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Letter from Kunming · *J. D. Brown*

ON YOUR OWN in China, the sights, however spectacular, mean nothing. Getting around is everything. What is most absorbing, even disturbing, is to see how things are done, because things are done in China as in nowhere else in the world.

This was particularly true in Kunming, the “City of Eternal Spring,” located on a high, lush plateau in extreme southwest China, bordering Vietnam. I began by visiting the great treasures of Kunming like a faithful devotee of the guidebooks: first, the Bamboo Temple, where Buddha’s five hundred followers fill the tiers of two halls, sculpted as if by Goya and Dali to create the ultimate congregation of surrealism, expressionism, and dementia; then, Dragon’s Gate, a series of paths, stairways, and tunnels linking a succession of stone temples perched in thin air, the whole honeycomb carved out of a sheer cliff above Kunming Lake like a precarious catwalk gouged into the walls of the Sears Tower; and last, the Stone Forest, the most celebrated sight in this region of the Orient, a vast limestone cave raised entirely above ground, its dome lopped off by the eons and exposed to the clear sky. All three were extraordinary sights, sights unlike any others in China, unlike any others on earth. . . . Yet what remains with me of Kunming is as ordinary as an airplane ride, a hotel room, a side street, a dinner in which every dish is fashioned from a single goat. It is how things are done that lasts.

I had flown into Kunming on CAAC, the government airline routinely described as the world’s worst, and found myself for the first time in China aboard a well-appointed, modern jet. The seats, even the seatbelts, of this Boeing 737 clone were unbroken; the air supply cones shone above our heads like stars at the entrance to a new era; but my fellow passengers, bound for home, had not advanced at breakneck speed into this Age of High Technology. Perhaps none had ever flown on a jet. They boarded the plane as they would a city bus, shoving every step of the way, across the airstrip, up the stairs, and into their seats, which had, of course, been assigned and reserved all along. Stranger still, I pushed as hard as they did, for even less reason. Once seated, their pace became even more frenzied. Overwhelmed by the smooth plastic and vinyl splendors of the cabin, my fellow passengers could not keep their hands off the reading lamp switches or air

nozzles, their arms and fingers rifling in every direction at once like a signal corps gone berserk. Not even the uniformed stewardess could restore order. Twice she sprinted down the aisle, chiding stragglers to strap in, but few of these boarders had ever buckled a seatbelt and they ignored her. As the jet lifted from the runway, screaming low over the karst peaks of Guilin, I heard a chorus of gleeful awe ripple up and down the rows like an unraveling strip of velcro.

The man next to me wore a well used green workers' jacket, hard black shoes with raised heels (high fashion in China now), and red silk long underwear (despite the temperate climate of the southwest, even in winter). He rolled up his sleeve, displaying two silver, spring-wound, Chinese-made Seagull watches on his wrist, smiled provocatively, then leaned across and minutely examined my \$4.99 black plastic quartz watch. Later he withdrew the vomit bag from the pocket of the seat in front and used it in the same way as the other passengers: to clear his throat. The vomit bag from the West has been transformed into the disposable spittoon of the East, serving a nation long renowned for its incessant hawking and spitting. Oddly enough, however, in a country without a Surgeon General's Report, where 82-year-old Leader Deng Xiao Ping smokes continually and speaks of the Seven Virtues of the Cigarette, no one smoked on the Kunming flight. It was the only smoke-free chamber I had been seated in since coming into China.

We landed on schedule, miraculously — past CAAC flights having been known to end up in the wrong city — and walked across the unlighted tarmac for half a mile under a light rain. The airfield at Kunming is where American pilots formed the Flying Tigers in 1940 to assist in the battle against the Japanese, where the U.S. Fourteenth Air Force resided throughout World War II, where each night the Chinese filled in the craters of the latest bombing raid. Today there's not a trace of an American presence. Here history is swallowed up, obliterated overnight.

My taxi, which also ferried an open bucket of gasoline in the front seat, followed an unpaved back road into the heart of the city, depositing me at the gate of the Kunming Hotel. I entered the lobby with dread. In the two cities I had previously visited in southern China, Canton and Guilin, both more familiar with foreign travelers, the hotel staff had been incompetent, uncaring, even savage. Chinese television is even now broadcasting a series which summarizes the situation in its ominous title: "*Civilized Hotel Service.*"

Luckily, the Kunming Hotel, under the guidance of its manager, Nian Jiafu, and his two young assistants, Mr. Li and Ms. Zhang, provided the finest actual service of any hotel I had stayed at in China, including the lavish first-class monoliths with swimming pools and bowling alleys I had sometimes suffered at in Canton. It is true that my toilet broke that first night, but when I summoned the floor attendant, who was napping in a chair beside the water boiler where room thermoses were filled, she righted the plumbing immediately. (Later, two Americans on an expensive tour told me that in their hotel in Kunming they had to flush the toilet using a hose from the bathtub.)

At the level of common human services, then, the Kunming Hotel has risen to an elite status in China, which is not to say it conforms to what the rest of the world so narrowly calls normal. The staff of the Kunming Hotel dons white gloves with undisguised arrogance. The groundskeepers set vases of flowers on exquisite dinner plates which they rinse off in the towering outdoor fountain—the same fountain where the taxi drivers wash the dust from their Russian-built Bear sedans twice daily. The spacious lobby is graced with nowhere much to sit, and the sitting room to the side, with rows of stuffed chairs, cuspidors, and a color television, is always locked. The manager's desk, prominently displayed in one corner of the lobby, has two telephones and a placard reading *MANAGER ON DUTY* to explain his constant absence.

In fact, Manager Nian Jiafu is usually on duty. One evening I was his guest at an intimate banquet in one of the hotel's many dining rooms. Yunnan cuisine will one day sweep the West. Its Ji Zong mushrooms, long, stringy, and outrageously expensive, are already much favored for their ginseng like properties by the Japanese, and Yunnan sweet ham and fried goat cheese have made Kunming the capital of Chinese fast food; but the centerpiece of Yunnan cooking is its Across-the-Bridge Noodles, a hearty fondue for one in which you dip an endless array of raw meats, vegetables, seasonings, and noodles into a hot pot of water and oil. Every dish is laden with an allegedly healthful, fat-reducing pharmacopoeia of herbs and spices.

Less healthful, no doubt, but more exotic is the fare served off the grounds of the Kunming Hotel, along the wide, flowery boulevards. In the workers' restaurants, bulk beer in a bowl is the rule, and caution must be tossed to the wind. At the improbably named Olympic Bar and Grill, its

opulent interior masked in cigarette smoke, diners pile up ten and twenty dishes of fish and fowl with eyes intact — and after each course, they sweep the bones from the table to the floor. My favorite is the Cooking School, a block from the hotel, where students serve a full range of bargain plates, from goat's cheese patties to French-fried potatoes, their white chef's hats bearing the stains of slain duck and pig and the odor of coal fire.

In the end I simply kept to the ordinary streets of Kunming, where metal stalls display the latest t-shirts, sweaters, and blue jeans. Glazed roofs shine above the winding lanes. Bikes and horse-drawn carts contend with pedestrians, and itinerant quilt-makers thread their looms on the sidewalks. Free markets line entire side streets, stocked with flowers, tropical fruits, and pork bellies. In open-air tailor shops, seamstresses turn out pants and blazers on brand new treadle sewing machines. Minority students gather at local teahouses, English language dictionaries in hand. And beyond these streets, in the countryside, there is a whole other world, like the fallen constellation of an ancient empire, outlined in green terraces, red clay, and pinnacles of white limestone.

As I leave Kunming aboard an old prop plane, I can't help but notice across the aisle a massive white refrigerator, strapped in where a row of seats has been removed. Bouncing in the turbulence, I am menaced by the image of a bizarre, ignoble fate: crushed to death by a loose refrigerator 20,000 feet over China. Otherwise, it promises to be another ordinary flight.