

## 11 – CHENGDU AND AROUND

Wednesday, 7 May

This morning I was woken at eight by Miss Liu and given a breakfast of milk and a soft-boiled egg, which proved to be very tricky to eat, as it was so runny. Afterwards, we prepared ourselves for our trip to Qingcheng Mountain. When we left the apartment block at about 9.30, the bicycle that had been borrowed from Miss Liu's sister-in-law was nowhere to be found. Because it had not been put in the shed and had been left outside, it had obviously been stolen. On discovering this, Miss Liu became understandably quite upset. She managed to borrow another bicycle and off we set.

Avoiding the city centre, we headed for the Ximen (West Gate) bus station at an easy pace. When we arrived there, we discovered that none of the regular buses were running because of the demonstrations. En route we had noticed a lack of buses on the roads; in fact, this should have come as no surprise as we had seen several of them being burned when watching television. After Miss Liu's husband made enquiries about travelling by minibus, we hauled our bicycles up a staircase to a friend's apartment, where we were able to leave them for the duration of our trip.

Out on the street again, we found a minibus and scrambled inside. Very soon the little vehicle was full. Tickets cost ¥3 each; as I was running short of ordinary RMB, I let Miss Liu's husband pay.

It was not long before we were off and bumping along the road. Miss Liu sat beside me, asking questions and practising her English. The journey in the old minibus was not without incident; en route a policeman stopped us and the engine refused to start after he had finished with us. Fortunately we got going again when the policeman was distracted and some of the people got out and pushed the vehicle. On approaching the town of Guanxian, we were stopped again, this time by a soldier, who then had to lend a hand by pushing the bus. However, this time it refused to start, and we had to complete the journey in traditional pedicabs. The fact that we had actually made the journey here from Chengdu was something of a miracle.

Guanxian turned out to be a scruffy town in the middle of nowhere. We made our way to a restaurant for lunch, which we ate while waiting for an ordinary bus bound for the mountain to fill up. The food was basic but welcome. Here I was able to observe peasant Chinese people and some interesting old folk. During the meal I espied an old man with a wispy beard

and long hair tied up in a bun on the top of his head; the bun protruded from a hat made of cloth. I was stared at quite a lot, for I was the only *wàiguó rén* (foreigner) in the town.

After lunch, which Miss Liu's husband paid for, we clambered aboard the bus with other people. As we drove away from the town, mountains loomed out of the mist and the scenery became more interesting. As Miss Liu continued to chat and I was given a portable cassette tape machine to listen to a selection of jazzed-up classical music, I had little time to admire the scenery, which became quite dramatic as we rose up into the lush, green mountains. They looked very much like the mountains depicted in classical Chinese paintings.



*Qingcheng Mountain, Sichuan*

Soon we arrived at a small touristy village clinging to the side of what I presumed was Qingcheng Mountain. However, we continued driving and made our way around to the other side – a journey that brought us through even more dramatic wild scenery while we slowly gained altitude. At one spot the road was very rough and the bus bounced up and down violently.

Finally, after crossing a bridge where we had to buy an admission ticket, we arrived at another touristy village. Having asked the way, we now set off on foot along a pathway. Here the scenery was pleasant and the houses were old and traditional. It was so pleasant to leave the noise and bustle of the city and go walking in such peaceful countryside. However, the silence that we should have relished was broken by music from the cassette recorder, which Miss Liu's husband was enjoying. It had become obvious to me that Chinese people dreaded silence. I was shocked by the amount of sweet papers and other rubbish that both of my companions dropped on the ground. Miss Liu realized that littering the countryside was not the right

thing to do but, as everyone dropped litter here, she said, 'When in Rome, do as the Romans do.' I was not impressed.

Our path crossed a river that we had been skirting and, after a little while, turned into stone steps that wound up the mountainside. We now followed the course of a stream in a narrow gorge which, at various points, cascaded downwards in a series of small waterfalls. The rough steps were difficult to negotiate at places and the going was pretty tough. My companions had no difficulty in climbing, but as I was not very fit after my recent indisposition, I became tired quickly and lagged behind. Miss Liu's husband noticed my slowness and insisted on carrying some of my luggage.



*Qingcheng Mountain, Sichuan*

Up and up we went, stopping at various pavilions and places to rest, eat and drink something. Although the sun had disappeared behind the thick bank of clouds normal in this region, it was still quite hot and humid, causing me to sweat profusely. We passed various beauty spots and, of more interest to me, little villages of quaint wooden buildings: shops, teahouses, restaurants and lodgings. It was all quite charming.

The birdsong up here was quite unusual; I had never heard birds like them before. One type of bird had a curious song that started like a note being played backwards on a tape recorder, followed by three pairs of rapid notes. At one stage we heard the call of a cuckoo, which reminded me that I had heard cuckoos when I had been at Tian Chi near Ürümqi. We also saw many unusual coloured butterflies and some black flying insects that I was unable to identify – they may have been moths. On the ground we saw lizards and, in the villages, 'ban-ban fish', which turned out to be frogs. No doubt these creatures, along with eels, would be sold and eaten as delicacies.

Various trees were also pointed out to me, but of course my companions did not know the names in English. Apparently, one species was very old – older than the panda, I was told.

At around six o'clock we reached a little village and asked directions for the next place, where we intended to find lodgings and stay the night. The locals, of course, wanted us to stay in this particular village and tried to dissuade us from going any farther. When we discovered that the way was blocked (as they had told us), and that the only other alternative was to proceed by taking a long detour, we decided to return to the village we had left and stay there overnight. A lady led us up to a couple of very clean little rooms in a wooden guest house, each one containing two small beds. After we had rested for a short while, we walked down to the restaurant, where we ate a combination of our own food (bread and jam with a can of soft drink) and food from the restaurant. We ordered rice and a dish containing pork and bamboo shoots, which was quite tasty.

Back in our lodgings, the lady gave us bowls of hot water for washing ourselves. After a good scrub I felt greatly refreshed. I then asked my companions to teach me some phrases in the Chengdu dialect, which I wrote down as best as I could. I got the impression that they used more tones than standard Mandarin Chinese. Unsurprisingly, the locals here spoke yet another dialect.

During the evening, the television was switched on and we were able to watch several news bulletins. By now the situation in Beijing, Chengdu and other cities across the country had got quite out of control: students and gangsters were burning vehicles, breaking shop windows, and creating havoc everywhere. Pictures were shown of the military, but not of them shooting at the people, which obviously was the cause of all this chaos. Two young men who sat with us, playing mah-jong, had fled from their university and had made for the mountains; they did not dare return to their college for the time being.

In the meantime, mosquitoes had appeared and I lent Miss You my insect repellent. She then got our rooms changed to ones with nets. These new rooms were not quite as good as the ones that we had been given, but they were comfortable enough. We later retired to our sleeping quarters but, as there was so much noise from downstairs, I sat up writing my diary for some time before going asleep.

Thursday, 8 June

Miss Liu called me at eight and shortly afterwards I joined her and her husband downstairs for a breakfast of rice porridge and pork with bamboo shoots. Again, we were given bowls of water for washing ourselves. Before we left, I took a photo of the lady, her husband in the kitchen and the old

grandmother, who was eating. They all seemed to be very nice people and they took a great interest in me, the foreigner. It seemed that not many foreigners came to this region. We had come at a good time, for there were very few people about on account of the student demonstrations and rioting. I was told that the place was quite often crowded.



*Qingcheng Mountain, Sichuan*

We now set off and took the enforced detour, which involved a steep climb up and around a hill. At first I felt fine, but soon got tired. We passed several caves, some containing rather gaudy statues of Daoist deities. This morning we heard the song of another unfamiliar bird; it sounded like a cuckoo but contained a repeated pattern of four notes. At one point we spotted a green lizard just after one of us accidentally stepped on it; fortunately it managed to escape. After we had climbed down from some uninteresting caves, my companions bought some sticks of bamboo, which were put in my bag.

Going uphill had been rather tiring, but now we began to descend. Despite this, I soon felt exhausted and weak, and had to keep stopping for short rests. At times I felt quite dizzy. The other two went on at full speed, especially Miss Liu, who had no luggage to carry.

The journey down the mountain seemed to be interminable, but at last we reached the village where we had arrived. By now I felt absolutely exhausted. We found a minibus that was about to leave for Guanxian and hopped on board. We were all tired now; once we got going I dozed for a while. It was much hotter at this lower altitude after the relative coolness up

in the mountains. I was quite hungry by this stage and was looking forward to a good lunch.

When we arrived at Guanxian, the sun was shining. We walked to a house belonging to another friend of Miss Liu's husband, in which we were allowed to store our luggage. The people living there very kindly brought us indoors, sat us down and gave us something to drink. We chatted to them for a few minutes, then went back out to the street. Here we found a small restaurant and ordered a late lunch of noodles and dumplings. Refreshed, we then caught the number one bus to the Dujiangyan Irrigation Scheme, which I knew about but had not visited. According to my guide book, this was 'a remarkable achievement for its time.' Begun in 256 BC by Li Bing, a local governor, its function was to 'control the capricious flow of the mighty Min river'.

The entrance to this area was guarded by soldiers with guns. Inside, we walked through a park containing temples, most of which were dedicated to Li Bing and his son, who had continued building his father's irrigation scheme. Most of these temples looked rather gaudy; my impression was that they had been built fairly recently. Fortunately the path to the river was downhill, but once again we had to negotiate a lot of steps. Near the river we found the Two Kings Temple and several small tourist stalls.



*Dujiangyan Irrigation Scheme, Sichuan*

We now made our way across a suspension bridge, which I found a little unnerving to negotiate, especially with the water rushing furiously past far below. At the end of the bridge we arrived at an island in the middle of the river. We now made our way to the far side of the island to take a look at the large modern dam that had been constructed in recent times. In such dramatic surroundings, it was quite an eyesore.

From here, we crossed the river again and made our way back towards the town along this side of the river. We had to hire a pedicab to get across a flooded part of the bank; I kept well out of the way while my companions bargained about the price. This was the advantage of having Chinese companions who could pay for me, for they were able to purchase things at the correct local prices. After the pedicab driver had brought us over the flooded stretch, we discovered that there was another one ahead. The crafty



*Dujiang River, Sichuan*

fellow had not told us about this one, and so my companions had to bargain again and pay more. We were finally left at a small park, which we now entered for a small fee. As I had been spotted this time, my entrance fee was doubled. Inside the rather uninteresting park I found a stall selling polished marble balls – the type that a musical friend of mine had recommended for a group of fellow musicians. Although a pair of balls cost ¥3.50 and the lady would not reduce her price, I bought six pairs. The price was reasonable; the only problem was the weight! I carried them at first, then Miss Liu's husband carried them the rest of the way. We now walked back to Guanxian, following the river. At one point we stopped to eat some delicious pancakes.

Back in the friends' house, we relaxed and had something to drink. As I felt quite tired by now, I was inclined to fall asleep. We finally picked up our bags, said goodbye and left. The lady followed us out into the street and we found it hard to stop her walking to the bus with us.

At the bus station we found an old bus marked 'Chengdu', but not many people were on board. I sat inside it while my companions looked for a minibus. Having failed to find one, they returned and we waited until the bus finally made a move. As we were by now too tired to talk, the journey felt long and tedious.

We finally reached Chengdu and went to the friends' apartment to collect our bicycles; before setting off on them, we rested over a drink and watched the news on a high-class Toshiba television set. We then cycled to the apartment of Miss Liu's parents-in-law, where we would be able to have a good wash. The place was not far away; although quite palatial, the apartment was sparsely furnished. Here the rooms were large and there were three bedrooms. An electric fan was mounted on the living room ceiling, and there was a western bathroom. The relative luxury of the apartment no doubt reflected the husband's position in the Chengdu Medical College. I relaxed over a drink and watched television while Miss Liu had a shower. My turn was next. The water was luke warm at first; after I had washed my hair it became quite cold.

After Miss Liu's husband had finished washing, we were given sweet rice cakes and eggs in honour of the Dragon Boat Festival. We then set off homewards. I was surprised that we went via the main street, Renmin Nan Lu. All seemed to be quiet here, but a little farther on we saw some people gathered in the street and two police cars. There was a definite feeling of tension in the air. At a crossroads nearby we saw a burnt-out army jeep. There were cyclists in the area, but no vehicular traffic.

We soon arrived home, tired and weary. Miss Liu asked me if I would like some noodles and I said yes, but only if she were making some for herself and her husband. When I discovered that she had just cooked some for me, I was very annoyed at having put her to so much trouble. I now tried to find out how much money they had spent over the last couple of days, but they would accept nothing from me. I finally got them to agree to accepting something if I could get my hands on some ordinary RMB cash.

I retired to bed at about midnight, exhausted, looked through the rather erotic magazine that I had found on arrival, then fell fast asleep.

Friday, 9 June

When I woke at 8.30 this morning, I discovered that my legs were very stiff after all the clambering up and down the mountain. I went out to buy some bread and sat down to a breakfast of that and some hot milk supplied by the grandmother. I then spent a relaxing morning writing my diary. Later Miss Liu's husband arrived and I learned from him that he had spent ¥120 over the last two days – quite a lot.

Miss Liu returned home from work for the day at 12.30 and gave me a letter from home. In it my parents told me of the latest news; as they had seen pictures of the massacre in Tiananmen Square on television, they were naturally concerned about me. Included was a letter that Miss Liu had written to me, and a letter from a young man whom I had met in Lanzhou during this trip. Miss Liu also gave me a message: a lad we had met on the way to

Qingcheng Mountain the other day, whom I had initially encountered two years previously when I had been here, wanted to make some arrangement so that he could meet me. Miss Liu said that she would ring him.

Later we sat down to a tasty lunch and made plans for the afternoon. Afterwards, Miss Liu and her husband went off somewhere and I finished writing my diary.

At about three o'clock I crossed over to the Chengdu Hotel and changed \$100 into FECs. Mr Gao was at the desk and asked me to read and correct the English on a new drinks menu for a bar that would be opened later in the year. We then went upstairs to his office, where I paid for my plane ticket.

I then returned to the apartment and waited for Miss Liu, and together we set off on our bikes for the Jinjiang Hotel. The main street, Renmin Nan Lu, looked the same as usual, except for some broken windows here and there. Miss Liu left me at the CAAC office and I went on alone. The Jinjiang Hotel looked rather closed up and there were several policemen standing outside the entrance. I could see no money changers around, but suddenly a seller of soft drinks called me to one side. As his rate of exchange was good enough, I changed ¥550 FEC into ¥935 RMB – plenty to keep me going!

I then met Miss Liu at the CAAC office and together we cycled off to do some shopping. First of all we bought a cassette tape of some typical Chinese pop music, which cost just ¥7.50 RMB. Next we went to an arts shop, where we just looked around, then ambled into a so-called 'antique' shop, where I bought a couple of cheap necklaces and two scented sandalwood fans. We then headed homewards; we stopped at a shop that sold silk clothes, but found it closed. En route we passed the Chairman Mao statue, which by now had been cleared of students. Scattered about were the remains of several burnt vehicles, including buses. Earlier we had noticed that the large People's Market was now a sorry, smouldering mess. We then saw more burnt shops and buildings.

As we were soon to meet the young man whom I met two years previously, we now hurried back to the apartment, stopping briefly to buy a pair of cotton socks. Miss Liu also bought a colourful bunch of not very fresh flowers for just 30 *fen*. Back at the apartment we joined Miss Liu's husband and walked over to the Chengdu Hotel at 6.30 p.m., as arranged. We waited for a while and chatted to Mr Gao, but there was no sign of the young man. As the messages today had been rather confused, I was not too surprised.

I then persuaded Miss Liu and her husband to have dinner in the restaurant beside the hotel and after a while they agreed. We had quite a good meal, and afterwards I chatted to a girl who I thought was American, but was in fact Austrian. Although she did not have a word of Chinese, she expected the waitresses to understand her. She had obviously organized her tour with CITS, for everything was planned for her, including rather

expensive guides. She had a video camera with her and I asked her if she had filmed any of the riots; as she had only arrived on the previous day, she had not.

At this point Miss Liu interrupted our conversation and indicated that it was time to leave. Fortunately the girl also had to go. I was then horrified to discover that Miss Liu and her husband had paid the bill and refused to tell me how much it had cost. Earlier I had insisted that they take the ¥120 RMB from me: the amount spent over the last two days. It seemed that they were now trying to undo this.

We left and took a detour through the small market nearby, where I bought a cigarette lighter for Miss Liu's brother and some underwear for myself. Afterwards we went to the brother's place for a wash, but there was nobody at home. On our way out of the residential area, a man said hello to me and asked if we could have a chat. I started to talk with him but once again was interrupted by Miss Liu, who said that they had invited somebody to their apartment who wanted to meet me. I got the distinct impression that this explanation had been made up on the spur of the moment, for now there was an urgency that did not fit in with our leisurely walk over to the brother's place. Needless to say, the friend never turned up. Obviously she did not want me to speak to the man for some reason.

We returned to the apartment, where I had a simple wash and were just about to do something when Wang Lihua arrived. She had called the previous evening, but we had not been at home. We sat down to chat, Miss Liu brought us tea, and we made plans for tomorrow. She would come shopping with me and we would buy tickets for a journey to Jiuzhai Valley. We looked at a map to figure out where we could go and what we could do. Later, when Miss Liu had retired to bed, I talked to Lihua about the student unrest, which she had observed first hand, and then asked her about her views on Tibet. It seemed to me that she had far more sympathy for and interest in the Tibetans than most Chinese people. Lihua told me about a recent incident that had happened in Chengdu when somebody – possibly a Tibetan – had torn down a communist slogan and had taken a photograph of it placed on a toilet. She spoke out strongly about the corruption within the government; she was quite disgusted by it and blamed most of China's problems on it. She also criticized wealthy Chinese people who liked to order huge meals and leave much of it uneaten; she believed this to be disgraceful considering that they were living in a country where food and money were often scarce. I realized that this young lady was certainly able to think for herself.

She left at about eleven o'clock and I went downstairs with her, lighting the way with my torch. After we said goodbye, I returned to the apartment, where I wrote a postcard to a friend at home. I was about to write a birthday

card for the girl I met in Lanzhou, but discovered that I had mislaid her address. This turned out to be a blessing in disguise, for I had forgotten the date of the birthday, which in fact had been today.

I then retired to bed, where I sat up until late writing my diary. I had appreciated this day of relative idleness, for my legs had been stiff and painful after our trip up the mountain.

Saturday, 10 June

This morning I woke early and got up at a little after seven o'clock. First of all I washed myself and then some clothes; afterwards I breakfasted on bread with milk and eggs supplied by grandma. As I had some time to spare afterwards, I washed my small daypack. At nine I walked over to the Chengdu Hotel, where I posted my card and, in the shop, bought a small bottle of perfume for Lihua's kind neighbour, some soap for myself, and (most importantly) a new bicycle for Miss Liu, which cost just ¥340 – about £37.

Back at the apartment block, I carried the bike up the stairs and left it on the balcony, much to Miss Liu's husband's surprise. I then collected some bits and pieces and cycled off to the Commercial Market, where I met Lihua at ten o'clock. Together we went off shopping; I bought a tape of Chinese music in the Foreign Languages Bookstore, and looked at some cushion covers, but the one that I liked the best was very dirty.

We then walked up another street, where we looked in more shops. Here I bought some pretty fans and then – miraculously – two pairs of genuine cotton shoes. In one of the shops, Lihua could not get the attention of a saleswoman behind a counter, who was busy talking to a colleague, and had to pull at her sleeve in order to ask her for something. After our shopping we stopped for a basic, though filling, lunch of dumplings and other delicacies in a nearby restaurant.

When we had finished eating, we collected the bikes and cycled to a small shop selling articles made of silk, but there was little of interest to be found. Following this we got some information about travelling to Jiuzhai Valley, but discovered that there would be no bus until Monday. We were told that a bus would be leaving on the following morning, but there was no guarantee that it would return within six days. Having heard all this, we decided to abandon this plan and travel to the famous and popular Mount Emei instead. We then cycled to the Nanmen bus station, near the Traffic Hotel, and after a short wait, Lihua emerged clutching two tickets at only ¥5 each.

We now set off for Lihua's home, but stopped at the big building behind the Chairman Mao statue, where I finally succeeded in buying a couple of silk

vests. The building was full of shops selling various types of silk garments, along with clothes made from other materials.

As Lihua was meeting somebody at three o'clock, we arrived at her apartment at that time. The man, who wanted to look at some dresses that Lihua had made, arrived much later. In the meantime we sat down and chatted over tea, buns, sunflower seeds and peanuts.

The man duly arrived and, after he had left, we continued a conversation that we had started earlier about love, marriage, relationships and so forth. Lihua gave me a very interesting insight into the Chinese class structure and how it operated, especially when couples decided to get married. All sorts of things were considered, such as the quality of the unit that one worked for, the money that one earned, and the quality of life that the person in question had. Love and romance were not the only considerations. All the various classes kept to themselves and never moved into higher or lower circles. I found all this quite fascinating. I told Lihua a lot about myself and she told me that I was being very frank – more so than most Chinese people. I realized that she had analysed and assessed her own people in a very perceptive manner, and was an astute observer. Interestingly, we both shared similar views. She told me why she still had not managed to marry and why she found it so difficult for her to do so. I told her about a recent relationship that I had had with a lady of about my own age in Ireland, which she seemed to want to know about.

We continued to chat in this vein, still munching the sunflower seeds, until her brother-in-law brought in an excellent meal. I was now introduced to Lihua's younger sister, who did not look like her at all and had little to say. I ate as much as I could, but soon had to stop.

Later we excused ourselves and cycled back to Miss Liu's apartment. She and her husband came in soon after we arrived and Miss Liu asked me how much the new bicycle had cost. I refused to tell her. I went with her and her husband over to her brother's place in order to wash but once again nobody was at home.

Instead, I had a quick wash in the apartment, packed my daypack for tomorrow and, having said goodbye, set off again by bike to Lihua's apartment, where I would stay the night. It started to rain but, as soon as I put on my raincoat, it stopped.

Back at the apartment, Lihua showed me into her room, made me feel at home, refused to let me carry the bikes upstairs and, after she had taken out some clothes, said goodnight and went off to her parents' home. I reorganized my luggage in order to make more space in my bag, wrote my diary, and finally retired to bed in the rather hot little room.