

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS

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# Fried Eggs With Chopsticks

Polly Evans

## About the Book

When she learnt that the Chinese had built enough new roads to circle the equator sixteen times, Polly Evans decided to go and witness for herself the way this vast nation was hurtling into the technological age. But on arriving in China she found the building work wasn't quite finished.

Squeezed up against Buddhist monks, squawking chickens and on one happy occasion a soldier named Hero, Polly clattered along pot-holed tracks from the snow-capped mountains of Shangri-La to the bear-infested jungles of the south. She braved encounters with a sadistic masseur, a ridiculously flexible kung-fu teacher, and a terrified child who screamed at the sight of her.

In quieter moments, Polly contemplated China's long and colourful history - the seven-foot-tall eunuch commander who sailed the globe in search of treasure; the empress that chopped off her rivals' hands and feet and boiled them to make soup - and pondered the bizarre traits of the modern mandarins. And, as she travelled, she attempted to solve the ultimate gastronomic conundrum: just how does one eat a soft-fried egg with chopsticks?

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# FRIED EGGS WITH CHOPSTICKS

Polly Evans

For Sophie and Lee, wishing you every happiness

## Acknowledgements

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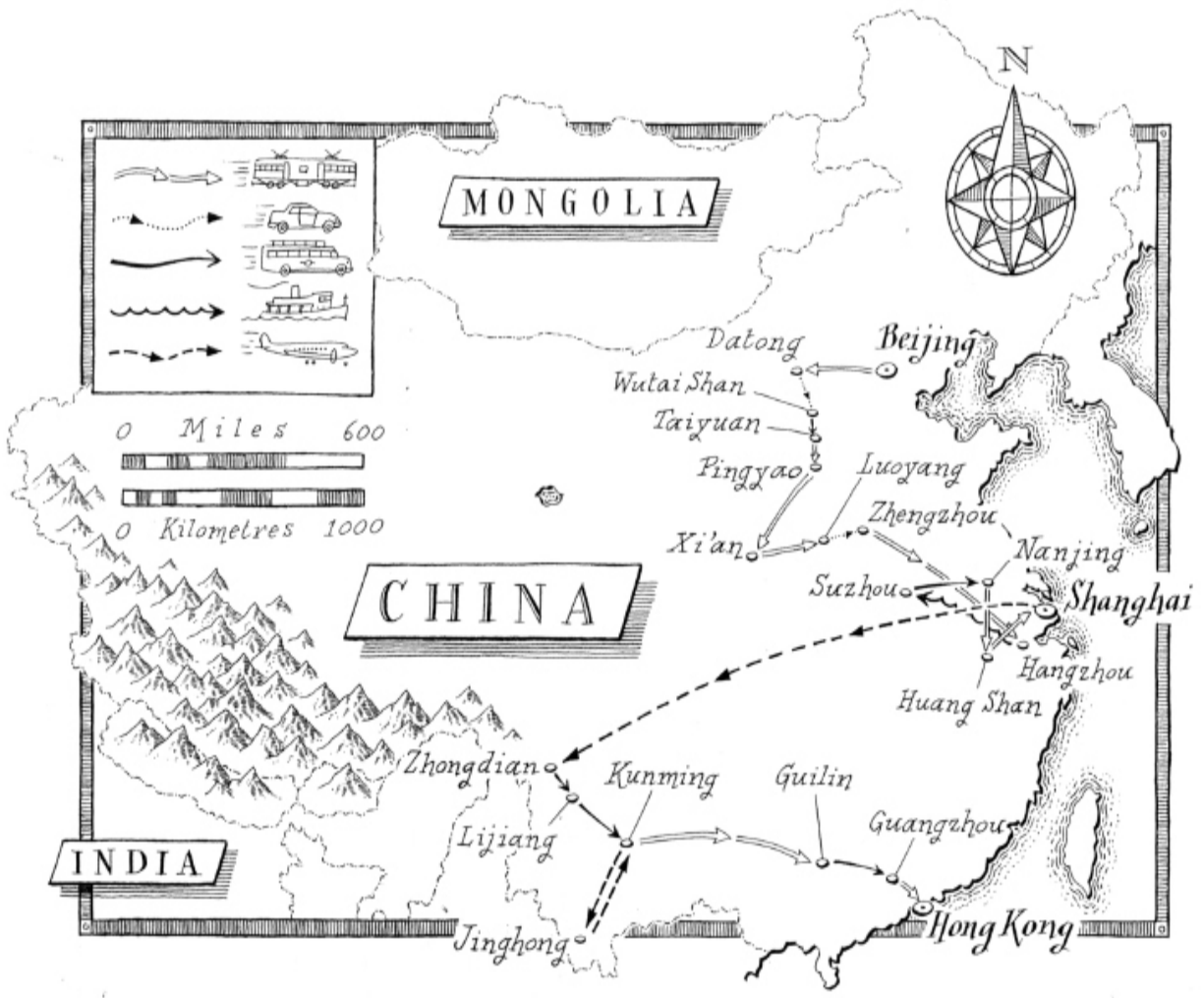
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## The Chairman is Dead

I GAZED WITH ghoulish fascination at the withered, waxen corpse. The infamous domed forehead and rounded cheeks looked weary and wrinkled, a far cry from the jubilant, plump jowls of the propaganda posters. The embalmed cadaver of Chairman Mao lay swaddled in military uniform, his hands crossed over his chest. An orange lamp beamed through the semi-darkness onto his shrivelled, death-stiffened skin. His face glowed like a ghastly, candlelit pumpkin.

A hushed awe filled this inner chamber of the mausoleum. Nobody spoke above a whisper. The room quivered with palpable excitement. My heart was beating faster than usual; a perverse thrill tickled my skin. I felt a morbid compulsion to stop and stare at the macabre spectacle, at the mortal remains of this man who had, to such catastrophic effect, held absolute power over the most populous nation on earth. A few decades ago, a single suggestion from that formaldehyde-plumped mouth could have spelt the slaughter of a man; the disastrous economic strategies that evolved in that glowing amber head had dealt a tortured death to tens of millions. Yet beneath that taut, unyielding skin had also breathed a man who had, against incredible odds, inflamed such passion and loyalty in his people that a vast and diverse country had united and, with almost no material resources, had overthrown the foreign super-powers that threatened it.

The embalming of Mao's corpse had been an anxious affair according to his personal physician Li Zhisui, who recorded the procedure in his book *The Private Life of Chairman Mao*. The problem was that neither Li, nor anyone else in China, had attempted to preserve human flesh before. Li himself had visited Stalin's and Lenin's remains some years previously and had noted that the bodies were shrunken. He had been told that Lenin's nose and ears had rotted and had been rebuilt in wax and that Stalin's moustache had fallen off. The medical team played for time by pumping Mao's corpse full of formaldehyde.

'We injected a total of twenty-two litres,' Li wrote. 'The results were shocking. Mao's face was bloated, as round as a ball, and his neck was now the width of his head. His skin was shiny, and the formaldehyde oozed from his pores like perspiration. His ears were swollen too, sticking out from his head at right angles. The corpse was grotesque.'

The terrified medics - who could have been executed for desecrating the semi-divine cadaver - tried to massage the liquid out from the face and down into the body where the bloating could be covered with clothing. One of them pressed too hard and broke a piece of skin off Mao's cheek. In the end, they managed to restore his face to something approaching normal proportions, but then the Chairman's clothes wouldn't fit on his body and they had to slit the back of his jacket and trousers in order to button them up.

Before carrying out the permanent preservation of the body, Li sent two investigators to Hanoi to find out how Ho Chi Minh's body had been treated. When they arrived, however, the Vietnamese officials refused to divulge their secrets and wouldn't allow them to see the corpse - though someone revealed confidentially that it hadn't been a great success. Ho's nose had already decomposed and his beard had fallen off.

In the end, Li worked out a method whereby he removed Mao's internal organs and filled the cavity with cotton

soaked in formaldehyde, while another group worked day and night building a pseudo-corpse out of wax just in case it all went wrong and they found themselves in need of a fake.

I wondered whether the body that lay before me was, in fact, the real cadaver or the waxen substitute. It was nearly thirty years since Mao's death; the pickling process had clearly been experimental at best. It seemed entirely possible that the real corpse could have long since rotted away and been quietly replaced with a skilfully crafted effigy.

But I wasn't allowed to linger. A dark-suited official insisted that the line of pilgrims kept moving. Silently, I filed with the coachloads of fellow tourists out of the dim mausoleum of the past and into the bright white light of contemporary Tiananmen Square.

'Follow me! Quick-a-ly!' A Chinese man dressed in a slightly soiled tracksuit top, baggy black jogging pants and scuffed pumps hollered at a white-haired Western tourist who stood in the queue that snaked around the cubic, concrete mausoleum. Amid the bedlam of loudly jabbering, camera-wielding day-trippers, the tourist nervously clutched his bag to his hip. The Chinese clasped the shoulder of the tourist's jacket and tried to pull him out of the queue. The tourist looked terrified.

He needn't have worried; I had been through the same charade just a few minutes earlier. Bags were forbidden in the mausoleum and the left-luggage office was on the other side of one of the busy roads that flanked the square. Seeing my bag, the man had grabbed me.

'Follow me! Quick-a-ly!'

We had hurtled through the square, dodging anorak-clad couples and fraught family groups. I was already struggling to keep up when Pumps had thrown himself into the multiple lanes of traffic that thronged the perimeter road. I had balked.

'Quick-a-ly!' Pumps had shrieked across the belching fumes and honking horns.

Fearing for my life, I had followed as speedily as I could until, a few metres further on, we had reached the 'checking room'.

Pumps had grabbed my bag.

'Ten yuan,' he had said. 'Quick-a-ly.'

I had fished it out.

'And ten yuan for me,' Pumps had commanded.

This was the new China, a place where you had to move fast because time was money. It was a world that Mao, had he woken in his mausoleum a short distance away, would never have recognized. Gone were the communes; the 'iron rice bowl' - the state system that guaranteed lifelong employment - had been melted down and sold for scrap. In its place came 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' where the entrepreneurial spirit was not only permitted but actively encouraged. 'To be rich is glorious,' Mao's successor Deng Xiaoping had pronounced. After the famines and fear of recent years, the Chinese had leapt at the opportunity to create wealth.

Tiananmen Square had been central to the cult of Mao. It was here that he stood in October 1949 and proclaimed the founding of the People's Republic to the enthusiastic cheers of a hopeful, war-weary nation. The largest public square in the world, this vast expanse of grey paving stones and rigidly rectangular monuments and buildings covers an awe-inspiring forty hectares. It was originally built - in less imposing form - during the fifteenth century as the gateway to the Forbidden City from where the imperial dynasties ruled. But in the late 1950s, Mao decided to enlarge the square, to recreate this ideological landmark in his regime's own image. It was to be massive, imposing, immovable - and a uniform grey.

Mao was determined that the new square should be ready for the tenth anniversary of the People's Republic.

Work started in November 1958; with the anniversary celebrations scheduled for 1 October the following year, the renovations had to be completed in just ten months. A labour force of twelve thousand 'volunteers' was conscripted. They worked round the clock in shifts of up to sixteen hours to clear the land; they built the Great Hall of the People whose auditorium would seat ten thousand and the banqueting hall where up to five thousand diners would feast.

Things had changed. In the twenty-first-century square, Mao's monuments still stood but they were surrounded by Beijingers flying kites; fashionably cut jeans and tailored jackets in purple, red and pink took the place of the blue Mao suits of yore.

In the roads around the square where, in the 1960s, the Chairman had come to inspect parades of up to one million Red Guards and to sanction their merciless ransacking of the country, shiny new BMWs and Volkswagens now streamed. Car sales in China were set to rise 80 per cent in 2003 alone. Sparkling expressways shimmered through the industrial haze - in just ten years, China had built enough new roads to circle the equator sixteen times. In Shanghai, the new Maglev train was whizzing millimetres above its magnetic tracks at a staggering 430 kilometres an hour. Two hundred and fifty million Chinese were jabbering into mobile phones.

Here in Beijing, crumbling hutongs - Beijing's ancient alleyways - were being controversially razed to make way for the clean, green city that China's capital is determined to become in time for the 2008 Olympics. The city wasn't settling for a simple facelift. It was having Botox, a nose job, and silicone implants to boot. In order to look at its best for the Games, Beijing was undergoing every cosmetic treatment on the market. Entire residential areas had been torn down and parks built in their place. Last time I had visited the city, two and a half years earlier, Beijing had

three ring roads; now there were six. In 2002 alone, two million trees had been planted. Everywhere I looked, sand and cement dust filled the air. Workers wielded picks and shovels. China was under construction.

Way above my head at this very moment, on the morning of 15 October 2003, China's first man in space quite literally had stars in his eyes. As I stood and stared at Mao's pickled corpse, Lieutenant Yang Liwei was gazing out at the cosmos, perhaps tucking into one of his specially prepared space snacks as he settled into another orbit of the earth. The thirty-eight-year-old ex-fighter pilot had spoken by radio to the Party leaders; he'd chatted with his wife and eight-year-old son. Tomorrow, after twenty-one hours and fourteen orbits, China's newest hero would come back down to earth, and then soar into a rather different universe as a lustrous celebrity. He was, as he said, feeling good.

Yes, yes, so the Russians and Americans had sent astronauts into outer space forty-two years earlier. The cynics were blathering that this escapade was a scandalous waste of money for a country many of whose people lived scarcely above subsistence, and that human space adventure had gone out of fashion with A-line skirts (and they were talking about the first time). But the Chinese didn't care, for their Motherland had entered the space age. After decades of instability, strife and starvation, China had recovered. Now she was announcing to the world with billowing jets of rocket fuel that she was a force to be reckoned with.

Alongside the economic and technological change ran a new-fangled cultural revolution. Differences in attitudes between mothers and daughters in today's China were blowing the customary inter-generational disputes into another stratosphere. In 1980, it was reckoned that a modest 15 per cent of Beijingers had indulged in premarital sex. Twenty years later, the figure had reached 80 per cent.

Divorce was booming. In this country where the insidious influences of barbarians from abroad had previously been so tightly controlled, sprawling internet cafés were springing up in every town. The Chinese could access the websites of international newspapers; the more affluent apartment blocks had cable TV and CNN.

All this change was precisely the reason I had come here. China was haring into a new age like an out-of-control high-speed train. Yet, I had heard, while the city folk were careering forth on their expressway to modernity, some of the country dwellers were still on a very different track. They were, as ever, crawling along in carts drawn by lame donkeys, and clattering down rough-hewn roads in buses with broken seats and haphazard suspension. For the majority of China's 1.4 billion residents this futuristic leap forward with its magnetic levitation trains and supersonic rockets didn't mean a lot. If I wanted to look at the strange dichotomies of this two-tier country, the time to go there was now.

So I could glimpse things the way the people saw them, I thought I'd attempt to travel alongside the masses. I'd take sleeper trains and long-distance buses to visit China's ancient heritage sites, natural wonders and modernistic masterpieces. I'd ride a bicycle through Beijing's hutongs and I'd float on a boat down the Grand Canal.

This wasn't my first foray into China. I'd lived in Hong Kong for nearly four years and had ventured across the border a number of times. I'd arrived in the former British colony seven months after the hand-over, hot on the trail of the Asian economic crisis of October 1997 and the bird flu outbreak that led to the demise of 1.4 million chickens in the territory.

The Hong Kong Chinese had seemed to be in two minds about their reunification with the Motherland. While they were delighted to be rid of a colonial power, the Chinese Communist government provided an unnerving alternative.

After the Tiananmen Square incident of June 1989, during which the Chinese government had sanctioned the deaths of hundreds, possibly thousands, of peaceful protesters, Hong Kong had descended into panic. Those who were sufficiently affluent and held the necessary professional qualifications had queued up at the gates of foreign nations willing to offer them passports out. Most of these countries also required a certain minimum residency; Hong Kong's middle classes deserted the territory in their droves. Most never returned.

Their attitudes towards the mainland were complicated by the fact that the majority of Hong Kong families had themselves immigrated from China within the last sixty years. Hong Kong's war-ravaged population stood at just 600,000 in 1945; it exceeds seven million today - and procreation has played only a small part. Yet Hong Kongers tended to look down on their cousins across the border, denigrating them as unsophisticated and, worse still, poor.

Among Westerners, even those who considered themselves enthusiastic sinophiles, China seemed to inspire a love-hate relationship. It was a fascinating country with a rich history of great culture and terrible cruelty - a history whose artefacts its own people had recently decimated in an attempt to wipe out the superstition and feudalism of the past. It was an entrancing country, but one that was dirty and difficult to travel in. China was still, even in today's cosmopolitan climate, alluringly foreign - but also a hellishly frustrating place in which to operate.

Knowing these small things about China had convinced me that, if I was going to try to negotiate my way around the country on public transport, I should make some attempt at learning the language. It would be nice, at least, to master a few vital phrases: 'This bus is slower than my grandmother', 'Has this train been cleaned since the Ming dynasty?' and so on.

I'd enrolled in classes at London University's School of Oriental and African Studies and, every Wednesday evening for two terms before I embarked on my journey, I'd trekked up to Russell Square to join a small group of other misguided souls who had been cursed with the silly idea that it might be fun to learn Chinese. Together we'd sat and stared bemusedly at Wei San, our teacher, and tried to make sense of the extraordinary sounds that came from her mouth. Other evenings, I'd pored over my square-ruled notebook and painstakingly copied out Chinese characters as I'd attempted to translate sensationally dull sentences designed to incorporate every possible grammatical complexity: 'Mr Li rang me last night and told me that he would not come today', or 'Do you know that the lady who came to see him last week was his elder sister?'

What is it with language teaching that inspires this kind of intense banality? Why not liven things up a bit with sentences such as: 'Pock-Marked Chang rang me last night and said he would not annihilate my family today'? Or 'Did you know that the lady who came to see him last week was his elder sister - and that he is the father of her strange-looking child?'

Still, as the weeks had progressed, the peculiar shapes on the page had started to take on a new significance. I'd learnt to ask for one ticket from Beijing to Shanghai, and to enquire at what time the train departed. I'd learnt to pronounce astonishment at the price of plums and to declare them very expensive. I'd learnt the words for beer and wine and chocolate.

And then, not very confidently, I'd packed my bags, my phrase book and my Wet Wipes, and set off for the mystical, maddening Middle Kingdom.

## ‘Might Be a Little Bit Painful ...’

I SAT ON the elegant white sofa and sneezed. I was spending my first few nights in China with my friends Guy and Nancy. They had been living in Beijing for the last seven years running their luxury holiday company, Imperial Tours. Their ability to battle through China’s lunatic administrative and bureaucratic complexities while – usually – retaining a modicum of sanity themselves sent them spinning into their very own stratosphere of heroism, in my book at least.

My journey around China was likely to be a challenging one and it seemed wise to ease myself into the skirmish slowly. From the cool, unflappable white of Guy and Nancy’s apartment, I thought I could peer from the satisfyingly elevated twentieth-floor window and perhaps start my trip by just *looking* down at bedlam below.

Guy and Nancy knew the country well. They would be able to tell me where to go and how to get there. After years of inspecting hotels across the land in order to ascertain whether they would be up to the discerning standards of their clients, they knew which ones changed the bed linen more than once a month. They were not just familiar with the good restaurants in all the major cities, they could even tell me which dishes to order in each. They imparted vital pieces of information that as a newcomer I could never have dreamt of: I shouldn’t take the bottom bunk on the sleeper trains unless I wanted to share it with

a group of chain-smoking men and their noodles, because the bottom bed is used as a communal seat during the daytime. I must always negotiate my room price as the figure featured on the rate board in reception would be a vastly inflated sum displayed merely for the staff's entertainment. And I shouldn't allow a period of more than about ten minutes to pass without annihilating the battalion of murderous germs that would have taken up residence on my hands. They accompanied me to the chemist and insisted I bought several bottles of antibacterial hand-cleaning gel for those moments when soap and water wouldn't be available. Guy and Nancy seemed to have developed something of a hand-washing mania since they'd been living in Beijing, I noticed. I took it to be an ominous sign and hoped the bugs here didn't mutate at the same pace as everything else.

The problem was, one of them seemed to have set up house about my person already. I coughed and then I spluttered. The delicate white porcelain cup from which I sipped contained not a straw-coloured infusion of China's most sought-after jasmine, but a canary-yellow solution of Lemsip. With a remarkable show of feebleness, I had managed to arrive in China and instantly catch a cold. My lamentable descent into sickness at this early stage in the game didn't augur well for the weeks ahead.

Guy looked at me with a worried expression; whether this was concern for my well-being or fear that I might take up residence on his sofa for rather longer than he had anticipated, I couldn't tell. Then he had an idea.

'Some friends of ours go for a Chinese massage treatment when they get sick,' he said. 'It's called *gua sha*. Apparently they rub your back with a piece of cow horn.'

It sounded fairly kooky, to be frank, but the Lemsip didn't seem to be doing much to drive these potent oriental germs into retreat, and I was becoming desperate. A few nights from now, I was scheduled to take the sleeper train

out of Beijing to Datong. I really, really didn't want to have to negotiate the nocturnal railway system of China feeling under par. And while slightly bizarre, having my back rubbed with a piece of cow horn hardly sounded arduous. I eagerly agreed to give it a try and Guy and Nancy escorted me to a nearby clinic.

I was shown to a room tastefully decorated with silks and brocade wall hangings. A young girl who spoke no English brought me a tall glass of green tea and gestured that I should undress to the waist. I did as I was told, then lay face down on the bed. A man came in. He was sinewy and youthful but, as I was about to discover, his lean forearms harboured an eye-watering strength. The masseur grinned at me. He seemed a little bit nervous.

'Er ... is this your first time doing *gua sha*?' he asked tentatively in heavily accented English. He laughed anxiously. He had the demeanour of a person confronted with a difficult, potentially embarrassing situation. Something about him suggested that, perhaps, I oughtn't to be there.

'Yes,' I replied far too confidently.

'Aaahhh.' His grin now grew close to a fearful grimace. He clenched and stretched his muscular fingers, then clenched them again. He looked distinctly uncomfortable.

'Um,' he said, wincing. He bit his lip, then added, 'Might be a little bit painful.'

Deep within me, an uneasy suspicion started to stir. And then, before it could develop into fully fledged panic, the masseur rather cautiously picked up a brown, flat implement from the tray beside the bed and started to scrape at my back.

He didn't just scrape. He scrubbed and scoured, ground and gnawed at my back. He frayed and flayed it. With every agonizing stroke, he pressed the fine, sharp edge of the flat brown rectangle - which could have been cow horn but might just as easily have been plastic - hard into the skin of

my waist then, leaning heavily so that it dug deep into my tissues, dragged it up the length of my torso to my neck. The pain was excruciating.

Trying not to scream out loud, I clenched the towel that covered the bed between my teeth.

'You can cry if you want to,' said the masseur in a matter-of-fact tone, and scraped some more.

I have a couple of moles on my back. Each time the masseur hauled the tablet over them, I felt them catch sickeningly. The pressure he was exerting was such that I worried he might pull them off. But still he continued, like a painter-decorator hacking decades-old emulsion from a wall, or a scullery maid cleaning a particularly bothersome pan. Or a butcher skinning a carcass.

I considered crying - or at least letting out a bloodcurdling scream. But then the full absurdity of the situation struck me. I only had a measly cold. A couple more Lemsips should have done the job. But instead I was lying here half naked in a Beijing torture chamber - albeit one with pretty décor - enduring ludicrous levels of pain inflicted by a skinny man wielding a flat, brown slab of something. It was a ridiculous place to have come. And if this was the Chinese treatment for a cold, what would they do for pneumonia or pleurisy? Stretching on the rack? The iron maiden? Or would they just resort to the guillotine and be done with it?

I didn't cry. Instead, I started to laugh hysterically. For one blissful moment, the masseur stopped scraping in surprise. Then he, too, began to chuckle and then to roar with hilarity. He seemed to have a curious sense of humour.

Finally, after about twenty minutes, he stopped. 'OK, finished,' he said cheerfully. 'You get dressed now.'

He left the room. I rolled off the bed and staggered, slightly light-headed, over to the opposite wall where a gilt-framed mirror hung. I turned my back to the mirror and

twisted my head to find out what visible damage had been done.

I couldn't believe what I saw. My whole back was covered in angry, deep-red welts and bruises. From shoulders to waist was one swollen, purplish blotch. I looked like a burns victim. Or a survivor of a punishment beating. Or road kill. I was horrified. The skin of my back had been transformed in the space of twenty brutal minutes from perfectly ordinary flesh to the kind of gruesome, gory mess you'd hope only ever to see on a television hospital drama.

The strange thing was that my back didn't hurt. It looked appalling, and felt slightly tender to the touch, but there was no stiffness or pain. I dressed, then wandered, shaken, back to Guy and Nancy's apartment, and showed them the results.

'Oh my God,' said Guy, and immediately fetched his camera to take photos.

That night I felt no better - a little more battered, slightly elated in the way that you are when you've just survived a brush with death, but my wretched flu symptoms remained. The next morning, however, they had vanished entirely. That festering, lingering cold had been stopped in its tracks and had evaporated into the ether. I was no longer snuffling; I felt renewed, invigorated and full of energy. A few days later the bruising had entirely disappeared, too. It was really very impressive. I'd never had a cold extinguished like that before. Usually a cold has to run its own grisly, determined course: first there is that ominous, mild headache, then the sneezing and streaming is followed by aches and pains, and finally there's the seemingly interminable period of very inelegant congestion. But this cold progressed as far as the initial stages of aches and pains, then I had *gua sha* and - *poof!* - the cold vanished. It was amazing.

*Sha*, I later found out, is the Chinese term for the congestion of blood just under the body's surface. The word *gua* means to scrape. The idea of *gua sha* is to scrape the skin in a way that encourages stagnant blood to rise, thereby promoting healthy circulation. The red marks are tiny haemorrhages as the *sha* comes to the surface. Traditional Chinese medicine uses *gua sha* to cure everything from fever to infectious diseases and digestive complaints. Apparently, if there is no toxic blood, no red marks will appear. Clearly, I had been very sick indeed.

\* \* \*

Fully recovered, I felt sufficiently lively to abandon the sofa and begin my exploration of the frenzied China that ran amok beyond the safe haven of Guy and Nancy's flat. Given the Chinese fondness for riding bicycles, I had decided I'd venture into the fray of Beijing on two wheels.

Guy and I went out to purchase a bike: he said he needed one anyway so he'd buy the machine and I could borrow it for the afternoon.

During the past few years, Guy had already had two mountain bikes stolen in Beijing. This time, he said, he was going to buy a cheap heap of Chinese tin. At least that way he stood a chance of holding on to it.

Just along the street from Guy and Nancy's apartment, we found Mr Jia in a cramped shop, surrounded by old tyres and inner tubes. Outside on the pavement stood a sorry-looking line of bicycles. Mr Jia was a garrulous, ebullient man with a perfectly round face, tiny, sparkling black eyes, and barely perceptible eyebrows. He wore a bright red anorak that purported to be made by Timberland but probably wasn't.

Mr Jia had known a few modes of transport in his day. He used to work aboard an Italian passenger ship where he was the only Chinese, he told us in his jumbled, scarcely

comprehensible English, and then pealed with exuberant laughter. He had sailed to New York, Miami, Finland and England. His fuzzy little suggestions of eyebrows leapt about his forehead in jaunty animation as he related his adventures.

The shinier, brand-new bikes in the line, even Mr Jia cheerfully admitted, weren't really up to much. Yes, they were gleaming right now, but when required to muscle in against mopeds and jump red lights on the streets of Beijing they'd be about as much use as My Little Pony on the course at Aintree.

His faint eyebrows slouched sadly for a moment, then sprang jovially up towards his hairline, sending his forehead into tight, wrinkled pleats.

'But this one,' he declared exultantly, his tiny eyes almost bursting with glee, 'this one very good.'

He danced to the end of the line where, all alone, spurned by its gloating, spangling companions, a tired, red contraption mooched. It looked as though it might have liked to be a mountain bike, with its straight handlebars and knobbly tyres, but it hadn't been picked for the team. It was a creaking, geriatric old thing, its stand so insecure that it frequently tumbled to the ground. It was once, a very long time ago, manufactured by Giant, as revealed by the large, white letters on its bodywork. And then, in smaller italic print, the model: Hunter. It was hard to see what Hunter could have hunted. Even the most sluggish of hedgehogs would have had plenty of time to scamper to safety when it heard those wheels grating and spokes clattering in the distance.

Mr Jia nodded and grinned, then nodded some more. Hunter, he assured us in radiantly upbeat tones, was a fabulous bike. Yes, it had seen better days and the paintwork probably dated back to the Qing dynasty, but it was a solid, dependable machine. He nodded a little harder

as if to convince himself as well as us; his face, I noticed, was becoming quite pink from the exertion.

Guy and I glanced at Hunter and then at each other with doubtful expressions.

'Yes, well, I suppose it might do,' said Guy gloomily, his aspirations towards style and class crumbling away like Hunter's bodywork. 'It looks just like all the other Chinese bikes. At least nobody will steal it.'

He volunteered me to take it for a test ride. I wobbled off down the street. The gears didn't work, but Beijing is flat so that wasn't of great consequence. The brakes seemed functional. But the best feature of all was this bike's bell. When I pressed a button on the handlebars, a speaker blared at ear-splitting volume a whole repertoire of synthesized tunes: 'This Old Man', 'Clementine', 'Frère Jacques' and 'Happy Birthday'. While the notes beeped merrily, a red light on the handlebars flashed in time to the music.

The sound system clinched the deal. Guy handed over 260 yuan (at the time of my visit, there were about fourteen yuan to the pound) and, to the reassuring tones of 'Clementine' and much flashing of lights, I teetered off down the road to join my fellow ten million Beijing cyclists - and a few hundred thousand learner drivers.

Ten years ago, cars were used only by government officials. But that day, as Hunter and I set forth into the fray, there were around ten million privately owned cars in China. That Wednesday in Beijing alone, the authorities would have issued around two thousand licence plates for new vehicles. And for every one of them, there was a novice behind the wheel.

It could be on account of their lack of experience that the drivers of Beijing take little notice of traffic lights.

'Red, now red, hold on, I'm sure that colour means something,' they were perhaps thinking as they hurtled in an uncontrolled manner towards the junction. 'Now what

was it again? Oh yes, I was meant to stop, I think, now, erm, which pedal was the brake?’

But by that time, they’d already jumped the light. Meanwhile the seasoned drivers of Beijing, the ones who passed their tests six months earlier, were hissing through their teeth, ‘Bloody learner drivers,’ and, with confident blasts of the horn, squeezing past them on the inside. Throw into the mêlée a few million cyclists and the odd slow-moving tricycle cart which didn’t think technological advances such as traffic lights applied to them, and there was chaos on the streets.

At some junctions, traffic policemen stood about. Curiously, however, they didn’t actually do anything. You’d think that in a country where the government exercises such total control it would be easy for a policeman to command the traffic. If they can introduce the death penalty for a person who fails to declare that they are infected with SARS, surely they could find a good deterrent for jumping red lights. But fear and respect didn’t seem to extend to traffic policemen. At red lights the traffic flow thinned but never entirely stopped. Cars, buses, bicycles and mopeds all converged at junctions into one slow-flowing, horn-honking, bell-jangling cacophony.

In the end, though, riding a bicycle through the streets of Beijing wasn’t quite as scary as it looked. The bedlam was much relieved by the fact that the main roads all had wide bicycle avenues running down each side. The pace was leisurely: millions of Beijingers pedalled unhurriedly along their way, travelling to and from work and running errands. It was almost peaceful, pottering among them, caught in the gentle flow of the city bustling about its business. Old men on tricycles drew carts to transport their wares. Children returning from school rode shinier bikes with more knobbly tyres that were almost, but not quite, mountain bikes. Women in office garb and shiny black-patent shoes remained serene and impervious to the horn-

blasting, fuel-belching chaos. Somehow, their clothes remained perfectly clean amid the black of Beijing's streets.

My trousers, on the other hand, were within minutes splattered with a dark, unsightly gunge. Still, I was feeling moderately pleased with myself. First, neither Hunter nor I had yet met our demise under the wheels of a Beijing novice driver. Second, I had, with un-customary navigational success, managed to find my way along Gulou Dongdajie and had dived left into a tiny narrow alley that led to Houhai Lake, my destination for the afternoon. This was one of Beijing's famous hutongs, the maze of narrow alleyways and walled courtyards that were first built after Genghis Khan galloped into the city at the beginning of the thirteenth century and reduced it to rubble.

Despite the rather different onslaught of Beijing's cleaning, greening machine, some hutongs stay standing. They're vibrant little back streets full of clattering bicycles, the occasional crawling car that doesn't really fit, and children in their uniform tracksuits skipping home from school. The low-rise buildings are constructed of grey brick which against the grey tarmac and grey Beijing sky gives something of a monotone look, but the tiny shops on the corners, the sun that occasionally breaks through to cast a dappled light under the trees, and the endless human chatter gives plenty of life to these busy little streets.

I wiggled through the lanes and arrived on the shores of the lake, where couples strolled and tourists snapped photos in the twilight. The lights from the bars and restaurants on the opposite bank twinkled over the water that rippled silvery blue and deep yellow in the fading light; willow trees bowed and stooped.

With the sun low, I started to head back towards Guy and Nancy's flat. Rows of red lanterns were strung from the façades of the restaurants that flanked the main road. People sat on the pavement eating and chatting. Streetside

shops sold snacks and drinks. The hordes of bicycles and tooting cars were making their way home for dinner now through the roads lined with newly planted trees, grass and flowers.

Then, quite suddenly, it was dark and the streets no longer looked the same. I looked at my map; I squinted at the street signs. They didn't seem to bear any relation to one another. I stopped at a kiosk and tried out my first-ever phrase of real-life Chinese - that is, spoken outside a classroom.

*'Wo zai nar?'* I asked the kiosk man - where am I? - and shrugged bewildered at the map. Remarkably, he seemed to understand. I had assumed that, despite all my efforts, my mangled tones would ensure that my simple attempt to ask directions would end up meaning something entirely different, for a simple error in timbre can alter the meaning of a Chinese word entirely. Quite feasibly, one could hope to ask for directions home but in reality say something along the lines of 'My uncle is an aardvark'.

The kiosk man didn't so much as smirk. With earnest politeness, he sent me down a road to the right; the next person told me to turn left, the next said I needed to go straight on. I had no idea where I was. The streets were packed full of jammed up cars and bicycles with no lights - including my own. Hunter clearly favoured stealth above 'be safe, be seen'.

In the end, I gave up and phoned Guy. I tried to describe where I was - there were lots of people, lots of cars, lots of bicycles with no lights ...

'Is there anyone standing next to you?' he asked. I had a couple of million Beijingers to choose from.

'Just pass the phone to one of them,' said Guy.

I chose a tiny, gnarled, dark-skinned man in blue overalls who was frying pancakes on a makeshift roadside stall.