

10 – CHENGDU

Friday, 2 June

After a sound, refreshing sleep, I rose when I had fully woken up and discovered that it was after nine o'clock. Much to my horror, Miss Liu had told me that she had telephoned her boss and told him that she would be in work later – no doubt much to her boss's annoyance. As a result, she and her husband were still at home, ready to serve me a breakfast of hot milk with two poached eggs floating in it.

After breakfast, Miss Liu came with me to the Chengdu Hotel across the road to see if I could hire a bicycle. Although the rate was higher here (¥1 RMB per hour), I handed over my passport and selected a fairly light lady's bicycle, which I found pleasantly easy to ride.



Students demonstrating in Chengdu's city centre

Back in the apartment I begged Miss Liu to go to work, which she did. When I was ready, I set off on the bicycle along the long ring road towards the zoo, passing some students who had gathered around the big statue of Chairman Mao. I followed my map as best as I could, though I made a mistake and had to go back a little. Finding the zoo was not too difficult, but because of the distance, it took me a while to reach it. I parked the bicycle outside and bought an entrance ticket.

As expected, the zoo was not up to much – it was very tatty, dirty and not particularly interesting. The animals looked extremely bored. I wandered around listlessly and managed to see some sleeping pandas and a pair of golden monkeys – both of which I had not managed to see when these animals had been brought to Ireland some time previously.

As I was interested in visiting the Zhaojue Buddhist monastery nearby, I tried to find it but failed to do so. While walking around a small lake, I found a little restaurant, where I ordered some dumplings. Later I asked for a bowl of noodles, but as they were far too spicy, I was unable to eat them. It now felt good to be in a part of Chengdu where there were so few foreigners.



Zhaojue Buddhist temple, Chengdu

After this rather unappetizing and inadequate meal, I set off again in search of the monastery. Just as I was about to give up the search, I suddenly found it, paid ten *fen* and went in. Although parts of the complex

were being rebuilt and despite the presence of builders' rubble here and there, the monastery was very interesting. I saw quite a number of monks with shaven heads and bright orange robes; among them were two young novices, one of whom was having difficulties with his new robes.

The complex was quite large and I saw many elderly people, mostly women, praying in front of statues of the various deities and lighting incense. I was not allowed to photograph the statues. Because there were now dark clouds in the sky, the light level was very low. Although the buildings did not look very old, the place was full of atmosphere, for many of the older people wore traditional dress here.

When I had seen enough of the place, I bought some biscuits, went to the teahouse within the complex and, sitting down near an old lady who was saying her prayers and dropping off to sleep, I drank a cup of tea and ate some of the biscuits. I then fell asleep for a while. I woke a little later, feeling somewhat refreshed, and shortly afterwards the old lady came to life. When I produced my camera, she and a man who was carrying a flask of boiling water were only too happy to pose for a photo. The scene here was reminiscent of pre-Liberation China.

Later I rose and left, throwing the ticket that I had bought into a special container; no doubt the ticket would be reused or the paper would be recycled. I then wandered around the zoo again and looked at some peacocks, monkeys, bears and a few other animals, then slowly made my way back to the entrance. At one point it began to rain, but fortunately it eased off. I emerged from the zoo at about 4.30 p.m. and collected my bike.

The journey back was uneventful and did not seem to take as long as this morning's journey. At least I now knew where I was going, though I did make a mistake at a crossroads when I mistook it for another. Cycling among the Chinese was a rather unnerving experience at times, for the movements of the cyclists were quite unpredictable. They never looked where they were going and were inclined to swerve left or right or cut across the traffic lanes without warning. Cyclists reluctantly stopped at red traffic lights – or did not stop at all – and nobody yielded to traffic coming from another road. Several times I had to jam on the brakes or hop off in order to avoid a collision.

I finally arrived at the apartment and was greeted by Miss Liu, who by now had returned from work. She fussed around me, making sure that all was well. Shortly after I had relaxed and spruced myself up, some friends and relations arrived, and the evening meal was prepared. I was not allowed to help and was urged to relax. Because the guests spoke no English and I could not understand their Sichuan dialect, Miss Liu had to translate for me. In true Chinese style, the television was switched on, adding more to the general noise level.

As Miss Liu's husband had disappeared with one of the guests, the meal had to be delayed. We finally sat down at 7.15 to eat; half an hour later I dashed off on Miss Liu's bicycle (I had returned the hired one to the hotel) and cycled to the No. 10 Middle School. As I had to stop en route to ask the way, I just about made it on time. Mr Ai, the teacher, was waiting just inside the gate. He and another teacher greeted me kindly and, after we had worked out a plan of action, Mr Ai led me up to his small class of about ten students, most of whom seemed to be interested to meet me. All the boys spoke English quite well, but the girls were very shy. First of all, I spoke to them about myself, then answered their questions; afterwards I went through one of their lessons in their books, and finally asked each student about his or her work.

By the time we had finished, the bell had rung for the first period and I was now conducted to the class that the other teacher had. Here the room was full of young men and girls. As they had not progressed as far as the other class, I now spoke slower and restricted my vocabulary. Once again I talked about myself and then answered questions, some of which I found difficult to understand. I then went through some of the lessons in their book. Most of them seemed to be pronouncing the words correctly. At the end of the class I was asked to sing a song, and so I sang 'Molly Malone' as best as I could. I received a round of applause for this and then I left.

As Mr Ai and his students had been delighted to meet me, an arrangement was made for us to meet at 9.30 on Sunday morning and go off somewhere to amuse ourselves. When we had agreed on a place to meet, which Mr Ai marked on my map, we set off on our bikes in the spitting rain to the English corner, where I spoke to a few of the students. Because of the changeable weather, only a few had gathered this evening.

We had not been there long when there was a sudden downpour and we had to run to the bar for cover. I was greeted by the lively gang that I had met before; they had found more Westerners and were now singing noisily to a guitar. Despite the din, we managed to converse over a few drinks about various subjects not normally discussed, including homosexuality and prostitution. My Chinese companions were very frank and I told them about some of the problems that we had in the West. I was told that homosexuality was regarded as an abnormality here (people could be punished for it), and that prostitution did exist, though on a minor scale. Naturally, it was illegal.

It continued to rain, but later it eased off a little. We ventured out and set off on our bikes for the Chengdu Hotel. As my companions cycled at a snail's pace, it was late when I finally arrived at the familiar landmark, said goodnight to them and returned to the three-room apartment. Miss Liu appeared in her dressing gown looking very worried as she thought that I had got lost and that something had happened to me. I explained what had

happened and apologized profusely. As it was now too late for her husband to sleep at his brother's house, I offered to share the double bed with him, which he accepted. I dried myself, retired to the bedroom, where we read and chatted, then finally went to sleep. An interesting day.

Saturday, 3 June

This morning I woke up at about nine o'clock, after a not particularly sound sleep, to discover that Miss Liu was still at home and had not yet gone to work. Once again she served a breakfast of milk and eggs, and talked to me about my plans for the day. Her husband left for work and later she and I set off together. On our way out, Miss Liu begged me not to converse with the man at the gate of the residential centre; she obviously thought that the less the authorities knew about me, the better.

We set off together; this time I had the use of a bicycle belonging to Miss Liu's sister-in-law. However, as I discovered that I had forgotten to bring money with me, I had to turn back. Once I had my wallet, I set off alone.

I now cycled to the city centre, past the students at Mao's statue. It was now obvious that they were protesting in solidarity with the students in Beijing. From here I made my way to the western part of the city. At one stage I stopped to consult my map and a girl who spoke English kindly asked me where I was going. She gave me directions and then departed. The one nice thing about cycling here was that I had plenty of opportunities of feasting my eyes on pretty girls, many of whom were elegantly dressed.



The Thatched Cottage of Du Fu, Chengdu

Following my map, I cycled towards the famous thatched cottage of Du Fu, a poet and politician of the Tang dynasty, which was in the countryside

just outside the city. I soon found the place and parked the bicycle for a small fee. It cost very little for the entrance ticket to the historic site.



The Thatched Cottage of Du Fu, Chengdu

Inside, all was peaceful and serene, in contrast to the noise and bustle outside. Although none of the 'classical' buildings here looked particularly old or genuine, there was a very pleasant atmosphere in the place. As I wandered from one building to another, through various gardens and groves, I paused here and there to take some photographs. The grounds were quite extensive; I could have spent an entire day here. As there were so many buildings and pavilions, I had no idea which one was supposed to be the poet's 'thatched cottage'!

I walked around the place until about midday and left. Tired and hungry by now, I went off in search of food and found a little restaurant nearby. Here I was able to rest and enjoy a dish of meat and vegetables with rice and a bottle of orangeade. Because I was now away from the touristy area, the price of the meal was just ¥4. The members of staff were very courteous to me.

I then left, cycled back towards the city centre, stopping en route to buy a banana. I then parked my bike and paid to enter the Qingyanggong, a fairly interesting complex of Buddhist temples built in the classical style, where I was able to see people (mostly elderly women) praying in front of the statues. Although it was interesting, there was little to see here, and I left soon afterwards.

Outside I helped an American fellow who was lost (he was looking for the Traffic Hotel) and I then cycled to the nearby Temple of Marquis Wu. The entrance fee seemed to be unusually small and I soon discovered why – I had

entered a children's park! I asked for directions and found the temple complex next door, where I paid another small entrance fee. I now found myself in pleasant classical surroundings: gardens with elegant buildings and pavilions, which provided welcome shade. Access to the actual temple of Marquis Wu cost another small sum of money. There was nothing remarkable about it; it was just pleasant to sit inside, in the cool, and relax. I fell asleep for a while and woke up feeling more refreshed.



The Temple of Marquis Wu, Chengdu

I now left by the main entrance and walked back along the street in the heat to where I had left the bicycle, then set off again. I now approached the familiar Jinjiang Hotel and made my way across the bridge to the first restaurant, where I relaxed for a while over a pot of tea, chatting to one of the waitresses. The manager also spoke to me.

After a while I left and cycled back to the apartment, where I washed and spruced myself up. As I now had the place to myself, I made myself at home and took some photographs of the rooms. Miss Liu returned later and, once again, some friends and relations arrived. This time we had Miss Liu's brother and his wife, neither of whom spoke English at all. We relaxed, drank cool drinks, watched television, and later sat down to eat. Because of the hot weather, we were served some cold dishes, which were quite tasty. Also on the menu was a popular summer porridge of rice and mung beans, which tasted a little watery.

Although it was now beginning to get dark, I tactfully waited for an opportunity to leave and set off for Wang Lihua's home. Lihua was one of the students whom I had met at the tea house by the river two years previously, after I had given the English language class. She was the same age as myself and had been studying chemistry and English at college; she

very much wanted to go abroad and study in a university. I had written to her, informing her that I was in Chengdu, but as I had not heard from her, I would now have to find her house and hope that she was at home. The street where she lived was not too far away but, because it was dark and I was not familiar with this part of the city, it took me some time to get there. Once I had found the street, I then had to find the right building. This turned out to be a complicated job and I had to ask many people. I was finally directed to the wrong building and then, having discovered the mistake, to the right one. As the doors on the various floors of the apartment block were not numbered, I had to work backwards from a door that was numbered and finally, with somebody's help, I knocked on the correct door. A man wearing spectacles, who resembled Lihua, opened it and told me that she had gone out. I was not too surprised. Having explained who I was, I gave the man (presumably Lihua's father) Miss Liu's address and telephone number, and handed him some photographs and a box of embroidered handkerchiefs for her. His wife and children, who appeared, all seemed to be fascinated by me and kept smiling. I noticed that the house was not as neat and clean as Miss Liu's, but it looked quite interesting. It was obvious that the people here lived in very cramped quarters.

When I had conveyed all the information to the man, I wrote a note in English for Lihua and, excusing myself, left. I did not want Miss Liu worrying about me again!

On returning I forgot to take a turn and found myself in unfamiliar surroundings. I backtracked, got my bearings and started off again. Fortunately I had no further trouble and soon arrived at the apartment. As Miss Liu's husband had gone out, I now sat down and we had a good chat. She showed me some photographs of herself and her husband, and I photographed her. We talked until quite late about various topics and finally retired to bed.

Sunday, 4 June

This morning, after a good sleep, I woke at 7.30 to the sound of swishing noises outside – the street cleaners were busy. I rose shortly afterwards, washed myself and some clothes, breakfasted on two remaining biscuits, and was just about to leave at nine o'clock when Miss Liu appeared. As she wanted to join me, I waited while she combed her hair. We set off on our bikes towards Wangjiang Park. After a little bit of confusion when Miss Liu went off in the wrong direction, we finally met up with Mr Ai and his students. Because of disruptions caused by the students' demonstration, the police had cordoned off certain streets in order to hinder the progress of the students. It seemed that things were getting a little out of hand, though nobody seemed to have much news of what was happening. The young

people I was with told me that if they wanted truthful news, they had to listen to The Voice of America or the BBC World Service, for the Chinese government only broadcast good news and withheld the truth.

Circumventing the cordoned-off streets, we now cycled southwards for a good distance. Various students rode beside me and chatted. Some I understood easily, but others with difficulty. The journey seemed endless and, along several stretches, the road surface was appalling. Finally we turned off on to a narrow road and arrived at a village called Zhong He. We left our bicycles in a building, walked to a river and went by boat to the other side, where there was a small park in what must have been a former temple. Here we found facilities for playing billiards and table tennis, and also a shaded open-air teahouse. Three tables and a number of chairs were fetched; various snacks were placed on the tables and tea was ordered. We sat down to relax, drink, eat and chat. The atmosphere was relaxed and it was pleasant to be with and talk to these young people. We touched on all sorts of topics, including drugs. Apparently there were drug addicts in the south-west part of the country, but the problem was not as bad as what we had in the West.

At one stage a tape recorder was produced and we listened to some pop music. Two of the lads gave us a demonstration of some jerky breakdancing and then we all had a go at dancing to some gentler music. I was encouraged to dance with a pretty girl but as she was expecting me to lead and I did not know the steps, we had to give up the attempt. The others had a good laugh at this.

After this we rested and returned to our food and drink. At this point Mr Ai quietly told me that there had been serious trouble in Beijing with the army and the demonstrators; he and a couple of the students had been talking about this worrying situation while we were enjoying ourselves. As Mr Ai said relatively little about what had happened, I gathered that the details were rather sketchy at the moment. However, we did not let this interrupt our fun, for now a counting game had begun. Every time the number seven or a multiple of that number was reached, we had to hit a bowl with a chopstick. Those who forgot or made a mistake had to sing a song or do something. Several people were caught out a few times and I fell into the trap twice. At first I counted to ten in various languages and then, the second time, I told them a joke.

Later we took it in turns to sing a song; most people managed one in Chinese and one in English. I sang two songs that I happened to know in Chinese, and 'Edelweiss' from *The Sound of Music*. I then added 'Molly Malone' for good measure.

I was then invited to play table tennis. I tried my hand at it, but Miss Liu approached me and said that she was tired and wanted to go home.

However, Mr Ai told her that we would not delay much longer and that we would all go together. Mosquitoes were bothering her and one had bitten her on the leg.

At about five o'clock we put all the food into a bag, crossed the river again and set off for the city on the bicycles. Cycling in the heat was quite tiring, and the dust and dirt proved to be a nuisance. The students continued to chat to me. At one stage, while freewheeling downhill, I took off at speed and raced on ahead. The others soon caught up with me and we laughed together.

Fortunately the journey back did not take so long, and we soon reached the bridge over the river. I said goodbye to Mr Ai and his students, and Miss Liu and I returned to the apartment. By now her face was quite flushed and she was tired. We had planned to go shopping, but returned home, flopped down on the couch and rested. I offered to take Miss Liu and her husband out for a meal in a restaurant, but when her husband returned, they began to prepare an evening meal. Relations then arrived and we all sat down to eat together. As I was hungry by now, I ate well. Like yesterday, the food was cold and served with rice porridge; I demolished two bowls of the latter.

Afterwards I relaxed, for I was really feeling quite tired by now, and later Miss Liu brought me over to her brother's house for 'a bath'. I was welcomed, invited to sit down, and was given a glass of Coca Cola. A great fuss was made of their little son, who seemed to be allowed to do just what he liked. Miss Liu translated for me. I was then shown the 'bath': a hose conveying warm water to a large plastic bucket, which was balanced over a typical Chinese toilet. This was obviously considered to be quite a luxury. I thanked the husband and proceeded to give myself a good wash, including my filthy hair.

Following this, Miss Liu washed herself while I was shown photographs of the husband and wife at various scenic spots, some of which I had already visited. When Miss Liu had finished, she joined us and, after the child was bathed, we talked about children, marriage, divorce, contraceptives and so forth; the parents were very interested to hear what I had to say about attitudes to these topics in my country. Miss Liu did a great job with the translating.

Later her parents arrived and the father sat on the floor, playing with the little boy. When her parents tried to leave later, the baby kicked up such a fuss because they were leaving, that they had to sit down again. When the little boy's father distracted him shortly afterwards and brought him outside, the grandparents quietly slipped away. When the child did discover that they had gone, there was no fuss. We had great fun trying to teach the little boy a few words of English: 'How do you boo?' was his best shot. I was

surprised that the little fellow was allowed to stay up so late. However, it transpired that he had slept a lot during the day.

By now we decided that it was time to leave, and so we said good night. As the stairwell was so dark, Miss Liu's brother-in-law led me down the steps as if I was an old man, for the slippers that I was wearing were inclined to fall off my feet.

Back at Miss Liu's place, we did not stay up much longer, and went to bed. Miss Liu's husband presumably went off to his brother's place to sleep.

Monday, 5 June

Up at 8.30 this morning to discover that Miss Liu had gone to work on time. After I had washed and dressed, I went out to buy some bread. Back in the apartment, I breakfasted on some of the bread with jam, an orange, and a cup of cold tea. I then settled down to bringing my diary up to date. I was surprised when Miss Liu suddenly appeared; she had come to warn me that there had been rioting in the city centre and that at least sixty students had been killed or injured. More people were being rushed to hospital than could be cared for. She wanted to stop me from going anywhere near the city centre (I had planned to go to a performance of Sichuan Opera there today) or near a park that she had recommended, for there had been an incident at the bridge where we had been yesterday. Under these circumstances I was quite happy to stay put!

She went back to work and later returned with her husband and brother at about midday. True to form, the television was switched on as soon as they arrived. The chaos in the city centre was being covered, though the television station was showing no pictures. Instead, viewers were presented with a caption of white Chinese characters on a blue background, which I was unable to read. However, one could clearly hear a commentary over a confused commotion of shouting and gunshots.

We chatted for a while and then had lunch. After Miss Liu's brother had left, we fell to talking about rather cheerless topics, such as health problems and death. I told them about our funeral arrangements and the expenses incurred.

Later I wandered outside and crossed over to the Chengdu Hotel to see if I could buy a jacket for my mother. I had discovered that the type of jacket that she wanted was not easily obtainable here. I tried the shop at the hotel entrance, but found nothing of interest. Inside, I went to the travel office and enquired about the possibility of buying a plane ticket to Hong Kong, as this now seemed to be the safest way of leaving the country. Astonishingly, one of the young men in the office recognized me – it was Mr Gao, the man who had bought me a present when we were at the teahouse by the river two

years previously! We had a short chat and agreed to meet on the following day at midday for lunch.

I then went up to the shop on the second floor and had a look around. As it was quite an exclusive boutique, everything was expensive. I saw a very nice black jacket that would have knocked me back ¥290 FEC: rather expensive, though it was made of good quality pure silk. I decided to think about it and left. I wandered back to the apartment via the nearby market, looking at things for sale. In the apartment I continued writing and brought my diary up to date.

Next I started to write a letter home, but was interrupted by Miss Liu and her husband's return home. Again the television was switched on and the coverage of the riot continued. When I was asked what I would like to eat, I invited them out for a meal. This time they accepted and suggested the Chengdu Hotel. We were just about to leave when Miss Liu's sister arrived and chatted for a while.

We finally left at a little before seven and entered the hotel restaurant that looked out over the street. This turned out to be of a rather poor standard, and they did not have two of the dishes printed on the rather limited menu. We left and decided to try the restaurant on the third floor. On our way up, we popped into the exclusive shop to take a look at the jacket that I had spotted.

The third-floor restaurant turned out to be a very exclusive place, with a performance of traditional Chinese music for the guests. Miss Liu talked to the waitress and ordered the '*à la mode*' meal at ¥40 per head. This turned out to be a set meal of many small dishes; some good and some not so good. It included a whole crab. Despite the rather touristy set-up, I quite enjoyed the meal, for it certainly was a novel experience and a way of treating my kind hosts to a taste of luxury and decadence. The bill came to ¥135 RMB – quite expensive, but I did not mind in the least as my hosts certainly deserved it.

We returned to the apartment, passing a group of people who had gathered in the street, probably for a demonstration. When we entered the building, a bespectacled face peeped out from the darkness and I recognized Wang Lihua, now looking very pretty in a blue dress and far less nervous than she had been two years previously. I was delighted to see her again and discover that her English was so much better. I was quite alarmed to discover that she had been waiting two hours for me – she had obviously arrived just after we had left. In the apartment, Miss Liu made tea and we sat down alone and talked. She had only received my postcard two days previously, on Saturday, and had gone to the Jinjiang Hotel looking for me. She had been very disappointed at having missed me, but was delighted to

learn from her father that I had called to the family home that evening. She told me that she had moved house and now lived in another part of the city.

While we talked, Miss Liu did some housework and her husband went off to find out about a bus going to Qingcheng Mountain, for we were planning to go somewhere for a short break. Later in the evening she joined us for a while. Wang Lihua very kindly offered me an invitation to her home tomorrow, but was disappointed to discover that I would not be free all day. She explained that she was on holiday from college and had plenty of time to spare. However, we agreed to meet at three o'clock on the following afternoon. Earlier I asked her if she would like to join us on the trip to Qingcheng Mountain and she accepted.

She left at 10.30 p.m. and I told Miss Liu that I had invited Lihua to join us on the trip. Unwittingly I had complicated the proposed arrangements; however, she said that she would talk to her husband. I then retired to the sitting room to write some more of my diary. Later I went to bed, but stayed up for a while, writing a letter to my parents.

Tuesday, 6 May

I was woken by the familiar cacophony outside soon after seven o'clock, but stayed in bed until nearly eight. I breakfasted on the remainder of my bread, jam, tea, and a bowl of hot milk prepared by Lihua's grandmother. I then ambled over to the Chengdu Hotel, where I did some shopping. I got some more money in the bank, made another attempt to buy a plane ticket to Hong Kong but did not get very far with it, bought the jacket for my mother, and purchased a small bottle of French perfume for Wang Lihua.

Afterwards, I returned to the apartment in spitting rain, left my shopping there, and collected a packet of linen handkerchiefs for Miss Li (the young lady whom Miss Liu had begged me to be wary of). I then hurried back to the hotel where, shortly after 10.30, a thin girl with short hair and spectacles approached me, clutching several parcels. She greeted me; it was Miss Li, who now looked completely different from what I had remembered two years previously.

I quickly discovered that communication was difficult, for she had not spoken English for a long time; she now found it hard to express herself and understand what I was saying. Her manner was very strange and I just could not warm to her. A friend of hers was supposed to join us, but did not turn up. She tried to telephone her friend, but got young Mr Gao in the hotel instead. We met him upstairs; he rang the friend who, it turned out, was busy reporting on the student unrest in the city centre. While we were talking, there was a commotion outside and everyone ran to the window. We saw truckloads of soldiers being driven around the nearby roundabout and heading back the way that they had come. I learned that a gang of students

had run amok in the Jinjiang Hotel and had smashed up the reception area. It was just as well that I was not still staying there! Many people were now afraid to stay in the city centre and had moved to this hotel.

At this stage, Mr Gao excused himself and returned to work. Miss Li and I went down to the bar and continued our lifeless conversation. It was immediately obvious to me that this young lady could be a nuisance: she had learned about my movements and wanted to come on the excursion that was being planned, though she admitted to being busy at the moment. By now she had changed her job and would be working somewhere else – hence the telegram asking me to come here first. (I later learned that she had to change her job because of what she had done. She had stayed away from work at one stage and had obviously undergone a change of personality, losing weight in the process.) By now she had lost much of her former confidence; every now and then she would sigh and then resume the conversation. Miss Liu had told me that she felt very sorry for her, as she was such a kind person. This proved to be just the case, for all the parcels that she had were for me. I felt very embarrassed about taking them, for all I had for her was the rather battered box of Irish linen handkerchiefs.

At midday we left the bar and met Mr Gao in the hotel lobby. We walked to a restaurant outside and had quite a good lunch of local specialities. Mr Gao turned out to be an unusually pleasant young man with impeccable manners. After the lunch I paid half the bill and we returned to the lobby, where we chatted for a little while. At two o'clock, Mr Gao brought me back up to the CITS office and made arrangements for my plane ticket. Again, there were complications as tickets were only sold five days before the flight. He photocopied my passport and I gave him a ¥30 FEC deposit for my ticket.

I thanked Mr Gao for all his help and returned to Miss Li downstairs, where we chatted for a little longer. I now gave her a bottle of the French perfume, which I had bought while I was upstairs. I felt a little better for having done this. Shortly afterwards I walked with her to a nearby junction and said goodbye to her.

I then returned to the apartment, where I spruced myself up. Just before three o'clock I went out to meet Wang Lihua, who turned up a little later, with apologies. We set off on our bicycles and, avoiding the city centre, made our way to her apartment, which was not far from where all the trouble was. I followed her to a typically run-down apartment block. We parked the bikes in a dark hall, climbed up a wooden staircase and arrived at the two-room apartment. The bigger room, which contained a double bed, belonged to Lihua's sister; the smaller room was Lihua's. We were greeted on the landing by her neighbours: a pleasant lady and her young daughter.

Lihua now brought me into a living room, which I presumed belonged to the lady, and invited me to sit down. She served tea and began to chat to me. After I had given her the bottle of perfume, she showed me a blue cotton scarf that she had made and asked me if I knew how she had made it; I guessed correctly that she had used the tie-dyeing method. Her design depicted ladies of ancient China and it was quite skilfully done.

Later she brought me into her bedroom, showed me a little blouse and skirt made for a baby girl, and asked me if I liked it. She told me that she enjoyed making clothes for children, and that she wanted me to bring this home for the daughter of one of our friends. I was quite touched by this. She then showed me some designs of women wearing various costumes, made of material and thin aeroboard, and asked me to choose the one that I liked the best. When I had done so, she asked me to take it as a present. Lihua may have been a little old-fashioned in her ways, but she seemed to be a very kind and talented young lady. We then looked at some postcards that depicted Chinese paintings, and had quite a deep and interesting conversation about art, perspective, focal points, and vanishing points.

Back in the living room we looked at her two albums of photographs and she explained each one in detail. Later, the lady whom we had met earlier and who had been preparing a meal, told us that a meal was ready and so we reorganized the room a little with the help of her husband. A selection of excellent dishes was then placed before us and a small bottle of Chinese red wine was opened. Lihua poured most of it into my glass and just took a little for herself. The little girl, who had been fiddling with some of her food using her fingers (Lihua and I had tried to restrain her), now behaved herself and ate properly, using her chopsticks. When she had eaten enough, she left.

We dined at a relaxed pace and I answered the questions put to me by the lady and her husband, which Lihua translated with little or no bother. We discussed various interesting topics. I let them know that I was enjoying the meal and thanked them very much for it. I noticed that the lady and her husband ate large bowls of rice, but did not offer any to Lihua or me. I supposed that this was their way of filling themselves and allowing us to enjoy the delicacies. The two items that I praised the most were the eggs that the lady had prepared and some sweet rice cakes that were offered to me later. I made a big blunder at one point: when the lady presented me with a bowl of soup, holding it in both her hands as a mark of respect, I absent-mindedly took it from her with just one hand. When I had realized that I had made the mistake, I apologized profusely. Fortunately they were not offended, for Lihua explained that foreigners were unfamiliar with their customs.

When we had finished eating, an attempt was made to clear the table, but Lihua stopped the husband and wife as she considered that it was more

informal to sit at the dinner table as it was. However, they did clear everything away later while Lihua and I continued to talk. When she began to expand on some erudite topic, I began to feel very drowsy and found it difficult to concentrate – no doubt the wine was having an effect on me. She spotted me nodding off and, realizing that I was no longer taking in what she was saying, wound up the conversation. We then folded up the table and chairs and, after a short while, decided to leave. The couple thought it best for me to return before it got dark.

We said goodbye to them, and I thanked them for their kind hospitality. Lihua and I collected our bicycles and set off towards Miss Liu's home. Out in the fresh air I now felt more alert. It did not take us too long to complete the journey. Lihua admitted to feeling quite tired this afternoon before she collected me, which probably explained why she had been late.

Back at the apartment I invited her in to see if there was any further news of the proposed trip on the following day, but as Miss Liu's husband had not yet returned, there was little that could be done. Lihua stayed for a while, refused to let me photograph her as she was tired, then left. After she had gone, Miss Liu and I went to her brother's apartment, where we both had a 'bath'. While Miss Liu washed herself, I played on the little boy's toy piano.

After I had washed, a man arrived and joined us. I chatted to him and Lihua's sister-in-law until Lihua decided that it was time for us to return home. This we did, and I began to prepare for tomorrow's journey to Qingcheng Mountain. Finally I went to bed, where I wrote a little of my diary, then fell asleep. An interesting day.