

DON'T JOKE  
ON THE STAIRS

*How I learnt to navigate China  
by breaking most of the rules*

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*To Ellen, with thanks*

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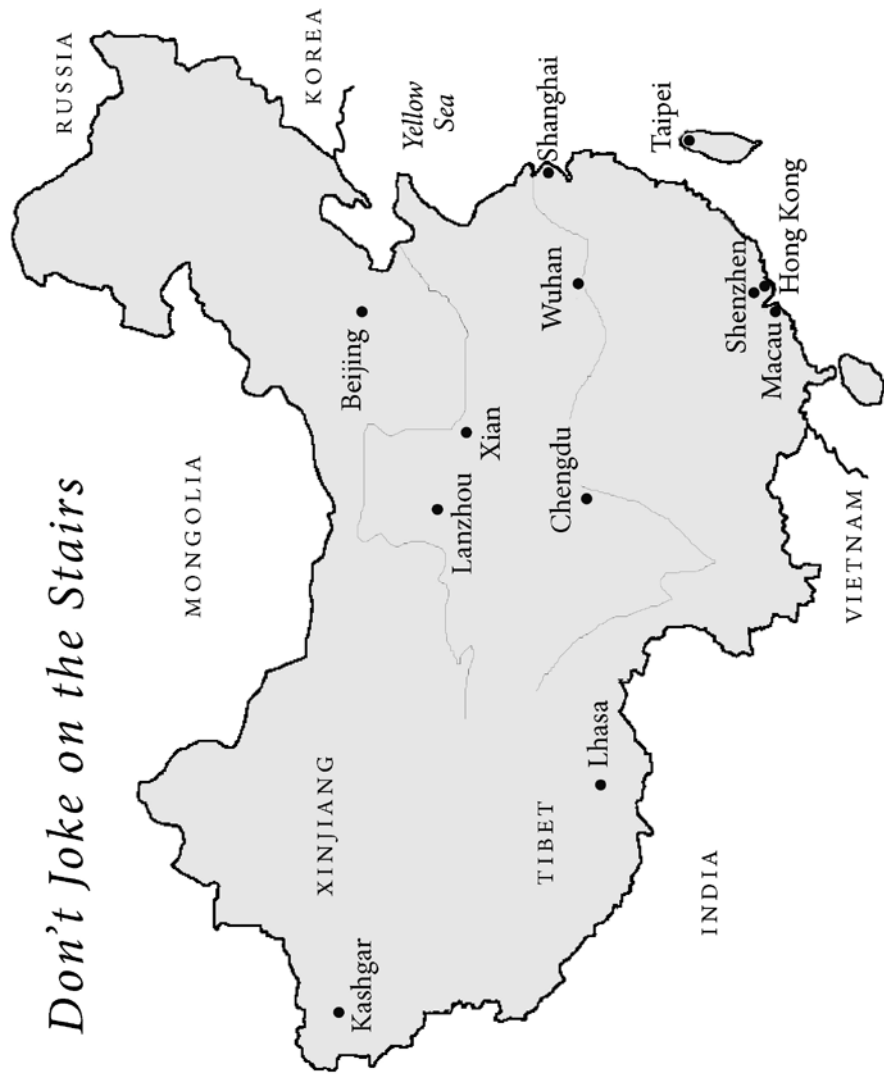
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Front cover photo by Liz Hemmings  
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# *Don't Joke on the Stairs*



## SMILE COMES BEFORE A FALL

So what's with the love? What is it about China that entralls me so, to the point where I love her, or rather, him, for richer, for poorer, in sickness, in health and in tainted food scandals, forsaking all others? Why this monogamous and almost unconditional love (I say almost, for there are a couple of things about China that even a mother couldn't love) which began at exactly 09:02 on September 31st 1988, the moment I first set foot on Chinese soil?

People often asked and still sometimes ask me, with increasing incredulousness year by year, what it is about China I love so much. For ages I couldn't pinpoint the reason, apart from the dull and hackneyed "Oh, I suppose the people, the food and the language, the music and the beauty of traditional Chinese architecture... and because it's huge and not Norway."

Well, these reasons still hold true. (By "people," by the way, I mean "men," by "food", "Sichuan food" and by "language," Cantonese). But the real reason for my Sinophilia eluded me until I went to Lanzhou in 2002.

It was there I saw *the sign* which finally told me exactly why I am such a slavering, unconditional lover of China who must have my regular fix of it every month.

I saw the sign.

Now at last I knew why I am happier squatting over the stinking cesspit latrine of some two-table restaurant in Sichuan while three pigs look on, than sitting daintily – well, just sitting – on the gleaming seat of a deep-carpeted, perfume-wafting “rest room” of a five-star Hong Kong hotel.

I realised why I'd rather sit up all night on a train thundering through Inner Mongolia with only three peasants for a pillow than fly business class to some golf resort in Thailand. And I finally understood why I'd rather sit and drink beer and play cards with three geezers on a street corner in Guangzhou than swan around a cocktail party with suave men in dinner jackets, being handed sparkling flutes of champagne by starched waiters.

It was the sign.

I was coming down by train from another, marginally happier trip to Xinjiang province; that furthest upper-left corner, the jaunty tail feathers of the chicken-like map of China, on my way home to Hong Kong, the chicken's asshole as it were. That particular train journey had been something of an epiphany in many ways. It was on it that I discovered my real identity; not a normal, day-to-day *lao wai* (Caucasian) closed off from Chinese things like shitty hotels, but a true-blue Hong Kong compatriot. That was also the trip I spent 31 hours on a wooden bench, resting my head on wood. After this harrowing but edifying two-day journey I stopped over in Lanzhou, the provincial capital of Gansu. The city clings to the banks of the Yellow River which is the “cradle of Chinese civilization” and is known as “China's Sorrow” due to its terrible floods.

About the “cradle of civilization” thing: Just like I've been to Xian probably seven times without ever bothering to see the famous Terracotta Warriors, I don't know how many times I've been to Lanzhou without even once checking out the famous cradle. I knew it was on the banks of the Yellow River somewhere, but it was only after my ill-fated, nadir-rich trip to Xinjiang in 2009, coming screaming into the city gagging for

an internet connection and someone to text, that after a serious bout of online reunion I thought of going to see the cradle.

I crossed the famous river on a footbridge and started asking people: “Where is the cradle of civilization? Is it here? Or here?” No one could or would really tell me, but in the end I found a unassuming spot covered in brush which looked promising.

It felt good having finally found the spot whence we all sprang.

That’s when I saw the pig.

No, hang on, it wasn’t a pig at all, it was a *human corpse*.

A big, fat, pink, swollen river corpse washed up after I don’t know how many days in the water. This was by no means the first corpse I’ve seen in China (but the second) so I thought nothing of it, just kept going, thinking: They could have put a blanket over it.

But that probably only happens in detective stories. The real thing, corpse-wise, probably looks like the scene I beheld: A bored policeman taking notes, another irritating upset to his largely peaceful day; a police boat put ashore, some spectators talking among themselves and, a few metres away, people drinking and having fun on anchored river boats.

I looked at the sexless, lifeless thing washed up, thinking: There’s really nothing more still than a corpse. Not even concrete. A corpse is the most immovable thing there is.

Murder, suicide, accident? Who knows? I didn’t care to ask.

I bought a newspaper the next day, as I felt a certain attachment to my corpse, but there was nothing. What was mentioned, though, was that a woman enjoying a Sichuan hotpot meal had felt a movement under her armpit only to see a “big, hairy, shiny fellow” (a rat) running away and promptly diving into one of the hotpots to be not only boiled alive but also beaten to death by diners. The screams of the woman, the article said, quickly taken up by fellow female diners although they knew not why, had “put diners at the high-class dining establishment off their appetite.” I’d say! Rat on the loose in China, that is big news.

Several hours after seeing the thing-like thing, I had no appetite either, and suddenly felt the need to text friends in Hong Kong: Guess what – I've just seen a corpse!

“Wah, bloody hell, where, how?” came the immediate answers, which made me feel a lot better. I hadn't been so unperturbed after all, it turned out.

I sat down to have a soothing beer, and right next to me I saw a matronly woman knitting comfortably away outside a SEX SHOP. Well, the sign in Chinese (on the curtain pretending to be a door) said “Maintain Health-Products” but it really was a sex shop full of dildos and other sex paraphernalia.

Death, sex. They are one.

And seeing death in all its, well, mundane-ness, really, made me feel so alive and to-be-or-not-to-be. It certainly made the pain of being all alone in the world go away. It could have been so much worse. I could have been the one lying there washed up on some riverbank with all my clothes torn off by the currents.

Morbid though it may seem, things like finding a corpse on a riverbank while looking for the cradle of civilization are what I love about China. But I was going to tell you about the one reason: The sign.

\*

Lanzhou bears the dubious distinction of being the most polluted city in China (and believe me, that takes some doing), windless and nestling among high hills, and with perhaps more than the usual number of smoke-belching factories. But I have always loved it for its rough-and-readiness combined with that old-world charm – “we're the cradle of civilization and we know it” attitude, its weirdly coloured hills, festooned with temples clawing on to the sheer cliff-face, that rise straight up just behind the train station.

Oh, and the train station itself, yeah, I'd go there just for that. It's beautifully designed, has a lovely statue of a leaping horse in front and those rust-, green- and brown-striped hills rearing up right behind it. About a third of the population of China are invariably milling around this station in ordered chaos at any given time of day; everybody going anywhere in the north has to pass through it. The place is such a hub that you have to wait for up to six days to get a train ticket out, so even I, a big anti-flyer, have had to fly out of the city more than once, instead of travelling the civilized way: by train.

\*

Lanzhou, far away from the eastern provinces and Beijing, hasn't been completely thrashed by "progress." You can still find winding streets with old geezers sitting outside their one-storey brick houses, shooting the breeze or playing board games, while other old geezers stand around them, commenting on the game.

In trees and on window sills nearby are clusters of bird cages, for the excuse the geezers use to go out every day and meet their mates is that the birds need to be taken for a walk. The birds look as if they're bored senseless if you ask me, but maybe they secretly appreciate the outdoors and the opportunity to pick up the latest gossip from their feathered pals, too.

Of all the cities in China I've been to, Lanzhou probably has the highest percentage of people openly not working and proud of it. At least half the city's population, day and night, are engaged in sitting down, chatting or playing some kind of board or card game.

Those who are standing seem mostly to be spiky-haired, impossibly thin young people (men) grouped around pool tables, fags parked permanently in corners of mouths. They look like youth everywhere; bored, indifferent and cocky. But even a middle-aged *lao wai* like me will



make them break out in the most delightful smiles and they will come up, wanting to chat.

That's one of the many things I love about China, and which separates it from western countries. If I were walking down the street in, oh, let's say South London, or maybe inner-city Washington DC, and I saw a group of spiky haired, no, hooded, thin and saggy-trouserred young men, I'd feel... if not exactly worried, at least decidedly middle-aged and terribly bourgeois. Perhaps I'd clutch my handbag a little harder, avoiding eye contact – what do I know?

But in China! Not only can I talk to these guys with impunity, more often than not they will invite me to actually socialize with them. Where else does that happen, I wonder?

Wherever it is, it has to be pretty good to beat China and its young men. They are so unthreatening. And so beautiful. Lovely skin, no facial hair... My oh my. And there are so incredibly many of them! With China's one-child policy, most girls have been eradicated, so the country is fast becoming the paradise known as "a world without women."

\*

The Yellow River is, despite its sad nickname, Lanzhou's pride and joy. Like most famous and touristy places of modern China, its northern banks have been "beautified," that is to say stripped of any distinction and anything reminding one that the thing came into being more than five years ago. The new concrete steps, the paved promenade with multi-coloured tiles, the scattered concrete benches without any kind of shade, the plastic sculptures – it looks very much like any riverbank in any Chinese city that's come into a bit of money of late.

But disneyfied or not, it's still the mythical Yellow River, a brown mass of turgid goo coming down from the red and barren hills, and I like the feeling of standing on her banks, knowing that this is the well from which all sprang.

Anyway, on this visit to the city, I had been doing what I enjoy most wherever I go in China, which is just walking around, talking to everybody I meet (in China everybody is approachable for *lao wai*) and taking photographs.

I had been out of the English-speaking world for several weeks and had no idea what was going on in the world; being stared at and mumbled about by Uyghurs who thought I was American having been my only contact with world news.

I nipped into an English language school to see if they had a *China Daily* (an English-language Communist Party mouthpiece) from at least the same month.

That's where I saw the sign.

On a large poster stuck on the wall at the bottom of the stairs, it said in English:

**Avoid exchange of jokes while using the stairs and  
don't concentrate on stairs that cause trip and fall.**

I can tell you I forgot all about *China Daily* as I perused this sign which, as well as warning people about the danger of joking, also featured an additional three well-intentioned tips (rules) about how to traverse two flights of stairs unharmed.

As I sat in my hotel room that night, still laughing as I looked at the photo I'd taken of the poster, I had an epiphany. Of course! That was it. Of all the things I love about China, that poster summed it up neatly.

It's the surrealism.

Surrealism was the word I'd been looking for all these years. Yes, more than anything, on every trip great and small I've undertaken in the Middle Kingdom, surrealism has unfailingly been at the forefront. Surrealism, strangeness, weirdness, outlandishness, drollness, kookiness... but most of all, surrealism. One could argue that what I call surrealism is just

realism or reality for 1.3 (and counting) billion Chinese, and everyday, humdrum, boring, painful and often dangerous reality at that, especially that which is controlled by the government. Which is, let's face it, most of the reality in China.

So in the following pages I have set out to describe the surreal reality that I have met in China for better and for worse; run of the mill, ordinary stuff for all the Chinese with whom I've come in contact, but surreal for me, a westerner with western sensibilities.

Yes, after 21 years in China I find I still have western sensibilities, so bearing in mind that many people think all cultures are equal and nobody has the right to pass judgement on another culture, the stuff I will go on to describe is what I and I personally, only me, solo, find surreal; whether it's Mao's curious hold on the Chinese 30 years after his death, or the habit of China's government to imprison people who try to help others who have had their homes taken away to make way for an Olympic-themed flowerbed, or simply alert the authorities to the fact that the blood peasants have been selling for money has been infected with AIDS... That's right, that's the kind of thing I find weird. Yes, surreal. I don't set out to engage in what many liberals call "China bashing," nor am I making fun of individuals. I just relate the stories as they happened to me.

I remember once I was cycling around Denmark with a friend, and we happened by accident upon a place called "Hamlet's Grave". A group of Americans were there and we, being young and silly, started spinning a tale about being Shakespeare addicts and having sold all our belongings to be able to achieve our lives' goal: Camping out on Hamlet's Grave.

The oldest American looked at us for a long time. Then he said: "That's bullshit. But it's a good story anyway!"

That's the thing about China too. No matter what happens, it's a good story anyway, and with the added bonus that unlike my youthful lying escapade, it's all true.

China is surreal. At least for me. And that's the main reason I love it.

For a lullophobe like me (a lullophobe is a person who abhors a lull, and it was indeed the over-abundance of lulls which made me leave my homeland, Norway, forever in 1988), being in China, anywhere, any time, has always been a guarantee of a lull-less time.

And I don't mean sightseeing, shopping or even playing cards, or more, with men. Just by being there, there is simply so much surrealism to be had, seen, heard and consumed on every corner and in every spot, that even the boring things are somehow fun.

China has got to be the most happening place on earth, and it's not for nothing that the place is storming forth as the Country of the New Millennium or Two. But rather than quoting the normal reasons – “economic miracle”, “fastest-growing economy”, “fastest changing” anything – I say it's the surrealism that makes China what it is for me: The country of my life. And it starts as soon as I cross the border from Hong Kong into the fabled mecca of whore-mongery and fake goods: Shenzhen. But before we go to Shenzhen, I want to tell you how I went from being a *wei po* ('devil hag', foreigner) to a real Hong Kong compatriot.

\*

“You have blue eyes and I have grey eyes. We must talk,” says the huge bloke in a hoarse and broken Putonghua and immediately sits down at my table in the train restaurant car. He starts talking away at once while gulping down beer straight from the bottle. A large bottle.

The train staff look at him with badly concealed disgust. He is, to put it diplomatically, shitfaced. Everybody working on the train is Chinese and he is so obviously not one of them: Tall and burly with brown hair and watered-down grey eyes. He looks like a Russian athlete who hasn't yet run to fat. He drinks like a Russian too: gulping down a big bottle of beer for every small glass I can manage (and I'm no mean drinker), and becomes more and more melancholic, not to say maudlin.

He's a Kazakh, one of the ethnic minorities the Chinese are so proud of and whom they are fond of trotting out on a national day or other celebrations to perform in charming folk costume. He staggers through the sentences as if wading in mud, and I can just make out that he's complaining about how crap it is to be a Kazakh in modern China, while the restaurant car staff hover with their ears sticking further and further out of their heads.

My Putonghua, which was always of the "speak better than understand" kind, is really put to the test during the three hours he holds me hostage at the table, for he belongs to a generation which, although born in China, was forced to learn Putonghua at a fairly mature age and with great unwillingness. And the Putonghua he does know is becoming more and more muddled.

"Why have they taken my country?" he exclaims several times while gripping my arm with giant strength.

I signal "help" with my eyes in the direction of the train staff, but no help is forthcoming. They probably think we two foreigners should be together. Oh dear, this is not good. It is evening and I'm already knackered after having spent 30 hours on the train without a berth. I'm travelling through Xinjiang province, the biggest in China, and it really takes a fair bit of time to get out of it.

My plan had been to have a light dinner and a bottle of beer in the restaurant car and then go back to my awful seat (I seldom call anything on a Chinese train "awful," but after 30 hours in, or rather on it, my seat had taken on distinctly terrible properties) and maybe catch a couple of winks before getting off the train at 1:00am. Instead I'm being "forced" to drink one glass of beer after another while listening to a quacking, drawling litany about the old cottage back home, the wife, the horse and the dogs that he had to leave to find work in enemy land, which is actually his own land where he was born.

Like the inhabitants of so many liberated countries, the people of Xinjiang, which would have been a country called East Turkestan if the Chinese hadn't discovered its rich natural resources, have discovered the true meaning of the word liberation.

It is the freedom to be poor, to be second- or third-rate citizens in one's own country. It's the freedom to be hauled into prison even for thinking that one's country is a country. What heresy – everybody knows that Xinjiang is a province which has “always” belonged to China – much in the same way as Tibet.

Looking at the drunk and distraught man, I wonder if China is the only place in the world where large parts of the population can't use the country's name as their nationality. Although the different minorities of China – the Uyghurs, Kazakhs, Tibetans, Mongols, Koreans and so on – are technically Chinese, they can't call themselves Chinese. Only the ethnic majority, the Han, can. Every person living inside the vast entity called China carries an identity card on which their ethnicity is clearly stated. He was born in China and should therefore be Chinese, but: Kazakh.

Thus a third-generation Han Chinese born in the US who has never been to China and doesn't know a word of Chinese is more Chinese than, for example, a Kazakh, Uyghur or Mongolian born and bred in China and with fluent Putonghua. It's a question of looks. Or “blood,” as they call it.

The official name of Xinjiang province is Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. That sounds fair and reasonable, but not surprisingly, the Uyghurs (and Kazakhs, Uzbeks, Kirghiz and Tatars, forced into a common nationality under Chinese suppression) have no more autonomy than the donkey has from the farmer.

Before the Communist Party came to power in 1949 it was part of its political platform to liberate the ethnic minorities of China from the “Han hegemony” they suffered under the Nationalist Kuomintang party.

The pre-revolution Communists tempted the Uyghurs with autonomy or even independence if they would only support Mao and his band of merry liberators.

The Party had planned that cadres from the ethnic minorities, groomed by 10,000 Han Chinese sent into the hinterland, were to administer Xinjiang after the province had been liberated.

After the revolution, however, Mao had a change of heart. Why let this gigantic area, filled to the brim with oil, minerals (a third of China's total) and other resources, just sit there for the sake of some minorities who didn't have the wherewithal to take advantage of it anyway?

He started a big operation to build roads and railway links to the provincial capital Urumqi and beyond, putting Han Chinese in all key positions, ostensibly to assist Uyghur and other minority leaders temporarily in their quest to bring communism to the hinterland. In reality, of course, they came to rule, and they came to stay. Today Han Chinese make up more than 41% of Xinjiang's population, not counting military personnel and their families.

My drinking captor is not happy with this situation. I get the impression that he thinks of little else than the Chinese invasion of his country, at least when drunk. When he eventually starts abusing the Communist Party in a rather thunderous manner, the train staff get their fingers out at last. He is brusquely half-carried, half-pushed out of the restaurant car, but the damage is already done: I am drunk. Not hammering, screaming drunk like the Kazakh, but drunk enough to start thinking that this is truly a miserable train journey and where am I, who am I and how much is it?

I might as well stay in the restaurant car – going back to the seat doesn't bear thinking about.

After a month's travel in Xinjiang I had got on this train without securing a sleeper ticket, confident that it would turn out all right somehow. I was counting on the train staff taking mercy on me; after

all, I was a foreigner and not as hardy as the Chinese. But two and three in the morning came and went, no sleeper was available and the staff stubbornly refused to throw anyone off the train so I could take their place. I had to resign myself to my fate.

At least I had a seat, that was something, and by the window at that, so I could rest my weary head on the window sill with the cool night air from the Gobi Desert caressing my troubled brow. I was privileged compared to many of the other passengers thronging the aisle, sitting wherever there was a scrap of space on their sacks and inevitable red, white and blue striped plastic bags. Many of them had been on the train for more than two days already, and were staring hungrily/compellingly at my luxurious bed arrangement, namely a wooden seat with a ninety-degree back and a rolled-up towel to put my head on. I didn't budge an inch. Here it was every man for himself. A trip to the toilet could result in extensive arguments to get my seat back, with the seat-thief uttering absurdities like: "I thought you had got off."

Yeah right, from a moving train in the middle of the Gobi Desert!

That's the thing about the Chinese; they really appreciate a good *opportunism*. Let's say you catch a *baozi* (steamed bun) seller cheating you by charging two yuan instead of one. He feels it is his right, as all foreigners are loaded. And of course, two yuan is not a lot of money, but it's still a 100% mark-up. If you then point out that *baozi* cost one yuan and that you in addition paid only one yuan for a *baozi* from this very stall the day before, he won't be embarrassed at all. No, it's thumbs up and braying laughs from the scoundrel himself as well as from the large congregation that has inevitably assembled hoping to catch an entertaining argument between *lao wai* and *lao bai xing* ('Old Hundred Surnames' – the ordinary Chinese).

When a corrupt cadre is caught embezzling 20 million yuan, people shake their heads and tut-tut. But not necessarily because he stole money from his company or from the people he was supposed to help, such



as the hundreds of thousands displaced every year by the government's many ambitious infrastructural projects; no, they disapprove of the fact that he became *too* greedy. Couldn't he just have taken a few hundred thousand here and there, like normal cadres? Just enough to build the three-storey house, send the kid abroad to university and buy the mistress some furs and baubles? But no. Trust old Wang to let his avarice run away with him. Oh well, he'll have time to ponder that in the labour camp. (Or, as in some unfortunates' cases, in front of the barrel of a gun.) Pity he dragged so many of his underlings down with him though...

But everybody can appreciate someone who goes for it.

Because of this national (or indeed global) trait, I can't get much sleep on the train even with the luxury of a window seat, because every time I find a relatively comfortable position on my rolled-up towel on the one spot on the window sill without nails sticking up, some conductor or other always comes up and tells me to look after my stuff so it won't be permanently removed by opportunists.

Therefore I'm more than ready to go to bed when I finally, at one o'clock in the morning, reach my destination, a small desert town. (By "small town" I mean "not even two million people".)

I'm stiff and aching and with a head swirling with beer and hoarse Kazakh mutterings and cries as I stumble from the train down onto dry land, my feet uncertain of how to deal with a surface with no movement.

As usual when I get to a new place, I saunter, or in this case stagger lightly, over to the nearest hotel, just across the road from the station.

But for the first time I experience the unthinkable: The station hotel is full. Not even the luxury super suite, for which I would have gladly forked out the additional 50 yuan, thereby pushing the room price up to a stratospheric 250 yuan per night, is vacant.

The situation is the same in the next hotel, and the next. Is it a cadre conference? The receptionist says something about a meeting. The only

meeting I care about, however, is my imminent meeting with death if I can't go to bed right now.

I'm too old to stay up two nights in a row, and not sleeping is just out of the question and also undignified. So I get into a taxi and ask the driver to take me anywhere at all. We go here and we go there as the warm August night (morning) deepens, but there isn't a vacant cupboard to be had anywhere. The driver insists on going into each hotel to enquire for me so I can rest, but every time he gets back to the car he looks more despondent. The town is stuffed like a *baozi*.

Then the driver has an idea and we drive to a small hotel, more like a pension without even a neon sign, huddled down some back street. He takes both me and the luggage inside. The reception is as simple as simple can be: A woman behind a desk, one staircase going up. Up, up to clean sheets and a horizontal placement of the body! And rejoicing glory to eternity, there are vacancies. Except for one little detail: Foreigners are not allowed.

What the...?

It's not the first time I have encountered this curious phenomenon, which in many other countries would be called "racial discrimination" but in China is labelled "protection against substandard or unsuitable accommodation for foreign nationals." Or something.

No, it's not the first time I've encountered it, but it's the first time it's made me so full of despair. The other times I had, after all, had the opportunity to swing around the corner and into another hotel with a more global outlook.

The driver is now frantic with worry, a sense of responsibility and eagerness to please. He tries to talk some sense into the receptionist but that is of course impossible, rule-bound as she is. Foreigners are not allowed and that's that.

So we're back in the car.

The driver is taking this rather personally, it seems. He is almost whimpering with discomfort, while shaking his head and uttering: “aiaaa” a lot. This expression has a lot of different meanings but in this case it’s probably “By Jove, this is a nasty mess and now I feel responsible.”

Then he is hit by a huge idea, an epiphany really, which turns out to be the greatest idea an inhabitant of the lovely China has had on my behalf since... possibly ever. The taxi driver says:

“Didn’t you say you live in Hong Kong?”

Snore. “What? Yes, yes, I did!”

“But then of course you’re a *Hong Kong compatriot!* You have an ID card, right?”

“Of course! I’m a permanent resident.” And proud of it, damn it!

The driver is also beaming with pride as he marches back into the reception with my suitcase in one hand and my hard-earned Hong Kong ID card in the other.

“*Xianggang tongbao* (Hong Kong compatriot)!” I hear him shout triumphantly by the desk as I follow a little hesitantly, so tired I’m staggering.

A group of people – what are they doing up at 2:30 in the morning? – stand looking at my ID card, discussing it loudly. The receptionist can’t get a word in, but that’s not necessary. As a *Xianggang tongbao* I have the same rights as a normal (in other words, Chinese) person from Hong Kong.

With my Chinese name, which with some presence of mind in 1991 I made sure got onto my ID card, I can pass for a normal Chinese person. How will the officials going through the guest registration records of the hotel (or as it turns out, “building containing some rooms with beds”) know that the number and lettering on my ID card identify me clearly as a non-Chinese and not a normal Hong Kong person at all, without as much as one star? (Hong Kong Chinese have three stars on their ID

cards; foreigners, even when born in Hong Kong, none.) As far as they are concerned, everything is fine as long as there is no passport palaver.

Yes, it's not really racial discrimination. No, no. It's just that some hotels have the right forms to deal with *passports*, while others do not.

For the first time I feel I'm officially a real human being in China, and not just some foreigner to be given preferential treatment as some kind of strangely patronizing gesture, or even inverted racism. The Chinese are actually more likely to discriminate against their own people than against foreigners. I feel I have broken through a kind of barrier and I have broken out of my foreigner pigeon-hole, despite my un-Chinese appearance.

Wei-hey, I'm no longer *Lao Wai* (Old Outside) but *Lao Nei* (Old Inside)!

Hong Kong is also not above discriminating against her own people. When I acquired the said ID card in 1991 it was by virtue of having married a Hong Kong man. I think I had to wait three days after the wedding to be issued the card, without any questions asked. Fair and square you may say, but a little not-so-fair when you consider the fact that if a Hong Kong person marries a mainlander, that spouse must wait ten years or more to achieve the coveted status of a Hong Kong person. Even if they have children.

As a Norwegian I'm certainly not used to that kind of discrimination. In Norway, as in every European country I've come across, it's the foreigners who need to be kept firmly at bay, not the country's own people.

And so, as a *Xianggang tongbao* and no longer a mere foreign devil, I can finally get some sleep. It is with a new-found and, I think, well deserved sense of identity that I slip laughing under the covers.

Since this momentous day I have often been denied access to certain hotels with the words "this hotel isn't suitable for Foreign Friends." "Foreign Friends" is the official name for us foreigners which the Chinese use when they want to keep us from doing something.

But whenever this happens, I take out my ID card with a smile: “You may not be aware of the fact that you’re dealing with a *Xianggang tongbao*? Write me into the guest register post-haste!”

Thank you, O wonderful taxi driver by the name of Wang! Had I met you sooner I could have saved thousands of yuan throughout the years I’d been staying in over-priced (in Chinese reckoning) hotels. If I had wanted to live in pensions for normal Chinese, that is. But I suppose I will continue to seek out hotels where the rooms come equipped with bathrooms and so on. And from now on I will always make sure I get a sleeper on the train. And nowadays, with modernization and all that, surprisingly many long train journeys start in Shenzhen.