



## Step 1 – I need a license

### An Experience Essay in China

There are days that you know are not ordinary. When I woke up this morning, the South-China Sea clouds drooped so low I couldn't see the top of the city's buildings and the winter monsoon brought us a chilly drizzle. Days like today are rare in Hong Kong. They occur only in February or March around the time of Chinese New Year. But it wasn't the weather that made today different from other days. It was instead my journey into China in order to apply for my Chinese driving license.

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It all started with me making an incorrect assumption: I thought I could drive in China like anywhere else I had ever wanted to drive by using an international driving license. But China is not like other countries. I knew that. How could I forget?

My assumption was proven incorrect just as soon as I tried to book a rental car in China. Yang Yang works for Hertz. She is a customer service representative at Pudong Airport in Shanghai. When I emailed her, I got a reply within fifteen minutes: without a Chinese driving license I could only be driven in China, not drive myself.

For me, the thought of "being driven" – that is, watching somebody else drive – is about as pleasant as watching somebody else eat. When I'm starving. So this discovery put a severe damper on my mood. But only for a minute since it was clear what had to be done: I needed to get a Chinese driving license. What would it take? Why not ask Yang Yang? In truth I didn't expect much of an answer – after all, what would a rental car company service desk lady know about foreigners getting a Chinese driving license? – but I was in for a surprise:

"I just heard a customer from IBM HK told me he has changed his US driver license into chinese one in HK", she wrote in almost perfect English.

She then went way beyond her call of duty as a Hertz customer service representative and got in touch with that IBM customer to find out how he did it. The answer, when it came, was as emphatic as it was discouraging:

"To obtain the China Driving License, you have to do this in China. Hong Kong Government CANNOT issue China Driving license."

To make a very long story reasonably short, the quest for a Chinese driving license – nah, just knowing how to get one – would take me through the full spectrum of emotions first explored by the romantics: from utter despair to radiant bliss. Utter despair hit when I was told by an otherwise reliable friend who runs a factory in China that I would have to live in mainland China – not Hong Kong which was my home: one country, two systems, remember! – for at least one year. Can you imagine yourself wanting to drive in, say, the U.K., that rainy island, and being told you've got to live there for one whole year first, being driven around all along? What a depressing thought.



My spirits lifted when I got in touch with Frances, my assistant during the two years I worked and lived in Shanghai because she informed me after researching the matter that I could apply for my license in Shanghai without needing to live there first for one year. It was still a far cry from being allowed to drive simply by using an international license, but at least it would only take a return trip to Shanghai plus about a week there for the processing. I wouldn't call it bliss, but this was at least doable.

My break came when another friend of mine put me in touch with one of his staff who put in touch with Hong Kong's Transport Department who put me in touch with the Automobile Management Department of Canton Province. Yes, it could be done. All I needed to do was to go to Shenzhen, a bustling town in Canton right across the border from Hong Kong, and to apply there in person by filling out a form that was downloadable from the department's website, presenting originals and copies of my passport (with China visa), Hong Kong driving license, Hong Kong ID card, and four mug shots against a RED background. Not white; not black; not green; not yellow. No, RED, like all things lucky in China. Finding this out was my idea of bliss at that moment given the emotional depths to which I had plumbed earlier.

I asked my Chinese teacher's help in filling out the form I downloaded. I went to my favourite photo shop to have the perfect picture taken – with RED background of course. I bought a Shenzhen map. I practiced my Chinese. I was ready.

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This morning I left home at 7:15, hailed a minibus that contained a few sleepy passengers and a grouchy driver, and descended from my home in Hong Kong's "Mid-Levels" to the Central district where I boarded the subway. In Tsim Sha Tsui East I took the short walk to the Kowloon-Canton Railway which would take me to Shenzhen. There was a bounce in my step and adventure in my pulse. Soon, very soon, I would be back in China. I was full of anticipation about what the day would bring.

About an hour later and after having come to within two train stations of the border – there are 13 altogether from Hong Kong's city centre to the border post – I was sitting in the train back toward Hong Kong. I had forgotten to bring my passport. Over-excitement was partly to blame, I thought; but more likely, it was that I decided in the last minute this morning to take my backpack instead of my briefcase which is where I keep my passport all the time. In case I need I travel. So why did I not take my briefcase, even though I was obviously traveling? Because I didn't want to look like a smug Western business man. I felt I would need people's help once over the border. Which meant I would need to appear approachable and deserving of help. Looking the part of a humble traveler with a backpack would be more appropriate to that end than being dressed to look like a high-powered executive who didn't deserve help so much as pocket book cleaning.

For one moment I was close to calling it quits and putting my trip off to another day, but then I resolved to go ahead. After all it was only 8:45 in the morning and I would still be able to do what I had come to do. I returned home, picked up my passport and got back on my way.



By 10am I was once again on the Kowloon-Canton Railway. Since it meanwhile was two hours later than I had wanted it to be, I was in no mood to waste time or money. I therefore spent the train ride practicing saying aloud the street name along with relevant other landmarks and marking the street address on my Shenzhen Tourist map. This would help ensure that I would get to my destination in the shortest possible way, instead of being taken on the scenic route by a driver who spotted an opportunity to extract a bit extra from an unsuspecting tourist.

By 10:30 I arrived at the border and just a few minutes later – I have a Hong Kong “permanent “ residence card which makes crossing this border quick – I found myself queuing for a taxi in Shenzhen. Right away I noticed a change from when I had lived in China previously: the front passenger seat of all the taxis went empty; it never used to. In Hong Kong and most other countries single passengers sit in the back seat of taxis. But not so in China, I recalled. It used to be common for single passengers to sit in the front seat next to the driver. It let them chat with the driver. It made them feel level with him or her. Sitting next to the driver made common Chinese folk passengers feel less pompous, less bashful about their well-to-do station in life. You see, in the not-so-distant past being chauffeured would have been taken as a sign of being a member of the much-loathed bourgeoisie. But evidently not any longer. The front seat went mostly empty this morning.

Despite this change in habits, I was determined to get into the front seat. Not that I have any problem being pompous, you must understand. It’s just that I wanted to be able to show the driver my marked-up map which would have been difficult to do from the backseat, separated as it is from the front seat by glass and steel bars.

It was my turn to board the next taxi. It was a Volkswagen Jetta. That has a nice ring to it: “Jetta”. Surely VW marketers picked it in a whole-hearted attempt to suggest an association with a jet-setting lifestyle: swift, graceful, stylish. But “Jetta” taxis in China are the automotive equivalent of rug-rat pooches: they squeal, their shoulders are drooping, their lights are dim, their coat is patched and of indistinct color. That puts them rather low on the ladder of Chinese social values, even lower in fact than the dogs they resemble because in Chinese minds dogs at least have nutritional value whereas Jettas that have served as taxis have a residual value of precisely \$0.

When I opened the door, I was welcomed by a musty smell, a deeply sagging passenger seat and a stereo that was going at full blast. And then there was the driver. He sized me up with a look that mixed annoyance and defiance: I’m tired; I’d rather you sit behind; we won’t have no nothing to talk to each other anyway. This cool welcome notwithstanding, I told him where to go, starting with the name of the district, then the name of the nearest train station, at last the name of the street. Since the stereo kept blasting, it would have been difficult to communicate even if he and I had spoken the same language. So I chose to switch to visual communication: I pointed out the street on the map. Barely glancing at it, he nodded and took off. The stereo kept blaring.

After driving for about five minutes, he felt he needed to look at the map after all. He turned down the radio and asked me to show him the map again. I took it back out of my back pack, folded it open and added that I was looking for the “automobile management department”. Yes, he had heard of that, and how come I speak Chinese so well? “Which makes one of us”, I thought, for he



spoke with a very, very heavy accent that I barely understood. I explained to him that I had lived in Shanghai some years ago. Then silence again. Since I didn't think we were going to talk a lot more – my Chinese was rusty to say the least and he clearly had trouble with standard Mandarin – I offered that it would be ok for him to continue to listen to his music. The volume staid down, however. After a few minutes in deep thought and swerving through traffic on the Shenzhen-Canton High-Speed Motorway, he popped an important question: is your wife Chinese? I explained that, yes, she is Chinese, but from Malaysia. Do we have children, was what he wanted to know next. I let my head hang low: no. That prompted an immediate follow-up: how old are you? I said 45. Ah, well then you must have children soon. You are no longer that young, you know. When I replied that my wife and I were still thinking about it, he chuckled and mumbled that this was not the way to have them.

I felt it was my turn to ask questions. Are you from Shenzhen? No. Are you married? Yes. In China we get hitched early: I got married at twenty. But never mind the wife. He felt he had something more important to tell me: he had a four-year old son. When I inquired whether he had other children, I immediately wanted to retract: what an insensitive question! Had I forgotten that China had a one-child policy? But before I could say anything, he explained: if we had a girl, we could have another one, but we're very lucky, so ... Ah, I see.

We continued wordlessly for a while. As we got closer to where I needed to go, I explained that I was here to apply for my Chinese driving license. That's funny, he said, but stopped short of asking why. In our approach to the address of the automobile management department, we looked at the map together. It wasn't long until we arrived at the specified road. He ambled along it. Since the automobile management department didn't jump out at us and no street number had been given, he stopped to ask another taxi driver for direction. A minute later we pulled up to the entrance of what seemed like the wrong place: as far as I could make out, it was the car inspections centre. He stopped at the guard house and inquired. Yes, we were at the right place, the driving license issuing department was right behind the hump in the road. We drove into the complex and came to a halt next to a wide, multi-storied office building. The lot before it was choke-full with cars and people milling about near the entrance.

My taxi-driving friend – he was now my friend because the radio had not come on again even once during the entire drive – offered to wait. I told him it might take some time and that he should feel free to leave, but he insisted that he'd wait to take me back. Great. I had acquired a chauffeur.

Just as soon as I got out of the taxi, I was encircled by rough, yelling men offering me a driving license on the spot: no exams required; just a little money. As I waved them aside and proceeded, the throng followed me right up to the entrance, shouting, tugging, trying to get a piece of me: no need to suffer queues or exams; we can help you solve your problems, really! I paid them no heed and showed the guard at the entrance the form I had filled out with the help of my Chinese teacher. After a moment's hesitation, he indicated I should go to the first floor. On the first floor, I found a large, noisy room with many counters. In front of some of them were long queues. I put on the biggest smile I could and proceeded to one counter behind which there was a friendly looking female official. I showed her my form. She took one look at it, pulled out three new ones and handed





them to me with the words: “We don’t use that one any longer.” But, but, I had filled it out at home diligently with the help of my teacher. What now? I can read Chinese, but I cannot write it.

I looked at the forms and began to read them. I found a desk and contemplated the daunting task of transcribing the information on the form I had filled out onto the new ones. Pouring over the first line on the first form and having just painted my name in Chinese in slow, laborious strokes, I heard someone say, “Need help you?” I turned around and replied: “Yes, because I can read, but I can’t write.” I told him I was from Hong Kong, here to apply for a Chinese driving license. Chuckle. Frown. But thankfully my being out-of-place and, from his point of view, without meaningful purpose didn’t prevent him from coming to my rescue. He grabbed my pen and began filling out the three forms on my behalf using the information on the old, superseded one that I was still clutching in my hands. I was wondering what demands he would make for helping me out. The fellows downstairs were still vividly on my mind. After filling out my forms, he explained that I now needed to take a health exam. He pointed out where I needed to go, namely to a building to the right of the one I was in. I thanked him profusely, and off he went, not asking for a thing.

On the way to the building where the health exam would take place, I was once again followed by a swarm of men offering me their service. They assured me that not only did I not have to queue or take a test, but that I needn’t subject myself to the torture of the official health exam either. Wasn’t I afraid of the health-exam? What about contracting AIDS in the process? No, I wasn’t afraid for as last I knew there was no way to get AIDS from having one’s height measured or one’s eye sight tested. (The FAQ that came with the form was unequivocal: no blood test was required.) In the event, my Chinese language skills were of more interest to the inspecting doctor than was my eye sight: “You know your numbers very well.” Also, my height was not measured, but simply inquired: how tall are you? “173” I told him. He completed one of the forms, stamped it and affixed one of the photos. It cost me 20 legitimate yuan, no AIDS included.

I returned to the previous building and lined up at the counter called “Accept”. That’s what it said in Chinese and English. “Accept”. I accepted to wait, right behind the same two Chinese people who had taken the health exam with me. They were both taller than me; one was 182cm and the other 179cm. That much I knew from the health inquiry. Not that these are intimate details, but still, I felt it broke the ice, so we got to talk. In contrast to my taxi driver, they spoke beautiful Mandarin. I could almost understand what they were saying. One of them, 182cm, complained about the long queue, in response to which I ventured: “It seems like living in China means living in queues.” Yes, yes, 182 smiled, but it’s a lot better now. He recalled how it was during the Cultural Revolution. “The queues were miles long,” he reminisced. “You couldn’t buy anything, even if you had money; everything was restricted, for everything you needed ‘stamps’.”

I asked them whether they enjoyed driving, seeing how they both also applied for a driving license. Emphatically, they did. 179 didn’t have his own car, but 182 did – was he driving without a license? I asked them about the roads in China. “They’re getting better, but there is a lot of pollution, because there are more and more cars.” I told them how much I enjoy driving, especially in open-top cars. Did they know about this kind? Yes, of course they did, but what would be the point of one in China? The air in China is not something you wanted to breathe more than you needed to, they



thought. Why do they enjoy driving? Without a moment's hesitation they replied that driving made them feel free. It was the third time I had heard this expressed in China: first by Frances, my erstwhile assistant; then this morning by my newly acquired chauffeur; and now by 182 and 179.

As we were waiting, I looked over my forms one more time to ensure everything was in order. I noticed that the fellow who had helped me fill out my forms had left the "nationality" field empty. Perhaps he didn't know how to write the word "Switzerland" in Chinese. Lest I get to the head of the queue only to find out that a key piece of information was missing, I asked 182 whether he could help. Of course, he could. As he took the forms from me his glance fell onto my photos with RED background.

"They are not right, you know. They should have a WHITE background, you know. You're missing a step in the assembly line process." And then to 179: "Come on, go with him to get the right photos taken."

I stared at my photos with RED background and sighed. RED background? WHITE background? Who gives a hoot? After a deep sigh, I looked up, and saw both of them looking at my quizzically: government instructions aren't supposed to make sense. Everyone knows that. So get with it. Lets go and get the right pictures taken.

I pulled myself together and replied that it wouldn't be necessary to accompany me. But 182 insisted, and off 179 and I went to the building on the left of the main building. Just as soon as we emerged from the building, the fake-license providers descended on both of us. This time my new friend did the waving aside. Walking by his side without concern about where to go, I had time to think about how odd this situation was: I was, we were, being offered fake licenses and AIDS-free health certificates smack in front of the government building that was issuing the genuine article. In fact, even the guard at the entrance had hesitated whether to send me upstairs or into the flock of genuine-imitation license peddlers. Was he getting a kick-back, right there at the entrance of the government building? (Not just any government building, by the way, but the traffic police building.) Presumably yes. The genuinely helpful and the opportunistically acting were side-by-side: here I was being protected by someone I had met only a few minutes earlier, someone who had left his place in a very long queue to help me get my photo taken...protecting me from a bunch of guys out to make a quick buck from those unable to get through the driving exam or were browbeaten into worrying about contracting AIDS. The idly unselfish and the desperately self-interested juxtaposed, as close together as I had ever seen them. How was I to make sense of all this?

We trudged up to the third floor of the building and found the photo-taking room. Inside were six PCs, all networked and set up to take digital photos. One of these PCs was used for work. The other five were used for video games by the sounds of them. At the sight of me, all six staff looked up, and one greeted me with the words: "Harro! Great!" Then he continued to play his video game. Oh well, it's lunch hour, is how I tried to explain the surprising ratio of work to fun.

When the one lady who was working looked at my form, she shook her head and explained that I needed to go back to the building I came from because I hadn't yet obtained my "assembly line



number”. Without that she could not take my photo and make it available online to the “Accept” department.

“But,” 179 insisted, “I was here just a few minutes ago, and you could take my photo without an assembly line number.”

“Yes, I could, because you’re from China, but he’s not,” she explained what seemed perfectly logical to her.

The assembly line steps for people applying from Hong Kong is different, it turned out. For this confusion 179 apologized abundantly. “How embarrassing. How unacceptable. I am so sorry.” I told him not to worry about it. After all, I was very grateful for his help. I mean, ok, we had just lost our spot in the queue and spent fifteen minutes doing the wrong thing, but that was nothing compared to me doing all this without his help. I felt a lot more embarrassed about him having given up his spot in the queue. That didn’t seem to concern him in the least, however.

As I walked back, with my friend by my side, my mind’s eye recalled the various occasions when I was performing some routine procedure in the cavernous halls or narrow cubicles of government offices in other countries which had been my home at different times. I recalled some foreign-looking man or woman trying to get something relatively straight-forward done, but unfamiliarity with local language and customs had turned a simple procedure into one that was baffling and arduous. I wondered: how many people have I seen taking five minutes out of their lives to fill out the form on behalf of a stranger? Or how many have I seen leaving their spot in a queue – a long, immovable queue – to help a stranger get his photo taken? I’m thinking hard right now, but I can’t think of one. I can’t even think of myself, yet I’ve walked by quite a few befuddled folks fighting with government bureaucracies over the years. Yes, that’s what I’ve always done: I’ve walked by them; sadly, not once did I stop to offer my help.

Back in the queue. About thirty minutes later my two friends had completed their business and I was next in line. That should have made me happy, but it didn’t, because I dreaded getting acquainted with the lady behind the counter. I had observed how she had returned to my two friends their completed documents. She slapped them on the counter with a dismissive motion of her hand that made them slide to the counter’s edge. This motion of hers conveyed disdain, but nothing like her look. It is a look that I have only seen in China. Not every one there is capable of presenting it, however; it appears to be the preserve of those acting in an official capacity. So prevalent is it among officials that doubtless it is part of the job description. This look, it is produced at those bothersome times when officials must serve the public. It expresses utter reluctance to do work – work that they view as beneath them – and profound contempt for you who makes them do this work instead of leaving them to sip tea, or read the newspaper, or preferably both. This look, it combines a scowl with a one-sided, reverse-pout. To present it, officials pull their eyes into a narrow slit and, at the same time, draw back their lips on one side of the mouth. And if you look closely you will see that their strained lips quiver, ever so slightly, to make it plain that this look is not a dead mask but brought to you “live” from the depths of their displeasure.



To my left and right people were pressing up against me as I stepped forward to the counter. Some of them were curious to see what this big nose wanted to do; others wanted to jump the queue – a common phenomenon in China where not too long ago people had lined up not for the privilege of driving a car but to get a meager ration of rice.

One did jump the queue, and I let it pass. Actually, it wasn't my decision because I had forgotten just how skillful mainland Chinese folks are at getting ahead in queues. They have a long list of tricks. One favorite is to pretend that you have queued up just a little while ago, but forgotten to ask one teeny-weeny question which it is assumed gives you the right to walk straight back up to the counter. It has this drawback, however: the counter staff may be alert and spot you for what you are – a con-artist – and send you away. But it's worth a try. A surer way is the slow-pass maneuver. It requires practice, though. And nerve. Ever so slowly move to the right or left of the individual in the queue you want to pass. Gradually pull even, perhaps pretending that you're only stepping closer in an attempt to read a sign in the distance above the counter. (Not such a great excuse when good vision is a prerequisite for getting a driving license, but never mind: I'm talking about queuing in general). Then move ahead, inch by inch, feigning absent-mindedness and oblivion to the gradually advancing position that puts you ahead of your unsuspecting victim. Depending on the feistiness of the individuals involved, you'll manage to jump a few positions in this way.

But the most skillful queue-jumpers have mastered the creeper-sneaker-I-don't-know-what-happened trick. Instead of just gaining a few positions, this gambit gets them into a queue in which they hadn't even been before. First, they amble up to near the queue, dissembling being lost or in pursuit of entirely unrelated business. The queue is of no significance to their life whatsoever, is the message they're sending. Step by tiny step, they creep closer while always looking elsewhere, never once at the people in the queue. An air of stupidity is of great assistance, too. They hum, talk into their mobile phone, do anything to suggest that joining the queue is the last thing on their mind. Then they hover, waiting for the inattention of those in the queue. When the victims' inattention is poised at its peak, with one fell swoop, they shuffle-sneak into the queue and assume a demeanor that suggests they've been in it all along. If you dare stare them down, they don't show a whiff of contrition. Instead, they continue to look utterly oblivious about their impertinence. In fact, they stare right back at you: What's wrong? What are you suggesting? So strong-willed are they that, like hypnotists, they make you believe that if anything did happen it was not them jumping the queue but the queue jumping to embrace them. It's a skill so consummate it makes me question my purpose in life.

So one had gotten in ahead of me, but now was I alert. When another tried to do the same, I turned around, lifted my hand to bar him, and said firmly, "Line up!" That made him back off and a young lady behind the counter throw me a smile that said, "Good on you!" Then the scowling and reverse-pouting lady behind the counter turned to me, "Next".

I produced all my materials. She inspected them and conferred with a colleague. Then, to my big surprise, she smiled – a first in the 4000-year history of Chinese officials serving the public, I imagine – and processed the "Accept" step in the assembly line. No questions asked. She just typed





some information into her computer, stapled forms and copies of my various documents together and handed them back to me with a look that said, "I've never, ever seen one of your kind here."

According to Yang Yang of Hertz someone from IBM HK had done this before. Perhaps he was overseas Chinese, but just as likely, he was Western. So why would she have never ever seen a Westerner here? Because very few western executives who live in China live in China, that is to say, they rarely if ever get in touch with China's government bureaucracy. When I was among them several years earlier, I recall that everything would be handled by my secretary Frances. I just needed to sign blank forms and then things got done. Somehow.

But now I was in the middle of it, and, strangely, it felt great because the feeling was a confluence of emotions: the freedom of being able to get things done independently, albeit with the help of strangers; the annoyance of being given the run-around (actually, I wasn't: it's just that I didn't know the rules of the assembly line); and the realization that with the simple decision to apply for my Chinese driving license on my own I had gotten to where I wanted to be: a lot closer to the real China than I had ever been before.

While focusing to get my documents accepted, I lost track of my two friends, 182 and 179. As miraculously as they had appeared in the health exam room, now they had disappeared. There was not a trace of them. I supposed that they had finished their assembly line steps and had already left. I felt embarrassed because once again I had let myself become to self-absorbed with my own to-dos that I failed to do the simplest of things, to say thanks. Instead I lost two potential friends. Which immediately made me wonder: would my chauffeur still be waiting for me? I had paid him in full when we arrived. He really had no reason to stay. In fact, he had every reason to be gone.

It was time to go back to the other building to get my picture taken since I now had the all-important assembly line number. It was still lunch hour there: five people playing video games, one of them looking up to say "Harro! Great!", one working. The same lady who had sent me away before now made me sit opposite her PC, asked me to focus on the camera and hit the PC's enter key. The mug shot was taken. I expected to be told to wait while she processed the photos, but no, she said I could go straight back to counter 3 in the other building. My photo would be available for inspection on the office's local-area network, she informed me proudly. The incongruity of digitally enhanced photographic efficiency and video game-retarded unproductiveness added to the day's count of imponderables.

On the way back to the main building I saw that my taxi was still there, but that my chauffeur was nowhere to be seen. There was hope against hoping.

I trudged up the same staircase for the sixth time that day and went to counter 3 with my documents. Within one minute I was given a receipt documenting that my application had been accepted and told to come back after seven days to counter 4 where I would be able to pick up my driving license. Before I left, I turned back to look across the counter: all eyes were on me, smiling. I guessed why, but surely it was the wrong guess altogether.



When I got out of the building, I looked at where I had seen my taxi a little while earlier. The car was there, but still now sight of my chauffeur. Could it be...? I trudged over to the car and, sure enough, my chauffeur was sleeping on his reclined seat. I knocked on the window. He woke up, opened the door, and bid me welcome with the words: "Back already?" Three hours had passed which he had spent catching a nap, but not without first switching off his meter.

We returned to Shenzhen's Kowloon-Canton Railway station where he gave me his mobile phone number so I could call him when I would return to pick up my license.

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The day I went to pick my license was uneventful. Everything went according to plan. I stepped up to counter 4, produced my receipt, paid a small fee and was handed my license. Full of pride, I held it in my hands as if it cost a lot more than the 140 Yuan (including AIDS-free medical exam) I paid. I began to check over the details. Oh dear. All the information on it – name, date of birth, etc. – was in good order, except for one glaring mistake. By applying for my Chinese driving license on my own I expected to take a step closer to China. I certainly did not expect, however, that China would embrace me in return., yet here was incontrovertible proof of just that: the "Nationality" field on my license did not read "Switzerland", but "China".