

2 – LANZHOU

Wednesday, 3 May continued

Following the small map in my guidebook, I began walking to the Lanzhou Hotel; it took me twenty minutes to reach it, but I deliberately passed it and continued until I reached a more luxurious hotel recommended in the guidebook. As it was far too expensive, I returned to the Lanzhou Hotel and procured a bed in a very basic triple room, located in a dark and dreary annex, for just ¥12. I found two Chinese men in the room chatting to each other. One of them, who greeted me in good English, told me that he hoped to go to England later in the year. In the following year he would be going to Scotland for a conference.

When the two men left shortly afterwards, I quickly washed some dirty clothes and hung them up to dry. I then left and caught a bus to the Shengli Hotel, where I wanted to get information about transport to the Binglingsi Buddhist grottoes tomorrow. After a little bit of confusion, I spoke to one of the drivers, who (I think) told me that there would be several buses tomorrow morning and that there was no need to buy a ticket in advance.

I then walked along the road and found a small restaurant. The lady in charge was plump, had a loud voice, and was good-humoured. I asked to see what other people were eating and chose two dishes of meat with vegetables, a bowl of rice, and a can of soft drink. Although the place was quite noisy with people coming and going, it was pleasant to be eating with the locals. However, the price of the meal took me by surprise: ¥20. No doubt I had been charged more than the Chinese customers; nothing seemed to be cheap any more here.

After the meal I ambled slowly towards the river through the market area, observing the people and the goods for sale. I noticed several Muslim and minority ethnic people buying and selling.

I soon arrived at the mighty Yellow River, where I paused to take a photograph, then crossed the Iron Bridge that led to a complex of Qing Dynasty pavilions built on the side of Baita Hill. I paid for a ticket and went in with a young couple, who tried to converse with me in Chinese; unfortunately I could not understand them. There was a wonderfully relaxed atmosphere here, with people sitting in the shade, drinking tea or minerals. The city in general quite surprised me: I had expected it to be a large, grim, industrial city, but found it to be quite pleasant. Slowly I climbed to the top

of the hill, stopping at the various pavilions to enjoy fine views of the city. I was lured into one of the pavilions to look at paintings that were for sale. Some were in the classical style and looked quite old. However, when the man was distracted by the arrival of more potential customers, I escaped, for I knew that he was expecting me to buy something from him.



View of the Yellow River (left) from Baita Shan (right), Lanzhou



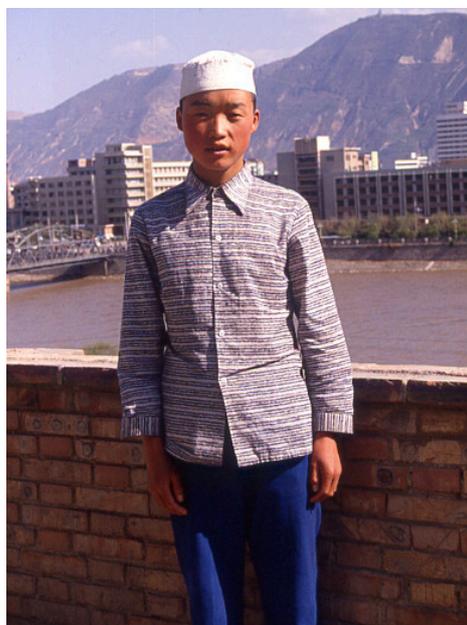
Tea party on Baita Shan, Lanzhou

After I had finished looking around, I made my way back down the hill and, because I was feeling quite hot and thirsty by now, sat on a deckchair in a shaded square and asked for some tea. For just ¥2 I received a bowl of sweet Muslim tea and a huge flask of boiling water. For a while I sat on my own, relaxing, but later some people called me over to their table.

Unfortunately only one girl spoke a few words of English and so communication proved to be difficult. Despite this, they seemed to be very pleased to have me in their midst and kept offering me beer, rice wine and as many watermelon seeds as I could eat. It was delightful to be with these hospitable people. One lively and friendly chap kept stressing that 'wōmen shi péngyou' ('we are friends'), and I was referred to as their 'Àiěrlán péngyou' ('Irish friend').

After a while some traditional musicians struck up and created an interesting though not particularly melodious din with their cymbals, clappers and fiddles. A man with large round sunglasses sang to the noisy accompaniment. While this was going on, my companions (and others in the square) played the popular game of 'guess fingers': a boisterous competition in which players tried to guess the number of fingers one of their friends extended. The person who lost (or won) after three attempts was obliged to drink a small measure of strong drink. In other words, it was a sure way to get drunk quickly.

My companions certainly did get drunk for, when I rose to leave at about five o'clock, the man who had dubbed me 'Irish friend' staggered over to shake hands and say goodbye to me. His wife, baby daughter and the little girl's nanny had arrived by now, and the wife did not look at all pleased. Sensing a quarrel, I departed quickly.



Muslim boy, Lanzhou

Down by the river I walked to a nearby mosque. I now found myself in the Muslim quarter, with small hovels lining the road. This district looked quite rural in comparison with the rest of the city. I managed to find my way up to the rather nondescript mosque with its green dome and found it locked. A couple of local children danced around me, shouting 'Hallo! Hallo!' and I

spoke to a Muslim lad who stopped and smiled at me. After I photographed his companion I left, passing some houses in which I could see people preparing food. I found this district quite fascinating. I looked at another mosque, popped into a very dirty and smelly public latrine to relieve myself, then photographed some doorways and alleyways.

Afterwards I crossed the bridge and tried to find a restaurant recommended in my guidebook, but failed to do so. I decided to return to the hotel and travelled back on a very crowded No. 1 bus. In my room I found a Dutch and German lad who were travelling along the Silk Road by motorbike; their belongings were strewn all over the place. Once we had refreshed ourselves, we made tracks for the hotel restaurant but found it closed. We then walked down the road, found a typically grubby restaurant that did not look too bad and, after a bit of hilarity over ordering dishes, sat down to eat quite a good meal. We each had a bottle of beer, though I could only drink half of mine. We had an interesting conversation, during which I was warned about the young ladies in China; although my companions agreed that they were very charming, they informed me that they were desperate to get out of the country because of the corruption and were anxious to befriend any foreigner that came their way. No wonder my pretty companion yesterday had bestowed so much attention on me, even though she had told me that she had a boyfriend!

Our meal over, we paid up – the bill was very reasonable – and returned to our room, where we watched television and chatted before going to bed.

Thursday, 4 May

I woke, after my first proper night's sleep, at about 6.30 this morning, and got up shortly afterwards. After a quick wash I caught the No. 1 bus to the Shengli Hotel. As I rounded the corner to the bus station, a Chinese lad approached me and asked me in English where I wanted to go. When I said the Binglingsi Grottoes, he pointed to a fairly smart bus. I clambered aboard and availed of a good seat at the front. It set off almost immediately and the Chinese lad I had met outside came to me in order to sell me a ticket. As I had heard that the bus to the reservoir only cost about two yuan, I was horrified to learn that he was charging ¥32 FEC. After a lot of discussion, I discovered that this was a return trip that included transport on a boat. I then heard that the local people had paid just ¥21 RMB. I and a Dutch lady, who was sitting behind me, decided that we would pay just ¥21 FEC. After another long discussion, we finally had to admit defeat and pay the ¥32 FEC. This business of charging foreigners far more than the locals was proving to be very irritating.

As we left the city behind and began to climb up into barren mountains, a girl in the seat in front suddenly sat down beside me and began to chat in

basic but adequate English. She seemed pleasant enough, though I noticed that her red and white jacket was rather grubby. She asked me various questions about myself and later we exchanged addresses. When she told me that her birthday would be on 9 June, I promised to send her a card. If I remember correctly, she told me that she was twenty-one. She sat unusually close to me and seemed to be quite pleased by my company. Here we go again, I thought!

Our journey brought us through stark but dramatic scenery: a mixture of jagged mountains and cultivated hills, patches of green and tall thin trees here and there, and little hamlets that blended perfectly with their rural surroundings. Because of my new companion, I just glanced out the window now and then, as our conversation filled most of the time.



On the boat to Binglingsi, at the Yellow River reservoir

After about an hour or so we finally reached a dam and reservoir on the Yellow River and after a delay, during which I bought something to eat, we boarded one of several gaily-painted boats, shaped like a pavilion, though we did not set off for another half hour. It was obvious that the people on the boat were enjoying themselves immensely: laughing, chatting, eating, drinking, playing card games, or attending to their colourfully-dressed children.

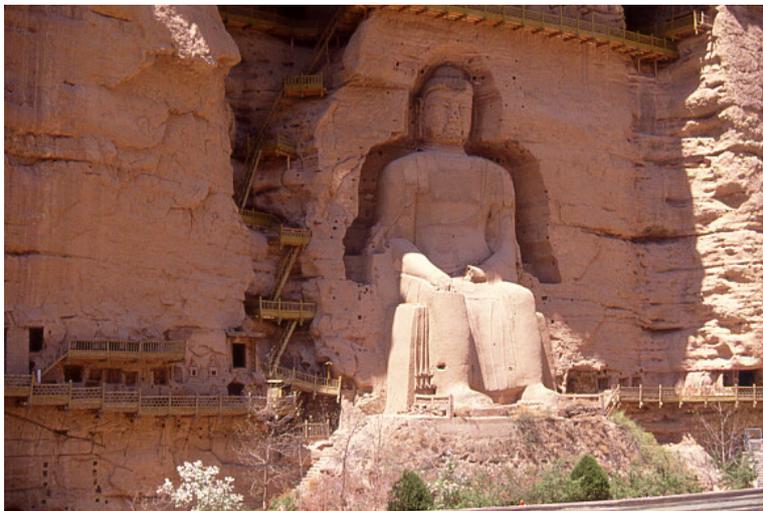
When we finally left the reservoir, the scenery along this mighty river became quite dramatic: all around us were bare brown hills of all shapes and sizes, and streaked with unusual red marks. At one point the water changed colour from muddy brown to deep blue.

We had not got very far when we suddenly wheeled around and headed back. It turned out that eight more people had turned up for the trip. We quickly picked them up and set off again.



The Yellow River, on the way to Binglingsi

The boat journey proved to be most enjoyable thanks to the fascinating scenery, the general horseplay on board, and the occasional smile, wink and few words from my newly-acquired friend, who now spent most of her time with her companions. I ate my lunch slowly over a period of time though, despite the lack of any breakfast, I did not feel very hungry. It was quite hot in the sun, cool in the shade, and very cold at the front of the boat. I took some photographs but, on discovering that I was near the end of my film and had not brought another, I went easy with the pictures.



The Great Maitreya Buddha, Binglingsi

At about two o'clock we finally reached the famous and historic grottoes of Binglingsi which, because of their inaccessibility, had escaped some of the ravages of time and the Red Guards. They were carved out of the rock over a long period, starting in about A.D. 420. The 183 caves contain nearly 700

statues of the Buddha and about 80 clay statues. We now scrambled off the boat and the girl joined me. In the distance could be seen wooden platforms and the 27-metre-high Great Maitreya Buddha that had been carved out of a cliff face; it was tucked into a corner in such a way that it was hardly visible from the river.

We were given an hour to visit the grottoes, but the hour included some time eaten up by confusion over admission tickets. My companion and I set off together; after I had taken a few photos from a distance, I put the camera away as photography was not permitted here.

Because of the limited amount of time allocated to us and the lack of an English-speaking guide, the grottoes were something of an anticlimax. Most of them were no more than shallow niches containing either carved or painted Buddhist images of different periods and styles. Many were in remarkably good condition, though nearly all of them looked the same – a typical feature of Buddhist art. Here and there I could discern faint Tibetan inscriptions. I had read that there was a village housing Tibetan monks somewhere in the locality.

Our time was soon up and my companion and I made our way back to the boat. By now the girl had invited me to her home for lunch tomorrow and we had agreed to meet at my hotel at ten o'clock. It was a nice gesture; it would put in the day as well as being an opportunity to see inside a Chinese home.

As everyone was tired by now, the atmosphere was a little more subdued on the boat. I sipped some lychee juice from a can and dozed in the sun. Later the girl joined me and chatted a little more. Although she claimed to be shy, she had been laughing and joking with some men on the boat, and now sat very close to me – I did not know what to make of her.

Towards the end of the boat journey, there was great activity when people began lowering bottles into the river and scooping up water, which they used for washing their hands. We finally arrived at our starting point at about 6.30 p.m. and clambered aboard the bus for the long journey back to Lanzhou. This time the driver indicated that I must sit elsewhere, despite somebody's protests. He obviously did not want me to sit with the girl again. I joined the Dutch lady and a Japanese lad in a row of three seats. This time I was able to pay more attention to the scenery, but the journey in the noisy bus soon became very tedious. There seemed to be no such thing as silence here in China!

We eventually returned to Lanzhou, where we were diverted in order to avoid a march that was celebrating the anniversary of the first protest in China. We were let off near the Shengli Hotel, where I said goodbye to the girl.

Tired after our excursion, the Dutch lady, the Japanese lad and I looked for a restaurant and went into the first decent one that we found. As the lady

wished to use the loo, we followed the young waiter out the back and along some very narrow alleyways until we finally reached one of the filthiest public toilets that we had ever encountered. We left the place as quickly as possible and returned to the restaurant. The fun and games now began when we attempted to order something. As the Japanese lad could only read and translate some of the characters, we had to chance our arms and hope that we would get something decent to eat. However, we managed to have quite a good and not too expensive meal. The members of the staff seemed to be quite curious to find out something about us, and were very polite to us when we left. The man in charge wished me *'màn zǒu'* ('go slowly' – i.e., 'safe journey') and we caught a minibus back to the hotel, where we were all staying.

Back in my room, I discovered that my companions had two guests: a couple of rather unfriendly German girls. I went off to the bathroom to shower and shave. I pottered around until the girls left, then went to bed. As I had developed the sniffles, I hoped that I was not catching a cold.

Friday, 5 May

I woke at about 7.30 after a night of strange dreams and discovered that I had a blocked nose and a sore throat; this did not augur well. My Dutch companion woke up and together we went over to the nearby restaurant for a 'Western' breakfast: hot milk (there was no tea!), lightly-toasted bread, and a boiled egg. We joined the two German girls, a Dutch girl, and the Dutch lady who had been on yesterday's trip. The restaurant staff seemed to be quite confused about everything; however, the food was cheap and nourishing.

After we had paid, I returned to my room and sorted my things for this evening's train journey. I then left my two bags in the room beside the service desk, posted two postcards and bought some lipstick for the girl that I had met yesterday. I now found her outside talking to the Dutch lady. We hopped on board a minibus and set off for the museum. The fare was ¥1 each and was much more expensive than the ordinary state-run buses. The girl was much quieter this morning and I sensed that she was feeling a little uneasy. It was a long journey to the museum, which we found closed. I was not too surprised, for I had read in my book that it seemed to be closed most of the time. At a loss of what to do next, we wandered around a nearby market, looking at clothes and whatever else was for sale. We then went into an impressive department store, where I saw bars of Western soap for sale. Back out again in the market, I was surprised to see quite a selection of magazines with saucy pictures of girls on the covers, some of them in a state of undress.

Later, though it was still rather early, we decided to eat something. Obviously we were not going to have lunch at the girl's home; I guessed that her parents had objected. We sat down at an outdoor table and started with triangular cakes made of sweet rice. Next we had noodles, Lanzhou style, which were not bad. The girl paid for the meal and refused to let me do so.

We left immediately afterwards and caught a minibus back to the hotel. The girl told me that she was going to Lanzhou University nearby and on to work at two o'clock. However, she seemed reluctant to leave me and accompanied me to the hotel, where she surprisingly accepted an invitation to come to my room, vacated by now, to see my photographs of home. I was curious to see if she would be allowed into the hotel, but nobody stopped her – even though I had to get somebody to open the door. Inside we sat on my bed together looking at the photographs and my colourful guide book to the Silk Road, which fascinated her. She allowed me to put my arm around her, but nothing more. We remained like this, despite a brief interruption, until shortly after 1.30 p.m., and then we left. As we went outside, she asked me if I would remember her after I had left. She hailed a minibus for me bound for the Five Springs Mountain (Wuquan Shan) and, as I clambered aboard, we shook hands and bid each other an abrupt goodbye. I had noticed that curt farewells like this were common enough here.

I left with mixed feelings about this girl, whose name I still didn't really know (although I had written it down with her address). It seemed that Chinese girls were easily fascinated by Western men and their ways; looking a pretty girl in the eye here generally resulted in an instant reaction and a radiant smile.

Thanks to the lady ticket seller on the bus, I hopped off the bus when we reached my destination and, after asking the way, I walked up a slight hill through a market towards the entrance of a park, where I bought an entrance ticket. Like Baita Hill by the side of the Yellow River, inside was a series of Buddhist temples built on the side of a hill – the word 'mountain' was something of an exaggeration. I noticed people worshipping in several temples; in one of them I found a large group of elderly men and women in traditional Chinese dress. I felt as if I had stepped into the past, despite the loud pop music that could be heard outside in the park. I stayed and watched as people, both young and old, lit incense sticks and bowed before the sacred statues while a monk struck a bowl-like gong.

Slowly I ascended the hill, passing the various temples, even though I was by now choking with a cold. I stopped to chat to two lads who greeted me in English. Afterwards I sat down in a teahouse and, while sipping a bowl of tea, wrote a postcard to my parents and to the lovely girl I had met on the train three days ago.

Later I moved off, climbed uphill a little more, then went down. The elderly people had now left their temple and, clad in loose brown robes, were entering another small building. Nearby, people paddled oddly-shaped boats in a shallow lake, and a lady with a microscope was examining samples of people's blood. Two pretty girls kept smiling shyly at me.

I then left, walked back to the main road and, after a couple of abortive attempts, succeeded in boarding a No. 31 bus. This left me down the road from the hotel. I now went to the nearby restaurant for a meal and was joined by the Dutch lady, who would also be travelling on the train with me to Jiayuguan this evening. I now learned that her name was Rita.

After the meal I returned to the hotel and had a hot shower, after which I felt a good deal better. I then moved to the lobby, where I joined Rita, and repacked my bags. Shortly after 8.30 p.m. we set off for the train station by bus and, after asking several people, found the correct waiting room. We did not have to wait long and soon were out on the platform. Our hard-seat carriage was a real dump: it was filthy and crowded. We tried to find free spaces in the hard-berth carriage, but were out of luck and had to return to the hard seats, which were very uncomfortable.

Once everybody was aboard, the train moved off and our journey to Jiayuguan, once regarded as the last outpost of civilized China, began.