

RIVER TOWN

Two Years on the Yangtze

PETER HESSLER

JOHN MURRAY



XINJIANG

Urumqi
Turpan

Hami

Jiayuguan

CHINA

Lanzhou

Yulin

Yan'an

Xi'an

THE GREAT WALL
Beijing

Yellow River

SICHUAN

Chengde

Fuling

Chongqing

Wu River

Yangtze River

Shanghai

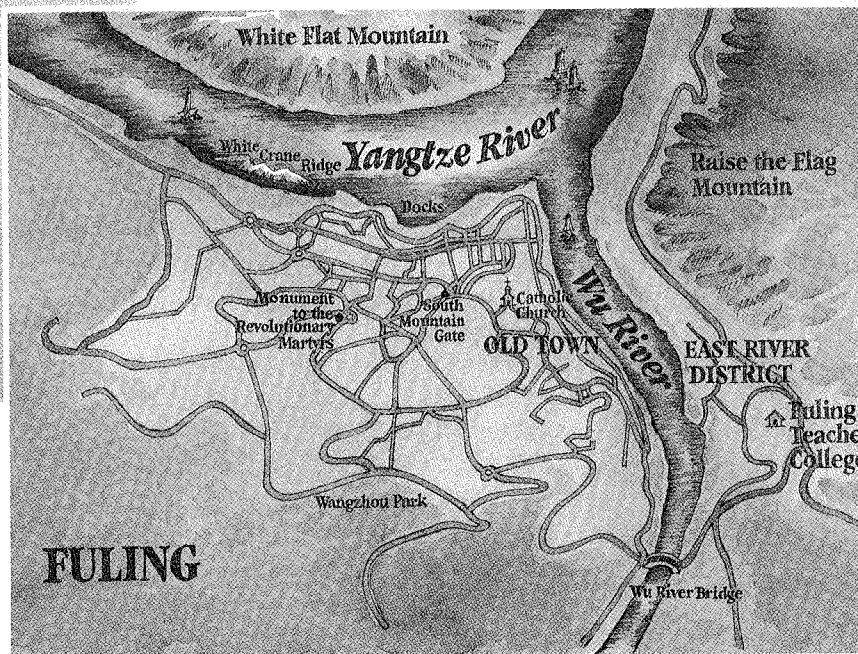
EAST CHINA SEA

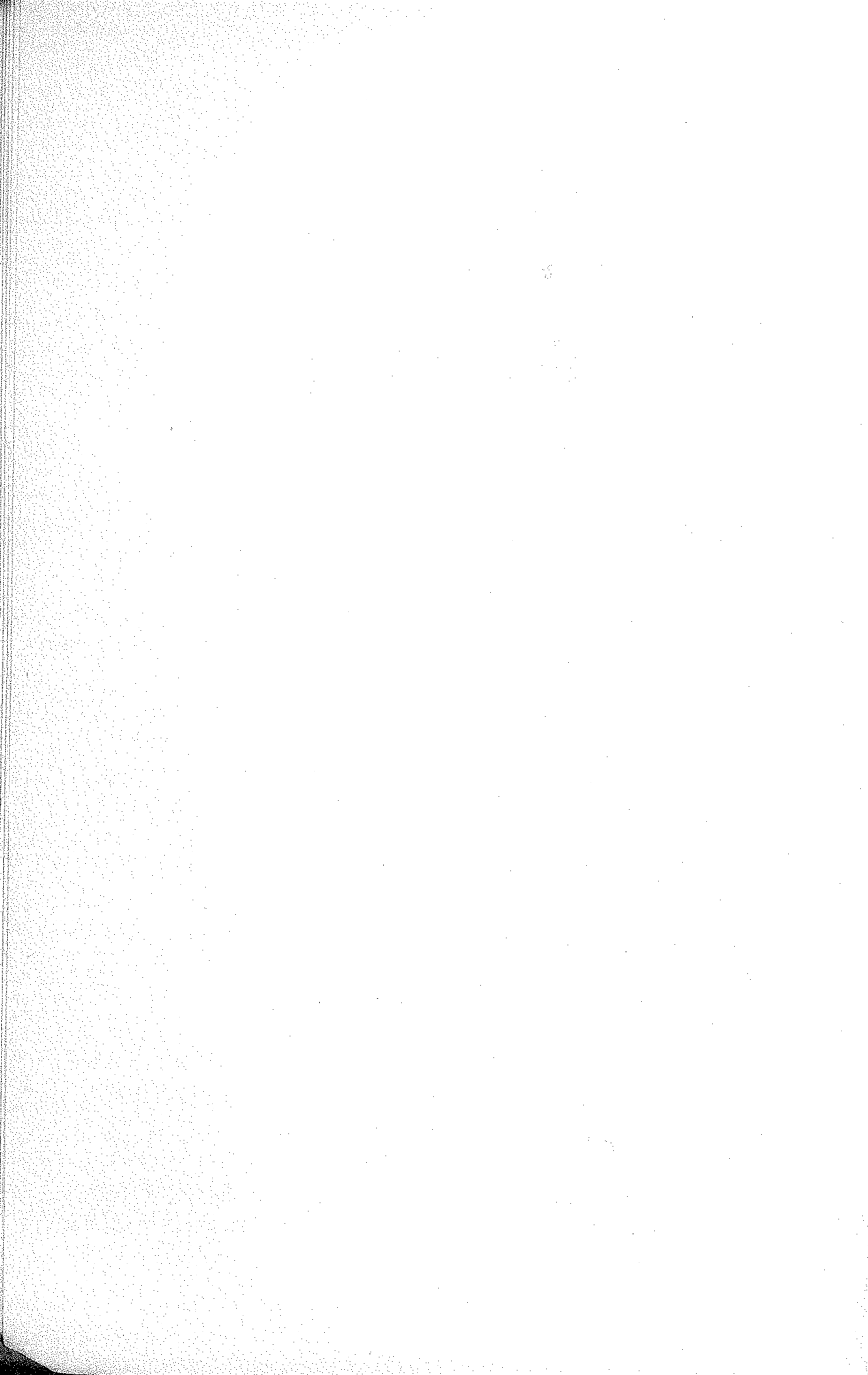
Pearl River

Hong Kong

TAIWAN

SOUTH CHINA SEA







CHAPTER ONE

Downstream

I CAME TO FULING on the slow boat downstream from Chongqing. It was a warm, clear night at the end of August in 1996—stars flickering above the Yangtze River, their light too faint to reflect off the black water. A car from the college drove us along the narrow streets that twisted up from the docks. The city rushed past, dim and strange under the stars.

There were two of us. We had been sent to work as teachers, and both of us were young: I was twenty-seven and Adam Meier was twenty-two. We had heard almost nothing about Fuling. I knew that part of the city would be flooded by the new Three Gorges Dam, and I knew that for many years Fuling had been closed to outsiders. Other than that I had been told very little.

No Americans had lived there for half a century. Later, I would meet older people in town who remembered some American residents in the 1940s, before the 1949 Communist Liberation, but such memories were always vague. When we arrived, there was one other foreigner, a German who was spending a semester teaching at a local high school. But we met him only once, and he left not long after we settled in. After that we were the only foreigners in town. The population was about 200,000, which made it a small city by Chinese standards.

There was no railroad in Fuling. It had always been a poor part of Sichuan province and the roads were bad. To go anywhere you took the boat, but mostly you didn't go anywhere. For the next two years the city was my home.

A WEEK AFTER WE ARRIVED, everybody in the college gathered at the front gate. A group of students and teachers had spent the summer walking from Fuling to Yan'an, the former revolutionary base in northern Shaanxi province, and now they were returning to school.

It was the sixtieth anniversary of the Long March, the six-thousand-mile trek that the Red Army had made during the most critical part of the civil war, when the Kuomintang was on the verge of destroying Mao Zedong's forces. Against all odds the Communists had marched to safety, over the mountains and deserts of western China, and from Yan'an they had steadily built their strength until at last their revolution carried the nation, driving the Kuomintang to Taiwan.

All semester there were special events in the college to commemorate the anniversary of the march. The students took classes on the history of the Long March, they wrote essays about the Long March, and in December there was a Long March Singing Contest. For the Long March Singing Contest, all of the departments practiced their songs for weeks and then performed in the auditorium. Many of the songs were the same, because the musical potential of the Long March is limited, which made the judging difficult. It was also confusing because costumes were in short supply and so they were shared, like the songs. The history department would perform, resplendent in clean white shirts and red ties, and then they would go offstage and quickly give their shirts and ties to the politics department, who would get dressed, rush onstage, and sing the same song that had just been sung. By the end of the evening the shirts were stained with sweat and everybody in the audience knew all the songs. The music department won, as they always did, and English was near the back. The English department never won any of the college's contests. There aren't any English songs about the Long March.

But the summer walk to Yan'an was not a contest, and the return of the Fuling group was by far the biggest event of the Long March season. They had walked more than a thousand miles, all of it in the brutal heat of the Chinese summer, and in the end only sixteen had made it. Thirteen were students, and two were teachers: the Chinese department's Communist Party Secretary and the math department's Assistant Political Adviser. There was also a lower-level administrator, who had burst into tears in the middle of the walk and gained a mea-

sure of local fame for his perseverance. All of the participants were men. Some of the women students had wanted to come along, but the college had decided that the Long March was not for girls.

A week before the assembly, President Li, the head of the college, had traveled to Xi'an to meet the marching students, because at the finish of the trek they had run into trouble.

"The students have some kind of problem," said Dean Fu Muyou, the head of the English department, when I asked him what had happened. "I think they probably have no money left." And it was true—they had run out of cash, despite their sponsorship by Magnificent Sound cigarettes, the Fuling tobacco company. It struck me as a particularly appropriate way to honor the history of Chinese Communism, to march a thousand miles and end up bankrupt in Yan'an.

But President Li had been able to bail them out, and now the entire student body of the college met in the plaza near the front gate. It was a small teachers college with an enrollment of two thousand students, and it had been opened in 1977, one of many that were founded after the 1966-1976 Cultural Revolution had destroyed much of China's education system. On the spectrum of Chinese higher education, this type of teachers college was near the bottom. Courses took three years and the degree was considered lower than a bachelor's, and nearly all of the students came from peasant homes in the countryside of Sichuan province. After graduation they returned to their hometowns, where they became teachers in rural middle schools.

For many of the students, especially the freshmen, the college was an exciting place. Campus was just across the Wu River from the main city of Fuling, and few of the students had ever lived near a city that large. The college had movies, competitions, and dances on the weekends. Often there were political rallies and assemblies like the one to welcome the Long Marchers, and the students buzzed with anticipation as they milled around the plaza.

A group of eight women students stood at attention near the gate. They wore white blouses and black skirts, and across their chests were red sashes emblazoned with the name of the college. They were known as Hospitality Girls, and they had been carefully selected from the student body. All of the Hospitality Girls were tall and beautiful,

and none of them smiled. They represented the college at official functions, standing in perfect formation, walking gracefully, pouring tea for dignitaries.

That was something else I had heard about Fuling: its women had a reputation for being beautiful. At least that's what I had been told in my Chinese class in Chengdu. One of my teachers was from Manchuria, a wisp of a woman with high cheekbones who had a gentle, skittish way of speaking. Even in summer she clutched a bottle of tea in both hands as if for warmth. Her name was Teacher Shang, and though she had never been to Fuling she said with conviction that the women there would be beautiful.

"It's because of the river and the mountains," she said. "All places with mountains and water have beautiful women."

And in Chengdu I had met a Fuling native who told me the same thing. "But sometimes the people there have bad tempers," she warned. "That's because it's so hot, and because they have mountains there." I often heard remarks like this, and they suggested that the Chinese saw their landscapes differently than outsiders did. I looked at the terraced hills and noticed how the people had changed the earth, taming it into dizzying staircases of rice paddies, but the Chinese looked at the people and saw how they had been shaped by the land. During my early days at the college I sometimes thought about this, especially since nearly all of my students had grown up close to the earth, and I wondered how the rugged Sichuan landscape had affected them. And at the same time I wondered what it would do to me in two years.

THE FULING MAYOR was the first to arrive. He was chauffeured to the college gate in a black Audi, and he stepped out of the car and waved briefly to the students' applause. The local TV news was there and they filmed him, a short pudgy man puffing in the September heat. Quickly he walked across the plaza and greeted Adam and me, shaking our hands and welcoming us to the city.

That was often the first thing that happened at events we attended in Fuling—the new Americans were greeted. On the day of the Long March rally we had been on our way to a hike, dressed casu-

ally in shorts and T-shirts, and we had stopped by out of curiosity. It was a foolish mistake to attend something of that sort without dressing appropriately, and we should have known better, because already we were learning that it was difficult to watch anything without becoming the center of attention.

Patriotic music blared from the campus loudspeakers as the Long Marchers arrived. They wore white T-shirts and camouflage fatigues. They were unshaven. Old canvas military packs hung from their shoulders. The leader carried a faded red banner that bore the name of the college and Magnificent Sound cigarettes, and he marched behind the Hospitality Girls, who were divided into two rows of four, walking in step, their heads steady, eyes straight ahead, arms swinging sharply. The rest of the Long Marchers followed in single file, smiling proudly and waving to the crowd. Everybody applauded, and the audience followed the procession into the auditorium, where a banner proclaimed:

**Warmly Welcome the Fuling Teachers College Magnificent Sound
Cigarette Ten-Thousand-Mile Long March Team as They Return
from Victory!**

Adam and I ducked into seats at the back of the auditorium, hoping to avoid attention. The students around us murmured and turned to stare. The attention spread, and soon everybody in the auditorium was craning their necks to see us—sinking in our chairs, baseball hats pulled low over our faces—and in a moment Vice President Dou was leading us onto the stage. Really he had no choice; otherwise the audience's attention would have been divided. This was one reason why we were so often incorporated into local events: it was a simple way to make sure people watched.

We were seated alongside the mayor and the Communist Party Secretary and the other cadres. The crowd roared as we took our seats; the Long Marchers applauded. The Hospitality Girls served us tea. I kept my head down and tried to hide my bare legs beneath the table. The cadres gave their speeches, praising the Long Marchers and reminding the crowd of the great history that was being honored. The speeches were delivered forcefully, like old films of dictators, and none of the speakers was better than Vice President Dou. He was a tiny man

in his fifties who weighed perhaps 115 pounds, and there was a spar-rowlike quality to his thin chest and delicate light-boned arms. But he worked the microphone brilliantly—at first softly, calmly, like a lecturer talking to a group of children; now louder, slowly quickening the gestures, a slender hand waving out over the crowd, almost as if scolding them; and finally he was shouting, arms pumping, eyes flashing, loudspeakers booming, the speaker and his audience now equal, united as comrades, patriots, servants of humanity; the crowd rising and erupting into cheers and a mad rush of applause.

I heard him say Adam's and my Chinese names, Mei Erkang and He Wei, and he announced that we had been sent to Fuling by the U.S.-China Friendship Volunteers, which was the Chinese term for Peace Corps. The crowd roared again—all of us were comrades now, together serving the people, building the country—and the Long Marchers stood proudly as each was pinned on the chest by a dignitary bearing a ribbon and a red plastic flower. Somebody handed me a flower and a ribbon; somebody else pointed me toward a Long Marcher waiting at the front of the stage. He smiled, bowed, and shook my hand fervently. I apologized and pinned him as quickly as possible, hoping to minimize the limelight on my shorts, but the crowd cheered again and I waved, the applause rising once more. I sat down, my face hot.

After the ceremony they took a photograph to commemorate the event. In the picture, the Long Marchers and the cadres are standing proudly in three rows, carefully spaced, and the faded red banner is unfurled in the style of the old revolutionary units. The Fuling Long Marchers wear clean white T-shirts and red ribbons on their chests. They are not smiling. The most important cadres stand in the front row, along with Adam and me. Vice President Dou and Communist Party Secretary Wei are smiling slightly while we grin in embarrassment. Adam is wearing sandals and I have on an old gray T-shirt, and our bare legs interrupt the row of neat trousers. None of the other cadres is smiling. There are no women in the photograph.

TWO YEARS LATER, after I returned to America, I would show that picture to friends and try to tell the story. But where to begin? To

explain why the post-Cultural Revolution college was honoring the Long March was as difficult as telling how the mountains had been turned into terraces. Finally I would say: This was a political assembly at our college, and our participation was a surprise, because in most parts of the world Peace Corps volunteers are not welcomed with Communist Party rallies. And I left it at that—that was my story of the photograph.

Of course, none of it was that simple. I was a Peace Corps volunteer but I wasn't; China was Communist but it wasn't. Nothing was quite what it seemed, and that was how life went in those early days, everything uncertain and half a step off.

In Chinese, Peace Corps was *Heping Dui*, and there was more to those three simple characters than met the eye. During the Cultural Revolution, when anti-American propaganda reached a climax, the Chinese government had said much about the Peace Corps—that it was in league with the CIA, that it was an agent of Western imperialism, that America sent its young people overseas so their idealism would influence the Third World toward Capitalism (the toughest job you'll ever love). These things were no longer said, but the echoes still remained, and the word was hopelessly tainted. But the Chinese language, like the people, had learned to shift with the political winds, and another title was found when the Peace Corps came to China in 1993—*Meizhong Youhou Zhiyuanzhe*, U.S.-China Friendship Volunteers. The characters were more complicated but the connotations infinitely simpler. College authorities instructed our students never to use the term "Peace Corps," in English or Chinese, and most of them didn't. And so with a euphemism for a job title, I came to teach at a college that was built on the ashes of the Cultural Revolution, where history was never far away and politics everywhere you looked.

It was the Friendship that terrified all of us at the beginning. That was the part of the title that was difficult to translate or interpret. The college had had three foreign teachers the year before, an elderly Australian couple and a middle-aged man from Mexico, but that had been simpler because they were there for less than a year and rarely strayed far from campus. We were different—we were young, we were planning to live in Fuling for two years, and we had been sent by the American government as part of the third group of Peace Corps volun-

teers to come to China. The college gave us apartments in its best building, where the Communist Party Secretary and the other most important cadres lived, and for weeks they banqueted us almost every other night. There was a protocol to these affairs. We would sit down to a table full of Chinese appetizers—cashews, dried beef, string beans, lotus root—and often Teacher Han would make an announcement. He was the interim representative of the college *waiban*, or foreign affairs office, and he was twenty-seven years old. He had the best spoken English in the college, but he was an uneasy young man in a new position of authority. He asked us to call him Albert.

One evening in the first week, he turned to us before the banquet had begun.

"The college has decided," he said, "to buy you telephones that can call outside the college. You will be able to call anywhere in China."

We protested—it wasn't necessary, phones were expensive, volunteers at other colleges didn't have them. He waved us off. "Not a problem," he said. "Otherwise it's not convenient for you." Adam and I looked at each other and shrugged. We thanked him, and everybody began to eat, and the next day repairmen appeared to install our telephones.

A few days later there was another banquet, another announcement. "The college has decided," Albert said, "that it will buy Adam a washing machine."

"I already have one in my apartment," I said. "We can share that one—there's no need to waste money."

"It is inconvenient," Albert said. "The college has decided." Again our protests were ignored. And so we began to eat, and the next morning a new washing machine appeared at Adam's door.

A few days later, Adam was playing cards with some of the English department faculty members, and Party Secretary Zhang Yan mentioned that the college had received our résumés and biographical information from the Peace Corps.

"I see that you play tennis," said Party Secretary Zhang. "You must play very well."

Adam had coached at a tennis camp during college summers, and he was quick to shake his head. "I don't play that well," he said. "It's been a long time since I played seriously."

Party Secretary Zhang grinned and picked up his cards. He was a thin, sinewy man with crewcut hair, and it had taken us a week to establish two facts about him: he was the best basketball player on the English department faculty, as well as the best drinker of Chinese *bai-jiu*, or grain alcohol. He was also the highest-ranking cadre in the department, and as Communist Party Secretary he had authority over academic, disciplinary, and political issues. He was the sort of man who rarely spoke, but when he did speak, things happened. Now he examined his cards, leaned forward, and looked up at Adam.

"The college," he said softly, "has decided to buy you tennis!"

He sat back in his chair, waiting for the meaning of the declaration to sink in. But that was the problem—how exactly does one go about buying tennis? For a few moments Adam tried to decide how he should respond.

"That's very kind of the college," he said at last, speaking carefully. "I appreciate that you want to do something for us, but it isn't necessary. You don't have to buy me tennis, Mr. Zhang."

Party Secretary Zhang smiled as he discarded a card.

"Mr. Wei," he said, "is concerned that you might want to play tennis. He wants to make sure that you and Pete are happy."

Mr. Wei was the Party Secretary of the entire college, and as the highest-level Communist Party official on campus he undoubtedly had more important things to do than buy tennis for Peace Corps volunteers. Adam said something to this effect, emphasizing that he was quite happy without tennis. But Party Secretary Zhang was firm.

"It has been decided," he said flatly. "The college will buy you tennis. Now it is time to play cards."

THE NEXT MORNING, tennis did not appear at Adam's doorstep, but he didn't take any chances. He told me about the conversation, and together we made an attempt to communicate to the college, the sort of effort that over the next two years would be made again and again, with mixed results. Often our communication was indirect, and rarely was it simple. Sometimes it resulted in exactly the opposite of what we wanted.

We talked with Albert, we talked again with Party Secretary

Zhang, and we talked with Dean Fu and other English department faculty members. We said that tennis was very expensive, and I didn't know how to play it, and in fact Adam didn't even like it anymore. He had outgrown it in college and if anything he was looking forward to having a nice long break from tennis. It was a lousy game. Basketball was much better, and so was soccer. Tennis was a game of the exploiting classes. Actually, we never went quite that far, but we tried everything else, and for a week we campaigned steadily against the buying of tennis.

Next to our apartment building was a croquet court. It was without a doubt the nicest spot on campus, and perhaps it was the most peaceful patch of earth I ever saw in China. In a crowded country there weren't many places like that—a spot where the land was used for nothing but enjoyment. A ring of trees shaded the borders, and the packed dirt surface was perfectly smooth. It was well tended, but mostly it was smooth and beautiful because it was well played. Every morning, the retired teachers and workers in the college met in the croquet court, where they played all day long, with a break for lunch. They were impossibly good. They were so good that it almost didn't seem competitive—the ball went where it was intended to go, the way a magician's cards move according to the silent harmony of routine and skill. It was a daily exhibition, a game of trick shots; the retirees were artists—they had taken croquet to an entirely new level. And the whole affair was almost the exact same size as a tennis court.

For the first few weeks that was our great fear. Our balconies overlooked the court, and every morning we gazed out, afraid to see workers, shovels, picks, backhoes, dynamite—whatever was involved in the buying of tennis, we were deeply and sincerely afraid of it. The uncertainty was the worst part; it seemed an abstract notion, to buy tennis, but at the same time Fuling was clearly the sort of place where a great deal of work could be put into turning the abstract into reality. A glance at the plans for the Three Gorges Dam was enough to prove that.

But in the end tennis was not bought in Fuling. The banquets ended after four weeks. Within a month the college stopped buying things for our apartments. It wasn't long before we were complaining like spoiled children that our needs were neglected, but we grumbled lightly and to ourselves, high above campus in our cadres' apartments.

THE CROQUET SOUNDS drifted up to my apartment in the mornings—the gentle knock of the ball, the sound of shuffled footsteps on hard dirt, the soft chatter and laughter of the retirees as they played without hurry. These were some of the most soothing sounds I had ever heard, and often I sat out on my balcony and simply listened, the croquet sounds backed by the unsteady hum of the cicadas and the noise of the Wu River. Boat horns echoed across the narrow river valley, and motors sputtered against the current, and barges clanked as they unloaded sand onto rumbling trucks at the water's edge. A mile from my apartment, the Wu died in the brown rush of the Yangtze, and often I could hear a lonely horn booming out from the big river.

At the beginning, Fuling was mostly sounds to me. It was a loud city, but also the noises were different from anything I had known before—the steady clinking of chisels at construction sites, the crush of rock broken with a sledgehammer: these were the sounds of a place where much of the work was still done by hand. And it was the first time I had lived next to a river, listening to the boat noises and the way they echoed up and down the valley.

My apartment was on the top floor of a building high on a hill above the Wu River. It was a pretty river, fast and clean, and it ran from the wild southern mountains of Guizhou province. Across the Wu River was the main city of Fuling, a tangle of blocky concrete buildings rising up the hillside. Everywhere I looked, the hills were steep, especially due north, where the heavy shape of White Flat Mountain loomed sheer above the junction of the two rivers.

That was the view from my aerie—high on the sixth floor, far above the rivers and their town. Nothing blocked my view, which was another reason I heard so much. Long before the croquet sounds began every morning, I heard the rooster behind the building start to crow, and I heard the morning alarm go off all over campus at six o'clock. I heard the students as they jogged groggily to the small road that ran through campus, where they did their morning exercises. The exercise music started shortly after six, broadcast over the loudspeakers—morning-cheerful, workout-repetitive music, the same day after day. After exercises there were announcements, and propaganda, and the sound of students getting their breakfast; and then there were the bells for morning class and the first soft echoes rising up from the croquet court.

I lived next to the main teaching building and I heard those sounds as well. I heard students repeating their lessons, because in Fuling much was learned by rote. That was also a soothing sound; there was something satisfying about hearing their voices rise and fall in unison as they recited lessons that all of them had learned. And I liked hearing the teachers' voices once class started, and the jumbled noise of the ten-minute breaks, and the electronic bells and the eager rush of the lunch hour.

None of these noises bothered me. The early sounds woke me but that was fine, because they were part of the routine of the college and hearing them made me feel as if I were also in step. I wasn't, of course—and in some ways I never fell in. But during those early weeks I would have felt even more disjointed if it hadn't been for the steady routines that surrounded me.

Everything followed a strict timetable. There was the morning routine—the exercises, the bells, the classes—and often in the afternoons there was the whisk of brooms as the students did their mandatory campus cleaning. On Mondays and Thursdays they cleaned their classrooms. Sunday nights were political meetings, when the students gathered to give speeches and sing songs. Sometimes they sang patriotic anthems, but mostly they sang love songs, their voices echoing across the nighttime campus.

At the start of the year, the freshmen had military training. Each class formed a regiment, boys and girls together, and People's Liberation Army soldiers came to teach them how to salute, goose-step, execute turns, and stand at attention. During their military training they also learned songs—that seemed to be a way to make Communism fun. Our students were always singing patriotic songs for one organization or another.

For their military training, the freshmen wore the class uniform, which consisted of powder-blue Adidas-knockoff sweat suits. Their bright uniforms seemed incongruous next to the military stiffness of the camouflaged instructors, and so did the students. They were in their early twenties but most looked younger, fresh off the farm, and they covered under the leaders' instructions. On hot days some of them fainted and were carried to the shade while the rest of the class continued goose-stepping. At the end of the two-week training, when

they had their steps down, they marched out to the rifle range in a deep corner of Mo Pan Valley, where, as a punctuation to their initiation, they blew the hell out of targets with high-powered rifles. I heard that as well, the bursts of gunfire drowning out the sounds of the Wu River.

★ Campus quieted early at night. The dormitory lights went out at eleven o'clock sharp—all of them at once, a row of buildings going black as the electricity was cut. Sometimes I sat out on my balcony at night, watching the lights go out, and again there was something soothing about the regularity of it all.

From my balcony the city was beautiful at night. During the day Fuling was a dirty river town, and you could see that much of it had been built too quickly, but at night all of the flaws disappeared. It was only water and lights—the brilliant lights and the dark water, the deep black mirror of the Wu River streaked with red and yellow and white. Sometimes a night boat slipped upriver, steadily pushing a triangle of light ahead of its prow, the motor coughcoughcoughing in the darkness of the valley. And every half hour or so there would be a big passenger boat on the Yangtze, a bright band of lights floating past in majestic silence.

★ I didn't really understand any of the routines. I didn't know where the boats were going and I didn't know why the college was regulated the way it was. They played croquet differently than we do in America, but I never bothered to figure out the Fuling rules. I simply liked their playing every day—the regularity was what mattered. Nor did I ever think much about the military training, until I read one of my students' journal as she described a typical afternoon in the college:

It's sunny, the first year students are doing their military training. They walked again and again. Although the sweat is dropping down from their head, they can't stop without the permission of their leader.

Of course, in this way, they know how hard the army life is. Their spirits can be discouraged.

Everyone should have a strong sense of patriotism, especially the college students. Our state costs a lot of money to educate them. They should be faithful to their motherland. Army force is a symbol of the power of a country, so it's necessary to have some knowledge about military. In 1989, there was a student movement in Beijing. For the

youth, their thoughts don't ripe and they don't have their own ideas, so the surroundings can influence them easily. Also they can't tell the truth for the fault. Where there is exciting thing, they turn up. After the movement, our state decides to have military training in college, to make them understand that it is not easy to obtain our present life.

That was what I had actually been hearing—the marching and the distant gunshots were the echoes of the Tiananmen Square protests. I realized that there was more to the routines of the college than I had first imagined, and after that I began to listen more carefully to the sounds that filtered up to my aerie high above the Wu River.

MUCH OF WHAT I LEARNED in the early days was from the students. My Chinese wasn't yet good enough to talk with the people in town, which made the city overwhelming—a mess of miscommunication. And so I listened to my students, reading what they wrote in their journals for class, and parts of Fuling slowly began to draw into focus.

The first thing I saw was myself and Adam. This was intimidating, because never in my life had I been watched so closely that every action was replayed and evaluated. Everything we did was talked and written about; every quirk or habit was laid bare. Students wrote about the way I always carried a water bottle to class; they wrote about how I paced the classroom as I taught; they wrote about my laugh, which they found ridiculous. They wrote about my foreign nose, which impressed them as impossibly long and straight, and many of them wrote about my blue eyes. This was perhaps the strangest detail of all, because my eyes are hazel—but my students had read that foreigners had blue eyes, and they saw what they wanted to see.

Mostly they wanted to see all of the outside world condensed into these two young *waiguoren*, which was what foreigners were called in Fuling—"people from outside the country." One afternoon, Adam and I threw a Frisbee around the front plaza after dinner, and by the next day, when I read one student's journal, the lazy game had become Olympian:

When I was writing my composition, someone shouted at the classes: 'Pete and Adam are playing Frisbee!' At once, I put down my pen and rushed out the classroom. Really, they are! I wanted to see it clearly and didn't want to miss any scene. I ran into the classroom and put the glasses on my nose, then dashed to the classroom again. I can see it clearly now! . . . The two sports men stood far away from Frisbee each other and began to play. How wonderful it looked! The Frisbee was like a red fire, flying person to person between the two men. I have seen it for a long time. Foreigners are so versatile.

Other descriptions were less heroic. My favorite was written by a student named Richard, in an essay entitled "Why Americans Are So Casual":

I'm a Chinese. As we all know, the Chinese nation is a rather conservative nation. So many of us have conservative thinking in some degree. I don't know whether it is bad or good.

Our foreign language teachers—Peter and Adam—came to teach us this term. It provides a good opportunity of understanding the American way of life. In my opinion, they are more casual than us Chinese people. Why do I think so? I'll give you some facts to explain this.

For example, when Mr. Hessler is having class, he can scratch himself casually without paying attention to what others may say. He dresses up casually, usually with his belt dropping and dangling. But, to tell you the truth, it isn't consider a good manner in China, especially in old people's eyes. In my opinion, I think it is very natural.

Last week, when Miss Thompson [another Peace Corps volunteer who visited Fuling] gave us a lecture on the American election, she took off her woolen sweater and tied it to her waist. To us Chinese people, it's almost unimaginable. How can a teacher do that when she/he is having a lesson! But thanks goodness, we major in English and know something about America, it didn't surprise us. But if other people saw this, they might can't believe their own eyes.

It was an easy place to make mistakes, and plenty were made. But the locals tended to be forgiving—usually they gave us a hint, a nudge in

the right direction. During the first week of class, Adam had his students introduce themselves, and a girl named Keller stood up. She told the name of her hometown, and she explained that she had chosen her English name in honor of Helen Keller. This was a common pattern; some of them had taken their names from people they admired, which explained why we had a Barbara (from Barbara Bush), an Armstrong (Neil Armstrong), and an idealistic second-year student called Marx. A few had translated their Chinese names directly—House, Yellow, North. There was one boy whose English name was Lazy. “My name is Lazy,” he said, on the first day of class. “I am very lazy. I do not like to play basketball or football or do many things. My hobbies are sleeping.”

Other names made less sense. There was a Soddy, a Sanlee, a Ker. Some were simply unfortunate: a very small boy called Pen, a very pretty girl named Coconut. One boy was called Daisy, a name that greatly dismayed Dean Fu. The dean was a handsome man with blue-black hair, and he was our main liaison with the English department—a position whose weight of responsibility often gave him a mournful air. He seemed particularly morose when he called me into his office to talk about Daisy.

“That’s a girl’s name, isn’t it?” Dean Fu asked.

“Yes,” I said. “Except now in America even girls don’t like that name.”

“I remember it from *The Great Gatsby*,” Dean Fu said, smiling sadly. As a student his specialty had been American literature, and he was familiar with virtually all of the great twentieth-century novelists. He sighed and shook his head.

“Last year that student had a boy’s name,” said the dean. “He changed it over the summer. I don’t know why.”

I didn’t know either—I never talked with Daisy about it. He wasn’t easy to speak with, and all I ever learned about him was that his lifelong goal of being a soldier had been crushed when the People’s Liberation Army turned him down because of bad eyesight. This was a failure that illuminated the mystery of Daisy’s existence; he was a tall, taciturn boy with an air of deep sadness, and every day he wore a full camouflage uniform to class. Whether it was consolation or a form of self-punishment, I never knew. I simply liked having a tall camouflaged boy named Daisy sitting in the back of my class, and I never

would have asked him to change either his name or his uniform. I didn't tell that to Dean Fu, of course.

But Keller's name was very straightforward. Helen Keller was a common heroine among the students—even some of the boys listed her as a role model, partly because she had had Communist sympathies. On the day that Keller introduced herself, she explained the reasons for her name, and then she smiled.

"Thank you," Adam said. "You have very nice freckles, Keller."

The classroom suddenly became very still. Keller's face fell and she sat down quickly. In the awkward silence Adam floundered for a moment, and then he hurriedly explained that in America freckles are considered attractive. Which, it turned out, is not the case in China—his compliment was like saying "You have a nice birthmark." But there was nothing to do except continue the lesson, and in a few minutes the awkwardness had passed.

But it wasn't forgotten. A week later two students mentioned the incident in their journals, trying, in the Chinese way, to communicate the message indirectly:

I have heard of that there are so many American women have freckles on their faces. In China, women especially girls who have freckles on their faces do not like other people to mention it. It's bad manner. I want to know what do the American women who have freckles think of it?

Some of their [the foreign teachers'] teaching methods are acceptable. We should affirm their achievements. But sometimes they also make some students embarrassed due to their absence of Chinese custom. We Chinese have our own taboos. We never make frivolous remarks about people's appearance. But one of these two American teachers broke this taboo once in class. But I think, with the time on, up their knowledge of Chinese daily life, would some embarrassments be avoided.

AND SO WE BUMBLED ON. We were naive, of course—we trusted good intentions and hard work, and we thought that soon we would slip into the routines of the city without much problem. But like most