The Great Walk of China

Travels on foot from Shanghai to Tibet

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To the people of China, who have taught me so much.

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Preface

The First Step

I am walking from Shanghai to Tibet.

It is a great line, and it is true. My journey is not continuous; I walk when I have the time, usually once a month and always starting from the last place I stopped and always heading west. With every step, I cover an unbroken trail that began at the Bund in the heart of Shanghai, to (as I write this in January of 2010) the Sichuan basin north of Chongqing.

I have walked, with many twists and turns, well over two thousand kilometres since I began this venture in 2004, having passed through two municipalities (Shanghai and Chongqing), five provinces (Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Anhui, Hubei and Sichuan) and countless towns and villages.

People often ask me how I came up with the concept of a walk across China, and my thanks go to Edwin Dingle for being my inspiration. In the late spring of 2004, I was sitting in a Japanese restaurant in Shanghai and reading Dingle's book *Across China on Foot*, which tells the tale of the Englishman's 1909 trek. But Dingle didn't really cross China on foot; instead, he took boats up the Yangtze River from Shanghai to Chungking (now spelled Chongqing) and then, over a period of nine months, walked southwest through Sichuan and Yunnan provinces to the

Burmese border. The twenty-eight-year-old Dingle could neither speak nor read Chinese, so while the book is highly readable and fascinating in its descriptions of magnificent scenery, hotel squalor and the activities of foreign missionaries, it lacks a certain local depth.

As I feasted as usual on salmon sashimi and cucumber sticks, I thought to myself: I can do better than that, and over another flask of hot sake I mapped out the plan. I would walk due west from Shanghai towards Lhasa, staying as close as possible to the 31st parallel – Shanghai is at thirty-one degrees north, which is the same latitude as Marrakesh, Morocco. The Yangtze Gorges are at thirty degrees north, while Lhasa is at twenty-nine degrees, making the journey pretty much a straight line due west for four thousand kilometres. The expedition would have to be non-contiguous, because I lead a busy life, but the rule would be to always start from the last place I stopped, so that I would literally walk every step of the way.

The decision was made: I would walk to Tibet. I pushed my empty plates aside, turned on my laptop and opened up Microsoft Encarta (this was in the days before Google Earth). Looking at the vast map of China, my first question as I looked west of Shanghai was whether I should go north or south of Tai Hu, the almost perfectly circular lake about fifty kilometres from the city. North would take me through Suzhou, Changzhou, Wuxi and Nanjing, tracking close to the lower reaches of the Yangtze River. This route wanders through towns and cities that are well-known, well-travelled and well-integrated into the global economy, thanks to their export industries. Travelling to the south of the lake would take me through Pingwang, Huzhou, Changxing and Guangde: towns and cities I had never even heard of and knew nothing about. It was an easy choice; I would take the southern route.

I started the walk the very next afternoon: April 4, 2004. It was a bright and shiny late spring day. As I walked those first few kilometres, I wondered many times if I could really do it and whether the goal of walking across China was, pardon the pun, really a step too far.

But I persevered and, after a few months, I became proud of the

distance I had put between myself and China's largest city. For a long time I didn't tell anyone of my plan because I was worried that I would fail. Then, somewhere in the rice paddies of Zhejiang Province, I decided the dream could become a reality and I became for many people, including myself, the man who is walking across China.

As I walk, I am constantly reminded of the many reasons I decided to do this.

I bill myself as a China expert, and while I have set foot in every province and region of China at one time or another over the thirty years I have lived in and around this country, there are vast areas that I have never seen. The walk gives me some credibility to speak to the 'Real China', in a way that is at least closer to the truth than the view from central Beijing or downtown Shanghai.

I have always been interested in how China and the West interact, in all ways. Just about everything I have done seems to have been an exploration of how these two cultures fit together and for me, it is an unending investigation. The walk yields an interesting perspective on China/Outside dynamics because for just about everyone I meet out there, I am the first non-Chinese person they have ever seen, let alone spoken to. The fact that, unlike Mr. Dingle, I can also read and speak Chinese means that I can talk to people and I can read the signs and slogans and graffiti that I come across. I see things in a way that many non-Chinese would not, and perhaps in a way that many Chinese would miss because I have an outsider's perspective.

When I first came to Mainland China in 1978, this was a very closed country. Foreigners were not allowed to travel beyond a radius of about twenty kilometres from the centre of Beijing without official approval from the Foreign Ministry. Every road out of Beijing had a sign posted and a checkpoint that required foreigners to stop and turn back if they lacked a pass to proceed. My walk is a way to test today's limits, of proving how much China has changed and how much it has opened up to the world. It is, hopefully, a celebration of tolerance.

I have a problem with my leg. I limp, and have done so since I

underwent an operation at the age of eleven to cut out a section of bone in my right hip joint that had been affected by tuberculosis. This, and later operations, resulted in my right leg being shorter than the left, leaving me with a lop-sided gait and an increasing stiffness of my spine. The walk is partly a message to heaven, declining to accept the affliction's constraints.

I suppose I am also a part of the tradition of English eccentricity, which is particularly strong in Englishmen resident in foreign parts, and often includes the habit of taking long walks. There is no point fighting this kind of thing.

There were other inspirations as well, including an 18th-century Chinese traveller named Xu Xiake, who wandered central China describing its sights in, amongst other tomes, *The Travel Diaries of Xu Xiake*. Then there was the great Isabella Bird, the intrepid British traveller of the late 19th century who wrote wonderful travelogues of Asia and elsewhere and passed along what became a key part of my route.

The only advantage of age is perspective, and at 57, I now have some of that. My first career was as a journalist for newspapers and news wire services, and while I am a journalist no more, I still look at the world as a reporter. People on the road ask me what I am doing and I say 'cai feng', which means to 'grab the wind', a metaphor for travel and experiencing the world. The phrase is also similar in sound to 'cai fang', which means to 'do reporting'. The trip is a bit of both concepts.

While walking across China sounds like a formidable concept, in a way, it is simply a series of strolls through the countryside. Or sometimes hikes – I walk up to fifteen or even twenty kilometres a day, depending on how many people I stop to talk to along the way. I do not camp out overnight. I sleep in little local inns, or in a hotel in the nearest town. I am not roughing it.

People ask if it is lonely on the walk, for I almost always walk alone, and the answer is: No! I come across people in every type of landscape. I say "Ni hao" to all, resulting in dozens of conversations each day I am out there, even when the weather is bad. I choose to walk alone because

it creates the opportunity for conversations, and it is these conversations that are the point of the whole enterprise. I hand out my name card to everyone I meet and encourage them to contact me. I get telephone calls from farmers and tea traders in the middle of nowhere asking where I am and how I am doing.

I have learned to read satellite images, use maps, Global Positioning System (GPS) units and a compass. I have learned more about how to talk to strangers, and to make people feel comfortable talking to me. I have learned how to read directions from the sun and moon, and something of the cycle of plant life and how farmers think. I see and learn something new every time I go out there.

On the walk so far, I have already talked to thousands of people, taken tens of thousands of photographs and seen places that are hidden in their ordinariness or remoteness from most Chinese people, let alone people from other parts of the world. I have had the opportunity to experience the spontaneous hospitality of ordinary Chinese people, see the rapid changes that are taking place in this country at the most basic of levels, and talk to kids and old people, farmers and traders, madmen and nuns, about everything under the Chinese sun. I have planted rice, de-corned corn cobs, winnowed wheat and paid my respects along the way to Buddha and a number of other deities – nothing wrong with hedging your bets.

The walk continues, and while my original plan was to do the book when I finished it, I now have no idea when it will end. For me, this is not a race. I saunter on and stop whenever I feel like it to talk to a farmer or an old woman or a kid about whatever comes to mind. With China continuing to change at such a fast rate, I was concerned that the value of some of the observations would be diminished if I left it too long. This is only the first part of the story.

So to paraphrase a Chinese saying, a story of ten thousand sentences begins with one word. And that word, may Buddha have mercy on my soul, is "I".

CHAPTER 1

Into the Mountains

I was nearly two years into the walk before I reached the mountains.

The road from Shanghai on the Pacific seaboard of China, at zero metres above sea level and sometimes less, through to the Tibet plateau in the heart of Asia involves two major 'steps'. The first is from the central China plain, where the average height above sea level is twenty-five metres or so, up to the Sichuan plateau with an altitude of around four-hundred-and-fifty metres. This is the range of mountains through which the Yangtze River has cut the Gorges, now dominated by a massive dam and reservoir. The second step, just west of Chengdu city, pushes the altitude up to more than four thousand metres. The paths up both steps are within one degree of latitude of Shanghai.

As I started out of Shanghai, I was out of shape and five kilometres a day was something to be proud of. Then my father died, I thought my right knee was collapsing, and I basically abandoned the walk on the shores of Lake Tai for nearly a year. But the urge to continue the project eventually resurfaced, and I picked it up again, and walked on through the rich rice lands of Zhejiang Province. I crossed into Anhui Province, making my way through many little towns until, on New Year's Day of

2006, I crossed the Yangtze River at Tongling, a filthy industrial city. I struggled on through the bleak Anhui winter, but when I hit springtime at the edge of the Dabie Mountains, the walk changed from a trudge to a romp. I haven't looked back since.

The countryside just to the east of the mountains is at roughly the same height above sea level as had been the previous five hundred kilometres from Shanghai – about forty metres. Then, suddenly, it changed.

On the satellite photographs, there is a clear straight line running NNE to SSW for a couple of hundred kilometres. To the right of the line are fields and flat land; to the left are mountains and forest. Highway 209, which is a paved but quiet country lane, crosses this line into the mountains.

The road up from the plain rises steeply to two hundred and fifty metres above sea level, making this leg of the journey a bit of a struggle, but I finally crossed a ridge, entering the world of mountain valleys, which, after so many hundreds of kilometres of flat paddies, was a startling and welcome change.

The Dabie Mountains region has the reputation of being one of the most remote and backward parts of China. The region is also a significant part of the Chinese Communist Party's mythology as its desperate rebels passed through the area in the late 1920s and early 1930s to escape the guns of the Nationalists. The rebels survived.

The air in the mountain valleys is clean and fresh in a way that is unknown on the plains to the east. I could hear the melodious sound of running water, a novelty for me, and within this there was a deeper silence, thanks to the muffling effect of the mountains and the thick forest cover.

I paused near two houses nestled below the road and sat down on a low wall. Before long, three women came over to find out who this stranger was. The woman was surnamed Zhu, she was in her late sixties, and she had two sons and an extended family of more than a dozen people all living in the same house with wonderful views of the deep valley in front and the steep mountain behind. She invited me into her clean kitchen,

which had an old-fashioned wood-burning stove on which she made me a cup of tea with tea leaves plucked from a bush just outside the door. In the corner was a covered plastic tub of water fed by a pipe from a deep well. I dipped a small bowl into the tub and took a refreshing gulp. It tasted ... how to describe it? Soft?

"This is better than any mineral water in the city," her son proudly told me. "No chemicals. It's the best water for making tea."

A little further along the road there was a small group of women and children playing in a yard in front of some simple houses. I said hello, and they all crowded round. One of the girls was wearing a T-shirt decorated with faded, unreadable English.

"What does that say?" I asked the girl, but she looked back at me and shook her head, while one of the women laughed and said: "It says she's an idiot."

"Well, I can read English," I announced, "and I can tell you it says the opposite, that she is smart and has a bright future."

The girl looked from the woman to me, and wondered what was going on.

I continued at a slow pace: the mountains and valleys were easily the most beautiful country I had passed through since the start of my walk, and I wanted to make sure I experienced every view and took every photo, aiming for the perfect digital photographic equivalent of a classical Chinese painting with mountains, water, trees, and, somewhere in an insignificant corner, a humble human overawed by the wonders of Nature.

There was a steady sprinkle of human habitation wherever I walked; after all, this is China with a population of well over a billion, and people and their homes are never far away. Down on the plains of Anhui, there were almost no thatched farmhouses left, but the traditional tiled-roof design still dominated in these nearby mountains. Scattered amongst the vestiges of olden times were more modern buildings in the standard early 21st-century design, which is two stories with a flat roof.

As I walked along, a man on a motorcycle passed me, then stopped and came back. He was Xu Hongsheng (Red Life Xu), a chemistry teacher at the Chashui High School from the nearby town of the same name. We talked for a while, and he invited me to visit the school the next day and speak to the students. I accepted gladly and asked what time I should arrive.

"Six o'clock." I groaned at the thought of getting up so early but agreed, and off he rode.

I passed a temple with a dog that growled angrily and wouldn't let me inside. Shortly after I heard a waterfall, which must have been massive from the roar of the water, but wasn't visible from the road. All the while, I gloried in the relative lack of litter along the roads, which was a big change from the plains where the edges are generally lined with rubbish.

The next day saw a gloomy, grey start in the depths of the mountains, but by 6am, there were hundreds of teenagers from farms and villages covering a wide area around Chashui standing before the main school building. Headmaster Chen, Teacher Xu and I watched three children raise the Chinese flag as the national anthem blared over the PA through sickening layers of karaoke-style reverb.

The students were wide-eyed at the sight of this non-Chinese person standing before them, the first they had ever seen in the flesh. One girl shyly approached the front and mumbled her way through an essay about the importance of the Beijing 2008 Olympics, scribbled on a sheet from an exercise book. The reverb was horrible; no one was listening.

I asked Teacher Xu if we could turn the reverb down. He went inside, and suddenly it was possible to vaguely understand what the girl was saying. I was up next with Teacher Xu introducing me to the gathering as a foreign friend walking to Tibet. He handed me the microphone, saying: "Tell them that learning Mandarin is important."

Okay.

So I introduced myself, the red flag of Communist China fluttering above me. "The Dabie Mountains are no longer isolated," I told the

group, "You are now linked into the rest of China, and China is now linked into the rest of the world. Languages are the tools we use to bind the world together."

Warming to the topic, I continued: "You and I can communicate because I speak and understand Mandarin, and so do you. With Mandarin, you can communicate with anyone in China. And beyond its boundaries is the whole world. English is the language that works outside China. First, make sure your Mandarin is good and then learn English."

I spoke for fifteen minutes. It was quite a responsibility, representing the world in front of hundreds of people, many of whom had never stepped beyond the mountain valleys. I told them about the many positive changes I had seen in China over the decades; about how optimistic I am about the future of China; and about the constructive role China can play in the world. "The world needs China," I said, "And China needs the world."

The students dispersed to the classrooms, and I asked the headmaster if I could visit a class. He had no problem with it, so we went upstairs to the senior class.

"Good morning," I said in English as I stepped in front of the blackboard.

"Good morning!" the teenagers roared back, beaming with delight.

"Shall I speak in English or Chinese?" They decided on Chinese.

One student asked why I was walking across China, so I told him I have a problem with my leg and wanted to send a message to the heavens. Another asked what I thought of China: "It is a place that is changing rapidly and opening up and full of promise and potential." Another wondered what I thought of Chinese education and did I like the Dabie Mountains. Yet another asked me to tell the class the most amazing thing that had ever happened to me. My brain raced for a couple of seconds before coming up with: "There was a day in 1980 when I was a reporter and I was in the Great Hall of the People and I stood right next to Deng Xiaoping." I paused. "He was short."

I asked if the school had computers they could use, and the answer was

that yes, there were a couple, but access was strictly controlled: 'Going online' is apparently not good. I decided to be subversive. I pulled out my laptop computer and said: "This computer is linked into the Internet right now, and I want to show you my homepage." I clicked on earnshaw.com, and the site came up really quickly, thanks to the wonders of wireless technology. The students were amazed.

I wrote the address for the site on the board and said: "On this site, you will find a link to send me an email. I want you all to send me emails, okay?" They declared as one that they would.

Back on the road, I walked along a steep gorge lined with waterfalls, then passed through a break in the ridge called Dragon's Pass. Once through, I found myself in a wide valley dotted with farms and fields, mostly planted with rice or rapeseed, a fast-growing plant with bright yellow flowers used to make canola oil. This was the Chashui High School's catchment area.

Passing by a small house with lines of gravestones at the front, I was invited in for a cup of tea by an old and balding gentleman named Zhang Zuhua, who turned out to be the engraver of the stones. I asked the sixty-five-year-old how much for a gravestone, and he told me about one hundred RMB in total, stone plus engraving. "It is a very seasonal business," he explained. "Things are busiest after the Qingming Festival." This traditional rite is celebrated on the one-hundred-and-fourth day after the winter solstice, which had just passed. Mr. Zhang said he made a few thousand RMB a year, which he said was more than enough to live on in his village. "I have five children, but I live alone and take no money from them," he added in a satisfied manner.

I left Mr. Zhang and continued walking, but about fifteen minutes later, I realized I had left my mobile phone in the engraver's house. "Not to worry," I thought and kept walking, knowing it would be safe with him. Sure enough, a short while later I was walking through a bamboo forest when a motorcycle roared up with Mr. Zhang on the back seat behind a young boy. "I found you!" he exclaimed. "You forgot your phone!"