

# SOUTH CHINA MORNING BLUES

*Ray Hecht*

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*South China Morning Blues*

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Also by Ray Hecht:

*Pearl River Drama*

*The Ghost of Lotus Mountain Brothel*

*Loser Parade*

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子 \* 丑 \* 寅 \* 卯 \* 辰 \* 巳 \* 午 \* 未 \* 申 \* 酉 \* 戌 \* 亥

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| <i>Character</i> | <i>Sign</i> | <i>Translation</i> |
|------------------|-------------|--------------------|
| Jackie           | 鼠           | Rat                |
| Danny            | 牛           | Ox                 |
| Marco            | 虎           | Tiger              |
| Sheila           | 兔           | Hare               |
| Ting Ting        | 龍           | Dragon             |
| Eric             | 蛇           | Snake              |
| Steven Lee       | 馬           | Horse              |
| Kyla             | 羊           | Goat               |
| Terry            | 猴           | Monkey             |
| Lu Lu            | 雞           | Chicken            |
| John             | 狗           | Dog                |
| Amber            | 豬           | Pig                |

## BOOK I

深圳

Shenzhen

*Prologue: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5*

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*China in the Early 21st Century*

1  
虎

I think it's very important to judge people based on appearances.

This comes from my background in sales and marketing. It's a simple matter of cost-benefit analysis. My time is too fucking precious to give every idiot in the world the time of day. Impress me fast, or get out of my way.

This especially goes for women. Damn right!

So I walk into the club with arms around my awkward co-worker (I've read that Chinese guys are more touchy-feely, and y'know, when in Rome...), and I feel that I'm the real alpha male of the venue. Any girl here I want, she's mine. All that's left is that I need to make a choice. Who will I impress?

But something feels off. I've been in this city four consecutive months already and yet can't say that I'm able to read these people. Blank and bored looks occupy the women's faces. There are some damn hot ones here, to be sure, but how do I know they aren't working girls? I need some big and obvious signal, or else my time just isn't worth investing.

Here at the Santa Maria club is the place to be on a Saturday night. I've needed this all week, and it's the culmination of my entire day. I spent the afternoon trying to pick out a perfect tie. Plus I napped for three-and-a-half hours so that I can stay up late and remain full of energy. The air around me holds just a hint of the cologne that I picked up from the

airport Duty Free. If only I knew where to get some coke in this country, I'd have done that too.

I yell over the hip-hop music and order three glasses of red wine. *Pinot Noir*. It's a South American blend, the best I can get here.

Taking a sip, I realize that I was wrong. The wine's terrible. I should have ordered rum and coke. How do you say rum in Mandarin? I can't be bothered to remember these things.

"Jackie", my workmate (Chinese people and their English names, am I right?), bobs his head up and down. Looking so damn out of place, he wears the same white dress shirt, with the outline of a wife-beater underneath, which he wears every day. Badly in need of a haircut and with long pinky nails, he looks like he couldn't get a job here serving drinks, and yet I know that he makes a salary four times the national average.

Me, I'm in my element.

It's getting harder to order a drink in this place, grown significantly more crowded in only the last 20 minutes. The air turns thick and hot, and I hate the smell of male sweat. It's different from a woman's sweat, which I can accept.

I step outside for a minute. There isn't much action out there, and it's just as sweaty. Blame the weather. In the dead of night, I've stepped out from an overcrowded nightclub with faulty air conditioning, and it's still as humid as a sauna. The so-called fresh air feels polluted, like the cigarette smoke inside the venue. I'm still not used to it, and I hate the feeling of that bead of sweat almost always rolling down from my brow to my nose. Nothing I can do, but wipe at it with the back of a shirtsleeve and try to ignore it.

Santa Maria's halfway an open-air club, with seats outside too in sort of a park setting surrounded by potted trees. Out here can get just as densely populated on a Saturday night. Bunches of cliques form. Beautiful women linger, but they're all with men. One plays pool. Another laughs while looking at a young Turk's camera pictures. What

the hell? I don't see anybody I know and don't want to stare too much, so I go back inside.

The music's loud. The DJ, a hot Chinese girl, literally unapproachable, waves her hands up, and the dancing crowd reacts. All of us on the edges can't be bothered to wave our hands in unison. The white guys mostly look around for girls, although one guy approaches me and asks, "What's your industry?" I'm about to tell him that I make six figures, but instead just ignore him. And the Chinese at tables play dice games.

Some of the girls are short, some skinny, some tall and some fat. Almost all have straight black hair and almond eyes. Aside from a few Russian models and overweight Europeans, the majority here is Chinese, and that's okay for me these days. I'm learning to like it. They come from all over China, I'm told. Cute-wifey chicks from Sichuan. Slender leggy babes from the *Dongbei* North. Cantonese with bad teeth. There may even be a few Japanese or Koreans here, but I wouldn't know. All I know is that the clock keeps ticking, and I'd better make my choice.

Ah! There she is. I see her, but don't approach just yet. She's dancing. I don't dance. But she suddenly stops when noticing me. Eye contact. Here she comes. It's easier this way. I judge her by her looks. I'm pretty sure that I can read this situation just fine, cultural differences aside.

"DO YOU SPEAK ENGLISH?"

Yeah, I know. Is that a great opening line or what?

## 兔

I've never slept with a foreign man. But I've been preparing for a while and feel almost ready.

Truthfully, I was an English major at Huizhou Normal, but I cheated all the time. We only had fun and watched movies. I miss those simpler days. Oh, I did have a crush on my foreign professor, but felt too shy to talk to him. He was so young and came from Ireland. I used to wonder where he is now. More recently, I don't care much. I meet *laowai* every day, and it's no big deal.



I dislike my job. It's very boring. I don't think that I'm the office-lady type. But I do appreciate the free time to spend on the Internet. I can flirt on the WeWa application, but I never meet most of those people. While I like talking on the telephone and making conference calls, I hate the business meetings. When the management watches over me, I'm so nervous. I don't like meeting the customers in person, especially the Taiwanese ones.

Tonight gives me my respite from the workweek. I wear my sexiest outfit, exposing almost my whole bare back. Strapless bra. High pump shoes. I tweezed my armpits and even tried shaving my legs, something that my friends would never do.

It all should be worth it, and I sincerely enjoy dancing. More than that, I crave a new experience. Everyone says this is the city's best club.

My roommate gets even more into this than I do. She dances, but isn't looking at any of the men.

I choose "him" because I know that we never will have any deep relationship. He's an arrogant rich man, and I hope that he buys me many presents. Name-brand ones, maybe Louis Vuitton! Bags, shoes and diamonds. Then when I meet the next man, and the one after that, I hope that the previous men – like the one I meet now – will kindly leave me alone. Then one day when I'm rich, married and have my own home, I will never even remember his name.

I need this now. Already I'm fantasizing. I want him to take me to his elegant hotel room and fuck the hell out of me.

"HELLO. WHERE ARE YOU FROM?"

## 虎

She's mine. I ditch Jackie, wink at her and squeeze in past the crowd, carefully maneuvering my wineglass between the bodies. She's looking straight at me. Sweat gathers on my forehead, but I ignore it. I'm unsure if she's answering me. She says something to me, but it's as if a mute button has been pressed and her mouth forms the words "I speak

English” or “I don’t speak English”. I’m not sure which, but I get that sense of interest and go with it.

When she says something more, I still don’t understand, so I just nod. That appears to work.

Carefully I make it into place right next to her, and the crowd squeezes our chests together. When I place my glass of wine to her lips, she takes a brief sip.

### 兔

He’s mine. The red grape wine tastes good. I wish that he’d buy me a glass of it. Not because I don’t have the money to buy my own, but because I want to know for sure that he wants me.

But I can’t be too easy, so I stare right at him as I back away into the center stage where everyone dances, and I carry on moving my hips and waving my arms. I don’t know this song, but I like the beat. Just as with this man, I know nothing, but so far I like it.

I hope that he likes me too. This guy’s too cool to dance with me properly just yet, but that doesn’t stop him from staring.

### 虎

Watching her dance, I smile and then laugh. But this can’t go on for much longer without progress. I need a change of scenery, and so I jerk my neck to motion that I’m going outside. Then I play it cool, turning away and not looking back.

This usually works, and sure enough, once I’ve taken a breath of fresher air, I find that she’s standing right next to me. Game on.

“It’s so hot in there.”

“Yes.” She speaks English.

“New York weather isn’t like this,” I say.

Talking about the weather? I know, lame, right? At least I say where I'm from, and that's a good topic. It gives her all the information about me that she needs. I put my arm around her, and she doesn't resist. Then I make a joke that she doesn't get, but she laughs anyway. I take her hand, and she squeezes mine back. Very good sign.

She's tall, I realize. Her shoulder almost reaches mine. She's slim too, the shape of her backside as thin as a child's.

We barely talk. If only all women were like this.

"Let's go back inside. I'll buy you a drink."

"Okay..."

Again we play the game of me watching her dance and she watching me watching her dance. We do this for at least an hour. I don't know where my co-worker has gone. Sometimes the girl talks to her friend, but most of the time she stays in my zone. Between us, we've had three cocktails. I'm rather buzzed while she just nurses her gin and tonic.

"Let's get out of here."

"Okay..."

One annoying factor is that I can't check into a hotel without a passport. They always crack down on laws for foreigners these days, and I've been rejected at a few hotels lately. It wasn't like this back in '05 when I first came to the province on business. Damn, ever since the Beijing Olympics. Well, I won't carry my passport around with me everywhere, but I do need it in situations like this.

We keep walking. The music grows softer, the air becomes fresher, and out beyond the palm trees, a line of taxis await.

"My place it is."

Back home in the United States, unless I'm really at the top of my game, it usually isn't so easy to convince a woman like this. Here, I can't say it's much of a problem.

I'd open the taxi door for her, but she hurriedly lets herself in and sits. Nervous much? I hope not.

She talks to the driver for a few moments, discussing Lord knows what. Meanwhile, I sift through my phone for my apartment address. This is the taxi routine.

I show the saved Chinese characters on my phone to the driver. He nods. The two of them talk some more before he flips down the meter and off we go.

Even yet, I don't know what these streets are. In my wallet, I keep business cards, a pile of them half-an-inch thick, that tell me how to get around in this city. Almost always by taxi. Rarely by subway. Never by bus.

While I have my phone out, something occurs to me. "What's your number?" I ask. "I'll save it in my phone."

She punches it in and then calls herself as we play with our cell phones. Next I need to type in a name.

Wait. What's her name again?

## 兔

The sex feels okay. I like the style of his home. It's very big and neat. I suppose that a cleaning lady must come here every day. What did he say his job is? I didn't understand.

"Yes, I like you do that."

I'd just expected more, but what exactly? Maybe never-ending, rolling orgasms? A bigger penis? He's just a man. A bit taller. Wider. Hairier chest. Sharper nose.

"YEAH, YEAH, YEAH."

Just 30 minutes ago, we got out of the taxi, walked through the gate, kissed in the elevator and then he gave me the tour: living room, kitchen and toilet. He suggested that I should cook for him someday. Okay, sounds nice. We went into the bedroom last. He lit a candle and took off my clothes.

Two months have passed since I broke up with my boyfriend, two months since I last made love. Well, I think I'm still good at it.

“FASTER, FASTER.”

Our clothes lie heaped in a pile next to the king-sized bed, together with a condom wrapper. He sprawls on his back as I sit up and ride him backward and forward. I like the feeling of this. We've only just begun this thing. I'm sure the endless pleasure will begin soon enough. He had better last long enough for me.

## 虎

The sex feels awesome. I'm so turned on that I'm going to cum any second. She's skinny, no ounce of fat on her. I love that flat stomach. She didn't put up any resistance. Totally into it! Goddamn, I still have the charm!

I grab her ass, and she moans, liking it so damn much. Cowgirl style, just like porn! I lay back, comfortable like, and let her do all of the work. I fondle her tits. Not a bad size for her nationality. Not the biggest I've had, but they fit her frame. She loves it when I give them a hard pinch.

Right away, it's too much, and I know that I'm on the verge of exploding. Squeezing near her hips where her love handles would be if she had any, I loudly release. Then I pull her down next to me, and I think that she wants to cuddle. She caresses my balls for a second, lets out a deep breath and then crawls over me to get something from her purse. I don't care because I'm totally relaxed.

She walks to the bathroom, returns and lights a cigarette. So clichéd. I'm slightly surprised; I don't think she smoked at the club, but I don't mind.

Damn. She looks sexy standing nude in my bedroom and smoking in the dim light. It's like art.

I do enjoy China. So far, this place has worked out well for me.

2  
牛

“Shenzhen is a modern developed city.”

I listen to the kid’s rehearsed monotone speech, and my ears perk up at the mention of Shenzhen, where I plan to move as soon as possible. Eight months in middle-of-nowhere Hunan is enough.

“Now I live in Futian District,” the child continues. “My hobbies are playing football and computer games.”

As the speech continues, I feign attention, getting lost in my own thoughts about where I’ve been and where I’m going. Four months ago, I went to Hong Kong. It was Mid-Autumn Festival. Damn good time. Now it’s Chinese New Year, and it’s damn cold. At the border to Hong Kong, you pass through a train station called Lo Wu, or Luohu, that being the Mandarin-influenced Shenzhen side. Cross the border, and there you are, suddenly gone from the Chinese mainland into a British-built, kinda-sorta China pseudo-sovereign nation-state or something like that. I still have a lot to learn.

“My family is my mother and father and country-brother.”

At this point, I’m just tuning out the poor kid, hardly listening at all. I pretend to write some notes.

Today I’m working at an English summer camp in Conghua, Guangdong Province, a few hours north of Guangzhou. In fact, I’m judging an English competition. Dozens of counselors and countless primary school students are in attendance. They gave me a hotel room, and I get to entertain the kids.

It’s not snowy weather here in southern China, but the humid wetness entails a biting cold. Not as bad as where I came from, but goddamn chilly for what had been promised to me as a tropical zone. And this campus/hot-spring resort is low on central heating.

As you may have guessed, I’m an English teacher.

“Eighty points,” I say.

Everyone claps, and I begin pretending to listen to the next kid’s speech.

Truly, I’m looking forward to the real world. Quaint village China is charming in its own right, but I need some time in a real first-tier city. Sometimes I need to eat tacos, pizza, or hummus. I need less McDonald’s and street food (McDonald’s and KFC do exist in Hunan, but that’s all there is for your international palate). I can’t eat white rice without even soy sauce in every single work-approved meal. While I need to practice Mandarin, I need to speak English with grown adults even more. I need to find a bookstore with English paperbacks beyond Victorian literature and textbooks. I need a faster Internet connection, places to catch taxis, a decent bar for hanging out and chances to hear live music and sing karaoke in a language I understand. I need a social scene and a group of friends I can relate to.

Most of all, I need a girlfriend. A smart girlfriend, a cool one not just studying broken English and using me to pass her TOEFL exams. I need a modern, worldly, middle-class Chinese woman who I can watch movies and drink beer with.

“Thank you, Teacher Danny.”

I stand up and step onto the stage. Three kids wait for me. With all the points tallied, their scores are tied. Arbitrarily I choose first and second-prize winners, and everyone claps. Hundreds of pairs of eyes focus on me. If I ever suffered from stage fright, then this kind of job cured me of it long ago.

Today’s the last day. An enormous suitcase waits in my hotel room, and tomorrow morning I’m taking the bus to my new place. I got this job online and they pay double compared to the college. I’ll teach middle school kids. They’ll give me a furnished apartment in the middle of a “garden”, one of those big, luxury Chinese apartment complexes.

This should be great. First thing, I’m going to eat spaghetti at the mall. Then I’m going to enjoy a massage. Then I’m going to get very drunk and try my luck at the clubs.

The day ends, and my time with this summer camp gig has concluded. I give a farewell speech and wave goodbye to my students. In return, I receive tearful waves back. They get so attached. It's only been a week.

I take a shower at my hotel. I watch some TV, and most of it I don't understand. One Hong Kong channel shows a lame Australian reality show about cooking. Here, I'll take what I can get. The Cantonese commercials bore me, and I turn off the TV. I watch a downloaded sitcom on my laptop, have a rest and then nod off for several hours.

I wake up early, have breakfast (buns and eggs) and wait in line to collect my 5,000 *kuai*. Not bad pay for a week's work.

Half-heartedly, I say goodbye to the counselors, who are young college students, English majors working as teaching assistants during the summer for credit. I give an even less-hearted goodbye to the other *waijiao* teachers, the foreigners. I didn't really want to get too close to them. Call me a snob, but wow, what a bunch of losers. Most of them are Germans or Eastern Europeans, with assorted accents, qualified for their jobs only because of their white faces. A few of my fellow Americans are here too, the worst of the lot, being red-state high-school dropouts, half of them sexual predators only in it to deflower those naive little counselors.

Look, I'm hardly the most qualified professor-type teacher. Still, I got my bachelor's degree and the TEFL certificate before moving halfway around the world, and here I naively thought that teaching was a serious thing.

Little did I know before coming to China that nothing here is serious, especially not with expats. Endless miscreants end up here as so called "English teachers". I don't know if they are running away from ex-wives, child support and warrants, or if they're actual registered sex offenders back home. All sorts of scenarios make sense, but really I just don't want to know.

We've only just started this tale, and already I'm getting negative. Someday I'll backtrack and tell you my stories and about my experiences. You'll see how such cynicism can spew from a young guy like me. Or



maybe soon everything will get better, and I'll totally forget. I can be moody.

First, let me relax. I want to settle into my new home. Shenzhen, that legendary, overnight city sits right beside Westernized Hong Kong. I don't know for sure if living there will be better or worse. But it should be damn interesting.

\* \* \*

It's still me. I still have a story to tell, and I'm not finished. Now I'm going back to the beginning, back to when I first came to China. I'd never even been to another country before. Well, I had been to Canada. A short drive from Ann Arbor. That doesn't really count. Until I flew in last year, I never had a single stamp in my passport.

Now, I've been to Thailand, Vietnam, Laos, Hong Kong and the mainland...

As I had prepared to graduate from the University of Michigan, my final lame-duck semester primarily defined by watching action movies in my apartment while the roomies were on-campus, I looked into working in Asia. I applied for a TEFL program (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) that set up recent graduates to work at Chinese universities, even paying for their flights. I'm sure glad that I did.

Hunan province was an amazing experience, and basically what I expected. Moderate economic development. Ancient temples and beautiful sights. Easy job. New culture. Bad English.

Hong Kong, on the other hand, was a bit different from what I anticipated. And Shenzhen was a complete shock to my system. You might say that I was pleasantly surprised. This is not China rising, per se, but rather this is China *surpassing*. Beyond the First World, this is Zero World 2.0 or something. Like Las Vegas or Manhattan times ten spread out to the size of the whole tri-county area. I don't know if it's all some superficial cheap-plastic model, and maybe it's going to crumble

next year, but I still think that the superficiality of Shenzhen trumps the substance of Ann Arbor by quite a bit.

Suffice to say, I need to stay in China for a while.

I remember my first night in Hunan province, feeling jet-lagged and culture-shocked. That's when I met Charles, my roommate for just one weekend. The school gave the foreign teachers off-campus apartments, beating the dormitory where the Chinese professors lived. For Charles, his contract had ended, and mine was just beginning. We had a few days of overlap, and I slept on the couch until he fully moved out. He gave me his brief introduction to the teaching profession.

"Dude, you will be getting so much pussy."

"Um..."

"Don't be shy, man. Those coeds will be ripe for the picking."

Not that I wasn't looking forward to meeting a nice girl, but did he need to be such a wretch about it?

Charles told me how he got a fake degree on Khao San Road in Bangkok last summer. He had been here ever since and learned all the essential Mandarin phrases for picking up 19-year-old girls.

"First thing you do is get a WeWa account. Message them and invite them over here to study. You got to get them drunk. Say that drinking wine is part of the Western cultural experience. Ha!"

"Okay. I'm on Facebook."

"No way! You can't use Facebook, at least not without a VPN. These girls won't even be able to log on there."

"I've read that quite a lot of Chinese students these days use software to sidestep the Great Firewall thing. Young people are more open-minded about getting information from abroad, and such."

"Maybe, but those aren't the chicks you want to bang. Chicks who can email in English are probably all snobby and shit. You want to meet students who suck at the language and who've never left the province before. They're all super-impressed that you're a white guy talking to them. It's awesome!"

"Well, that is higher standards..."

“And the brilliant thing is that they will never, ever tell their friends. You can dump one and go on to the next every bloody week. Dude, you’re gonna love it here.”

Later that day, I surfed around online on the ESL (English as a Second Language) forums and read several articles about teachers getting fired for blogging about fucking students. I vowed not to take my lead from those people...

\* \* \*

My first week in Shenzhen goes well. I have experience and a system. Everything comes down to learning the new names and smiling to a few parents.

While opening day can be tricky, I made it through at the middle school with much less incident than on my first day when young. These days, the kids are more fashionable and surprisingly rich, a few of them even fluent in English. Every other student has the newest iPhone and isn’t above playing video games in class.

I received a tour from the assistant principal and met some of my co-workers. A math teacher. A PE teacher. Most can’t speak English, and my Mandarin definitely isn’t up to speed. (People here seem to have an accent different from up north. I’ve been assured, though, that the main dialect in Shenzhen is Mandarin, not Cantonese, because of the whole Special Economic Zone economic-miracle-history thing.) The campus looks surprisingly impressive and upper class. The halls shine with fresh white paint, and the green school uniforms look like they were designed by someone from a famous label. I think I chose this job well.

My morning classes consist of two one-hour sessions with 20-some kids per room. So I use the textbook for 30 minutes and play tic-tac-toe or hangman on the whiteboard for another 30. I try to remember a few names, but mostly just make jokes and lecture from the textbook.

So many differently-sized kids sit in front of me. At this age there's a major gap between pre and post-growth spurts. The short skinny ones, the tall fat ones and all the other combinations in between – they all flow through the sea of classrooms.

The morning goes by fast, and soon I take a three-hour lunch break in which I walk across the street to my home, make instant noodles, eat them, and then take a nap. The Chinese teachers always invite me for smelly lunch in the cafeteria, but I politely decline. Three more hours, repeat the pattern. Not a bad schedule at all.

Before I know it, the routine has me on autopilot. Suddenly it's Friday, and the week's over, done. Contractually speaking, I only have 42 weeks left.

One of my co-workers is Amber, another foreign teacher, in her case from Canada. She lives next door to me. Bleached blonde hair and a bit of an attitude. Overall, I'm happy to meet someone with the same general background. Altogether, the school has four non-Chinese teachers, but the graying Mrs. Hartford and Mister Schumann are probably not as much fun. Twenty-something Canadians are basically my culture, right? I exchange greetings with the staff every morning, but Amber is the only one worth being friends with.

We met on the first day and introduced ourselves. It always starts with, "Where are you from?" Then we talked about movies, and she told me about the neighborhood's best bootleg-DVD shop.

We both live in Qian Shi Tou Garden, beneath the luxurious high-rises of Luohu District. "That's Luohu," she explains, "the oldest business district with lots of Hong Kong investment."

Next time, I see her on the morning walk, and after that I always wave hello. In the evenings, we're busier, but a few times she waves first. She has worked at the Qian Shi Tou Middle School for the past year, and her Mandarin is better than mine. The students aren't shy to tell me that they like her more than me. She seems nice.

"Futian District," she continues, "is in the middle where the government offices are."

“Where’s the hip district with the clubs?” I ask.

“They’re all like that.”

When Friday evening comes, she catches up with me, and weekend plans come up for discussion.

“Danny, you’ve got to check out Blank Slate with us.”

“Blank Slate?” I say. “Sounds very cool.”

“Exactly.”

“So where is that?”

“Nanshan District. The newest one, my favorite. It has lots of tech companies, maybe like the Silicon Valley of the south. Very chill, I like it. And it’s the farthest from here.”

We exchange numbers and WeWa IDs, making a plan. By 10 p.m., four of us meet outside the front gate of Qian Shi Tou Garden. There’s me, Amber, her Hong Konger boyfriend Steven Lee, and his mainland work colleague who doesn’t have an English name and whose Chinese name I didn’t catch. After introductions all around, we squeeze into the backseat of a taxi. Steven Lee seems to be the leader of the group and tells the driver where to go.

I’m surprised to see that the taxi meter starts at 13 *kuai* here. It keeps going, past 40, 50 and 60. Is this the cheap, affordable living standard of China I’ve heard so much about?

The meter stops at 72, plus three as a surcharge for gas. Although splitting the fare four ways amounts to about 18.5 each (less than US\$3), there’s a cheap Chinese part of me that nags, having been conditioned after all these months, and I can’t believe a taxi ride could cost so much.

Blank Slate is cool. Steven Lee (I’ll refer to him that way because he keeps calling himself the full “Steven Lee”) says that it’s the original rock club of Shenzhen. Some famous Chinese star I’d never heard of played here last month.

“Take a look at the photos on the wall,” Steven Lee tells me.

"I'm impressed," I say, looking at a puzzle of photographs hanging there. They depict endless bands and pretty-girl singers posing on the stage, and I don't know any of them.

I do like the décor. It's a crowded dive bar. Lots of ironic Communist decorations. The stage, indicated by an empty, lonely drum set, sits at the same level as the chairs. There's no band playing tonight, just everyone hanging out and smoking cigarettes. They have tables out front too.

Apparently, this is Shenzhen's bohemian district. I didn't know they had one here. It's Overseas Chinese Town (OCT), modern and scenic, slightly off the beaten path.

"Where are you from?"

"How long have you been in China?"

"What do you do?"

"What brought you to Shenzhen?"

"What do you think of the weather?"

All the usual conversation.

The turnout is about half foreigner and half Chinese. I hear Australian accents, German speeches, British cheering, French conversations, Cantonese, Mandarin and what I can only assume to be Swahili.

When I'm handed a small pill, I don't even know whose palm dropped it to me. I think it's Ecstasy. Cue a flashback to my college freshman year.

Steven Lee mouths the letters M-D-M-A under the music, smiles, swallows a similar pill and washes it down with Tsingtao beer.

I think *what the hell* and swallow mine too. It tastes as bitter and mediciney as anything I've ever ingested. Before it kicks in, a Chinese girl sitting beside me at the bar starts talking. Immediately, she introduces herself.

"My name is Cherry."

She's looking right at me. She wears a cute beret and a stylish sweater and she asks me all the usual questions. I struggle to keep my composure and to impress. I talk about how I love to travel and how I'm new to the area, and won't you please show me around?

But soon the feeling kicks in, and I stare out in front of me in a meaningless daze. She says something or laughs. I don't know. It's so loud that I can't hear the quiet.

Um, I don't think that was Ecstasy. But didn't Steven Lee specifically tell me? Where is he? Where's Amber? Suddenly I feel very paranoid and self-conscious. The girl walked away a long time ago. Or is it that she walked away one minute ago? How long have I been here? Time has no meaning. What am I doing in this place? Where am I?

WHAT THE HELL AM I DOING IN THIS PLACE?

I walk outside in a way that must look comical to anyone watching. Somehow I feel like I'm underwater, under moon-gravity or something. Big careful steps lest I fall into the earth. Leaning against a palm tree, I try not to look at anyone entering or exiting. Everything's spinning. I'm a bit nauseous and trying to play it cool.

"I'm, uh, I feel, uh... highly inebriated?" I say to no one in particular. What is this?

I sit down on a space between the sidewalk and dirt to wait it out. Hopefully no one's looking at me.

It's so weird. I'm in China and in this place. Is it real? I'd be very surprised if this was real.

These are the thoughts that come to me with my eyes closed in the cool night air, shivering as gravel crawls up my pants.

An hour later I'm breathing heavily, and the sensation of oxygen molecules in my lungs feels more abstract and less lumpy. Well, I don't exactly sense that it's an hour later because time isn't something that I can judge right now, but my cell phone does flash to me: 2:18 a.m.

I rub my eyes and go inside and pee a very long pee. I order a beer. It's dark, but I wish that I had sunglasses. The bar is emptier than it was an hour ago. I hope that girl is gone.

Steven Lee approaches from the side of the bar, looking just as disheveled as I feel, and says, "Sorry, mate. That was definitely ketamine. Always happens these days. Never know what you're going to get."

He says this very casually with no effort at discretion. Always happens indeed. His tie is undone. His hair gel's all out of shape. Amber is leaning on his arm, and she looks the worst of all. She has a small bruise on her chin. The easy consensus is that it's time to share a taxi ride home.

That was K?

And that was my first weekend in Shenzhen, and my first of many new experiences.

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After living here six months, I still have no girlfriend. I've had wild experiences, gotten drunk on beaches and high on rooftops, and taught more than I ever imagined possible to adolescent children of various levels. But mostly, I just wish that I had a girlfriend.

Meanwhile, I watch all of my new friends bounce from relationship to relationship. Steven Lee jokes with me about how he cheats on Amber, and I wish that he wouldn't. All the Americans and Europeans I've met at Blank Slate and Santa Maria have a new Chinese girl on their arm every Saturday night.

Maybe I shouldn't complain. In fact, I have gotten laid four times (mostly due to dating websites), a pretty good rate for me. But as soon as I start talking about kung fu movies, Taoism or how I never want to get married, they stop calling me back. All of the girls I've met want either a one-night stand or immediate marriage. Where's the middle ground in the Middle Kingdom?

I tried to date some foreigners, and that's even worse luck, especially with South Americans, Russians, and that crazy girl from Florida who stole my shoes.

Nobody respects English teachers in this town. I miss Hunan.



Today I'm with some people I met through a WeWa travel group. It's a Saturday. We're bowling, and I have my sights set on a thin Cantonese girl with great hair. There are 12 of us, six per lane, and I reckon that I'm doing pretty well with my flirting.

"Nice shot!" I yell as the bowling ball rolls down a gutter lane.

"You're so mean," she snaps and sticks out her tongue.

Yeah, I think this will work out.

Her name is Sheila, and she seems very elegant. Her accented English sounds more European than Asian. I admire the way that she curves her back when standing up and holding the ball. I really hope she likes me.

Later we sit on the benches, weary and perspired. The game has ended, and people are discussing what to do next.

"Let me ask you something," I begin.

"Go ahead," she says.

"I'm thinking about my contract for next year. I'm halfway through now. Do you think that I should stay in Shenzhen, or live in another part of China?"

"Well. Shanghai is nice. But people are mean there."

"What about Beijing?"

"I've never been there!"

"You're Chinese, and you've never been to Beijing?"

She shakes her head no.

"Never been to the Great Wall?"

She shakes her head faster. It's so cute.

"Oh, what are we going to do with you, Sheila?"

She giggles, and we conclude that the economic development makes Shenzhen the best place to be. That's the answer I wanted.

We go outside. Several of our fellow bowlers discuss taxis. Some of them are due to go north and some west. I lead Sheila away to a vacant part of the street, and there we exchange numbers (that part's always easy). Now I'm trying to convince her to share a cab with me.

"I think it's the same way."

"Where do you live again?"