

IN CHINA

BEI WANG

Author: Bei Wang
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Prologue

I have been going back for twenty-five years.

Not returning. Returning implies arrival. Going back suggests a loop, a motion without fixed end, a road that folds into itself. Each time I land, the country is both more familiar and more foreign than I remember. The streets have been renamed. The skyline has rewritten itself.

In my professional life, I learned to write myself out of the frame. For years, I produced market reports, media updates, policy analyses; texts that demanded clarity, structure, and the careful erasure of the writer's shadow. Data did not have a biography. Forecasts did not dream. I was trained to observe without trembling, to record without remembering.

But field notes are different. They carry the smell of rain on concrete, the unfinished sentence of a stranger's gesture, the weight of a question that arrives unbidden at 2 a.m. in a hotel room in Changsha. These essays are not reports. They are not scholarship, though they carry the residue of both. They are an attempt to let the small details carry the larger meaning—以小见大—and to let the past illuminate the present: 以史为鉴，博古论今。

This book follows a particular thread: a week I spent guiding young Dutch students through Nanjing, Changzhou, and Shanghai. Their questions were fresh, uncynical, and often impossible. Why is this place like this? What does that sign mean? Do you still feel like you belong here? I answered as best I could, but the answers kept leading me backward, to earlier trips, earlier cities, earlier versions of myself.

So this is not a travelogue, nor a memoir. It is not a history. It is a map of disorientation drawn in pencil, erased, and drawn again.

Over twenty-five years, I have visited several cities in China. Some I know well enough to navigate without a map. Others I barely recognize from one visit to the next. This book moves between them, between the brutalist sprawl of the north and the humid gardens of the south, between the Beijing of my teenage years and the Shenzhen of now, between the student I was and the writer I am still becoming.

I do not claim to understand what I have seen. Understanding, in this context, feels like a kind of arrogance. I claim only to have paid attention, to have kept my eyes open, my notebook ready, and my questions unresolved.

If you are reading this, you are now a witness to that attention.

Nanjing — The Road More Travelled

*Two roads diverged in a wood, and I —
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.*

— Robert Frost

By the time we cleared the platform, two of them were already filming.

Nanjing at the end of June is a wet, standing heat, the kind that meets you at the jet bridge and never quite lets go, and the students held their phones above the crowd like periscopes. “All these train stations, they’re like airports!” Sadie swept her camera across the concourse, the far ceiling, the departure boards ticking over in characters she couldn’t read, the sheer horizontal sprawl of the place. “And this is normal for them. This is just a normal train station.”

I have taken people to China before, but never this cohort, and never at this particular moment, when China has become, for a certain kind of nineteen-year-old with a phone, less a country than a genre. They arrived

pre-loaded. On the flight over, Daan showed me his feed: drone shots of interchanges folded like ribbon, a man in Shenzhen ordering a coffee from a machine that made it, delivered it, and thanked him.

“ChinaMaxxing,” the students told me, was the word, and the word had a whole grammar behind it. Somewhere in the last two years the online story about this place had flipped from menace to marvel, and my students had caught the bright tail of it. They had come, they believed, to see the future the algorithm had promised them, and, in coming, to take the road their (grand)parents had been too wary to take.

That was the Frost of it. Every one of them, in the class essays I’d read, had reached for some version of the road less travelled. They were the ones who’d looked past the headlines. They’d chosen the braver path east. It did not occur to them that a road can be the one less travelled and the most travelled at once; that ten million phones were narrating the same discovery that same summer; that the feeling of having gone against the current is itself a current, and a strong one.

I didn’t say any of this. You don’t hand a nineteen-year-old the irony of a poem on the first day. You let the mountain do it.

On the first night I asked them the question I ask every group, and will ask again on the last: “What did you expect?” The gap between the two answers is the whole education. That evening the answers came fast and glossy: clean, fast, huge, ahead of us. I wrote them down. My husband, who is Dutch and long past being surprised by any of it, texted to ask whether the students had melted yet. Nearly, I wrote back. Give it a week.

We were guests of Hohai University, on the banks of the Yangtze, for a one-week summer school with a hopeful name: the Young Envoy Scholarship (YES). Hohai (河海) means “river and sea.” It is, I told them on the bus, very likely the only university on earth named after two bodies of water, and named so for a reason: it exists to study the thing

China has feared and fought and needed for longer than it has been China at all. Water.

They wanted robots. They got, first, water, and were briefly deflated; the way you're deflated when the trailer promises the future and the film opens on a river. We stood in a control room the size of a tennis court, watching a wall of screens render the entire Yangtze basin as a living model: every gate, every reservoir, every centimetre of rise, a digital twin of a river breathing in real time.

On the screens among all the letters there are red signs of CCP and on the wall hung a portrait the students recognised before they could read a word of it: Mao, younger than the face on the banknotes, looking north. This, our guide explained, was where the vision began. In the autumn of 1952, standing on a hill above the Yellow River, Mao had said something almost offhand, that the south had water to spare and the north had none, and that if it could be managed, the north might borrow a little. Half a century of surveys and arguments later, the borrowing had become the largest water-transfer scheme ever built: three man-made rivers dragging the Yangtze north across the whole width of the country, some forty billion cubic metres a year, enough to make the taps run in Beijing. 南水北调, the wall said. South water, north-diverted. Four characters for a sentence a man had once spoken as a wish.

The students filmed the number and the scale, because the number and the scale were astonishing. What the wall did not narrate, and what I told them, quietly, at the back of the room, was the price of the sentence. The eastern channel had simply annexed the Grand Canal, a waterway older than the Roman Empire, dug by hand twenty-five centuries ago, and set it running north again, as though the country kept its oldest tools in a drawer and took them out when needed. The central channel came from a reservoir whose level had to be raised, and to raise it the state had moved some three hundred and thirty thousand people off land their

families had farmed for a dozen generations, so that a city eight hundred miles away, the distance from Corsica to London, could drink. None of those people were on the screens. They never are. That is what makes it a screen.

The students saw the Party emblem and the familiar face and reached, reflexively, for the word propaganda. And it was; but it was also true, and the two facts sat in the same room without touching, which is the first thing this country teaches and the last thing a feed will let you feel. I wished I had the hours to tell them the older story, the one running underneath the newest one.

Four thousand years back there was Yu the Great, who tamed the primeval floods not by damming the water but by patiently dredging it a path to the sea; who, the legend insists, passed his own front door three times in those years of labour and did not once go in. This is the founding myth of Chinese governance. Not a battle. A man against water, choosing the work over his own house. And here was the same argument, forty centuries on, rendered in fibre-optic and gravity: what do you do with too much water in one place and too little in another? You move it. You have always moved it. You move it whatever it costs, and you write the cost small.

That is the thing the feeds cannot carry. On a phone, the control room is spectacle, everything automated, everything gleaming. Standing inside it, you understand you are looking at four thousand years of dread wearing a new coat. The scale that so impressed them on the first day was never really about scale. It was about stakes.

The robotics enterprise, two days later, gave them the spectacle back and then quietly took it apart.

It was everything the algorithm had promised: a showroom of industrial-robot prototypes and a screen the size of a wall for the story they wanted told. But the lead engineer told them something the feed

never had. “Those dancing humanoid robots are actually useless,” he said. “Two legs are not balanced; four legs work better. Five fingers break more easily than two. Why do we want to make robots like humans, when we could design them as better machines?” In the Tech4Good course I teach in Utrecht, I always tell my students where the word robot comes from: *robota*, a Czech word for the drudgery of serfs, lifted into a 1920 play about machines built to do our labour until, one day, they refuse. The students filmed all of it. “This is so cool!” For twenty minutes ChinaMaxxing was simply, gloriously true, and I let them have it, because it was.

Then Daniella, who notices people before machines, drifted toward a workstation at the edge of the floor, where a young engineer sat hunched over a diagnostic screen, and asked him, through me, how long he’d been there. Since seven that morning, he said. He would leave around nine at night, and he said it without complaint, the way you’d report the weather. He was proud of the line. He’d helped build it. He was also, I could see Anouk calculating, about five years older than she was, and living a life she would not trade for.

“Is that ... normal?” She asked me afterward, on the bus.

“For some. Not for all. It’s a big country. It holds the man who works until nine and the man who films himself refusing to.”

“The videos never show him.”

“The videos never show anyone,” I said. “That’s what makes them videos.”

This is the crack I wait for on every trip: the moment the shine acquires a face, and a fatigue, and the flat picture buckles into a person. You cannot maxx a country once you have met one tired, proud, specific person inside it. He is not the future and he is not the threat. He is a man who wants to go home and is not going home yet; and once you have seen him, the whole meme sits differently in your hand.

The solar farm, on the last day, was where the binaries went to die. This single country now makes most of the world's capacity to catch the sun; the panels on half of Europe's roofs began somewhere like this. Bigger, more, faster, the refrain of the whole trip, made literal in glass. And yet the country that burns the most coal on earth is also building the most solar, faster than anyone has built anything, and it is doing both at once, without apology, because both are true. The students had come with two Chinas in their heads: the menace their (grand) parents feared, the marvel their feeds sold them; and spent seven days discovering that both were real, and neither was, and that the truth was not a point between them but the entire cloudy distance that held them apart.

That is the education. Not choosing the correct China. Learning that the question has no single mountain to sit on.



Hohai University Archives — photo by the author



At Baijiahu 1912 shopping center — photo courtesy of the author