a tea house farther on. Here, following the instructions from the lady in charge, I bought a bowl of tea at a hatch and was conducted to a low table. Here I sat for a good while, munching my cakes and drinking my tea, which was constantly replenished. I cursed to myself when it began to rain.

I finally left and retraced my steps, arriving back at the bus stop. I quickly found a bus bound for Chengdu and sat beside a lovely girl whom I thought was quite young, but she was eighteen. Every now and then she smiled sweetly at me. Certainly this region had pretty girls aplenty! Shortly afterwards she plucked up enough courage to offer me one of two little fruits given to her by her companions in the seat behind us. She handed me what looked like a small green oval-shaped apple, which had a dry, crunchy taste. She told me the name of the fruit in Chinese, but I was not familiar with the word. Possibly it was unwise of me to eat this unpeeled fruit, but it was very small.

After this, my pretty companion relaxed and we began to talk. As she had almost no English, I was obliged to speak Chinese, which I managed to do with reasonable success. She also offered me some chewy sweets from a little bag. To keep herself cool, she used a pretty fan that had feathers attached to it. Later in the journey, a fellow on my right fell fast asleep, with his head resting on my shoulder!

As the bus approached Chengdu and slowed down in the heavy traffic, the girl began to feel hotter and hotter, until she sank down into a state of listlessness in her seat. By the time she got off the bus and said goodbye to me, she had to be supported by her friends.

I now found myself in an unfamiliar bus depot, not knowing where I was. I asked a lady the way to the number 16 bus, and followed her directions to the main street, where I could see the train station in the distance. I hopped on a 16 bus and was soon approaching the hotel. I got off one stop before the hotel and walked past some picture sellers. The good ones seemed to be reproductions of various old Chinese masters. Gone were all the political portraits and heroes of the revolutionary past.

Back at the hotel I spruced myself up and went down to the café for a bite to eat. All I could get was a cup of lukewarm 'English' tea and a tasteless small chocolate cake. Up in my room I made some proper Chinese tea, ate some nuts and my last apple.

At half past seven I went down to the gate, where I met yesterday evening's English teacher and four female students; together we set off for a riverside bar. They all seemed to be delighted to see me. I noticed that the girls had dressed up specially for the occasion. One of them amused me by

asking if she should call me 'Mr Charles', and when I said no, continued to address to me as 'sir'.

We sat down at a vacant table and, because the girls did not want to drink, only ordered two beers. Some of the others from yesterday afternoon then appeared, including the smiling trainee manageress. As we chatted together in English, a small crowd gathered, which annoyed the barman. He complained that we had only bought two beers and ordered us out. We ignored him until we had finished the beer, then crossed the river to a tea house. Here we managed to find a table under a light in a reasonably quiet corner and, tea having been served to us, the students took out their books and we had another reading and pronunciation lesson. The session went very well and afterwards we all exchanged addresses. One of the chaps from yesterday, who had joined us by now, disappeared and returned with a present for me: a beautifully made round bamboo box. I was genuinely astonished at this kind gesture and expressed my gratitude as best as I could. I was beginning to love these young people, who wished that I could stay longer and be their teacher. By now I was cursing the fact that I had to join the delegation for another organized tour, for I was now seeing China as it should be seen, and enjoying being among the ordinary people.

We finally left the tea house when it was closing at 10.30 p.m., and walked back to the hotel, where I said goodnight to them all. Back in my room I talked to a Canadian chap, sorted out my things, washed and retired to bed. It had been another pleasant evening in Chengdu. Tomorrow morning I would be flying north-eastwards towards Beijing.