



On the Road in Shangri-La

An Experience Essay in China

I often look north and have long been wondering what might be possible.

Hong Kong has been my home for many years. Despite it no longer justifying the name “The Pearl of the Orient”, it is a place I love – a vibrant city full of can-do people who have managed to preserve three quarters of their mountainous territory as country parks that are lush blue and green. But there is one way in which Hong Kong and I are completely incompatible: it is one of the world’s worst places for anyone who loves driving on an open road. Hong Kong’s roads are short or congested or both.

So, I have been looking north full of yearning, and earlier this year I finally acquired a mainland China driving licence (without which driving there is not permitted). Then I met up with Shanghainese friends in the summer and discovered that they, too, loved driving. So we hastily agreed to set off on a 2000+ mile driving journey in Sichuan and Yunnan, two of China’s provinces that border on Tibet and are the home of the fabled Shangri-La.

I wish I had the space to tell you about the entire, magical journey, but let me relive just one of the nine days. We had it all worked out. We would spend that morning not driving, but hiking from Kangding (a city 200 miles west of Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan) up to a pasture from which we would enjoy a clear view of Sichuan’s highest mountain, the Gonggashan. When I turned off the light the night before, there should have been darkness, but instead my vision was filled with the splendour of the first snow-capped peaks that I would see in the Tibetan highlands.

What a let-down it was to wake up to a dreary grey sky. Now what do we do? Should we still go hiking? The inn manager, a friendly chap who served us a brandy that tasted remarkably like schnapps the evening before, can’t help but listen in on our conversation for a while and suggests that “If you want to see Gonggashan, drive to a near-by look-out!”

“How far is it to this look-out?” I ask.

“About five miles. I show you. Don’t worry!”, he replies cheerily.

It is 7am and close to freezing and all six of us pile into our hire car, a hapless Mitsubishi rental. I turn the key in the ignition and for a while it refuses to come to life. At last, it begins to tick over, but it shakes and rattles in grouching protest.

Four kilometres down the road, the inn manager indicates a turn off the paved road - a winding, gradually rising dirt track with potholes a foot deep. For the first time I am wishing that our SUV not only looked like a cool off-road vehicle, but actually behaved like one: in fact, it lacks both four-wheel drive, has no low gears and is panting merely at the sight of the mountains. Before pressing on, I check whether it is still dripping coolant from its piping, as it did yesterday when we were climbing to 15,000 feet. It seems not.



“How much further?” I want to know before continuing up hill.

“One mile”, comes the reply.

“Does it continue like this?”

“Yep! No problem!”

Even though I proceed gingerly – at no more than 1.5 – 2 miles per hour – the heads and bodies of my passengers bob up and down and swing right and left, following the trajectory of the wobbly path. Before long the track becomes narrower and, more ominously, wetter.

Our car keeps going valiantly past one obstacle or another and my confidence buoys. I begin to think we might just make it when I misjudge the track ahead as being merely wet when in fact it is a swamp. Within seconds the hind quarters of our long-suffering conveyance are spinning and digging themselves two snug holes. I try to rock my way out of the predicament, forward and backward half a foot each, but it makes matters worse: we only sink deeper. Then the engine stalls with a “phew!” and a shake that seems to say, “Not in my wildest dreams am I going where you guys want me to go.”

With beads of sweat on my forehead and our car, thereafter known as ‘Not in your Dreams’, sitting there sulking, I feel a desperate need to state the incredibly obvious, “We’re stuck”. I take comfort from the fact that my passengers all concur.

What we need is ingenuity. Sadly, all we have is a shovel. I feel I should take the lead since I got us all into this mess. And so I go to work while my companions light cigarettes and begin to discuss the situation. After exactly thirty seconds of shovelling, and having dislodged about 20 cubic inches of dirt, I run out of breath and my muscles flag. I have forgotten we are at 12,000+ feet.

In this part of the world, a suburban SUV stuck in the mud with one feisty woman and five urban alpha males holding a meeting, cigarettes glowing and mobile phones ringing, tends to draw attention. Sure enough, before we know it a Tibetan farmer appears, shaking his head. He introduces himself as Wang Dui. His face is dark brown and young looking, but rough. His hair is long and thick and has never seen a comb. His eyes are unfathomable. How will he react? Are we trespassing? After an exchange of a few words, it seems not for he takes complete command of the situation. A shout summons a neighbour who is sent to organise a tractor while he takes the shovel on which I am leaning and begins to build, within thirty minutes, what to us looks like a perfect highway immaculately laid with locally obtained thin tiles. And he hasn’t even work up a sweat, let alone run out of breath!

Meanwhile the tractor has arrived, a steel cable is attached to the tow hook of our wallowing car, and I am installed in the driver seat again – feeling for once totally out of place. The neighbour makes the tractor pull while Wang Dui and the members of my staff push and, within a few seconds, our beleaguered vehicle pops out of the marsh. [photo] We all, ‘Not in my Dreams’ included, share a deep feeling of relief and gratitude to Wang Dui.



To celebrate the rescue and to thank his neighbour for his help, Wang Dui invites us to his house for tea. But, as if that is not enough and knowing that we came to see Gonggashan, he offers to take us on foot to where we attempted to go by car: the point from which we could possibly behold this beautiful snow-capped mountain. The sun is beginning to peak through the cloud cover and we gladly accept his offer. An uphill path leads us to a lookout and a temple surrounded by colourful Tibetan prayer flags, fluttering in the breeze. [photo]

We all sit on the most grass and gaze reverently in the direction of Gonggashan but all we see are alluring, dancing clouds. However, we do not leave disappointed. The sun warms our bodies and the view into the valley is magnificent – a smattering of tan Tibetan houses set, dreamlike, among white-green wheat fields and jade hedges. [photo] Wang Dui points out the one that is his, and we get up and follow him downhill.

I have never seen a Tibetan house close-up. From the distance it looked like a crude bunker, but nothing could be further from the truth. Its four walls, made of large, rectangular bricks offset against each other, are tilted slightly inward for added strength. In each of the four corners, the joins are designed and built with great precision. And set into the walls are massive, yet delicately-designed wooden window frames. The roof is made of weathered slate. It has an air of eternal permanence. The yaks that graze nearby – black, sturdy, and furry – and the weather-beaten faces of Wang Dui's neighbours tell me that I am entering a most unfamiliar place. [photo]

My sense of unease returns. Perhaps it is because I feel, despite the invitation, that I am a trespasser. Wang Dui, smiling in welcome, pushes open the gate of the compound that surrounds his house. In an instant two piglets come racing, almost flying, toward us. They skid around us in a thousand twirling circles, shrieking all the while. It is here, on the ground floor of the house, that Wang Dui's livestock make their home. In the twilight of grey sky and dark dwelling that reigns in these quarters, we keep walking toward a stocky wooden ladder that leads to Wang Dui's living space. From the hole in the ceiling through which the ladder rises drips the warmth of lived-in spaces; mixed into the smell are darkness and mustiness. This is unlike any home I've ever been to and I am ill at ease. And yet, as I emerge from climbing the ladder, I spot two bright beacons of happiness behind a wooden beam, the radiant faces of two girls: faces ruddy, teeth white and gleaming, jackets in blue denim, t-shirts flashing in pink. My uneasiness melts away and reshapes itself into awe. [photo]

I am invited to walk about freely, to explore the house. It is dark, illuminated only by faint cones of light filtering through small windows, and seems poor and barren, devoid of decoration and furnishings. And it is cold. I push open a creaking door and enter Wang Dui's prayer room. How could I have thought this was a poor man's house? In this room the family's wealth – paintings, sculptures, jewellery, all in turquoise, gold, blue and purple – is spread out before a resplendent figure of Buddha, towering, as I'm told it should, above all and everyone else. There is wealth, but used for anything but instant gratification.

For some time I stand there enveloped in thought, then feel an urge to catch up with my friends and Wang Dui who are by now sitting before the kitchen's wood-burning stove. Yak butter tea has been served. I take a sip and remind myself that it is good for fending off the cold. I am glad, too,



to see that my fellow travellers drink it with the same circumspect air of guests not wanting to offend their host.

While we sip his tea and warm ourselves, Wang Dui tells us about his dream: he would like his two children to attend elementary school. After musing for a while about what that would mean for him, he proudly shows us the many daggers he has made and the many more he's inherited. They are not works of art, but they have the elegance of utility, being used for cutting ropes, slicing off chunks of yak cheese, and sheering sheep. Sturdy things they are: a good foot in length, sharp, pointed and fitted with a heavy hilt. Then he continues telling us about his life. Since I don't understand a word of his heavy Tibetan accent, my mind drifts away. All I hear is the murmur of a contented man at one with himself and his immediate surroundings. The world's anxieties aren't even a whisper in his ears for there is nothing that connects him to them: no radio, no television, no telephone, no newspaper. It sinks in that his roughness, which originally put me so ill at ease, is a reflection of the harshness of his surroundings, not the scar of modern life.

The light passing through the window is getting brighter and so we say farewell and return to the car. We press on westward and upward along the 318 toward the Tagong grasslands. Turn after turn, hairpin after hairpin, we gain more height and before long leave the tree line behind us. The countryside becomes more rugged. As the 318 unfolds in the direction of Lhasa, the limitless vistas that come into view take my breath away. By the time we reach the intersection with the road to Tagong and its grasslands, the last cloud has disappeared, the air has become invisible, the sky is dark blue above and the sun edges razor-sharp shadows into the land.

We should really head direct for Yajiang, the nearest town but, enticed by the evening sun's golden rays, we throw caution to the wind and drive in. After only a few turns, the valley opens up and before us lie expansive meadows, glowing bright yellow. Amidst them graze heavy yaks, moving slowly in the breeze. The road is tree-lined for long sections and meanders along the shape and at the same height as that of a gentle stream. It makes me feel as if I am almost driving on water, and I am lulled by its soothing sounds and flowing motion. [photo]

After just under an hour of driving in this splendour, we reach Tagong. The sun is now flirting with the horizon and we are anxious to turn around. But Ron, my climbing friend, says: "Lets just drive through town and around the next corner. I climbed the Yala Holy Mountain two years ago. The tallest peak is 18,000 feet. We should be able to see it from here."

We are sceptical, but grudgingly concede another few minutes' drive. And thank heavens we do because after turning only one corner coming out of Tagong, we are rewarded: far away and yet so close I feel I can touch it, the Yala Holy Mountain is revealed in all its glory, its snow-capped peaks shaped like a king's crown, glowing in the unadulterated light of the setting sun. And just in front of us lies an expansive Tibetan monestary with white walls and a golden tower. 'Not in my Dreams' rolls to a halt, and we walk up a nearby hill to get an even better view - and then fall into silence to take in the overwhelming magnificence of the moment. [photo]



Later that night, when I lie down on a hard sprung bed in Yajiang, I fall asleep in an instant and dream silly dreams about 'Not in my Dreams' staring down dagger-wielding yaks grazing on gold-coloured highways.