

China Beyond the Binary

China Beyond the Binary:

*Race, Gender,
and the Use of Story*

Edited by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	vii
Chapter One.....	1
“Monkey Mountain and Urban Sprawl: Cycling Where No One Else Wants to Go” <i>Kate Rose</i>	
Chapter Two.....	25
“Crossing from Luohu to Lo Wu” <i>Miodrag Kojadinović</i>	
Chapter Three.....	35
“Passing on Traditional Stories in China, South Korea and Scotland” <i>Anna Fancett</i>	
Chapter Four.....	51
“La Belle est la Bête? Mirroring Narratives: Beauties and Beasts in Ancient China and Modern England” <i>Gong Qiangwei</i>	
Chapter Five.....	61
“Her Life in His World: Suffering and Alienation in Contemporary Online Literature in China” <i>Xue Wei</i>	
Chapter Six.....	79
“Through a Cultural Looking Glass – Taoist, Confucian, and Popular Elements in Two Great Novels about China” <i>Zuzana Dudasova</i>	
Chapter Seven.....	95
“A linguistic celebration of Chinese New Year in the Modern World” <i>Zhong Ai</i>	

INTRODUCTION

This anthology combines, original scholarly research with creative writing and translations, in a socio-literary perspective shedding light on contemporary China in the world. It discusses China in a comparative and interdisciplinary way, in light of cultural fusion or hybridity between Chinese and other cultures through art forms and disciplines. This broad range invites reflections on literature in society, how it intersects with other disciplines, and how it is relevant to and useful for addressing cross-cultural concerns of gender and race. Pioneering a sociological and literary approach to China Studies, with analysis of how disciplines intersect and cross-pollinate, we examine how China has participated in shaping the world beyond. This is a celebration of voices from and about China, with a critical awareness applied across time. It suggests China's place in the global melting pot of artistic and cultural expression, comparatively, around the theme of story.

CHAPTER ONE

MONKEY MOUNTAIN AND URBAN SPRAWL: CYCLING WHERE NO ONE ELSE WANTS TO GO

KATE ROSE

Going where no one has been before: what does this mean in today's predictable world where the Internet has been everywhere for you and can take you there? Is anything off the beaten track, a well-worn phrase connoting the everlasting appeal of discovery, of unspoiled lands that speak to us and no one else? Perhaps today the places no one visits, the places not even mentioned online, are just not worth visiting because they have no natural, cultural, historical, or another appeal. Or maybe they do.

The first long-distance bike trip with my little son in tow took 5 weeks, pedaling us from anonymous coastal city Lian Yun Gong to the famous former German colony of Qingdao. We did the entire trip by bicycle, using a map and compass, with the goal of going places that no one else goes. With no phone, computer, or other device providing information or links to anyone beyond the here and now, and no previous research on what to expect from one day to the next or where to sleep at night, I decided one day to do this, and the next day we were gone. It was August, temperatures so hot that almost no one ventured outside. It gave me a picture of China that most foreigners will never see.

Miraculously, we found a bike trailer, "the pulling kind" my four-year-old son Zengan kept asking for, and the only one I've seen in China. While the ones in the West are light, aerodynamic crafts with cute little flags, this was a heavy, bulky piece of equipment reminiscent of those used in China for hauling goods or trash. I happened to go the right bike shop where, though none were for sale, a kind couple dusted this trailer off from deep in their garage. I practiced using this unwieldy contraption, bumping into a few cars and e-bikes as I learned our new size. By noon the next day, I had thrown one change of clothes each, a notebook, pen,

three marbles, and day-glow suction dart gun into the small rucksack and was pedaling back downtown to catch the bus to the nearest coastal place. From there, the plan was to head north using only a compass and paper map. No one talks about this stretch of coast from Lian Yun Gong to Qingdao, and we would see not a single other foreigner for the entire journey.

I hoped my son could touch and be touched by people who are grounded in enclaves of tides and nets, boats and barnacles, their history, their stories, unheard, untold. When they get tired, children do not much care where they sleep, and they'll eat it if they're hungry. Most of all, people are people to them, and kids are kids. If kids pile onto a motorbike, or catch fish in a tide-pool, or pick apples, or race across the sand at night, so would he.



Long-distance bike trip, huh? I've never been one of those sinewy people in spandex, stream-lined helmets matching their mirrored strapped-on sunglasses, tool-kits under the seat. My bike is an ordinary three-speed bought a year before and, as our only source of transportation, well used to the road. It cost me the equivalent of 100 US dollars, the cheapest model at the Giant store in Xuzhou. It looked simple and thus reliable (the more you can do, the more can go wrong). I liked the name of the model:

Athena. Maybe the Greek Goddess of Wisdom would help with repairs, since I had no tools. If I started thinking about everything I *might* need, and that *could* go wrong, I'd never get away.

Zengan is jumping. Loud music, lights, costly (by Chinese standards) activities for kids... My first glimpse of a Chinese beach. We're a short walk from a street full of famished restaurateurs trying to pull you over to their sputtering, outdoor woks, piled high with crabs and other fruits of the sea (the street where the hotel, and many, even more dingy ones, is). There are (Chinese) tourists, just not very many of them to go around, for all the lodging and dining that is offered. After all, who would come here? The beach is small, a cove below a large urban road, cargo ships not far off.

This city, Lian Yun Gong, must translate as something like "Endless Urban Sprawl." I cycled at least 60 km (possibly much more; I actually have no idea, and the map seems inaccurate), to get from one end to the other. I just let my compass keep pointing east. People back home in Xuzhou said Lian Yun Gong is a nice, little-known seaside town. I thought it was a place I would enjoy regular day-trips to, once the initial ice was broken. Nothing could be further from the image I'd had. Lian Yun Gong, as I've seen it, is an endless sprawl of steel factories, pesticide plants, dumps, recycling centers, farms, fish-ponds, empty buildings, and very well-kept, large and empty roads with utopian bike paths. The problem is, it feels like you're not getting anywhere. The only people you meet (who, when you ask directions to the sea, invariably say it is far and you should take a bus), are carefully tending the plants on the sides of these roads that almost no one uses. They squint their eyes and shake their heads to dismiss the map you put in front of them. They cut grass and branches, they water, fertilize, plant, weed. Sometimes they have trucks and equipment, but more often they have a small hand-tools and gloves, and, much to my joy, bicycles. These carry their brooms, bedrolls for napping, and whatever green matter they need to transport; the trash collectors use similar 3-wheeler bikes with carts.

I'm not really a city person, though I've lived in cities over half my life. I long to get out into the countryside, into nature. I was thrilled when, hiking just across from the new campus of my university in Xuzhou, there was a herd of goats. I am as interested in human usage of nature. I fantasized about stopping at pick-your-own farms along the way, and maybe they'd have a restaurant attached, to cook up their produce for you, friendly farm families with plenty of children for Zengan to play with. They would go off to see the duck pond, and I would wander into the orchard, rest under an apple tree. This day, the only farm I passed was a blackberry farm. Zengan loves blackberries. Where we previously lived, in

a remote valley in France, there were as many wild ones as anyone could eat, and he devoured handfuls at a time. I thought about waking him up to pick at this farm, or even about buying some; but the more he sleeps, the better a mood he'll be in; and I only had 17 RMB in my pocket, while the old man insisted on 20 for a large carton of oversized berries. I would have had to risk waking up Zengan, who was asleep on my backpack. I kept going, hoping other exciting farms and produce would come my way and break up the endless track of gray, the hot, hot sun keeping everyone else indoors.

We finally got to Hua Guo Shan (Flower Fruit Mountain, AKA Monkey Mountain) – I had thought it would be a little morning jaunt, a city park. The Lian Yun Gong of my mind was perched nicely on a hill, and on one side was the sea, on the other were the monkeys, with a cable car taking you to go up into the mist. When I saw this was not the case, I still assumed the mountain was nearby. It was well into lunchtime when we arrived, as evidenced by the touts, mostly teenagers, wearing orange vests and trying to stop cars by waving red flags to lure customers into their restaurants, which advertised local game like pheasant and rabbit. Eating is a problem for travelling vegetarian foodies. I settled for cold noodles, the kind with sesame and cucumber, which can be really, really excellent sometimes, but are usually just passably good when you are really hungry. There were, suddenly, a lot of people. Where did they come from? Certainly didn't seem like they'd taken the same road as I had. The tourists I spoke with, who wanted to take pictures with us, were from neighboring provinces. The mountain is famed to be the birthplace of the Monkey King from the Chinese classical epic, *Journey to the West*. A student of mine later explained that the Chinese love this character, maybe more than all others, because he rebels against the gods. Also because the actor playing him on TV for many years was very handsome. The art of Monkey Play, she said, is passed down from generation to generation, and when I asked what it would be like knowing that from birth, you have no other choice in life than to act out the part of a monkey, she didn't seem to understand my question. I also read that some surnames in English come from stock-character roles that were handed down in a similar fashion; including one that used to exist: Death. It is startling sometimes to find parallels between cultures and distant times.

I couldn't find the "Monkey Viewing Area," and was getting annoyed. I kept asking people: where are the monkeys? Have you seen monkeys? Some proudly told me they had, and showed me the images on their cellphones, which only annoyed me even more. Because actually, taking a bus up a mountain amid seas of tourists is a frustrating experience for

someone who loves nature and hiking, but monkey-seeing would make up for it. That's what we were there for, as were most people, I think, judging from all the monkey trinkets that were sold, and the logo on our entrance tickets (a whopping 100 yuan – though as in many places, an adventurous person could just take another road and pay nothing). Zengan was in an OK mood, but he most often refuses to walk even small distances, so I knew we couldn't push it. Yes, there was a winding trail down the other side, the side where no one goes, that looked lovely, steep and craggy, full of butterflies and windswept trees like in a Chinese scroll painting. Yes, I wanted to take that trail very, very much. But I had a 4-year-old in tow, and so was heading, instead, for the Monkey Viewing Platform. I tell myself the time goes quickly. I can do such things when he's grown. I know how much I will miss his company, his observations, his actions that lead me to something or show me people and places as I would not have seen them; the way he dis-estranges me from other humans.

I resigned to take the road more travelled by, trampled by Chinese tourists not wanting to pay the bus fare again to go down, or wanting to see the sights, especially the monkeys, but also the deer park, the pagodas, the waterfall cave. And the foreign kid – that's always a big hit. Sometimes they treat him like a monkey, feed him bits of whatever they've got. He found a girl he could relate to, and they spent some of the walks together. Finally, just as Zengan was refusing to walk, and I was walking in front hoping he'd change his mind (he never does) there were the monkeys! He didn't believe me – thought it was a ploy to get him moving – but then he saw them too. They weren't at the “Monkey Viewing Platform” by the way – I guess it's hard to fully grasp that these are wild monkeys; though I'm not sure they could survive without human patronage of fruits, nuts, and sometimes junk. A few of the monkeys were captured and donned satin jackets and feather caps. You could get your picture taken with them. I wondered how they felt about being chained up when the rest of the tribe went free. Maybe captivity has attractive advantages, like a steady food source without competition, or warmth in winter, maybe even medical care. Maybe they are like a business partner. But if so, why the chains?

Zengan wants to play with the monkeys; he shakes his dart gun at them, and when they respond in kind, he hides behind me. I think without the stress of so many passers-by, if we could sit and get used to each other, real play could happen. We would all lose these fears of the Other. But the usual Chinese response to animals is either to eat them or warn you that they bite. So do I, if you give me a reason to.

Part of the decision to bike, whereas I'd originally fantasized about

horse-trekking in Tibetan areas, or riding camels across Xinjiang, is an increasing reluctance to participate in animal exploitation. Tourism seems to make everyone greedy, and it's hard to know if the animals are business partners or slaves. I'm not against animals participating in the dignity of work, even as defined by humans; but exploiting others, animal or human, is wrong. But how is it defined? I just know that when I'm pedaling along, I feel autonomous, and free. The desire to trek with animals was partly because I thought it would be interesting for Zengan to interact with them. It was something we used to talk about when the routine of Chinese school got long and boring for him. I'd say, just a few more weeks and it's summer vacation; we'll take a horse through the mountains. I feel guilty sometimes that he is not getting an education according to values I think are right, healthy, beneficial. But in exchange for 3-hour compulsory naps, and drawings that are required to be all the same, and coercion to eat meat when he doesn't want to... he also gets three kind-hearted women who provide a stable, structured environment, and 20 classmates who are like siblings. He is a part of something, which he doesn't have in our 2-person family. I know what he is missing, because I miss it too. But we can't have it now. And when people criticize me (strange, given my previous view of how I'd be as a mother), for giving too much of myself, living for him, my inner answer is that it's actually because of everything I can't give him. Another person might make compromises and force themselves beyond their solitary nature. I hope to someday find community, but for now, he'll have to settle for the heritage of the open road and all it has to teach. On this bike trip, this microcosm of life, idealism, and deception pass with the terrain, perhaps as flat and monotonous. My mind is empty of worry. Everything passes, and my body is active, so that my mind can finally rest.

Zengan laughs among the inflated yellow doggies and open-armed ghostly snowmen. Actually, this whole set of "Crazy Penguin" (yes, that's its real name, spelled out in English and Chinese) jumping equipment could be on a horror movie set. Creepy caricatures of human features move in stilted scariness when the kids jump. Sometimes I wonder if, beneath my smiles and laughs, joining his, offered in affirmation, my son can sense my deep-seated unrest. Hopefully not, or if he does, it's with the holistic, simple understanding with which kids are gifted. I hope he also senses the deep joys that don't always smile or cry out, but are equally part of me.

Lian Yun Gong has certainly invested in transportation. The bus stops are sleek, modern shelters, the buses themselves large, newish, and half-empty (where could people be going?). There are bus maps showing the

stops, a luxury I have never seen in Xuzhou. For hours, I had a bike lane totally cut off from cars, and wider than a car itself. An occasional e-bike would speed by, driver staring back at the quivering mirage of us, and be gone. E-bikes are wonderfully quiet. Sometimes, I flagged the driver down to ask where we were on the map and if I was, indeed, heading towards the sea. The even, new roads, the well-tended roadsides, point to a certain optimism, an unrealized dream I see all over east China. It is in the gaping, unfinished buildings that harken to people to move in, but they never will (or haven't yet) found a reason to come. Zengan and I have developed a funny habit of using the Chinese verb and English "it" – "Qing Wen" is how you introduce a question; so when we need to ask directions, which we do every 5 minutes it seems, we say we are going to "Qing Wen it." The people I flagged down had no notion of distance. A friendly man pulling an old television behind his e-bike, when we were at a pointless stop light (no one else for miles) told me it was in 8km. An hour later, a city worker told me 15km. There is something awful about the thought of these kilometers in vain. It's too bad I don't have a slogan, a cause I can print on a flag, on our tee-shirts, since we get so much "publicity." I am doing this for a cause of sorts, but it may be too complicated and vast to print on a tee-shirt. Sometimes, the bike road suddenly draws you away from the multi-lane (empty) highway, past corn fields and shacks of those who tend them and perhaps always have.

The woman operating the "Crazy Penguin" looks weather-beaten and I imagine in her sadness the loss of a child, as if this job were some sort of punishment. Some people just gave Zengan an ice-cream. Good thing they didn't ask me, since I'd already said no. I'm trying to be strict about junk food, since hunger is needed to persuade him to eat the healthy food I put before him. Impossible to make Chinese people, with their structured routines, children trained to do what they're told and eat if they're not hungry, understand such logic. A very pregnant woman just told her kid to pee right on this wooden boardwalk where he is standing. Overall, I'm glad the Chinese are free and easy about kids' peeing. They think it's cute, and many kids wear open crotch pants, even some big kids. I still remember the image of a round-faced kid around 5 in a leopard-print furry pajama suit, open crotch, standing up on some blocks in an indoor playground (it was winter in Xuzhou), dancing Ganman Style, letting it all hang out. Xuzhou people have the charming habit of wearing their pajamas outside, to the grocery store, wherever they feel like. This is often retired people or children, but young couples can also be seen in their padded cartoon pajamas on a Saturday, and not just in the morning. It is not just Xuzhou, although here they seem particularly fond of their

jammies. And in winter, it is common to see children so heavily bundled that their arms stick straight out, but their little genitals are open to the elements, in these crotchless snowsuits. I dislike diapers, they are an ecological catastrophe, unhealthy and uncomfortable for kids, and teach them not to listen to their bodies. Interestingly, “elimination communication” – the wisdom of the Chinese grandmother – is making a come-back among progressive North Americans. I do believe diaper-free is worth a few misplaced pees, and kids peeing everywhere is better than diapers piling up in landfills. But here, the sand is a few yards away and so is the grass, and also the bucket the Crazy Penguin operator placed to the side for this purpose. Why this mother would think beneath his feet in the middle of the boardwalk is the best option baffles me. I’ve often seen kids ask where to pee, as if they have an instinctual sense, which their parents have lost, that it may not be a good idea to pee right where you are. Sitting on a bench, vaguely watching their kid get back onto the Crazy Penguin, she and her husband smile with a healthy glow of no questions asked. But maybe that was just the flash of a glance, because when I look again, there is more strain than I’d first seen. I have started taking pictures again, after years of not doing so – I guess that’s the problem I have with them: the image captured can be powerfully wrong. Should I photograph the game of checkers in front of the abandoned demolition site? Broken pieces of terra cotta tiles serve as the dark pieces, and gray pebbles are white. The board is drawn in terra cotta on the pavement, and an intact tile perched on a tree stump serves as our champion’s seat. He may even have been playing against himself, in hopes of some future conversation he might have – because that’s what such games are: silent conversations, and very intimate intellectual transcendence lived together, shared in pairs. A poem says that baseball is not a game, it’s an argument. These checker-players, often city workers on lunch break, or the boss isn’t there today, converse under the trees, the two who play, and the several who watch, about emotions, dreams, and things they can never put into words but only into the clear, concise moving of round stones. Ruins, and incompleteness. Buildings are torn down after ten years, more are built, or started, then left behind. Like the buildings, no one has “moved in” to these ghost roads, these long, big, modern stretches of silence. Sometimes there is something that looks like a dump, but then you see it is specialized in something, like cardboard or plastic or glass. And there is a shack of some sort, clothing, including children’s, on the line. There are prettier, more exotic and wild destinations than the coast of Shandong Province. There are reasons guidebooks skip right up north to Qingdao.

How far to the coast, I ask another cyclist at the stoplight. He offers to

lead me there, and tells me he is a recently-graduated pharmacist, just off work. I don't know what the rest of Lian Yun Gong's coast is like. He took me to this little plop of a beach, there it was, suddenly, after our speedy jaunt through a crowded stretch of the city with modern stores and bakeries with names like Tiramisu. There it was, suddenly, looking grim and uninviting, yet undeniably, it was a beach, gray in the smoggy sunset, with a backdrop of cargo ships. We had passed a few signs for "holiday villages" that had beach umbrellas on them – the first sign that coast was anywhere near. I don't really believe him that such places would be really expensive. Like the misplaced optimism of the empty buildings and motionless cranes bowing their heads, like the posters, falling down, heralding the building of an "International Town" on what remains a vacant rubble of land, the "holiday villages," through not going there, became places of faded, missed glory: rock bottom prices for a dilapidated luxury resort all for yourself. Maybe beach tourism was an idea an official had one day, when he'd had a little too much to drink, then he went on to other things. From what I've seen and sometimes experienced through my own work, decisions in China are made at the dinner table, after a good few drinks. This is when a request is finally voiced, an approval usually given. In China, there are rules but none of them seems inflexible in the interest of greater harmony. It's a sort of humanism: relationships count more than red tape. It's a land of great opportunity, and rags-to-riches stories are not few. A man can be a chicken farmer, then buy apartment buildings and become very rich, at least that's how it was 10 or 20 years ago, and that class of nouveaux-riches is influential, including in bringing ever-increasing numbers of native English speakers over to teach their children. Chinese people come to the West for better lives, but now it's also working the other way around. Xi Jinping was right to showcase in his propaganda "The China Dream."

I'm sitting in the sand now. Far out on the sand, since it seems to be low tide now, I can see the lights from peoples' cellphones or flashlights. Fishing? Exercising? Just looking, touching?

At one point, I wanted to photograph all the city workers. Maybe because they are the main people I meet along the way. Or maybe because they are usually invisible – cars, if any, whiz by – though colorful in their orange suits and faded hats, and they are old enough that maybe certain dreams have faded too, but there they are on their miniature fold-out stools, weeding what they have planted. The hotter it is, the more clothing they wear, so that all is covered but eyes gleaming out with a longing dulled like sea glass. Sometimes, among the ornamental highway shrubbery, there are patches of corn and cabbage. It is common in China to cultivate

the wasteland, the commons, land that is tacitly parceled out among those who want it, the unmarked boundaries respected. I have even seen a row of corn plants perched on a precarious turn in a mountain road. The shoulder was already narrow, the drop below steep, but it was still planted with corn. My next-door neighbor, too, is sometimes seen furtively hoeing the narrow strip of land that separates her building from some hedges. She just can't resist planting some lettuce there. One day, she showed me her real garden. It was 500 meters away, down a dirt road I'd never noticed, the land of an abandoned factory. Each plot was small, well-tended; her husband was there harvesting sweet potatoes. They gave me some. She'd worked in a factory her whole life, back when the government told you what to do. You really didn't have choices and didn't ask questions about whether you liked the work or not. I think she said they made electric fans. Now, she has a pension of 2000 RMB/ month (the 1-bedroom apartment I rent costs 1500/ month), two sons and two grandsons. She says she tries not to spend her money, giving it to her children instead. She often calls to me from her front steps where she shells crates of beans, or dries out plants I've never seen. She has a very old book on medicinal herbs and sometimes refers to it or shows me something that is growing right in our yard. Her husband is often not there. Sometimes Zengan goes to her apartment. This was a real blessing when I was getting settled. He sometimes plays with one of the grandsons. Overall, life seems pretty good here for old people. They have an active role in raising their grandchildren (sometimes, whether they like it or not). They go outside, dance together at night, play checkers in the park. There doesn't seem to be the loneliness, here, that haunts the West.

At the grocery store today, there was a kiddie slot machine (pinball, if you prefer). Zengan put the marble in, shot it, and a much bigger handful of marbles poured out. The game presumes you are there until you've gambled all your marbles away. I saw the decision cross his face. Clutching the marbles in bulging fists, he made for the door. I saw no good reason to stop him. I guess it's not innate, the reflex to gamble it all, in hopes of getting more. Sometimes what you get is already more than you ever bargained for.

On a bike, you can't do other things. You are active, occupied. It clears my mind in just the way I need, eating up miles, chomp, chomp, appeasing a hunger I cannot quite name.

Barbecue, a Chinese institution as much as an American one. But they have more variety than we do: a squid sizzles alongside chicken feet and several kinds of mushrooms, garlic stems, infinite varieties of tofu... and my favorite, barbecued steamed buns. That is, when the buns are a day old,

too old for eating their usual way, they are taken to the BBQers, who turn them into a real toasty treat. BBQs are fun; they last far into the night, when other restaurants are closed, and the one I was at tonight did not sell or provide water, only beer. This is served by the pitcher, a blond lager from kegs, that international classic of Chinese beer, the only most people know, and also the best on the market: Tsing Tao, an old spelling of Qingdao, the city that looms in my mind as our final destination further up the coast (where beer is brewed and pizza to be had). Tonight, the BBQer got it right, the right light dose of spice (cumin and chili, and, of course, MSG and other magic powders).

It's late. I'll set my alarm for 10 instead of 7:30. Zengan is afraid of the dark, so I left the little light on as he was lying down playing with his marbles. They are like people to him, little folks he can hold in his hand. We have two small beds (at home, we are co-sleepers). We lie down and look at each other across the gulf between beds, with the closeness distance brings. It's a perfect moment. I don't like perfect moments, though. Because there's always the necessary tarnishing them and blaming yourself, like when I finally asked him to be quiet so I could sleep, when he was cooing to his marbles. Another voice tells me this imperfection is actually part of a greater perfection.

The false glamour of this tacky room is counter-balanced by the cold air and the fact that the girl (like a girl, though 28) is really kind. There's something ingratiating about her – she's probably too nice. Seems there are no grandkids yet. She is letting Zengan watch “Boonie Bears” again, even though I said no. I think this family is lacking small children, so they are being more generous with him than they otherwise would be. They are a bit abrupt, or I am, but OK. We bargained hard about this room. For 140 RMB, I could go to the Home Inn, which this is not. The mother is interested in money, the daughter (whose room this usually is when she comes home from the city) is not. But I understand that it's a lot of hassle having house guests. This is a real business, an unofficial hotel somewhat affiliated, informally of course, with the large hotel whose sign and sea view, perched on a cliff, had drawn me in, while its prices (though not really that high) sent me away before even looking at a room. It was hard to believe anyone was staying there, and thus that they couldn't give me a rock-bottom rate. They were doing some renovations, all working, happily, in a very informal way, taking out old beds, children's beds they were, with cartoon sheets sewn over the mattresses. Then, the only woman among them, who they laughingly said was the boss, though it seems they were all on equal footing, said she'd rent me her room if I wanted (she'd sleep elsewhere), for my price (120 RMB max). It was a mess, though, so

as she tried to shove all her dirty clothes into a closet, I told her not to bother; that's when she said I should stay at her sister's house. She had a nicer manner than her sister, more like her niece maybe. This niece is like a movie star, slim, perfect, a natural grace. But 28 is late in China to have no husband. There is a story there. Maybe we could have made friends, but I am in such a foul mood this evening. Why so many regrets, even as the living moment passes? It's the sunburn that's getting me down. My appearance is horrifying. I am a bruised, red-brown color that is splotched according to what I've been wearing on given days. It's the worse sunburn I've ever had, which is saying something. It was a particularly frustrating feeling to have to ride, already burned, knowing what is to come, yet no protection from that. But whatever my problems, I should stop bargaining so hard for rooms.



My compass said the road I was taking was the opposite direction, but it was inviting and my plan was, anyway, to stay as close to the sea as possible. I had the sea on both sides. This road, in fact a human-built, deinsularizing strip of land, was taking me to "Lian Island." The road was wide, with a bike path. All along the way were large ships and their looming red cranes. Zengan was interested in the cranes, so when we got onto the "island" we went towards them instead of the direction all the

tourists were pouring into, all pink and yellow inner tubes and frilly suits, like balloons, soft-bodied with kids at the ends of their hands. And maybe this bike trip is most simply about being this kind of mother, my legs getting sinewy, my skin burnt, not knowing where I'll end up tonight, instead of the kind who is obeying a schedule, bowing to a traditional family structure, and leading her kids where the sign points. So we left behind the "balloon convention" buying their tickets, going through the turn-style onto the over-crowded beach, maybe riding a golf-cart to a place slightly further afield, still walled into this beach compound. Everywhere, stalls selling inner tubes and bathing suits. Water costs 5 RMB for a small bottle (usually 1 or 2 – I try to boil it and bring it in my own 1-liter bottle as much as possible). Yet for some reason, this island does not speak to me of prosperity. Too much is abandoned, incomplete, falling down. I would have paid even more for the water, when we got back to this small patch of over-civilization. I drank a whole bottle in one gulp. Zengan was asleep, slumped over the bag. I had been refused access to where I was going, with my plan to circle the whole island (about 16km). I think I'd reached the end, after which the road would switch back. Instead, I had to backtrack and re-do the same route. Sure, I did it much quicker. But still, I had chosen the side where I could see the realities of the island – saving the fun side with its peacock parks and other sites for the way back. I was sure there'd be the perfect little guesthouse on the outskirts of the fun side, waiting for us, just a little too far for tourists to reach. But no, we were sent back! It seemed surreal – the image of a bike, crossed out in red, not far from the checkpoint. A *bicycle*, not a motorbike. Certainly not a car, or a pedestrian. Just a bicycle! I didn't believe it, but the gatekeepers, 2 ladies in green uniforms, maybe my own age, though I always think of such people as older, confirmed as if it were no big deal. I should have gotten a clue from them saying I could leave my bike and walk. Find the loophole. Should have said the bike was for carrying my child, then plowed right through. Or even pretended I didn't understand. The great thing about China is you can get away with that sometimes. The bad thing is all the arbitrary restrictions. I was told it was unsafe. But at that same moment, a motorbike sped through from the other direction. Looked like a very normal road. I think locals can take it, tourists must buy tickets, but can only go on foot. Again, policy-making done at the dinner table after the interested parties have had far too much of the social lubricant that is the bottoms-upping of obligatory little cups of baijiu. I've heard people from various sectors referring to going out to these banquets as a necessary evil of their job. The smoking, drinking, and over-eating, sometimes with gambling, gossip, karaoke, and even prostitution, is a downside for many

businessmen and officials alike (and probably a barrier to gender equality, too). They complain about this work. It is work. They don't say I'm going out tonight, they say I'm working. Sometimes, if a high-up official really cannot stand another night of boozing it up – because once it starts, the toasts are endless and you can't refuse – he (maybe she, though this is rare) gets a “designated drinker” instead of a designated driver. So when a toast is given, the high-up guy clinks the glass, then hands it to the drinker, who swings it. What a job!



Maybe the 50 RMB toll they collect for outsiders to walk on this road goes to paying the salary of the drivers of trucks that water the cosmos all along the deserted non-paying part of the road: proof, perhaps, that it is an “Ecological Park” – name they seem to give to any land too steep to build on, or that they simply haven't figured out how to optimize. With regards to this steepness, when going down a dirt back-road, I saw dwellings built into the ground, with terraced cultivation – they were barely visible, so well hidden, and some were clearly deserted, but others looked like they may still be occupied. I could not take pictures of them, because they would not have shown up. I was very curious, but Zengan maybe took to heart my bad joke about there being pirates and insisted I leave this little road at once to regain the main drag. Of course, he was basically right –

the road would not lead tranquilly around the island, but get worse and worse, the cliff back up steeper and steeper. The bud of curiosity lingers, though, about what we might have seen on this untraveled old path. There were some old stone houses, crumbling, hidden behind vines, steep stairs to get there (inviting someone like me, but repelling my more cautious child). There was one tunnel into the earth, seemed to be an old shed, which I could peer into before Zengan totally lost it. He even helped me push our vehicle back up, so eager was he to leave. The main road rarely saw a vehicle. Only maintenance crews were our occasional company. We had a picnic on a cliff and the land was un-littered with the signs of human presence; lovely view down below, the waters (even looking azure in my memory, against the olive-colored shrubs) reminding me of the coast of northern Spain. It always amazes me, the high concentration of tourists, and then *no one*. One reason may be that the Chinese have little time. Too expensive to stay long. Getting near the “fun side,” we did see a couple of peacocks and fed them the sesame cake we’d bought at the mountain (one of those local specialties that are never quite so good when you get them home). Back to civilization, I decided against the area around the turn-style beach, and opted instead for a brown sign for “Fishing Village.” Usually brown signs for fishing villages tip me off *not* to go there. It often means a picturesque little overpriced something set up just for tourists, the ragged remnants of fishing folk reduced to selling trinkets. This one, however, was crowded with fishing boats and old ladies making nets out of rope. The beach has a lot of trash, but also a lot of charm. The dwellings are shacks – sometimes of stone, sometimes of concrete, very often abandoned, even while sitting right on the cliffs in a setting that would be worth millions, somewhere else. What a view! The stairs lead down to a private little cove. Right down to the terra cotta roof tiles on the crumbling stone, this reminds me of the Mediterranean. But an impoverished, neglected, deserted version. Old appliances stick out of the sand of this beach that doubles as a dump. It is the underachiever selling itself short, victim of human folly and helplessness. The old is lost, and the new only offers its dregs.

Finally, after we found this room, I got my swim. Zengan was playing in the tide-pools with local kids – they were kind to him, ones only a little bit bigger careful to guide his steps over the slippery stones. I think kids are evolutionarily wired to care for those smaller, and best at it. The idea of education is to leave them mostly in that world. I am less cautious with Zengan than these children were. I let him make his own way, fall, get up, and mix with the locals in ways I never will. I want him to learn from children who spend their time outdoors, on farms and in fishing

communities. They often have tremendous resourcefulness and creativity, unspoiled by the bounty of city and apartment life. A boy caught Zengan a fish and put it in a plastic bottle. We took it everywhere, including dinner on a grounded boat. Then I convinced him to come down to the now-deserted beach and, under the moon, set the fish free.

The waves numbed away the burning of my skin. I swam out farther than the small groups of locals, who were also taking evening dips with their kids. I just floated on my back, confident Zengan was being cared for in this world of tide-pools and children spending their days searching for the small treasures the sea has coughed up.



For some reason, I cannot get out of Lian Yun Gong! It goes on and on and is everywhere I go! This is my fourth night on this bike trip, and even though I'm slow and easily distracted, I have ridden long miles and eaten up great distances, compass at hand, north. Now, I look at the envelope of this swanky hotel's stationary and cry out at the insult of the return address – I'm still *there*!

I had seen hope when the buses changed, no longer those fancy futuristic terminals, and saw a sign for Something New Town. But it's the same old town, same orange-clad street sweepers out there in this desert with me, when all others are comfortably indoors. Signs for places like

“Jiangsu Salt Chemical” – though no one speaks English in these parts, company names are often translated. I wonder if it is a chemical factory, or just a salt factory with a quirky translation. Optimism, or folly? I know, somehow, what a drunken city planner may not have: foreigners will never arrive.

The man with the gold teeth, pulling the jerry-cans of brackish water on his e-bike, told me my map is wrong, because the roads have changed. The road I am on leads nowhere; but he can help me find the way up to that big road, which goes somewhere. I just need to get out of the sun! It’s not this man’s fault – shoot the messenger! – but he doesn’t seem to mind my briskness. People have the reputation of speaking louder when foreigners do not understand them. I think it’s universal. But in China, I’ve developed the habit of speaking louder when they don’t understand my Chinese. My accent is not great; but often they wave me away and say they don’t understand before I’ve even opened my mouth. Things that would be rude for Americans, such as yelling at people, are not considered rude here, as long as they are not personal attacks. If you just yell: “Well, where is that f-ing road?!” it doesn’t seem to offend anyone’s “face.” Face is an important concept in China – it is something like honor. But it is not a difficult society in this respect – at least in casual encounters. I think you have to really want to humiliate someone to do so effectively. They are so good-humored; even, annoyingly, laughing at your frustrations or distress. So when various workmen and passers-by gathered to consult the map with me, it was a novel break for them; but I was sunburnt and eager to be on my way without having to track back by all those plastic-harvesting fields. They were like cranes, tall structures with elevator-type things going up, going down and a long, white ribbon, one end up top, one end held by a worker. Somehow, these were turned into coils of white plastic ready to be fed into machines to make the world’s cheap goods. I can see them now, fed into a machine, poured into molds of cars on a vast assembly line – the kinds you might get in a gumball machine, lose or throw away a few days later, when it breaks. Temporary things.

The towns don’t exist anymore, according to these men – the towns on the map. Hence “New Town,” I guess.

Pulled into New Town. Empty streets, empty buildings, even empty parks which are quite pretty, like extensions of salt marsh allowed to wash into its lanes. Zengan hums along, inventing dialogues between his blue marble and the ticket I keep meaning to tape into my diary. I get myself a mini-bar Tsing Tao beer, to console myself for how hard it is to get to the real place. Yes, it’s the same green bottle as that beer everyone has in Chinese restaurants, the same place name as Qingdao, only the beer has

kept the colonized version. It means clear island. I have heard the sea there is blue. It's where people go for beer and beaches, two of my favorite things.

Tomorrow, my fantasy is to not go outside at all. A taxi can transport us to a nearby shopping mall, where I'll do what I should have done in Xuzhou: buy some armor against Helios. The nightmare version: the nearest mall where the taxi brings us is right back where we started from days ago! But it's impossible. That compass really did point north, and we ate a lot of miles in our slow, sweating but constant pace, with little place or reason to stop. I will get one of those ridiculous hats with the wide plastic visor, and sunscreen, and glasses. We westerners tend to strip down in the heat; but the experts, the only other people out, city workers weeding and watering, cover every inch of flesh. This is almost a fashion here in Jiangsu, and these women could probably travel in Saudi Arabia with an approving nod from the cultural police, although they are not Muslims, or even prudes, at all. They are just keeping safe of the heat and dust on the road as they ride their e-bikes, lone-ranger style down the wide, crowded city bike lanes, a colorful array of smocks, huge gloves attached to the handles in the cold season, sleeve-covers in the heat, and always lacking helmets. Sleeping children are balanced between the drivers' knees, and some e-bikes hold families of 5. I plan to buy Zengan a baseball hat just for fun, although the good news is, he isn't sunburned! I can't even see a line where his shirt was. Never have I been so happy about his south Indian skin.

Zengan asks me: "Why are you drinking beer out of a wine glass?" "Because it's fun." Satisfied with my response, he goes back to slurping his room-service noodle soup.

There is always something: a cigarette butt in the otherwise pristine lunching spot, or that whitening cream in the bathroom of my idealized beauty of yesterday. Always something to keep me moving on.

I just wanted to get off that peninsula before they chased me down because of Zengan peeing in the bed. I recently read Obama's autobiography. Never anything disobliging about himself: occasional errors due to naivety (gets corrected), or regrets about not doing even better. But he never really messes up or loses his cool – so is he just that kind of exceptional person, or is he only revealing his best, like in a job interview? I will also tell the worst about myself, as you have seen. I am cheap: I'll sacrifice all civility to knock off a few RMB on a room rate. And I am capable of running from wet beds. I feel ashamed of them, even though I am never the wetter. There is nothing to be said or done that would mitigate that shame.

The beads on my wine glass are lovely. Hot air goes to find cool. The city skyline looks inviting after miles of marsh and highway; even though just this morning I was eager to get anywhere beyond urban sprawl. Cycling stretches out time. Many moods may be crossed in a single day, many longings. You absorb your scenery, rather than just skimming across it and then away. You are part of it, whether you like it or not. My usual philosophy is that sunny days should be spent outdoors. But now, I stop to ask directions of the mechanics and see them playing cards on old car seats, the breeze coming in from all sides, their door open for potential customers even though, like a heavy snow day, the weather will probably leave them safe from interruption. They are a family, I think; middle-aged man and woman and their two sons. They politely tell me the way, then turn back to their game.

The heat is only part of why these places are ghost towns. There is no one in these buildings. China is famous for whole residential communities built without a soul to buy them, and now I'm seeing it with my own eyes. Many of the buildings are unfinished, usually gray concrete skeletons with dark, square eyes, a motionless crane poised overhead as if wondering whether to tear back down or continue to build. It may be there for a long time. In a country famous for over-population, the places I've been going through are vastly underpopulated. Enormous highways for me alone. Miles of fields and vacant land, followed by patches of ghost buildings; through it all, one constant is the city workers. They are consistently there in their orange vests, rickety bicycles, weeding the places no one sees or visits, pruning, watering plants. Sometimes, they plant their own crops between the official decorative ones, hiding them behind shrubs. There, they play cards in the shade. Sometimes they stop me to tell me it is too hot to be cycling, or that the place I want to get to that day is too far, I should take the bus. Sometimes I cannot for the life of me make out what they are saying because their accents are so strong (even though the local dialect is very similar to Mandarin). It is probably better that way. Those of them who can write attempt to spell out the characters on their hands. This method makes sense, in a country where a written language is shared although local dialects vary vastly, and possibly pronunciations of Mandarin do too. But in my case, scribbling Chinese into the air, or on their leathery palms, does not really help.

The road back from the island was endless this time. The wind was in my face, and as an old Irish farmer friend of mine used to say "an empty sack can't stand." In fact, I couldn't stand anything – the friendly inquiries of astonished workers included. My only hope was this: a coffee shop we'd passed when the pharmacist was showing us to the beach. Coffee

and coldness. Then buying what I needed for protection. All of this failed when I took a wrong turn back into town. And one thing I despise is backtracking. I plowed onward, hoping another downtown would pop up somewhere – it did not. I ended up in a nowhere land of big road and sparse, drab businesses. The army is everywhere, and their tanks, complete with netting camo with “leaves” over their green and camo paint-jobs, loaded up with soldiers I suppose, who barely look 16 – they were stopping all the (almost all electric) bike traffic and standing there with guns that looked almost as big as they were, and possibly weighed more. On the island, too, is a big military base. I’ve heard that joining the army is highly sought, especially for getting a youth with behavior problems back on track, but also as a decent life choice. It takes connections, and gifts, I have heard, to get someone in. At the beach base, the soldiers were picnicking on the docks.

I’d been ready to pay *seven times more* for a coffee, so why get angry at the watermelon seller (lying down in his open, low truck) for not giving it to me for 1 RMB/ 500 grams, but rather 1.80? Why get angry at the farmers on the ground, selling their fresh produce, with their weather-worn hands and plow-bent, gaunt figures, for trying to charge me a little extra, and not be angry at the supermarket owners, paying such low wages to their workers, and charging whatever they think they can get people to pay? In Xuzhou, sellers do not try to charge me more than locals; that only happens when people have seen enough foreigners to have thought about it. When I say I don’t need a bag, the farmers smile and thank me for sparing them this fraction of a cent. The first strange visitors to a strange place are always welcomed; it is when disproportionate numbers arrive that the dehumanizing begins. Mass tourism rarely benefits local communities.

Now, Zengan is making a bridge between our two just-right beds out of the bathrobe sashes. Getting a decent room was my best (or my only good) idea of the day! We’ve now put out all the imaginary fires with our towely hoses.

Life got back at me, about the watermelon. Zengan threw it back up, at a time when I wouldn’t have believed much could get worse. Under the merciless sun, my body burning, aching, hungry, thirsty, no clear destination in sight, I cried.

The plastic farms gave way to salt fields and various small fisheries, also some natural land of ponds and marsh. Egrets. Small dwellings cobbled together from various materials: wood, straw, concrete, plastic... some quite lovely, on stilts guarding their pen of water and the life in it, but unnoticed, undiscovered, without any of the amenities, or the eye-

sores, that tourism brings.

Yes, navigation is hard, because no matter where I go, I'm still, they tell me, in the same city, and neither the city map nor the province maps tell it anything like this! The best investment was a compass. But the coast is jagged, and going north may just mean dead-ending somewhere, or having to then go west, then east. Maybe the biggest road would be best, with clear signs for a clear destination. There were none on the road the man with the plastic-tasting water put me on. The road was scary, after the car-free bliss of previous days. I quickly put Zengan's helmet on – mine was already attempting to give me some tiny degree of sun protection. I didn't have the heart to try to find downtown after that first wrong turn. He hadn't told me he'd been feeling sick, I think, precisely to avoid my worry – until too late. Not much worse than motion sickness. But he's always taken it very quietly. Some people externalize when in pain, others clam up. Sometimes, I feel I am pulling happiness itself behind me, in the form of my cheerful son. Other times, I fully feel the weight of a very heavy cargo I need to tug with my own strength, alone through inhospitable climates, to the unknown.



There are places where everyone is, but also places where no one is. It is true for Chinese tourism: people visit certain spots, and nowhere else. I

was heading northeast on some fairly deserted roads that looked like they belonged in a city (intersections with stop lights, but no one to go or stop), and suddenly a blank in the distance, which could only mean the sea. Unlike the beach with the turn styles, ticket-takers, and towel-to-towel droves, here was a beach with no one on it, and pretty as can be. I am a little bit squeamish about water, even though I love swimming in nature; I usually swim where other people are swimming. At some distance was a rickety wooden vessel that looked worthy of Red Beard; some piratey mirage from the past, out on that hot, reddish sea. It was real though; Zengan saw it too. (Mumma, pirates! Let's go!) Then one of the "pirates" jumped off the boat, apparently to fix something; he swam around it, fiddled with some ropes. I was glad; it meant I could jump in, too. Underwater, it was a striking amber color; fish brushed against my legs, and I'm glad I did not see the various kinds of worms and other life that had washed up amid the confetti of green seaweed, before I swam. It was lovely on my burned skin, this velvety wetness, floating on my back and feeling the sun could no longer get at me, just for that moment. In the distance, not very far, a small island (pirate treasure?). Why no people? Are the Chinese not adventurous enough to go the few miles, to go and see? There was a motionless merry-go-round, waiting for some locals to come in the evening I suppose. In my local lake (Yunlong Hu in Xuzhou) 2 miles from home, devoted swimmers dip in all year round, even when everyone else is wearing hats and gloves. I am the only non-Chinese person who swims here. It is dirty, I know; but lovely. Temples and greenery surround the lake, and even the lampposts in the water do not detract from the pull of the open sky. In summer, lots of families swim, the kids in bright inner tubes, and music pumped out. I like it best in Fall when the music stops. A huge lake, and only one area for official swimming (and one where it is not allowed, but is tolerated). Besides the no-swimming signs, why do people obey? I heard a rumor there are spikes in the lake, and people get impaled if they swim too far. I do not believe this, but I feel it is representative of how Chinese people are kept in line. Because even if I do not really believe it, I still hesitate to swim too far. So imagine if all your life you've been told to believe such stories, in a place where official sources of information may not always be accurate? You would probably swim there where you are supposed to swim.

Zengan is jumping on the bed joking about peeing everywhere, because I told him about our morning situation – the abrupt departure which he had slept through. At our restaurant of the night before, on the ship, they had all kinds of creatures in tanks – better than an aquarium. Some I had never seen before, such as the wiggly animals looking just like