

BEIJING NOTES

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MAY 12

Subway station construction upheaves streets, buildings that five years earlier had a purpose. Everything is changing. In China, expect to see torn down buildings, strange grey shacks between skyscrapers, a cemetery filled with farmers alongside the train. Dirty children, more buildings. Expect rivers and miles and miles of mountain and then a stream filled with garbage. Remember that the darker the women, the harder their labour in the fields. The darker the children, the further they are from the city, and the longer the bike ride under the sun.

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If you are unfamiliar with this place, the best way to get a succinct view of China is to sit at a window on a train and stare until you reach your destination.

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The Bird's Nest is filled with Asian people touring the gardens, the stadiums. There is thick smog and a busyness that is inescapable because people, here, are inescapable.

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I don't want to believe that after you live long enough in a massive metropolis, few things come to surprise you. No one stares at the beggar and her child on the street, the girl playing the *erhu* except me.

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The greater the population, it seems, the less regard for the individual—the less time, space, to *be* an individual. I am no longer someone to be met because there are millions of others here, like me, to meet.

In a city like Beijing, it seems that population, urban-ness, all of this, pushes people to be acutely aware of their need to survive; their need to make a living, somehow, in a place where everyone is always moving, always working. There is no time or place for a slower pace, a casual conversation between strangers. That can come later, perhaps.

MAY 13

A man in grey clothing in a fashion district. He is a professional shoe-polisher. He flogs a tube of shoe polish shouting at people on the street that it is *wu jiao*, or 50 cents, for a polish. There are millions of ways here to make a living, and millions upon millions of people doing just that. My shoes, sadly, don't need to be polished.

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In less populated cities there are plenty of opportunities to feel unique, to "think big," and to imagine, possibly, becoming famous, rich, etc. But while I am here, I realize that I do not understand sacrifice. Someone here has already thought exactly what I have thought, but hasn't had the luxury to write about it.

Outside my window, there is a farmer and he has bundled his child in a cloth and they are bicycling home. This is real and there are too many places where this is real.

MAY 14

Give a dog a bone and expect the dog to take it. Is it the same for cats? A cat outside my grandmother's house has given birth to kittens, but I've only seen one. Someone told me the others died. Today I went outside and there was a kitten in the piles of garbage, hiding. I tried to lure it with food, but neither mother nor kitten would come out. I think they'd rather starve. It's as if someone has told them how appalling strangers can be.

Maybe not. I tried to give a dog water today. He stared at me like I was a fool and passersby stared at me as though I was an idiot. *What?* I wanted to ask. I suspect everyone except me knew that no matter how hungry these stray animals are they will always survive on their own. I think the animals here know that kindness is fleeting, is often polluted by a perverse self-righteousness that turns into pity... They don't seem to want pity.

MAY 16

My father's home is in Hubei. Outside of Wuhan, there is a place called Shengjiatan. The *noung ming* are raised here, in shacks made of wet wood and tree branches, the occasional patch of bricks, and a hole to shit in. When I was 15, my uncle took me to this place. The door was covered in words my father wrote as a child. I met a childhood friend of my father's. His home was a shack. His wife cooked for us, a dinner filled with spices, foods, and colours. And

outside, this man's son and his son's friend, arm in arm, walked home; the road piled with garbage, the walls outside ridged with broken glass. One kicked a can across the dirt.

My father was raised in this heat. I imagined, then, that those two boys were my father and his friend as boys, and I felt closer to him. His friend later said to me, "Tell your father, thank you." I didn't ask why. I still do not know where this thanks came from, and I do not ask my father. He looks guilty whenever he is remembering home.

MAY 18

I am in Taiyuan, Shanxi. My mother's hometown. After my eldest aunt examines my palms, she concludes that, based on the knottiness of some lines on my right hand, I must have pains in my waist; that the length and shape of my fingers dictate that I have occasional physical ailments. She looks at my left hand and tells me that my parents may have poor health. *Clap and you will be healthy*, she tells me. Where did she learn this?

There's some sort of doctor on television about whom I yelled was a big fake the moment I saw her broadcast. She tells viewers (and there are millions of them) strange things that might be true, and that likewise might not be. Stretch and your back will strengthen. Clap and your circulation will improve. Clap a thousand times a day and you will live longer.

Clap and your fingers will grow longer. *What?*

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There's a joke that the price of green porridge beans was hiked because this very same doctor said they were the best. I said she was probably endorsed by some bean company, but no one listened to me. The price of these beans is now exorbitant. My aunt has stopped buying them because they're too expensive. Still, everyone believes everything this doctor says. My grandmother watches her intently and my aunt insists I point my hands to the sky each day in order to straighten my back.

It doesn't matter how ridiculous you are—if you win over a significant portion of a country's population, you have won. It takes people who *want* to be healthy, who *want* to believe, and who will easily be convinced that x equals y , to drive this sort of believing right to the sky.

MAY 19

In July when I was nine-years-old, my uncle and I carried watermelons from his truck, up the stairs to my grandmother's home. We ate them in halves while watching television in the evenings. I could never finish mine. My uncle visited me today and, even though they're not in season, in his hand was a bag with a watermelon. They are not eaten at this time of year because they are not red enough. But my uncle bought me one anyway and told me to carry it up the stairs.

Later:

I learned the first of 24 sequences in *qigong*, but I suck at it and seem to be forgetting the movements already.

MAY 20

I learned how to write the names of my parents in Chinese. The words sometimes look like their meanings—I think this is the most beautiful poetry.

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A very dirty cat begging for love crawled into my lap and rolled around. Someone called me, so I pushed it off. It meowed and left weird black chips, perhaps fleas, on my jeans.

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I went to the Taiyuan Merchant's Museum, which has a park surrounding it. I ran around like a child. The best way I can explain it is to compare it to that panoramic scene halfway through *Atonement* where in one instance there is a carousel somewhere and in the next, soldiers are singing in a choir. An overload of sights and sounds.

In the evenings, the elderly, thousands of them, come together and sing old songs—high-pitched traditional music from Shanxi. I saw a group of people who were being led by a man who just kept drumming. Cymbals covered in green or red ribbons, men smoking cigarettes, a little boy dancing to the beat of the music. Elsewhere in the park, there were hundreds of people clapping. *If you clap a thousand times a day, your circulation improves.* A man teaching a little girl some form of martial arts on a pagoda. And, of course, a woman across a bridge could be heard singing karaoke.





Giant groups of people in a circle and old men and women playing saxophones, *erhus*, violins; clouds of old men leaning over, listening to a woman sing old songs from an old time—it did not end! In the middle of the circle, one singer would lead everyone else in singing the song he or she sang the loudest. Everyone knew the music.

If you come from a particular time in China, or were raised by people who did (which is inevitable), it is customary that you will know the distinct notes of not only one song, but maybe a thousand; you will know these songs and the martial arts and the ways to clap to improve your heartbeat!

MAY 22

I walked into a courtyard filled with old people with posters, little booklets containing names, ages, and heights. That was all I could understand. My aunt told me these people were parents, conferring with one another to find match-makers for their busy children who were approaching 28-years-old.

“What?” my aunt said. “If their children are too busy, the parents need to step in.” Two women behind me said, “too tall.” When I turned around, they were staring at me.

Damn.

There is this strange need here to get married before you hit 30. Twenty-nine is considered old. “It’s not the same here,” my cousin explained to me. “Chinese women, our bodies are different. After 30, our bodies have a great deal of trouble giving birth.”

She told me this, satisfied with her explanation, expecting me to understand. I think she missed the point, but, perhaps, so did I.

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A bowlegged woman walked by my grandmother and me. She swayed like a little boat in the water. My grandmother was watching her.

“My walk is prettier than that, right?” she asked.

“Do you miss your grandfather?”

MAY 24

My uncle took me out of Taiyuan, around to the gas stations he manages. I climbed the stairs to the tops of these stations. There were little cots and bunk beds where the employees sleep. Water for the most part from a giant brick basin covered by a wooden board. There was a grimy dog with an injured foot,

panting in the shade. The employees stared at both the dog and me. Their faces red. I offered the dog water but he wouldn't take it. The employees chuckled at me.

The stations are extremely close to the homes of many farmers. A large brick wall separates each station from the farmers and their vegetables. I tried to climb over these walls but they were covered in glass, so I peeked over some steps.

Behind the gas stations are gravestones of farmers, bouquets of flowers beneath them, names chiselled in stone. Old farmers. Trees and fields, pinched clay, and then the big iron skeleton of train tracks, the sneer of a roaring train.

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Stray animals are everywhere. Running in between cars on busy streets, hiding in the shade, tearing open garbage bags. They only come near you if you have food. And it's me, always me, calling their names, trying to give them some sort of attention.

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On the streets, people sprawled all day selling popsicles, shoes, toiletries—I no longer stop and think *how do you do this every day?* There is no time for a person here to think of all the things they could be doing—you must survive and provide for your offspring. *Xin ku*.

It's hard to find a direct English translation of *xin ku*, but it means difficult, hard-working, earnest, committed, etc. Essentially, that a person with less discipline would have perished earlier on. But you continue and your efforts go unnoticed, especially when there are millions doing what you are doing. The woman selling plastic whistles for five cents, every day, outside in weather I can't sit an hour in. The boy who is the head waiter in this dingy restaurant I'm eating at. I check the time and it's late. Perhaps, too late. *Xin ku*.

Me, I have been to places that those who live in China will never go. I have been to the holiest of temples with only the slightest idea of their significance, and I have stared at monks, interested only in where they got their odd shoes. I have walked through the most famous streets in Nanjing, Shanghai, Wuxi, Beijing, only concerned with how some women still don't care if they shave their armpits. I might be an idiot. I can barely speak Mandarin and I am too tall.

MAY 30

“An emperor lived here...These were his concubines...During x dynasty these three words were written in beautiful calligraphy to illustrate this and that... Eunuchs were powerful once and then eunuchs were no longer powerful... This garden illustrates what...This is a stone lion with a ball in its mouth... This is a very old turtle...There was a war here...And so and so was a famous general...” These things were told to me over and over again during the tours through Nanjing, Wuxi, Hangzhou, and Suzhou. I can't remember a thing and I can't seem to understand unless I concentrate.

It doesn't matter where I travel anymore. It doesn't matter which city. It is always the same—the temples have their stories. What always gets to me are the people peddling wooden carts that look like they are going to break. The women with their umbrellas in sunny weather. Just as history fascinates others, the people I see are tangible and fascinate me.

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I am back from the Expo. I saw a woman club another woman in the lineup for the German pavilion. Her bra was sliding off. Two old men started to hit each other. The sweat on my body did not belong to me. I went home and drank four or five giant bottles of beer and sang a really bad rendition of a Chinese song. I think my relatives hate me.