

### 3 – JIAYUGUAN AND DUNHUANG



Friday, 5 May continued

Despite the discomfort and dirt in the carriage, I had good company. A man in his fifties and a young couple joined me, and we had quite a long conversation in simple Chinese. I produced my photos of home, which fascinated them, and answered their questions as best as I could. Of great interest to them were the prices of things in Ireland; fortunately I was able to convert them into the local currency and give them a rough idea of how much we paid for certain products.

Later the conversation petered out when we tried to snatch some sleep. This was far from easy, for most of the people in the carriage remained awake and talked loudly. At one stage there was a long and noisy argument between two young women and some members of the staff. The carriage attendants were not at all helpful; they constantly talked and woke people as they swept the floor and wheeled trolleys of soft drinks in and out. Most of the passengers had hacking coughs and the men all smoked. Because of this, the air in the carriage was foul. This journey was certainly an introduction to the real China.

Putting aside any hope of sleep, I took out my diary (which had got way behind) and began writing. By about 7 a.m. I had brought it almost up to date.

Saturday, 6 May

After I had finished writing, I got up and put my diary away, knocking down my camera bag by accident as I did so. Just as I was about to go to the restaurant car, I met a lad who did not look entirely like a typical Chinese person, but spoke Chinese well. It turned out that he was a member of the minority Uighur ethnic group. He lived in Kashgar – my ultimate destination, near the border with Pakistan, at the end of my Silk Road journey. I took out my notebook, sat with him on the floor, and received an impromptu lesson in the Uighur language from him. When I wrote down the phrases, I realized that many of them bore strong resemblances to similar phrases in Turkish, some of which I had learned before my trip. The lad had never heard of Turkey and was quite puzzled when I produced my Turkish phrase book. A look of utter astonishment spread over his face when I counted from one to ten in Turkish, for most of the numbers were similar to the ones used in the Uighur language. (These similarities, in fact, pertain to most of the local languages stretching across Central Asia from Mongolia to Turkey.)

In the meantime, we stopped at Wuwei, and the young couple who had been sitting opposite me on the train got out. The young lady, although married, had kept looking straight into my eyes and smiling at me when we had been sitting together.

When Rita and I had boarded yesterday evening and were trying to find seats in the hard sleeper compartment, a really gorgeous-looking girl had flashed me a wonderful smile that had left me momentarily stunned. While I now sat on the floor showing my Kashgari friend and some other grubby-looking characters the photographs of my home, this girl appeared again and I invited her to have a look. She then indicated that I should join her. I accepted her kind invitation and we walked to her carriage. In true Chinese style, she insisted that I go first.

We soon reached the familiar and much more civilized hard berth compartment. Here I could sense that the people were much more civilized. We sat down opposite each other, beside a business man and an elderly lady and, as my pretty companion could hardly speak a word of English, a limited conversation followed. Fortunately she was able to follow my faulty Chinese and make some sense of it for the others. Soon everybody was crowding around in order to see my photographs. The elderly lady sitting beside me seemed fascinated by everything – including my battered old watch. A child gave me something resembling sweet popcorn to eat and the lady offered me nuts. All in all, they made a great fuss of me and plied me with many questions, very few of which I managed to understand; unfortunately we did not have the man who spoke good English with us. The girl did her best to help me; she was only eighteen and had just finished her

secondary education. She told me that her boyfriend was a soldier. She showed me some photographs of her family and opened a tin of pears for me to share with her.



*Girl on the train to Jiayuguan*

I then excused myself, fetched my camera and brought it back to photograph her. Unfortunately I now discovered that my wide-angle zoom lens was now broken and could not be used – it must have broken when the case had fallen down earlier. However, using my other lens, I managed to photograph her.

At 11.30 she invited me to have lunch with her in the restaurant car. The food was basic and I paid for most of it: ¥10. As soon as we had finished eating, we returned to the carriage and sleepiness overtook me. At first I dozed sitting up, then fell asleep curled up. Later, when I woke, somebody indicated a free top bunk bed and I clambered up to it. As it was pleasantly warm, I managed to have a good rest, despite the noise of the people below and the blaring radio, which was now broadcasting a programme featuring two popular comedians. I did not mind being up here as the scenery outside had by now become very bleak and uninteresting.

Later I clambered down, spruced myself up and bought a box of food from the trolley, which I demolished while sitting beside the girl. The business man now admired my beard. While the girl leafed through my Chinese phrase book, I looked at two trendy magazines belonging to her. The magazines contained love stories, and the illustrations depicted girls with their boyfriends or in various states of undress, mostly in their bedrooms. One even depicted a topless girl – very surprising, I thought. It seemed that the young girls here were very romantic; somebody had told me that the girls here are intent on getting married, but that the boys are now looking for more freedom.

I finally said goodbye to my companions and returned to my hard seat compartment, carefully avoiding the Kashgari lad, who was now quite drunk. I packed away my things and went next door to speak to Rita and the Chinese man who spoke good English.

We finally arrived at Jiayuguan at about 6.40 p.m. – later than expected. I quickly said goodbye to the Kashgari lad, then walked to the hotel minibus with Rita and the lovely girl from the hard sleeper compartment. We all squeezed into the minibus, but the girl said goodbye and left before we reached the hotel. Despite our limited communication, I had enjoyed her company as she had been so friendly and helpful.

Although a large, modern city, Jiayuguan seemed to be very lifeless and quiet. I was in no mood for exploring it now – all I wanted to do was go to the hotel and lie down. I thought that I would only have to pay ¥8 for accommodation in a room with four beds, but discovered that I would have to pay ¥64 for two nights if I wanted to be alone. The room that I was shown into was very basic: it had no washbasin, no shower nearby, and no hot water in the men's bathroom across the way. I was rather annoyed by all this, but decided that I would have to make the best of it. A young lady brought me flask of lukewarm water for tea. I tidied myself up, made myself a cup of tea, took a couple of tablets for my cold, and repaired to bed very early with my diary.

Sunday, 7 May

I slept very well through the night and found it quite difficult to wake up this morning. I finally managed to drag myself out of the bed and went down for breakfast at eight with Rita. We were given a set breakfast at ¥10 each, which we both thought was too expensive.

Afterwards we went across the road to book tomorrow morning's bus ride to Dunhuang and the famous Mogao Caves (Buddhist grottoes) at an oasis nearby. This turned out to be a relatively simple business, and the fare cost just ¥12.50 FEC. We then attempted to get transport to the nearby fort of Jiayuguan. We enquired about hiring bicycles, but discovered that no ladies' bikes were available. In the end we set off in a regular minibus at ten o'clock. It only took about five minutes to get to the well-known fort, which was just outside the city in the bleak desert landscape.

This well-preserved and impressive brick structure was the last frontier fortress at the western end of the Great Wall, through which many disgraced officials who had been banished from China departed to the west, often never to return to their homeland. They would enter the fort through the east gate and leave from the western one into the desert beyond. The Great Wall joined the fort at the north and south walls. The structure is believed to have been built in around 1372, in the Ming Dynasty.



*Fort at Jiayuguan*

We had plenty of time to see the fort, as our bus was not due to leave until midday. Although there was relatively little to see, I found it fascinating to wander around inside the building and then on the walls above, looking down at the dry, inhospitable landscape that stretched away as far as the eye could see. Quite a lot of people, mostly Chinese, were here and workmen were busy restoring some small buildings within the large complex.

Having walked around every part that was accessible, I took some photographs using my close-up lens, then wandered out of the place, past the camels for the tourists, to the remains of the Great Wall. I skirted a small lake and stopped to photograph the fort from a distance. I then retraced my steps, rejoined Rita, and together we ambled back to the entrance, where we caught the bus back to the city. The fare was just ¥1 each; earlier a taxi driver had offered to drive us back for ¥10.

Back at our hotel we made for the dining room, where we had an excellent lunch for just ¥10: four starters, about four main dishes, rice, soup, and either beer or orange juice. I drank orange juice and Rita asked for tea.

Afterwards we spruced ourselves up and then made enquiries as how we might get to the Great Wall or else the city of Jiuquan. A bus ride would bring us to Jiuquan, but it seemed that there was little of interest there. Seeing the Great Wall would be more difficult and expensive, as there was no bus. However, as luck would have it, we met some Germans who told us that they would be going there later by jeep and invited us to join them. They explained that they had set off from Dunhuang at 5.30 this morning and that their driver was resting. I bought some postcards and wrote one or two until it was time for us to go. We clambered aboard the jeep, but the driver was wary of taking us as there were now too many people in the vehicle and he was afraid of being stopped by the authorities. As I had seen



the Great Wall twice before, I hopped off and let Rita go. I then returned to my postcards and wrote some more.

Later I walked to the post office, where I bought stamps and posted the cards. On my way back to the hotel, I crossed a road and was greeted in English by a Chinese man, who told me that he was an English teacher in a local school. It turned out that he could speak the language excellently but his comprehension was very poor. Whenever I asked him a question, he looked blankly at me and continued prattling on about himself and his work.

Back in the hotel I pottered about until 6.30, when it was time to eat. I joined Rita and, on our way to the dining room, bumped into the German and Dutch lads whom I had met in Lanzhou. I invited them to share my room, which suited us all. Rita and I then sat down to another excellent meal, and the lads joined us later to drink some beer and chat. As the waitress had forgotten to ask Rita for the ¥15 (the price of her meal), Rita paid me ¥7 later!

I then managed to have a hot shower. Afterwards, I returned to writing my diary while my companions were outside fixing their motorbike. I finally brought my diary up to date, prepared for tomorrow's journey, and was then joined by the lads. I went to bed shortly afterwards.



Monday, 8 May

Up at 6.40 this morning when it was still dark. I washed quickly, threw on my clothes, grabbed my luggage, and ran downstairs to join Rita in the lobby. Together we set off for the bus station, stopping now and then to ask the way. Because of the distance and the weight of our luggage, it took us quite some time to get there. When we finally arrived, we were joined by a tall and bearded American chap wearing an overcoat and cap who, I quickly

discovered, spoke good Chinese. He kindly brought us to the bus, where our luggage was weighed. Having paid ¥1 for the transport of our bags, we walked up a staircase to a platform over the bus and placed them on the luggage rack on the roof.

We then clambered aboard the grubby bus; as several of the windows were open, it was bitterly cold inside. As we sped out of the city, I spoke to the American lad briefly, then lapsed into silence. When dawn broke, I gazed out of the window at the bleak and inhospitable scenery: endless stretches of sand, rock, sparse vegetation and, occasionally in the distance, crazy mountains. At intervals we passed ruined and eroded beacon towers, now distorted into unrecognizable shapes. The fortress of Jiayuguan was certainly the last outpost of Chinese civilization, for already I felt that we had entered a different country.



*Near Anxi*

Despite the almost unrelieved bleakness, there was a certain amount of variety in the scenery, for occasionally an oasis would appear and trees could be discerned in the distance. We stopped briefly in a small town to relieve ourselves and I photographed a tree-lined road down which local people

were strolling or riding in donkey carts. Apart from a few bicycles and an occasional modern vehicle, the scene looked timeless. Anything Chinese here looked like an intrusion.

We moved off again – the driver was quite impatient – and drove through more stark landscape until we reached the small but bustling town of Anxi. This was where we would have our lunch; we were given half an hour to eat. We stopped in the main street, along which the local people had set up food stalls. Our American companion kindly advised us what to eat and what not to eat. I chose some slightly sweet fried dumplings and then some large, flat savoury dumplings, both of which were quite tasty. Afterwards, I climbed to the top of the bus, where I managed to get at my rucksack. I quickly spruced myself up and took out another film for my camera. I then clambered aboard the bus and we were off again.

We now drove across another empty landscape and skirted some low mountains. As there were less people on the bus by now, the three of us had chosen individual seats and I found myself beside a Chinese lad. All of a sudden he clapped his hands for attention, spread his jacket over his knees and began performing the three-card trick with a great deal of showmanship and fast talking. I guessed that another lad was in league with him; this became apparent when he bit the crucial card when the trickster was not looking and signalled to another man to say nothing. The object was to get the man to gamble, but he was not at all interested. The game went on for some time, with frequent heated arguments, but it eventually fizzled out and all the participants fell asleep. At least it put in the time!

We finally arrived at an oasis that looked bigger than usual and found ourselves driving down a long, tree-lined road with curious little brick houses here and there. These dwellings, which looked quite primitive, were the same colour as the earth. When we passed a small airport, I realized that we had arrived in Dunhuang. We then turned a corner and suddenly the bland architecture of a typical Chinese town greeted us. The bus stopped briefly and Rita demanded to get off, shouting, 'Dish ish de Dunhuang Hotel!' in her heavy Dutch accent. There was no stopping this strong-willed lady. Once again I had to clamber up to the top of the bus and extricate our two rucksacks, which our American companion helped us get down.

We then walked to the front of the hotel and entered the very posh modern foyer, complete with a gimmicky fountain and all mod cons. Glasses of tea were handed to us at the reception desk and Rita, despite the very high price, checked in. The American lad and I decided to scout around and see what else was available.

We walked up the main street; by Chinese standards this was a very small town, yet it was quite busy and noisy. We noticed that donkey carts formed a large part of the traffic, along with old rusty buses, cars, trucks, and



bicycles. We saw some tourist shops and a few tourists walking around. After a roundabout I spotted a Chinese hotel that my companion had not noticed. Although it looked very basic and lacking in comfort, we managed to get a neat little double room for just ¥7 each, a saving of about ¥20 perhaps.

As there were no showers here, we spruced ourselves up as best we could and headed off down the road, stopping at other hotels to see how much they charged for a room. They were quite expensive and Gordon, my companion, put on a great show of being profoundly shocked. Because he had been living in China for a year, studying oil painting in Xi'an, he knew how to deal with the Chinese people. Already I was learning from him.

After our tour around the hotels, we came to the bus station and sat down at a little eatery outside and ordered some beer. Gordon opened his bottle, tasted it, and declared that it was not beer. I tasted it and, liking it, decided to drink it. We chatted to the people in charge, who were very good humoured, inspected the little hotel that they ran (where beds were to be had for only ¥3), and then talked among ourselves. I found Gordon to be a most interesting person: he was a deep thinker and had many interesting theories on all sorts of things. The more he drank, the more he talked.

We ordered some food – dumplings with vegetables – but had to wait a long time until they were cooked. We had decided to hire bicycles and head out to the famous sand dunes nearby, but time was ticking by. At last our meal arrived: it was basic and very cheap. I drank some tea afterwards and we relaxed, though still deep in conversation. We decided that we liked this easy-going place in the middle of nowhere.

Later we went off for a walk and to look at the shops. Near the roundabout was a large department store with tables and chairs outside for drinking and dining. Gordon sat down on one of the chairs and I went into the shop to buy four cassette tapes of local folk music, for a colleague of mine had encouraged me to present a radio programme of Chinese music when I returned home. Outside again, I joined Gordon, who now introduced me to a most unusual bespectacled character who did not look Chinese at all. He had a great shock of red hair, a long red beard, and pale skin that was burnt from the sun. He wore a smart jacket with a handkerchief in the breast pocket, a waistcoat, and an open-necked shirt. He carried a very fancy cane that featured a vibrating gadget that could be used for massaging, a light, and a button that switched on a bleeper. His manners were impeccable and he was able to speak a few words of English. Despite his Celtic appearance, he told us that he was a Uighur from Ürümqi in Xinjiang province. For all his eccentricities, he seemed to be quite a pleasant person. He was obviously a well-known character here and something of an entrepreneur: a money changer, a business man, and a general factotum. I said a few words to him in his language; he was delighted and taught me a few more. I had read

about the Celtic people in this region. Although Celts once lived in Galatia in central Anatolia, Turkey, a theory suggests that the Central Asian Celts might be descendants of captured members of the army that marched east under Alexander the Great in the fourth century B.C.

When the Celtic man left us, we were joined by an interesting Australian chap who worked here. We discussed many topics such as Chinese women who, we all agreed, were quite special. They appeared to be very dependable and honest. It seemed that many young women married because of pressure to do so, and often married men who treated them deplorably. During our discussion, Gordon drank beer and ate hot kebabs that were being cooked over flames in front of us. I just sipped some orange juice as I was feeling just a little tipsy after the beer I had drunk earlier. It was wonderful to relax, sit here, and listen to the interesting conversation. I now found myself becoming more aware of everything around me and, instead of criticizing everything, beginning to appreciate my surroundings – despite the poor quality of most things. My conversations with Gordon had been quite enlightening.

Although we talked about going to a disco, we stayed put and continued talking. When it turned cool, we made a move and returned to our hotel just before it closed for the night. It had been a most interesting day.

Tuesday, 9 May

After a good night's sleep, I woke at 7.45 this morning – too late to catch the eight o'clock bus to the Mogao Caves. As Gordon remained fast asleep after drinking so much beer last night, I got up quietly, washed and left. I was surprised to discover the town still dead at this late hour of the morning. I walked to the bus station and asked about the next bus to Mogao, which would be at 1.30 p.m. I then went in search of a bicycle that I could hire, but could find nothing.



*Outside Dunhuang*

At a loss to know what to do next, I walked down the main street and out of the town, heading towards the airport. I now found myself out in the countryside. I thought that I might try hitching a lift to Mogao, though I was sure that not many vehicles would be heading that way. I walked along the tree-lined road for a while, then took a turn to the right. By now I was in the heart of the countryside, surrounded by fields, and passing interesting rural dwellings that featured strangely-constructed chimneys. The local people – some of them toiling in the fields, others in donkey carts – gazed at me in curiosity. It was obvious that few tourists ventured out here. I noticed that it was the women who were working in the fields: most of them had their faces and heads well covered. I wondered if this was to protect them from the sun and dust or because they were Muslims.



*House outside Dunhuang*

As I walked along the dirt track, two Chinese lads overtook me. They greeted me and one of them invited me to his house. I accepted his kind offer and was led into a small courtyard. I was introduced to his mother and

brought into a smart, clean room that served both as a bedroom and sitting room. A washing machine stood in one corner. Judging by my surroundings, these people seemed to be fairly well off. The décor was colourful and posters, most of which depicted pretty girls, had been hung on the walls. I was invited to sit down and tea was brought to me. The lad now introduced me to his younger brother and I was shown photographs of various members of the family in Kashgar and other parts of Xinjiang province. Conversation was limited, for these people spoke with a local accent, which made it difficult for me to understand them. However, they managed to understand me. I took some photos, stayed a little while longer and, when I felt that I had been with them long enough, excused myself, thanked them all and left. It had been a very pleasant interlude.

I continued along the road, passed an old lady who did not seem to approve of my presence here at all, and came to a crossroads. I guessed that if I turned right and right again, I would arrive back in the town. I asked a man on a bicycle and he confirmed this by drawing a map on the road.

Off I went again, stopping briefly to take a photo. A man in a little motorized pedicab passed me, returned, and offered me a lift. As he did not want any money, I hopped into the back and off we drove, bumping along the road. In no time I was back at the bus station. I thanked the man and got out. Hungry by now, having eaten no breakfast, I tried to find lunch somewhere, but discovered that all the restaurants were empty, which was very odd. I tried the dining room of a hotel, but could not read the Chinese menu. I eventually ended up in a tiny place where I ate a big bowl of noodles in very watery soup, and drank a bottle of orangeade. Outside again, I ate a couple of sweet dumplings at a little food stall near the bus station. Fed and happy, I returned to the hotel, where I tidied myself up and made ready for the journey to the Mogao Caves. Gordon had left a note on my rucksack explaining that the police had objected to us staying in the cheaper hotel we had found yesterday evening. I therefore paid for another night before I left.

I then met Gordon and together we walked to the bus station and boarded the bus bound for Mogao at 1.30; however, in true Chinese fashion, it did not leave until 2.00 p.m. Off we bumped towards the airport, but turned right and headed for the desert. On we went until we approached some low, sandy-coloured mountains. These we skirted until the caves, familiar to us from photographs, came into sight on our right. Although trees now lined the road, they could not have been in a bleaker spot.

Unsurprisingly, the place was a real tourist trap, with a large parking area for coaches, souvenir shops, and a ticket office. We had to pay ¥10 FEC for a ticket, although it was apparent that the Chinese people only paid ¥2 RMB. Gordon was quite annoyed about this, especially as his student card did not entitle him to any discount. At the entrance we had to surrender our



cameras and bags, then Gordon could not find his ticket. By the time we finally got in, the group of people we had arrived with had gone on ahead and disappeared. As all the doors into the caves were locked, we had to latch on to the next tour group. Gordon was furious at this system of locking up all the caves and cursed aloud, much to the Chinese tourists' amusement. Naturally, when we entered the first cave, we could not understand the commentary, though this did not bother me too much as I was delighted to be here at last and to enjoy examining this first painted grotto.



*The Mogao Caves near Dunhuang*

We entered a couple of the grottoes with this Chinese group, then found a group of French tourists. As their Chinese guide was translating the commentary into slow French, we were able to understand it quite easily. One of the party, obviously the leader, spoke English well and was able to translate again whenever necessary. The whole experience of seeing these caves for real was really fascinating. The paintings and statues were in amazing condition despite their great age: most of them dated from the Tang dynasty, though there were many examples from the fourth to the thirteenth centuries A.D. Not only did we see various grottoes but also a reclining and two huge upright Buddhas.

These caves were one of the great sites – and archaeological discovery stories – of the East. They were the first known Buddhist temples in the Chinese Empire. Begun in A.D. 366 by the monk Luo Zun, they were a crucial centre of the Silk Road's culture for over a millennium. However, when new trading links turned central China towards different directions, Mogao and Dunhuang became increasingly provincial, and the caves were eventually sealed and abandoned.

In 1900, a wandering monk named Wang Yuan Lu stumbled across them. Realizing their significance, he made it his life's work to restore and beautify



the site, excavating the caves that were full of sand and touching up the murals. During the restoration work he discovered a bricked-up hidden chamber that contained a huge collection of manuscripts, sutras, and silk and paper paintings – some of them a thousand years old and virtually undamaged. The authorities in Dunhuang took many of these treasures for themselves and suggested moving the rest to Lanzhou. However, as this proved to be too expensive, they were sealed up again.

Seven years later, the Central Asian explorer and scholar Auriel Stein (a Hungarian working for the British and Indian Survey) appeared on the scene. He persuaded Wang to reopen the chamber and was astonished by what he found. Having examined the contents, Stein gave Wang £130 for his restoration fund and left with about 700 manuscripts and 500 paintings. Later in the year Paul Pelliot, a French man, negotiated a similar deal and sent 6,000 manuscripts and many paintings back to Paris. Naturally the Chinese authorities in Beijing were very annoyed when they discovered what had happened. Although the removal of these precious items should never have happened in this manner, it can be argued that if they had remained in China, they may have been destroyed by fanatics or the Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution.

As the French guide had kindly offered us a lift back to Dunhuang in their coach, we had an extra half hour and did not have to rush off for the public bus. This turned out to be a most interesting visit; I was expecting it to be a little tedious as I had already seen so much Buddhist art.

Travelling back in the comfortable coach, I suddenly felt quite out of place among my fellow Europeans, most of whom were dressed in typical tourist garb. Their mannerisms, so different from those of the Chinese people's, now looked very strange indeed, now that I was so accustomed to the ways of the locals here. For the first time in ages I caught a whiff of perfume. The familiar routine of an organized tourist group now struck me as being very artificial and I was glad to hop off the bus at our street and step back into 'normality'. I explained my reactions to Gordon and he understood my feelings.

We now walked to our hotel, where we managed to hire a couple of heavy bicycles and set off for the famous Mingsha sand dunes just south of the town. The ride was pleasant enough, though one of the pedals on my bike was slightly broken.

After a little less than half an hour we reached the high dunes. I hopped off the bike to take a photograph and a local lad showed me where to put my bike and how to lock it. He then told me that I would have to pay ¥2 in order to climb up the dune. I took my photograph and then, when Gordon discovered that we would have to pay, he got back on his bike and cycled off. He thought it absolutely ludicrous having to pay to climb up a dune that

belonged to nobody. I joined him and we stopped at a sandy path between some fields. When Gordon went off to ask directions, I followed him and we found our way back, bypassing the ticket office. We parked the bikes, clambered through a hopelessly inadequate barbed wire fence without any difficulty and began to climb a slippery sandy dune. I followed local custom and did it barefoot. It was very tough going, especially when the incline became more acute – even Gordon, a big, strong fellow, found it hard to manage. Finally, with lots of encouragement from local people selling bottles of orangeade, we made it to the top and sat down, panting, to admire the surrounding dramatic scenery: the sand dunes stretching away in one direction and flat land with the oasis and town in the other. It was quite spectacular and worth all the trouble. Just behind the dune was the much advertised 'Crescent Moon Lake', a little of which we could just about see. We did not bother to clamber any farther in order to see it properly. The local people kept pestering us with their bottles of orangeade until we finally gave in and bought a couple at inflated prices. Afterwards they began to pester us to change money. A gust of wind then blew up and suddenly we found ourselves engulfed in a mini sandstorm. We slid down quickly, jumped on our bicycles and set off for the town. By now I was quite tired and hungry, and found the heavy bicycle quite hard to push. We finally made it back and returned the bikes. Although we both felt filthy dirty, we walked down the road to our local eatery, where we drank some beer and ate some *jiaozi* (dumplings). They were quite tasty, though I could have done with a bigger meal.

Here we had another interesting conversation – this time about literature – then wandered down to the roundabout, where we met the red-haired dandy. We sat down with him and I drank some tea and tried some of the kebabs, which were a little too hot and spicy for my liking. We were then joined by two lads who were rather drunk, one of whom was Uighur. The other fellow, who was Chinese, practised *qi gong* and told us about spectacular tricks using swords, knives, and so forth. He demonstrated his skill by breaking a brick twice with a dry glass, without breaking the glass. It was quite astonishing.

We stayed chatting until about midnight, then returned to our hotel. This evening's experience had opened my eyes to a few more interesting and unusual aspects of China.