

Food, Fang Shi Yu and How Not to Get A Haircut.

Today Beijing Language and Culture University is almost a Marie Celeste. Outside there is snow, temperature about 4 degrees below zero. The little canteen where I usually eat has shut down, chairs piled on the tables. The mischievous waitresses who like to wrestle and play tag and look too young to be anywhere but a school playground, have gone home for a well-earned rest. But the Japanese restaurant next door is still open. So I eat Japanese. Not that there's any chance of starving in Beijing. Everywhere you look there are restaurants. Even in the University after three months I was still discovering restaurants and canteens, it seems there's always a better and cheaper one somewhere. It reminds me a little of Birmingham where I saw row after row of Balti restaurants, each with one customer and a sign in the window saying "further seating upstairs". But here the restaurants are a lot busier, perhaps because many people have scant cooking facilities at home. The food is not much like the Chinese food you get in Germany or Britain, there are lots of dumplings and soups. And there are regional foods. There are supposed to be eight main local flavours of Chinese food. The only special kind I've tried is Sichuan food, which is a hotpot. You have a calor gas burner on your table on which they put a large stainless steel pot with a divider down the middle. One compartment has a spicy red soup with lots of whole chillies in it, the other a white soup with black chicken or fish. You take pieces of meat and veg and cook them in the broth. Very delicious, but very hot. Another famous variety is Guangdong food. A famous dish is called "dragon fights tiger", made of snake meat and cat meat. I haven't tried it. My teacher told me Guangdong people will eat anything that flies except an aeroplane and anything on four legs except a chair. I told her there's a Frenchman who eats light aircraft. Things almost started to get nasty. A couple of my local restaurants offer dog, and many restaurants have large tanks full of live fish. You can look them over and presumably, if you feel so inclined, interview one or two before making your choice. The other day I ate in a place which had live frogs in a tank. I've yet to see a restaurant where you can choose your own pig. Then there's always Mai Deng Lao. Whether in London or Stuttgart or Beijing or the fourth moon of Jupiter Mai Deng Lao is always the same. I don't like it much, but when you're suffering an acute attack of culture shock it's sometimes the only resort. A group of students at the Geological University across the road told me after the American attack on the Chinese Embassy in Prague they vowed to boycott American goods, but a few days later their will power weakened and they went to Mai Deng Lao and stuffed themselves with Ham Bao Bao. Who needs the neutron bomb when you've got the Big Mac?

I watch a lot of Chinese TV, it helps reinforce my study and the language as spoken is generally more standard than the Beijing patois. My favourite TV fare is the historical dramas, which are endless and which bear the same relationship to Chinese history as "Men in Tights" does to the real Robin Hood. Mulan manages to spin out an interminable domestic drama to about 20 episodes, though it must be said that she's a lot prettier than in the Disney version. Never mind. The sets and the costumes are beautiful. The men wear flowing robes and sashes, or wooden armour like the stone warriors of Xi'an. The women look stunning in silken gowns with large silk flowers in their hair, a hint of rouge, modest dove like eyes. They never take any of the clothes off, of course, but when it

comes to smouldering they set the World Olympic standard. Wait a minute, I lie, in one episode Mulan's husband unwittingly walks in to a girl's boudoir when she has removed her outer layer and is seen wearing only three layers of petticoats. Her screams wake the palace guard.

But my favourite is Fang Shi Yu. I watched most of Fang Shi Yu when I had just arrived in China, and understood not one word. Now I am watching it again and understanding quite a lot. It is subtitled (in Chinese), presumably for people in other regions who don't understand Putonghua, or for the Cantonese market. But this also makes it very helpful for foreign students. Fang Shi Yu is a juvenile delinquent and a dab hand at Wushu (Kung Fu). He gets into a fight and has to leave town so his mum and dad send him to study Wushu with the Shaolin monks. Of course the evil characters who are chasing him don't leave it at that. Every episode has at least a dozen bouts of Wushu, and I don't need my Chinese friends to tell me "shi jia de" (it's phoney). The kung fu is totally stagey, like Beijing Opera, with huge leaps and somersaults and increasingly improbable feats of co-ordination like kicking furniture into the air to stop flights of arrows and suchlike. One is reminded of the exploits of Cuchulain as recorded in the Tain. It is impossible for Fang Shi Yu to sit down anywhere and eat without some attempt being made on his life, and a meal in which only two masked ninja burst in through the windows and try their swords against his invincible bare knuckles is just so boring that he wouldn't leave a tip. But ultimately Fang Shi Yu has a big problem which is the master villain Bai Mei (White Eyebrows). Bai Mei is an old gent with a highly elaborate bone white coiffure architecturally poised on a massive silver frame and long flowing white eyebrows. He really looks magnificent. I thought he was a woman when I saw him in the credits, but he is actually male. He lives in style with a private army of about sixty retainers. When he feels bored he orders them all to charge him en masse and try and cut him up with their swords upon which with a couple of deft flicks he gives them all fat lips or cauliflower ears, blows on his nails and goes back calmly to his chair. Eat your heart out, Sly Stallone, only in China could someone so cool be cast as a villain! He travels in a sedan chair, flicks his teacup at a bamboo pole and a whole peasant village collapses in a heap. His Kung Fu is so advanced that if somebody hits him the shock travels back up their own limb and rebounds on themselves. And yet he is nasty. He is petulant. He whines. He is fastidious. Although you can't punch him you can put him off his stride by throwing a little sand at him upon which he says "eeeurgh" and goes off to tidy his hair. Eventually there's a showdown. Fang Shi Yu flies at him, and beats him furiously all over while Bai Mei sniggers. Even his wedding tackle's hard as Fort Knox. But suddenly Fang Shi Yu finds his weak spot, it's the soles of his feet. Fang Shi Yu gets hold of his foot and starts beating the sole. Bai Mei says "eeeurgh", "eeeurgh", "eeeurgh". He's been rumbled. But wait a minute, aren't those Nike trainers he's wearing? Where have I seen him before? Ah yes, remember the opening scene of 2001?

What, if anything, has studying Chinese done for my appreciation of these dramas? Well, nothing really. I'm not impressed to discover that when Fang Shi Yu wanders around an abandoned Buddhist temple waving a torch he's actually dying for a shit and too scared to go outside, nor to discover that in the scene where the Shaolin Abbot addresses the

new students in the wuthering incense choked interior of the Shaolin Temple he's actually saying "who farted?"

Higher cultural pursuits there are some. Soon after I arrived I heard a Gu Zheng concert in a small room in the Hotel. The Gu Zheng is sometimes called the "Chinese Zither". It is a flat instrument, looks a little like a small square piano or a large clavichord. It has twenty one strings stretched across it, and the strings pass over bridges so that as you pluck them with the right hand you can apply pressure to the strings with your left hand and bend the notes giving that characteristic wailing effect so characteristic of Chinese (and Indian) music. The instrument has a 5000 year history (and here I have to eat my own heart out). At first it had seven strings, but gradually more were added. It stuck at twelve strings for a thousand years, but then some brave (or reckless) soul came along and added another. Since the revolution it has got half a dozen more. The sound is beautiful, intimate and expressive. I also visited a traditional Chinese medicine hospital. A student from one of my English classes is a doctor and gave me a guided tour for which I had to put on a white coat which made me look very like Dr. Kildare. I saw people with dozens of needles sticking out of them, a bit of moxibustion, some massage, some of the usual things like X-ray and ultrasound. The most interesting part for me, especially since it didn't involve rubbernecking complete strangers in distress, was the herbal pharmacy. Two rooms, the walls completely lined with wooden drawers, each drawer having three compartments, each compartment containing a different dried herbal remedy. The air was scented, spicy, medicinal. The assistants all wore white coats and masks. Cartier-Bresson would have spent half a day there, I couldn't help feeling.

Yesterday I finished teaching an English class and walked home along an unfamiliar avenue. From time to time when I pass a shop the shopkeepers will come out and invite me in, after all I'm a foreigner and I may spend some money. The other day an old man invited me into a little shop and showed me a collection of interesting pipes, maybe opium pipes, I thought. Today it's two women sitting in a doorway, they rattle the glass door of their shop enthusiastically. I'm feeling in quite high spirits, so I go in to see what they are doing. There's a chair, clippers, scissors, shampoo. The room is tiny and dark, they are burning coke on a little stove. So, I have a little time, I could do with a haircut. I sit down. They ask me how I want it. I tell them very short all over, like a football.

"Can't do that, it won't look good",

"I don't care, I often have it done like that." I don't know the Chinese for "I'm not courting". Anyway, they refuse. They wash it and snip it in a rather perfunctory way. I tell them I am planning to go to Guilin but I have been told I won't understand the dialect.

"I'm from Guilin", says the girl with the scissors, "Can you understand me?". I can't understand everything, but it sounds to me like Putonghua so I'm delighted. We chat. They keep telling me my tummy is too big.

"You have a little child?"

I tell them I've been trying all my life to get pregnant but never succeeded. (I just learned the word for pregnant and I want to try it out). They are very jolly, quite young. After the haircut I want to go, but they insist I lie down on the sofa, they are going to give me a massage. This really is friendly of them, they are obviously very bored and finding

my conversation exceedingly diverting. I lie down and one of them thumps me all over and sticks her elbow in my back. I try and get up, but the other one wants a go, so she also thumps me all over and sticks her elbow in my back. It feels quite good. What an interesting local custom, giving someone a haircut and then thumping them all over, my goodness, these people are friendly. While the second girl is thumping me the first girl is chatting to me. What a lot of hairs I have on my arm, she says, she doesn't have nearly so many. That's because I'm a man and she's a woman, I point out, helpfully. Then she produces my pocket IC recorder. What's this? I show her and they have a great laugh playing back my messages which I pray they don't understand. Must have fallen out of my pocket, I suppose. Then she gives me my jacket and tells me I'd better keep it safe. Very thoughtful of her, after all, you never know who might be going through your pockets, do you? Luckily my purse is in my trouser pocket. Finally the second girl has finished thumping me. I'm worried now because I have another appointment. The first girl wants to thump me again, but forbearance has its limits. I've enjoyed chatting to them and learned a little Chinese and being thumped hasn't been too bad but now I have to go. How much for the haircut, I say, expecting to pay about ten, maybe twenty kuai.

"Three hundred"

"You're joking!"

"You've had a haircut and two massages, three hundred."

"I'm not giving you three hundred!"

"How much then".

"Thirty".

"No good. We're not cheap you know."

"Yes you are, you're a petty thief".

"You calling her a thief?"

"We're not cheap, you just go out there and ask anyone, we're not cheap.", says the girl who has wedged herself against the door. "It's not us you know, it's the boss."

"I will go out there, and I'll clear off too.". I can't get out without physically pushing the girl away and I don't feel like doing that, in any case I don't know where the boss is or what he might be packing. I up the offer to fifty. I am thinking if I start low I can get them down to a hundred which won't be so bad.

"No good."

"Okay, one hundred, that's my final offer."

"All right, give me a hundred". I give the girl a hundred. They still won't let me go.

"Hey, where's mine?", says the other girl.

"You give her fifty", I explain to the first girl.

"No way", says the girl clutching the hundred kuai note. So I give the other girl her hundred. I'm getting later and later for my appointment and I just can't stand the aggro. But goddamn it, they still won't let me go.

"Now you're angry", they say.

"You're dead right, I'm angry", I say.

"Don't be angry, it's not us, it's the boss, you see."

So in the end I have to forgive them as well. The bastards. I am only about fifteen quid down, but it's the thought that hurts.

My appointment is with my tutor and I'm an hour late, he's almost given up on me. I tell him the story and expect him to pour scorn on me in his usual fashion. "You did WHAT!, You paid HOW MUCH!" etc. But he is surprisingly philosophical.

"You were had", he says. "When you know about those places you absolutely never go in. You were lucky, you only lost two hundred. They could have asked for a thousand. And by the way, if you understood a single word they said then they definitely weren't from Guilin."

Guilin.

The visit to the south didn't turn out at all as I'd expected it to, but then I never expected it to. The train journey took 28 hours, but the sleeper car was comfortable, hot water on tap, boring but not too stressful. I had two motives for going to Guilin, one was to see a completely different part of China, and the other was to have a rest and collect my thoughts. I picked Guilin because I had heard that it was set amongst the most beautiful landscape in China and because it was a long way from Beijing and because it was almost as far south as you can go and therefore would be warmer rather than colder. I had been told that I wouldn't understand the Guilin dialect so I assumed I wouldn't have to speak to anyone and could revert to nodding and smiling and thinking in English. But that wasn't the way it turned out.

My contact met me at the station and we took a taxi to the place he had organised for me. It was a room in a farmer's dormitory in a village about five kilometres from the town. We had to walk into the village to find the farmer along the mud track we heard sporadic bursts of explosions as the village children let off firecrackers left over from the New Year celebrations. The houses were one story redbrick affairs that look more like stables and outhouses than dwelling places. People were cooking dinner on woks over gas rings, chickens running about, vegetable patches. I looked forward to walking the area some more. The farmer came and found me keys and bedding and lent me a bike and an absurdly cheap rent was agreed on. A neighbour invited me to eat and my friendly contact went off to pursue other engagements. My neighbour's house was a small redbrick building, again more like a shed than anything I would think of as a house. There may have been more than I saw because he had two sons aged 11 and 12, it didn't look as though there was sleeping space for all of them. Various sacks of grain and farm implements, a double ring gas cooker and a small round stove that burned round coke mouldings of the sort you see everywhere being burned, and also in Beijing. Dinner was on the living room floor swimming around in a large steel bowl. My neighbour scooped up dinner in one hand and a large chopper in the other hand and went outside. After a moment he reappeared, and dinner, perhaps having some presentiment of what was to come, wriggled out of his grasp and with astonishing direction and timing plummeted back into the bowl. The scenario was repeated and this time the fish came back neatly chopped on a board. The wok was set on top of the coke stove and the fish put in along with some meat, stock, chopped farm grown spring onions. The result really tasted very good, although squeamishly I didn't eat more than one bowl. The two lads came in and wolfed down their portions and helped themselves to more and then went out again. I found I could speak to my neighbour well enough to talk about our children and our ages, our work and so on. I did determine that he wasn't originally from the Guilin area, which may have had something to do with it. His trade was keeping chickens. He was very gentle and kind and I felt rather sad also. As far as I could make out his wife was no longer about. At one point he asked me why I'd come to China and I tried to explain that I was looking for new sources of energy and reasons to go on living, but my language skills being inadequate could only manage something like "at my age a man needs new hobbies". His face fell a mile as I imagine mine might if someone wandered into my house and announced that I was his new hobby. It wasn't what I meant, of course, but I

had the feeling at that moment of how deep a pit the poverty trap is and how steep the walls of the pit. He was not stupid or dull, he just happened to be in that trap and I happened not to be. I can get on a plane and fly to his country and have a look, whereas he would probably be hard stretched to get a train to Beijing.

The room was maybe a little more basic than I had imagined, but I passed a comfortable night there. The next day I took the bike and pedalled into Guilin. Not having ridden a bike for probably twenty odd years I found it very fatiguing, though I later realised that this was mainly because the bike was far too small and my legs don't function so efficiently when my kneecaps are circling my ears. I parked the bike under a picture of Julia Roberts so as to be sure to be able to find it again and tramped all over the town looking for such luxuries as a decent cup of coffee and a WC with a bolt on the door. I felt quite positive about the setup, all I needed was a coffee pot and a table and chair and maybe some kind of oil lamp to add a bit of atmosphere. The dormitory had a calor gas ring for boiling water and water for boiling on it, everything I needed could be bought extremely cheaply. I love moving into a bare room and creating a new temporary bijou existence for myself. But when I got back at about 4 in the afternoon the police had been in touch with my comrade to tell him my situation was illegal and unsafe and I would have to move to a hotel. So I had to move to a hotel and this was not so great. The hotel was between the railway and a Karaoke bar, so bang went the peace and quiet. No heat, and one fluorescent striplight, so bang went the atmosphere. One shared squat lavatory and one shower without a shower head. The TV in my room showing nothing but Guang Dong Buduan Guang Gao TV.

I pulled myself together as best I could and threw myself into the task of wandering aimlessly around Guilin. The town is presently being rebuilt, so everywhere roads are dug up, piles of mud block the walkways, shopfronts dangle over deep trenches, their owners plainly and probably uncomplainingly going out of business. Every restaurant has a small menagerie of fish and fowl sitting outside on the pavement. Fish, chickens, ducks, turtles, in one place a large dignified tabby cat sat patiently in a cage with his back turned on a snake as if to say "we may be going in the same wok together but don't expect me to talk to you, you slimy reptile". In the streets around the city peasants hold food markets, each seller offering a few chickens or some spring greens or a fish, a woman picks up a large fish and whacks it's head twice on the pavement like an angler and starts peeling it as though it was a potato, housewives wander home dangling live chickens head down towards the pavement, one optimistic soul even tried to sell me a chicken. I said what am I going to do with it, take it home on the plane? And as well as the food markets there are tourist markets, clothes markets, electronic goods markets, computer markets, every corner you turn there's yet another market. And aside from the food markets they're all empty, no-one ever seems to be buying. They remind me of the sea anemones I used to watch as a boy. The anemone puts out it's tentacles and apparently food wanders into them and this is how it feeds. But no matter how long you watch one it never seems to catch anything. Yet it must catch food sometimes, because anemones have existed for millions of years, longer, perhaps, even than these little markets full of patient individual stallholders, hundreds in each market, all selling similar looking goods who also never

seem to sell anything but one supposes sometimes they must, otherwise why would they open their stalls day after day? Perhaps it was the time of year.

I had the feeling that the poverty was depressing me, but I later realised it wasn't the poverty of the peasants so much as the anxiety of the tourist industry that got me down. Although there were tourists around they were almost all Chinese come to celebrate the Spring Festival. In a week in Guilin I only saw about half a dozen foreigners and some of them were probably me reflected in a shop window. But everywhere I walked taxi drivers would shout to me, bicycle rickshaw drivers would hulloah me (in Yangshuo one determined lady drove her motorcycle taxi right across the road at high speed straight at me gesticulating as if to say get in my cab or die, foreigner. I called her bluff). And then an endless succession of stringers would come along, "hello, isn't it a nice day? Do you need a hotel / Li River Cruise / come and see my studio / nose job / aeroplane ticket" and so on. I started to realise what it must be like to be a woman, everyone who started a conversation, no matter how pleasant and innocent they seemed, wound up wanting to feel up my wallet in some way. And the worst of it is I can't blame, them, it's their living and I am a foreigner wandering around in an internationally famous tourist area. What business do I have wandering around not intending to buy anything or even take a Li River Cruise. Don't I deserve to be raped? It makes me feel very guilty. And worse, it makes me ignore people when they say hello in their very friendly way. Except for the children. At least they don't have anything to sell.

So Guilin is turning out to be a bit of a downer. All the food I try is very disappointing, nothing like the delicious Beijing food, and always more expensive. I am sure there are good things, but I can't read a Chinese menu very well and a lot of the dishes have traditional names I wouldn't understand anyway. The Chinese families have hotpots or woks put on gas rings on the table and cook for themselves, but this isn't offered to a solitary foreigner. I'm not complaining about the lack of gastronomic interest but I am walking a lot and need to eat and nothing I eat here fills me up. I can't find the internet anywhere, so I can't check my email and feel worried in case there are messages. In the evenings I sit in the lobby of the hotel and drink beer and watch the world go by. The fuwuyuan comes from a different part of China and she and I can understand each other, also she is patient and sympathetic and so we talk a lot. The local accent is strange. Instead of "shi" they say "si" which might not sound like a big difference, but considering that in my Chinese dictionary there are 39 difference characters all pronounced as "shi" with the fourth tone (many of them having at least 3 separate and distinct meanings) and again 14 characters pronounced as "si" with the fourth tone, is it sensible, I ask myself, to eliminate that subtle distinction or to put it another way, how the dickens can they understand what the other person's saying? Indeed it has on occasion struck me that the reason for so called Chinese inscrutability is that they actually don't understand what each other is saying, but are too proud to let on, particularly in the presence of foreigners. I have entertained the suspicion that when we're not around they do the sensible thing and speak English to each other. "What on earth were you saying back there Xiao Wang?" "I can't remember now, Xiao Li, does it really matter?"

On Sunday I hired a bike for the day and determined to start exploring the countryside. Guilin region is supposed to be the most beautiful landscape in China. The bike is the right size and feels like flying, I cover the ground in no time. I ride along the road towards Yangshuo, but Yangshuo is too far and in any case it would be more sensible to take a bus. Just about to turn back when I hit a small village. This is really interesting, there's a market day on, evidently, and people are streaming into the village. Many of the vehicles are little more than trailers which have had what looks like large lawnmower engines attached to the front, the vehicle is steered by rotating the whole engine with a tiller, rather like an outboard. I used to dream about making my own cars when I was a boy, and this is a Heath Robinson paradise. I turn along a little road and ride for miles. The road becomes a mud track. It's strange country, a very flat plain with mountains or rather large crags that seem to rise almost vertically into the air. I skirt round a smart army base. Elsewhere are small houses or little groups of houses, a few oxen, small sculptured fields, children letting off firecrackers, groups of country people standing and chatting, watching me go by with a mild curiosity. The road comes to another village and joins a wider road. I take a left and follow quite a wide road, not metalled, but very smooth, it drives along a plain between mountains rising on either side. Nobody is around but a few strange looking stone sculptures appear on the left, one looks like Humpty Dumpty after his fall. After four or five kilometres I come to a place where there is a small settlement, a school, mountains in front and the road winds up into the mountains, people are making their way up there, walking or on motorcycles, a lorry goes up, it's clear there's a settlement up there somewhere, I want to go up but I don't know how late it is and don't want to be stuck after dark. The road winds around the side of the hills, but a footpath goes directly up the middle and I can see a distant figure in a yellow jacket climbing the path. The mountains on either side are brilliantly green and the birdsong intense. Opposite me on the side of the hill I see an animal, almost certainly a deer. It is one of the most beautiful places I've ever seen in my life. I often dream about coming to live in a place like this, to weld myself into the beautiful scenery and write poems, perhaps, but now I find myself asking whether I could really shoehorn myself back into that idyll. Suppose the poems didn't fetch the expected price or, worse, the whole crop failed? How would I feel about taking a job as a part time chicken strangler to make ends meet. There's a paradox involved in the fact that peasant life often has a rawness and directness and energy which is very attractive to people with comfortable incomes travelling soft sleeper class. And it's an empirical fact that many poor people are happy nevertheless, and many rich folk desperate. What Guilin is driving home to me is that I really don't know the answer to this question. How does civilisation advance without losing this raw flame, this directness of experience? Coming here hasn't brought me any closer to the answer.

On the return journey I met a couple of characters, one cycled along with me some way practising his English, he kept saying "I am not a thief" which didn't exactly inspire confidence. Then he suddenly invited me to dinner which was so unexpected that I fell off my bike and broke my spectacle case. I was too tired and didn't take him up on his offer. Every so often we'd pass a building and he'd say "See that hotel there? You been there?", "No", "There's a girl there, very pretty, for 10 kuai she'll . . .", this happened a couple of times. Eventually we parted but not before exchanging names and addresses. A

little further on I met a three wheel bike rider, we discovered we were both going to Guilin so we rode along together. His two topics of conversation were money and girls. "Take a train to Guilin, how much? When you come to Guilin how much do you spend? One night in the hotel how much? See that hotel there, they've got a girl who'll . . . you got girls like that in England?" and so on and so on. I suppose the amounts of money I was spending seemed fabulous to him. A couple of kilometres outside Guilin the pedal snapped off my hired bicycle. I could have pushed it in without too much trouble, but my friend picked it up and tied in on the back of the three wheeler and then I got in on top and he pedalled us back to the hotel. A couple of times he asked me what I was doing in the evening so I asked him to come and have a drink later. He did eventually come, but just wanted money so I gave him a bit and he went. Perhaps his wife read the riot act to him.

The day before returning to Beijing I took a bus over to Yangshuo, a place one or two people had suggested was worth a visit. Yangshuo is much smaller than Guilin and nothing like Guilin at all. The scenery is dramatic, the mountains many and close in to the town. Some of the peaks have radio or radar stations on the top. There's a long street of antique shops and restaurants which is curiously cosmopolitan, the restaurants all have signs in English and sell American breakfasts and French or Italian food, there are stalls selling the Lonely Planet and dog eared second hand Ken Kesey novels. It feels like the sort of place hip young Americans go so they can say "Oh you haven't been to . . .?" and I saw more foreigners in a day than I saw in a week in Guilin, though still not enough to save me being rubbed to the raw by the sales talk. But the atmosphere hits you, there's no denying it, the atmosphere is very strong. An enterprising soul called Billy runs an internet café, you can sign up for courses in taichi, survival mandarin ("bu yao"), Chinese cooking or you can rent a tube. A tube is what, I wondered. A tube is an inner tube, you rent one or two and rig up a raft and float down the Li river like Huckleberry Finn. You can find out about Billy (and Yangshuo) on the internet at www.yangshuo.com. Interleaved with this hip cosmopolitan culture is a genuine peasant culture, the people here to my eyes looked more rugged and beautiful than the people I saw in Guilin though there's probably nothing substantial in that. There's a market, bustling and raw, there's a man sawing a large fish in half with a chopper. The fish is still alive and it's mouth is working and it's eyes rolling. He finishes chopping and puts the head down on a board. I follow his movement and there are three of them, three large fish heads all in a row, noiselessly working, dumb-mouthing a chorus of fishhead curses against mankind and all of our issue.

But I had another very odd moment in Yangshuo. I was wandering out of the town a little, past a street market where people were plucking chickens, mending bicycles, a mother holding a small child up to crap on a newspaper, nothing out of the usual. At a large crossroads an old man came past me in blue dungarees driving three cattle. One of his eyes was clearly sightless. I nodded to him and he nodded to me and for that moment it seemed beyond strange that I could nod to someone in such a different universe and that he could nod to me. And maybe it was then or maybe a little later that I felt for a moment a sense of an existence lived on a completely different timescale, a sense of time

that grows, waxes and wanes instead of rushing irredeemably away, and within which exists a silent flame of energy that invigorates refreshes and protects. I've got to go back.