

12 – EMEI MOUNTAIN

Back in 1977, when I had been studying Chinese at University College Dublin, Professor Tao Kiang had introduced us to a short poem, *The Song of Mount Emei's Moon*, by the Tang dynasty poet Li Bai (or Li Bo), AD 701–762. Like a Chinese sketch rapidly painted with a few deft strokes of a brush, using just black ink, it is a perfect example of poetic minimalism; only the essential words are supplied and the reader must use his or her imagination to fill in the details. This is what Li Bai wrote about the sadness of departing from Sichuan's most famous mountain:

峨眉山月半轮秋
影入平羌江水流。
夜发清溪向三峡
思君不见下渝州。

É Méi Shān yuè bàn lún qiū
Yǐng rù Píng Qiáng jiāng shuǐ liú.
Yè fā Qīng Xī xiàng Sān Xiá
Sī jūn bú jiàn xià Yú Zhōu.

Mount Emei's autumn half moon
Reflected in the Pingqiang River currents.
Last night I started at Clear Stream, moving towards
the Three Gorges;
I think of, but do not see you below Yuzhou.

Having been acquainted for some time with the celebrated Emei Mountain featured in this short poem, I was now interested to see it for real.

I found it very difficult to sleep in Lihua's bedroom because of the heat, and also because of the noise in the street outside. As I could not get the lamp beside the bed to work, I was unable to read. The night passed slowly and eventually I managed to drift off to sleep. However, I woke early and was washed and dressed by the time Lihua arrived. She too had slept badly because she had been worrying about me and had dreamt that we had arrived at the bus station an hour late.

I managed to fit some of Lihua's things into my rucksack, and as soon as we were ready we left and walked along the dark streets. Even though it was after seven o'clock, there were very few people about and hardly any buses. Rather than waste time waiting for a local bus, we continued walking and reached the bus station with about ten minutes to spare. We then had to find our bus; after asking a couple of people, we eventually located it. I was surprised that so few people were on board. We sat down beside a middle-aged woman (as usual, it was three to a seat here) and almost immediately the bus sped off through the outskirts of the city. The conductor was quite friendly towards us and showed us an interesting book that had been published, which outlined the truth about the student demonstrations. Although the publication was banned, the man promised to get me a copy. He also had a magazine that contained good articles about the situation; he said that he would procure a copy for me.

Lihua and I talked for a while, but later Lihua began to feel sleepy and started to doze. I tried to rest, but the noise of the bus and its horn was far too loud for my comfort. After a while, Lihua opened her eyes and, with a smile, coyly asked me if she could put her head on my shoulder. Never one to refuse a young lady such a pleasing favour, I readily granted her permission and she snuggled up to me. The woman sitting beside her looked seriously displeased. Later, when the bus stopped to let more people on, our hands met and we spent the rest of the journey hand in hand. Our emotions now stirred, we continually gazed into each others' eyes. Despite her gentle mockery (she liked to repeat my overused expressions), I had developed great admiration for this intelligent young lady and by now had quite warmed to her. I detected that she was more relaxed now that we had left her hometown far behind. However, I suspected that the people on the bus wondered what we were up to!

Most of the journey was uninteresting as regards scenery (though by now I was paying little attention to it), but when we neared the mountains, paddy fields appeared and everything looked green and lush. At last I managed to doze for a while.

The bus took about four hours to reach its destination: a small, scruffy town. After the conductor had given his details to Lihua, we walked to a nearby restaurant, where we had a good meal; having eaten no breakfast, we were both hungry.

We relaxed after eating and chatted a little, then went outside to find a little three-wheeled taxi that would bring us to the foot of the mountain, as this was the quickest way to reach it. All the drivers wanted our custom and so, after a little bargaining, we selected one for ¥3 each. Once in the privacy of the little taxi, we kissed and cuddled (much to the amusement of some

lorry drivers behind) until we reached a very commercialized village that served as a starting point for Mount Emei.

Having bought a map of the route, asked for directions and bought some food (including sunflower seeds), we set off. We passed some beggars and soon arrived at a Buddhist temple, from which emerged a number of elderly women pilgrims. This was another welcome glimpse of old China and its traditions. We bought tickets to see inside; although interesting, it looked like so many other temples of its type.

After we left, we began the ascent, but ended back at the temple. Confused, we asked for directions and found ourselves having to take a more rugged path. We then discovered that we would both have to buy tickets to climb the mountain. This place was a real tourist trap!



Ascending Mount Emei, Sichuan province

The hard work now began as we tackled the steep steps up the famous mountain. This place turned out to be not as interesting as Qingcheng

Mountain, although much of the scenery was similar. As we walked, we sometimes held hands or else went arm in arm. Later a fellow from a hotel, which we learned was farther up the mountain, joined us. He proved to be quite a nuisance and I wished that he would go away. After a while he went ahead and so we had a little more privacy.

We stopped once or twice to rest or have something to drink, but in general kept moving despite the fact that the ascent was tiring. When we were not out of breath, we talked about various topics of interest. I was now learning quite a lot about Chinese society and life from this young lady. She told me a couple of her pet names; one of them, *Láo Wǔ*, had been bestowed upon her by her family. She hated this one, for it meant 'Old Number Five' – referring to the fact that she was the fifth child in the family.

At last, after a walk of about two or three hours, we arrived at a rather dreary-looking converted monastery, now a hotel. The staff were not at all pleasant and there seemed to be countless rules and regulations for foreign guests. As I felt that ¥12 for a single room in this filthy place was excessive, I asked if I could stay in a room containing three beds for ¥5 – my intention was to share it with others. However, I was not satisfied with the standard of the rooms and went outside to look at some nearby chalets that looked a good deal cleaner. There seemed to be no problem for a foreigner like me staying in one of these little places, but when Lihua joined me to have a look, the man in the big hotel where we had been came with us and obviously told the owner of the chalets that we could not stay in his chalets. We therefore got a polite refusal.

Trapped, we returned to the grim lodgings in the monastery, where we were now informed that we could share a double room for just ¥5 per person. As Lihua was not against this idea (though I was surprised that we had been allowed to share a room), we were brought first to a room with a double bed and then, at our request, to a room with two beds. We noticed that it was not very clean, and that the mosquito nets contained large holes.

The fellow then brought Lihua to another room, which he showed her in case there might be trouble from the police, who came to the hotel every evening. Lihua did not like the sound of this and also did not care for the man who had showed us the rooms. I could see that she was uneasy. I, like her, did not like this place at all. However, we decided to take the rooms.

We then went off to wash – quite a complicated procedure in this primitive place. I washed a shirt and had quite a lot of trouble getting a hanger to put it on. Lihua had quite a long argument with the uncooperative members of the staff.

Annoyed by the situation in which we now found ourselves, we went outside in the drizzling rain to a nearby restaurant in order to have a meal. We ate well and Lihua pointed out a small matter of table manners that I had

not known about: one was always supposed to hold a rice bowl when eating from it. Lihua was very much aware of the lack of manners among her own people, such as belching after meals and throwing litter on the ground. She realized that there was a huge difference between the peasant and educated classes.

After the meal, which I paid for, we walked back to our dismal hotel and, in the privacy of the double room, spent the rest of the evening very pleasantly in each other's arms. Later, when it got late and it was time to go to bed, Lihua expressed her fears about sleeping in the other room on her own. As all seemed to be quiet, I allowed her to stay with me. We both stripped down to our briefs and Lihua got into one of the beds, making room for me. I then opened the door, pulled the string outside to turn off the light, went back in, locked the door, and slipped into the bed with her. Just as we were kissing each other goodnight, the light was switched back on again, there were shouts from without, the door was hammered, and – *crash!* – the window between the two beds was smashed, the curtain pushed back, and a man's head appeared, turned towards us. The men in the corridor demanded that we open the door (or so I guessed, for everything was in Chinese). I sprang out of the bed, terrified, and Lihua sat up, started to put her clothes back on, and told the men to wait while she was dressing.

When she was ready, I unbolted the door. Two policemen with torches marched in, signalled to me to stand aside, and roughly hauled Lihua out. I was worried stiff about the poor girl and sat on the edge of the other bed, quaking and wondering what these merciless policemen would do with her. I realized immediately that she was in big trouble. I looked out the window – or rather what was left of it – and saw her sitting in an office, being interrogated. I felt such a fool and wished that I had been more strict with her; either she should have gone to the other bedroom or we should have used both beds. Now I understood why the light switches in these Chinese hotels were outside the rooms rather than inside.

As I could not sleep and let these brutal policemen treat Lihua in such an unreasonable manner, I dressed and went outside to see what was happening. I wandered over to the office and caught a glimpse of the frightened girl writing either a confession or the details of what had happened. I sat down nearby and refused a request by one of the policemen to go to bed. He showed a little bit of mercy by lending me a jacket to wear.

The talking and writing went on long into the night and I began to doze. Eventually poor Lihua emerged from the office, looking quite shaken. She was surprised to see me. I felt that she was under tremendous pressure and could only say what she was allowed to say to me: 'Don't worry – no matter – go to bed'. At first I stayed put and then, as the police began to ask me

details about Lihua's address, which I did not know, I decided not to complicate matters, and returned to my room.

This surely had to be one of the craziest days in China so far: it was a bitter ending to what could have been one of the most satisfying journeys that I had ever made. I cursed myself for coming here, for agreeing to travel to this godforsaken place, and for causing Lihua so much misery.

Monday, 12 June

Having slept badly, I was woken by noises outside. I peeped out the window and saw Lihua who, looking the worse for wear, was about to perform her morning ablutions. She was accompanied to the washroom, escorted back, and was made sit down again for more questioning. As she had told me that she would not be able to see me this morning, I was curious to see what would happen. I went out to use the toilet and, when I passed the office, I could hear the poor girl crying. I washed and, on returning to my room, found Lihua calling for me. She now informed me that both of us were to go back to Chengdu with the two policemen immediately. In the dark corridor I held Lihua's hand and, in the room, I broke down and cried. Lihua comforted me and we got our luggage ready. I gave her my umbrella and put on my raincoat as it was raining.

Off we walked, in low spirits, with the two policemen (now in plain clothes) in front of us. We were now free to converse in English which, fortunately, the policemen did not understand. The plan was that I would wait at the foot of the mountain while Lihua and the policemen went back to check her identification and my passport (which I had left with Miss Liu). One of the policemen asked me through Lihua what I thought of the situation on the previous night. I replied that in such circumstances there would be no problem associated with a young man and woman sharing a hotel room in my home country, and reminded him that a member of the hotel staff had offered us the double room. I explained that I was unaware of having broken any laws, and apologized if I had done so. I told him that I now wanted to help Miss Wang in any way that I could. I also mentioned that I had been very frightened during the previous night.

Later, when the two policemen stopped to converse, I asked Lihua if they would take a bribe. She was not sure; if they accepted one, it would have to be given to them surreptitiously. When the policemen were not looking, I slipped her the spare ¥150 that I had brought with me. She then joined the policemen and later I was called over. The plans had now changed; I was informed that it was Miss Wang's idea (or was it?) that I should return to the hotel and that she and the senior policeman would go ahead to Chengdu. As this could have been a tactic to slip a bribe to the policeman who went with Lihua, I fell in with the plan, though I really did not know what exactly

was going on. The senior policeman politely wished me goodbye and I returned to the hotel with his companion.

After I had washed off the sweat caused by wearing my plastic raincoat, I went to the dark dining hall and had a breakfast of noodles with egg and tomato – not bad. I drank plenty of tea, for I was very thirsty. Afterwards a cheeky member of the staff, who I knew was chancing his arm, asked me for ¥5, but I told him that this was too expensive for my meal. As I could not discover what the real price was, I left and returned to my room. Later a lady came to my door and asked for ¥3, which I gave her.

I then washed my teeth and later sat down to bring my diary up to date. As I was tired from the lack of sleep and because of noisy music being played on a cassette tape recorder outside, this took me most of the morning. (One particular pop song that was played again and again stuck in my head and I can still remember the melody to this day.) Staying in this cheerless place was like being in prison.

I finished writing at about lunchtime and wandered out in search of food. Beside a temple not so far away was a simple restaurant where the ingredients of various dishes were on display. I was therefore able to point to various vegetables and have a plateful of them cooked. They were served with a bowl of rice and I was able to buy some orange juice from the shop next door.



View from Mount Emei

Lunch over, I wandered back to the hotel and had a short nap. I was woken by some loud pop music from a radio nearby. I emerged and spent most of the afternoon reading Lihua's Chinese publication of *The Fables of*

Aesop (in English). As some of them were quite funny, I had a good laugh, and this cheered me up. Later I went out to take a couple of photographs of the scenery. I then went down to the bottom of a valley and discovered that the path brought me back to the place where I had eaten my lunch. I then returned to my 'prison'.

At about seven o'clock I went out in search of food, but found most of the restaurants empty. I had another rest and went out again an hour later to the place where we had eaten the previous evening. After I had ordered a dish of pork and tomato with rice, a Chinese man in shorts, whom I had seen earlier in the hotel, entered and greeted me in excellent English. He sat down to join me but immediately jumped up and made an attempt to improve the picture quality of a television set in the corner and reduce the volume considerably as it was far too loud. I was quite surprised, for this was something that no other Chinese person would think of doing.

Conversation did not start properly until we had finished eating. I found this man to be an extremely interesting individual. He was a scientist in Nanjing University and, like Lihua and myself, was unmarried. His views were very liberal and sensible, and he told me about his views on the student unrest. In his opinion, the individuals who had burned and broken so many things were just ordinary people giving vent to their anger. The reason why everyone now hated the leader Deng Xiaoping was because of his decision to use the military to mow down the students in Tiananmen Square, and the way in which he had been so unyielding. According to my companion, nothing would change in the country until Deng's death. He had admired Deng until about one month ago, and now felt that although the unrest had more or less been stopped by the military, it would explode again sometime.

We talked about many interesting subjects; later the man told me that his brother was a musician, and was interested in both ancient Chinese music and modern composition.

When we wandered back to my hotel in order to exchange addresses, I told him about what had happened on the previous night and today. He had heard about it from the man who had led him to the hotel (the same fellow who had forced us to stay here) and was told that everyone was talking about the affair between the foreign man and the Chinese prostitute. I was very upset when I heard that Lihua had been described as a prostitute. Because it was so dark in my place, we went to his little chalet nearby, where we exchanged addresses and discussed the situation. He then came with me to my place and I asked to talk to the policeman. Using my new companion (Mr Gao) as an interpreter, I began to give an account of the situation from my point of view, but the young policeman, who seemed unable to think logically, was not interested in my story but only about identification and passport details, the difficulty of his job, and the low salary that he was paid.

We got very little out of him other than an assurance that Lihua's work unit would not be informed. I wondered about the truth of this. I filled in another form and paid for tonight's accommodation.

After all this, Mr Gao left me and I retired to bed early.

Tuesday, 13 June

I slept well and, at about eight o'clock, I was woken by a knock at the door. Groggy with sleep, I got up and reluctantly opened it to discover Lihua standing before me. I was so sleepy that I must have seemed very unfriendly towards her. We embraced briefly, then set about washing ourselves. Afterwards I ordered some breakfast. While waiting for my bowl of noodles, I popped out and found Mr Gao, who was happy to join me in case of any difficulties. He quickly told me that after he had left me the previous evening, he had realized that the whole situation was a trap that had been set up for us, for all these policeman wanted was money. He warned me not to give them any more than ¥100 RMB.

I thanked him for his advice and invited him to join me, even though he had already eaten breakfast. Shortly afterwards Lihua joined us and we talked about what had happened. Just when Lihua was halfway through telling us about her experiences, we were joined by the policeman who had accompanied her and a couple of his pals, and so we had to stop talking. To ease the tension, we began telling jokes and laughing. These officious individuals now seemed happy enough with everything and all had come to a satisfactory conclusion. However, Lihua was brought off for more questioning after breakfast.

I now prepared to leave, but there was a slight delay. I was called to take a photograph, but discovered that the policemen wanted Mr Gao to take a shot of them with me. It was a most unusual request.

After this, Lihua was free and together we went to my room, where we fell into each others' arms in a state of relief and spent a long time together. By the time we had packed and emerged from the hotel, Mr Gao had disappeared. This was unfortunate, as Lihua and I had wanted to thank him for all his help.

As we had decided to continue our journey since we had gone through so much bother to get here, we plodded our way up the steps at our usual slow pace. The weather was poor today; it was rather damp and, as low clouds had gathered around the mountain, there was no scenery to be seen. The journey upwards was now becoming rather pointless. We were constantly being put to shame by elderly women who nimbly skipped up the steps or ran down them, cackling with laughter and singing as they did so. At every food stall we were invited to eat something and, from time to time, sedan chair bearers offered us their services. We now saw some monkeys with

owners, but fortunately were not bothered by the wild ones that we had been told about. We chatted together about what had happened to us and, after a good deal of thinking, I offered to marry her and bring her to Ireland if she found herself in too much trouble after this unpleasant escapade. She was very grateful for my proposal, but said that she would have to think about it carefully – which I thought was a very sensible response.

We stopped at a place for some lunch, but discovered that they only had tofu and packets of biscuits. We made a meal of cakes, tofu, eggs (our own) and something to drink. Afterwards, we continued our upward climb in the spitting rain. At one point we stopped to rest in a temple that was being restored, and watched a couple of elderly carpenters at work. When we emerged, it was raining in earnest. Fortunately the place in which we had planned to stay was not too far away and so our discomfort was relatively short-lived. The hostel turned out to be large monastery; it was like a maze inside, with corridors all over the place. We were brought from one part to another until I was finally shown quite a large, luxurious double room for ¥15. While Lihua was brought off to a dormitory, I watched some monks in a temple who were chanting to the accompaniment of a gong and drum; I found the ceremony quite interesting.

Later we got together and went to my room. We then found our way to the grubby washroom and gave ourselves a good wash. Clean once again, we went to the restaurant and enjoyed a good meal. The place was buzzing with life – quite a lot of people were coming and going.

After eating we repaired to my bedroom and spent the rest of the evening pleasantly together; fortunately this part of the complex was quiet. However, we were much more cautious this time. Later Lihua left and I accompanied her to her small dormitory, which she had to herself. I made my way back to my place and settled down for a night's sleep. Apart from this evening, it had not been a particularly interesting day.

Wednesday, 14 June

Shortly after I woke this morning, Lihua came to me and we spent a little time together. I asked her if anyone had seen her coming to my room; she thought not. Later, much to our horror, there was a knock on the door – it was another policeman! His first question to me was, 'Is this your guide?' I replied in the affirmative. As we both had identification and as the young policeman was not aggressive, we were not too worried this time. He questioned us, wrote down some particulars, then let us go. On our way to breakfast we met Mr Gao. We were surprised to see him, for we thought that he would have reached the top of the mountain yesterday. It turned out that the rain had held him up. Although he had already eaten, he joined us

while we ate our breakfast of rice porridge, small steamed buns and some pickles.

Just as we were about to leave, the policeman appeared again and brought Lihua off for more questioning. I discussed the problem with Mr Gao in my bedroom and then went off to find Lihua and the policeman. I entered the office, drummed my fingers on the desk as a sign of impatience, then fetched Mr Gao, who translated the policeman's questions to me and my responses. I now discovered that Lihua had described me as her boyfriend. I let the policeman know that he was delaying us and interfering with my plans to buy a plane ticket. The fellow finished his report as quickly as possible and finally let us go.

The three of us then set off together. Yesterday we had decided to go down and leave this crazy place as soon as possible, but as the weather had now improved and the sky was blue, we changed our minds and continued up towards the summit. We went at an unhurried pace, stopping every so often to rest or to admire the fine views that we were now beginning to see. We also began to notice various unusual plants and flowers growing by the wayside.

At about midday we reached the point where the path met a road; here there was a shuttle bus stop and a cable car station. We had planned to catch one of the buses and go down, but now decided to go to the top in the cable car. Before we did this, however, the three of us sat down in a restaurant and ordered some lunch. I paid for all three of us, and Mr Gao and I shared a bottle of light beer.



View from Mount Emei's summit

While we were finishing our meal, Mr Gao popped out and bought three tickets for the cable car journey to the summit, so that he could get my ticket at the normal price. However, during the wait for enough people to join us,

my ticket was examined and I was hauled off to pay the foreigners' rate: ¥12 FEC. The trip to the top of the mountain was swift and the views were dramatic.

The summit, as my guide book had warned, was an anti-climax: it was ruined by the presence of ugly buildings and a television mast. Nonetheless, the views down and across to the other mountains were quite dramatic and clear. Mr Gao left us and went off to see if he could hire a warm coat. Unfortunately we did not see him again. As it was quite cold up here – poor Lihua was frozen – we did not dally long but went to the cable car station and bought tickets. For some strange reason, I only had to pay ¥8 this time. Once again we had to wait a good while before the car went down. The top of the mountain was certainly a disappointment – so much for all the effort and trouble that we had put into getting to it. Presumably the poet Li Bai had seen the mountain in more favourable conditions all those years ago.

At the bottom, a young man in a car offered to drive us to our next destination, Leshan, famous for its huge statue of the Buddha. He wanted ¥90, but told us that we would have to wait for a while. As I thought that this was rather expensive, we walked down to the main bus stop and boarded a bus bound for Emei town. The driver offered to bring us to Leshan for ¥60 – cheaper than the first offer, though still expensive.

We had to wait until six o'clock for the bus to leave. Once we got going, we sat together holding hands and Lihua dozed. The scenery along this route was the best that I had seen here so far and it was so much easier travelling this way! We had a couple of minor delays en route, but we reached Emei town at the expected time after a two-hour journey. As we saw a little three-wheeled taxi parked nearby, Lihua hopped out of the bus and bargained with the driver. He would take us to nearby Leshan for just ¥20 – a far better deal.

Off we bumped in the little vehicle and, because we had a certain amount of privacy in the back and there was little traffic behind, we spent the journey locked together in a tight embrace. There was no doubt about it: underneath Lihua's rather strict and formidable exterior lurked a warm-hearted and very sensual young woman. Her effect upon me was quite mesmerizing, for I had never experienced such passionate loving, warmth and kindness. She had told me several times how comfortable she felt in my arms, and yet she still described me as being like 'a little boy'. In many ways I did feel like a small child in her presence, as she was quite a motherly type of woman and, as I had observed, she was very fond of children. She seemed confident that she would make an excellent wife.

We soon arrived in Leshan: a very ugly and dirty town full of filthy beggars with long matted hair. We had certainly strayed from the usual tourist trail. As we searched for accommodation, we were bothered by two women who

kept directing us to a certain hotel. We ignored them and made enquiries elsewhere, but as none of the hotels would accept foreigners, we ended up having to go to the place recommended by the women. As I was accepted and it seemed clean enough, I took a double room with an en suite bathroom for just ¥15, and Lihua got a triple room for ¥12. We washed, spent a little time together and then went out for a meal.

In the restaurant, Lihua told me about some more points of Chinese table manners that I had not known about. It turned out that I had not been doing anything drastically wrong, but I had been making little blunders that would have made educated people smile; most Chinese people, however, knew little or nothing about table manners, as even I had noticed.

After the meal we took a short stroll and returned to the hotel to find it closed, but we managed to get to get the door opened. Upstairs we said goodnight and went to bed.